

1918 murder of Sheriff Lowry

Glenda Farley Jul 14, 2022

During World War I, a few days after the new state-of-the-art smelter began producing copper, investigation into the murder of James Lowry revealed the existence of pro-German traitors and a dangerous conspiracy to interfere with copper production. Federal troops arrived in September.

At the United Verde Extension Mining Company (UVX) smelter south of Cottonwood fires were aglow in the furnaces and smoke began curling from the top of the 425-foot smokestack on July 12, 1918. The main building, surrounded by 17 large and small buildings, was a beehive of activity with 779 men on the payroll. The mighty roar meant that industry and prosperity had come to Verde [Clemenceau]. The blast furnace began treating 500 tons of ore daily, and when additional furnaces were completed, the smelter would produce 5 million pounds of copper a month. Although there were many larger smelters, the UVX smelter was the most modern in the world. (Verde Copper News; July 13, 17, 1918.)

There was a large "tent city" with bath houses (now, hospital parking lots). Within the fenced and gated community wooden bunk houses 300 feet long and a boarding house with a dining room were built near the artesian well (now, north of Mingus) to house employees. There were bath houses for men and women, a commissary, and a post office. The Amusement Hall was constructed with reading rooms, soda fountain, a cigar and news stand, and a theater where motion pictures were shown three evenings a week. Dr. W.C. Judd was the first physician at the UVX hospital by July of 1917. Construction of 15 frame three-room and 16 frame four-room houses began during September. The big camp was to be a pleasant one in which to live. (Verde Copper News: Aug. 2, Sep. 17, 1917.)

Jim Speed was the superintendent of the Verde townsite. He was assisted by town watchmen Officer C.R. Wright and Officer James R. Lowry, one of the most famous of Arizona peace officers. Officer Lowry had been elected Yavapai County Sheriff and had served from Jan. 1, 1891, until Dec. 31, 1894, and from Jan. 1, 1905, until Dec. 31, 1908. His two sons were officers in the U.S. Army and served in France. Mr. Speed had approved a vacation for Officer Lowry so he could visit his semi-invalid wife, who was being cared for in California, about 10 minutes before Officer Wright asked for his assistance in arresting Porfirio Hernandez. (Verde Copper News; July 17; Weekly Journal-Miner; July 24, 1918.)

Labor problems and threatened strikes at Jerome had resulted in the deportation on July 10, 1917, of some members and sympathizers of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Leaders of the IWW moved to Cottonwood and remained active. Officers raided homes of IWW leaders and arrests were made during September and October of 1917. (Verde Copper News; Sept. 17, 1917.)

Porfirio Hernandez was about 22 years old and had been a sheep herder on Oak Creek and in the Mogollons before he found employment at Verde. He became "an agitator of the true pro-German type." He was an outspoken promoter, which "had come close to getting him into trouble on former occasions." (Verde Copper News; July 18, 1918.)

There was a "work or fight" policy during World War I, when more women entered the workforce. As a result, Porfirio Hernandez lost his easy job in the Verde boarding house and had to go to work with a shovel at the smelter. Mr. Hernandez "was complaining to his friend about the injustice of this. He said that if it were not for the 'accursed gringos' the Mexicans would not have to work with the pick and

shovel, but a brighter day was coming, for the Villistas would soon arrive to take possession of this whole country."

Because of his pro-German and Villistas sympathies, Officer Wright advised Porfirio Hernandez "to drop that kind of talk, and an altercation ensued between the two men. Officer Wright was armed with a little .25 caliber revolver and with this in his fist he landed a stiff jolt to the side of Mr. Hernandez' jaw." Mr. Hernandez "hurried off to his quarters, declaring that he would get a gun and kill the officer. Officer Wright went to Officer Lowry and told him about the occurrence. The two of them set out for the Mexican Bunkhouse, intending to arrest Mr. Hernandez for disturbing the peace."

Near the door of the bunkhouse about 12 or 15 men were gathered. Officer "Wright heard one them profanely advise Mr. Hernandez not to let himself be taken. Officer Wright singled out Porfirio Hernandez from the crowd and said: 'Come along, I want you.' With that Porfirio Hernandez drew an automatic revolver and began firing at Officer Lowry. It is believed that his first three bullets hit Officer Lowry in the breast and stomach."

"Officer Lowry started to double up. As he sank to the ground, he managed to draw his own revolver and fire twice at Mr. Hernandez, but both shots went wild. Porfirio Hernandez turned and fled around the building. Officer Wright had only three cartridges in his little revolver but fired them all at the fleeing murderer."

"Half the town of Verde was almost instantly on the scene. Revolvers, rifles, and shotguns were hurriedly procured, and a little group of men started to follow Porfirio Hernandez toward Cottonwood, which was the direction he had taken. Back of the UVX Hospital, they ran into a bunch of men armed with revolvers, knives, and rocks. The would-be pursuers were soon driven back, as much by the rocks as by the bullets. All was noise and confusion."

"Friends picked up Officer Lowry, who was still breathing, but he expired within a minute or two, probably before they reached the UVX Hospital."

"In spite of the fact that he had a bullet hole through one arm, Officer Wright took charge of the pursuit. ... An hour or two after the shooting, Porfirio Hernandez' trail was picked up along the river below Cottonwood. One of the posses, led by John Munds (a former Yavapai County Sheriff), surrounded him in a thicket. Mr. Munds was the only person armed and naturally there was some trepidation about going into the brush after the murderer, himself armed with an ugly automatic." Darkness made pursuit impossible. (Verde Copper News; July 17, 1918.)

The best information is that Porfirio Hernandez fired five shots altogether. A man standing near him fired several more. Which ones hit Officer Wright, W.C. Scouller and Tim Ryan are uncertain. Flying bullets hit two men in a nearby bunkhouse. W.C. Scouller was hit just above the left ankle, probably fracturing a bone, and a bullet hit Tim Ryan in his right foot. C.R. Wright's bullet wound was in his left forearm. After being treated in the UVX Hospital, the three men spent the night in the United Verde hospital at Jerome.

Early the following morning the trail was picked up again on the other side of the river. Under Sheriff John Robinson and a force from the sheriff's office arrived from Prescott and "organized several posses and sent them in pursuit of the fleeing murderer, some on horseback, some in automobiles, and some on foot." By afternoon, the slayer had been tracked two miles above Cornville. (Verde Copper News; July 18, 1918.)

Robinson, assisted by a small posse, made a search through Verde, confiscating revolvers and knives, and arrested 12 Mexicans who were identified as being implicated in assisting the murderer to escape. The men were taken to Clarkdale and lodged in jail for investigation. Porfirio Hernandez and his compatriots were part of a plot by pro-German traitors, and the killing of Officer Lowry "served to disclose the existence of a dangerous conspiracy."... "Most of the 10 defendants were armed at the time they were arrested." By the time of their preliminary hearing at the end of July, there were 14 defendants. (Verde Copper News; July 18; Weekly Journal-Miner; July 31, Nov. 27, 1918.)

July 19: "The entire Oak Creek country was filled with posses searching for the fleeing slayer. ... Those parties were doubtless attracted by the reward of \$2,500 offered by the UVX." ... "Under Sheriff Robinson and Sheriff Young and their posses were in all probability responsible for the fugitive taking a road which led him to his fatal encounter." They were about six miles behind Porfirio Hernandez when he encountered Deputy Sheriff Frank Dickerson, of Coconino County. (Verde Copper News; July 19; Journal-Miner; July 24, 1918.)

Officer Frank Dickerson was riding along a road looking for some cattle when he overtook a man riding eastward. The man said he was looking for his sheep and wanted to buy a horse. "The man was highly nervous and kept a close eye on the ranchman. His hand never strayed far from the butt of a big pistol he wore," a .32 Savage automatic. In order to divert his attention for a moment, Officer Dickerson pointed over his shoulder and asked him if that was not a wolf over there. Porfirio Hernandez turned to look. Officer Dickinson "sprang from his saddle, drawing his gun, a .38 Colt, as he leaped, and ordered the man to throw up his hands. Hernandez' only response was to draw his gun and open fire on his captor who immediately returned the fusillade. The murderer fell dead to the ground." (Verde Copper News; July 20, 1918.)

Lowry was just the second YCSO officer killed in the line of duty in the history of the department.

Due to continued unrest, a detachment of 50 infantrymen from the U.S. Army arrived Sept. 26, 1918, to assure peace and the continued production of copper at the Jerome mines and smelters at Clarkdale and Verde.

See: The Verde Independent: "1918: VERDE/CLEMENCEAU; Deputy Sheriff Lowry Murdered July 16;" July 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 2013.