

# THE GALLANT SHERIFF

*As a young man he had worked successively as a railroader, miner, politician, soldier and rancher, and was flawless at all of those endeavors . . . but he was really in his element when he donned the sheriff's badge, with a flair for crime deduction which made him one of the greats . . .*

THE LAST ISSUE of Silver City's *Southwest Sentinel* for November, 1883, blazoned the black headlines: First Train Robbery – Masked Cowboys Kill Engineer – Rob Passengers, Mail Car!

The account detailed how the conductor and a passenger were robbed and the mail car pilfered. Erroneously the weekly reported that six cowboys pulled the job, whereas only four were in on it.

For three weeks not one clue developed leading to the identification and apprehension of the robbers. Seething in wrath over failure of railroad officers, and federal territorial lawmen, Wells Fargo then approached cowman Howard Harvey Whitehill of Silver City, asking him to assume the almost hopeless task of running down the train-robbing cowboys.

After nearly ten years as county sheriff, Whitehill had quit

to devote his time to raising cattle on the Mimbres River, something he had been dreaming of doing for a long time. His family had continued to live in town. Then came the Southern Pacific train robbery six miles east of Gage, on November 24, 1883.

Engineer Theopolis C. Webster had spotted the removal of the rails just in time to prevent wrecking the train. Yelling a warning at the fireman, he threw the air brakes. Before the train ground to a halt, the fireman leaped from his side of the cab. Webster prepared to do the same, but a bullet from nowhere pierced his heart, dropping him lifeless beside the engine.

Four masked robbers hastened to the express and mail cars: Conductor Zack Vail, coming off the near coach, lost \$12 to the bandits. Chicagoan Charles A. Gaskill, disembarking out of mere curiosity, contributed \$200 and a gold watch to the bandits. The express messenger opened up on demand, but the through safe was locked. The robbers got \$800 from a wayside shipment and departed, melting away into the desert.

Author's Photo



Silver City, 1882; first white child born there, in the early 1870s, was sheriff's son, Wayne Whitehill

Photo: Courtesy Mrs. Olive W. Bell.



**Seven of sheriff's nine children: (top): Harriet, Harry, Cornelius and Emma: (below): Wayne, Olive, Josie. (Olive, who is now Mrs. Olive W. Bell, 86 years old, is only surviving child of Harvey and Harriet.)**

When he became sheriff Silver City vied with Dodge City and Deadwood as a place where killers held sway. But gunmen and outlaws soon found it prudent to stay out of his bailiwick. Only a few stubborn ones had to learn the hard way.

A gang of stock thieves and bank robbers rode in to "hoorah" the town. When they cut loose late at night, Whitehill kissed his family, strapped on his gun and went after them. Catching two in a dive who had just emptied their weapons at lighted windows across the street, he corralled them. The one who offered to fight was quickly knocked down with Whitehill's gun barrel. Four more were gathered in before the rest concluded it was wise to streak for parts unknown. Anyway, as it turned out, he had luckily arrested the prize desperadoes of the gang.

Mrs. Whitehill was a loyal and helpful sheriff's wife, although she much preferred the solitude of a cattle ranch. Of course she worried over his safety, but never revealed it to others. The night the gang terrorized the town she waited in a darkened room while the children slept peacefully in their beds, until he returned at daybreak.

One day two hard-cases drifted into Silver City who aroused Whitehill's dire suspicions. The pair behaved themselves until one of them held up a saloon poker game after sundown. That one disappeared, and his partner couldn't be found either. Before daylight, Whitehill learned that the wanted one took his horse from a feedlots. The trace led towards Fort Bayard before cutting west into Cherry Creek Canyon. Tracking until after midday, the sheriff unexpectedly heard the crack of a gun and a bullet whined closely past his head.

He worked carefully around the *(Continued on page 52)*



**Beautiful Olive Whitehill in 1985 photo.**

Exerpt from *The West* "The Gallant Sheriff". Unfortunately, we don't have the entire article.