

97

# DOCTOR ON HORSEBACK

A COLLECTION OF ANECDOTES  
LARGELY  
BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY  
MEDICALLY ORIENTED

DEPARTMENT OF  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES  
ARIZONA

RALPH F. PALMER, M.D.

1875-1954

AZ  
92  
P176

*Mesa Historical & Archaeological Society  
is pleased to publish this volume  
about Arizona when a century ended and  
the days we enjoy were far in the future.  
The pen of our beloved doctor townsman  
scribed it for remembering.*

*Copyright © 1979  
HARRIET PALMER McCARTER  
Mesa, Arizona*

# 1

## MURDER IN BLOODY BASIN

CAMP VERDE DURING the Apache Indian days was an Army Post. This was the scene of Captain Charles King's novel "*Winning His Spurs*" mentioned earlier in my Orchard Lake days. In the novel the Post was called Camp Sandy. Several of the old timers who had been in the country during the army occupation remembered Charley King and told me many stories about him which would bear repeating, but this is not an army story and I have plenty of my own experiences to tell about.

The population at the Post itself at the time of our advent was perhaps two hundred, but with a considerable number of ranches up and down the river. It was also headquarters for a number of cattle outfits on the surrounding ranges. Camp Verde is about 40 miles by road from Prescott and 25 from Jerome. These were the only two real roads. There were a few ruts going to ranches up and down the valley, and one passable road up Beaver Creek past Montezuma Castle and Well (both now National Monuments). There was also a road going across the river and up a canyon to the Mogollon Rim, and thence along the rim for many miles to the San Carlos Indian Reservation and on to El Paso — an old army trail.

The settlement boasted a general store and one smaller one, a saloon, a barber shop, blacksmith shop and boarding house besides a schoolhouse which was used as a church on Sundays and for meetings of the "Camp Verde Literary Society" once a

week on Wednesdays as well as for dances on Saturday nights. Also with my advent, there was "The Verde Drugstore."

On our arrival we put up at the Hances and went early to bed. About 5 a.m. Mrs. Hance woke me up to tell me that her husband, the Justice of Peace, wanted me at a ranch some 8 miles down the valley. She said her son Harvey had come in during the night with the message and had left a horse saddled and tied at the rack and for me to head him down past the general store and he, the horse, would take me to the ranch.

I reached the ranch just at daybreak and found some 12 to 14 cowboys around an open fire making coffee in a black pot and hot biscuits in a Dutch oven. The Justice of Peace introduced me to the boys as the new doctor and we had breakfast together. The Judge announced that this was a coroner's jury called to view the body of a man who had been shot at a cabin in Bloody Basin, some 45 miles south. The jury was sworn in and Hance showed me a horse called *Raccadoni* and told me I was to ride him on the trip.

Raccadoni was a beautiful bay with a racking gait which would do seven to eight miles an hour on good ground and riding him was like sitting in a rocking chair. The only trouble was that on the trail with other horses this gait was much too fast for the usual cow-pony jog which covered so many miles on the trails and caused them to take a rough trot to keep up. Raccadoni was from a famous thoroughbred Crowder stallion and one of Hance's good mares — but more about him later.

I would have been able to make the 45-mile ride to Brown Springs in Bloody Basin easily except that the cowboys had recently got to using spy glasses, and every once in a while they would spot an unbranded calf on a far ridge and take out after it. So Raccadoni and I had to go along too, often across rough ravines and canyons where our rocking-chair gait was not possible.

I think, too, the cowboys thought it a good opportunity to break in the new "tenderfoot doctor."

At any rate along towards evening we came to the Sullivan

## DOCTOR ON HORSEBACK

Goat Ranch where they picked up a burro and some pine boards for a coffin, and about three miles further we crossed a deep sand wash just below Brown Springs. In climbing the bank of this wash my saddle, which had become loose, slipped down over Raccadoni's rump and I slid off down into the wash quite all in. Some of the cowboys picked me up and carried me to the cabin about 100 yards or so farther, and one of them caught my horse and took care of him.

At the cabin the dead man was lying in front of the door. Although the altitude here was some 6,000 feet and the weather in December quite cool in the daytime and freezing at night, the body was quite bloated. The Judge called the jury to view the body and was about to move it away from the door when I suggested that the post-mortem autopsy should be done first. In my saddlebags I had my pocket case and proceeded with the old Cook County Morgue incision from chin to pelvis. As the distended gas-filled intestines rolled out, the coroner's jury departed the scene.

After learning the direction of the bullets and suturing the incision with a sacking needle, we moved the body a few feet from the cabin door under the only tree there. Brown Springs was also a goat camp and in the meantime Sullivan had gone up to a nearby corral and brought down a young goat which he proceeded to skin, hanging it from a limb of the tree under which we had dragged the body. After my professional duties were completed, I walked up to the springs to wash my gory hands. As I had to break the ice to reach water and there was no soap, my wash job was none too thorough.

While these things were going on some of the cowboys had found a dead tree and lugged it roots foremost through the door and into a small fireplace opposite, with the upper end sticking out through the door. They had a fire going and Hance had found a little flour and some sour beans. He was heating up a Dutch oven to make bread. A sack of shelled corn had been brought along for the horses but no food for the men.

When I came back from the springs, I found Harvey Hance

and Les Hart, who had taken particular delight in "breaking me in" on the ride from the ranch, toasting strips of goat meat on sticks. I asked them how to do it and they gave me a pointed stick. Not being hungry myself or at least too tired to eat, I rubbed my still gory-looking hands all over the strips of goat meat lying on the log and finally after selecting the strip I wanted, proceeded to put it on the stick and toast it. Harvey and Les evidently had lost their appetites also, at least they got up and went outside and nobody, including myself, seemed to care for the toasted goat meat. Hance's bread was apparently not appreciated either, and the very weak tea he made from some tea leaves left in a pot was about all we had for supper.

I think Sullivan went back to his ranch for I did not see him again that evening. Some of the boys had dug a shallow grave but not having nails to make a coffin put the body in and laid the boards on it in the grave and buried the corpse.

Smith, the "Murderer" who had shot the man, had come in for the inquest and as there was only one bunk in the cabin and that belonged to Smith, the Judge asked who would want to occupy it with him. There was no response and the only other sleeping accommodations were our wet saddle blankets along the log with the stump end burning in the fireplace. Of course, I could not sleep anyway and Hance had a fund of the dirtiest stories I have ever heard. To these I responded with post-mortem stories from my experiences in the Cook County morgue in Chicago and, with occasional intercessions from "Preacher Wright," a traveling cowboy preacher, we passed the night and at daylight started on the trail back to Camp Verde.

When we reached the Sullivan goat ranch I was so stiff and all in that Judge Hance suggested I stay there for a few days and rest up before trying to ride into Camp Verde. He assured me that Raccadoni would follow the trail so that I could not get lost.

Sullivan's ranch was a large area surrounded by a pole fence with a spring on one side emptying into a pond. The house was about in the center of this area which contained a couple of hun-

## DOCTOR ON HORSEBACK

dred goats. The goats were taken outside in the daytime to forage but brought in at night to water at the pond. I lay around there for three days — sleeping on goat skins, drinking goat milk, eating goat meat and goat-flavored bread and smelling that ever-present goat smell. I decided that stiff and sore as I was I would rather bear the discomfort of riding than resting any longer in a goat corral.

It was the fourth day after my companions had left me for Camp Verde when I saddled up and started north. We, Raccadoni and I, racked along at a good clip for three or four hours when we came to a ridge running east and west. It was good going on the ridge going east and it was not until we came out on a bluff and could look down on the Verde River about 50 feet below that I realized we had left the Camp Verde trail somewhere along that ridge. Anyway, I concluded we could both stand a drink and as the bluff was almost straight up and down we went back a few hundred yards and found a place where by jumping off the rim two or three feet there was a steep but gravelly slope to the sand wash below.

I got off the horse and pushed him over the bluff and he slid on down to the wash and started down to the river. I followed as fast as I could but when I reached the river, Raccadoni, instead of waiting for me to catch his bridle, raised his head and forded the river coming out on a sandbank in a cove between two bluffs. There were some tufts of grass there which he started to nibble. I lay down on my belly and had a drink, then whistled and called but got no response from the horse. Finally I waded across the river, some 50 feet but not over waist deep, thinking of course Raccadoni would let me catch him. He had other ideas however, and before I could reach him, he went back into the river wading upstream and coming out in the next cove above the ridge we had followed.

At least he was making north toward home.

We played this little game for two more crossings until Raccadoni probably thought he had had enough fun with me and finally let me catch him on the east side of the Verde. The ridges

on this side seemed less precipitous than on the west so we headed north by going up the sand washes till we found a place where we could climb the bank and get over. At last, when I was beginning to think we would never come to the end of them, the horse took off up one of the ridges in a determined manner and, although I was loath to leave the river which I knew would eventually take us up to Camp Verde and once out of the canyon we'd be in open country, I let him have his head.

The horse was right and evidently knew the country for in a short time he took a trail slanting down the north side of the ridge. The trail was well defined and evidently not a cow trail. After another hour or so we entered a wide canyon running north and south and very soon came to a cabin. Believe it or not, it was another goat corral.

The goat herder, a man named Holden, fed me some beans and coffee and told me the trail which had come from Indian Spring at the mouth of Fossil Creek was one used by the Indians for many years in their treks to the Spring, also what was more to the point that it led to the Bill Wingfield ranch on Clear Creek about 10 miles north. So, much refreshed both mentally and physically, we went on to the Wingfield ranch where we spent the night and got home on the following day. My wife and Mrs. Hance were beginning to get quite worried and Mrs. Hance was insisting that the Judge send a cowboy to the Sullivan ranch. He, however, was just as insistent that Raccadoni knew the country and would bring me back okay, which of course he did, but not in the way that Hance had thought.

I think the cowboys, after the breaking in they had given me, decided that I was fit company for them and during my year at Camp Verde — and for many years thereafter — they showed their friendship for me in many ways.

# 2

## THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY COMES TO TOWN

**A** FEW DAYS AFTER MY RETURN we moved into our own place in Camp Verde, and Joe Morrison, the District Attorney at Prescott, came to prosecute the murder charges against Smith. Joe drove down with his wife on a Saturday to get details and prepare his case for trial on Monday. Two or three things upset his preparations.

First, as there were no hotels and as we had acquired an extra bed, they stayed with us. Saturday night after supper at the boarding house the girls stopped in at some kind of woman's meeting going on in the schoolhouse. Joe and I wandered around the old parade grounds for a bit, and then dropped in at Bill Lane's Saloon. Here, besides a drink, we found a poker game in session. Bill Head, a rancher near Camp Verde and owner of the Head Hotel in Prescott, was in the game. As he and Joe were acquainted, we were invited to sit in the game.

We were introduced to Joe Crain, a one-armed old-timer but plenty fast with his good hand, to Bill Eades the stage driver, and to Bill Lane the proprietor of the saloon. As my collections had not started to come in yet, I borrowed fifty from Joe and, fortunately, had good cards. With my college experience in penny ante I was able to play them even in fast company, so that we came out all right financially, even though Joe lost a little.

Also fortunately, about 1 a.m. the girls had gotten lonely and started looking for us, busting in the side door, and breaking

up the game at a time when Joe and I combined were ahead. We protested some on cashing-in our chips, but of course we had to do it.

Sunday morning Joe and I borrowed a steel boat from Dave Wingfield whose father Henry ran the general store. This boat was slung on the axle of two wheels. The horse that pulled it was accustomed to go up the river some five miles and, when turned loose, would take the wheels back to the corral by himself. We also borrowed a couple of shot guns and bought some shells. We launched the boat and had some 16 miles of river to float down. Between us, we got about a dozen ducks and had a swell time.

After supper that evening we all went to the church services in the schoolhouse. The preacher was a Dunkard<sup>4</sup> and we had heard that he was notorious for beating and cursing his mules on weekdays and preaching the Gospel on Sundays. We were all four sitting on the front bench and after a few prayers the preacher launched into his sermon — the principal topic being the iniquities of those who gambled on Saturday nights and shot ducks on Sunday.

After the tirade had gone on for a time, and I for one was thinking what a poor start I had made for a doctor in a moral community, Joe got up and interrupted the preacher with the request that he might have the floor and make a few remarks. Joe, who in his early thirties was already a finished orator, turned loose on the preacher to everyone's delight, and it was said that thereafter his mules had a much happier existence and the air around the preacher's ranch was much less blue on weekdays.

The trial came off Monday morning. Smith, as the only actual witness of the shooting, testified that the man had come up to his cabin about dark and rapped on the door. Smith told him to go away but instead, so Smith said, the man pulled his gun and started to come in so he had to take his rifle and shoot. However, the coroner's jury found that Smith had fired through

<sup>4</sup>A sect of German-Americans opposed to military service and the taking of oaths, properly called "German Baptist Brethern."

## DOCTOR ON HORSEBACK

the clapboard door as evidenced by three bullet holes.

The autopsy showed that the three bullets had entered the body from behind, one through the back of the head coming out the left eyeball, one through the chest with wound of exit anterior, and one through the back and abdomen with wound of exit on right flank. After Joe's impassioned speech to the jury, during part of which Mrs. Morrison was pulling on his coattail, the jury rendered Smith a verdict of "Guilty of murder." The Judge bound him over to the grand jury on his own recognition.

Smith took advantage of his liberty and has not been heard of since.

# 3

## OBSTETRICS IN THE COUNTRY

**D**R. KETCHERSIDE HAD LEFT ME some cases of one kind and another. One of them, a primipara (first child birth), was due most any time. She lived up the Verde River several miles and on this case I learned some of the local customs and also got some needed medical experience.

I was called on a Wednesday evening. On entering the house, I noticed a peculiar odor first and then that several neighborhood women were sitting around with little sticks in their mouths. The lumberjacks in Michigan used to chew Copenhagen snuff, and the odor seemed familiar, but the sticks were new to me. These Verde women, mostly from the South, were