

The Hanging Tree

Part I

By Robert Hutchison

On the morning of August 11, 1888, between 25 and 27 men converged on the Aztec Spring Ranch of James Warren Stott. They moved in from five locations—Tonto Basin, Pleasant Valley/Young, Heber, Snowflake/Taylor and Holbrook. With only substandard telegraph (or none at all) and no newspaper or post office service to record the specific date, it was a well-planned conspiracy—to commit the triple homicides that were about to be carried out.

Deputy Sheriff J.D. Houck of the Black Canyon Sheep Ranch was the leader. He had no warrant for any of the three young men, each of whom was 24 years of age. Jamie Stott and Jeff Wilson prepared breakfast for the men, including hot coffee, not knowing it would be the last meal for both. They had no knowledge of the fact that, within hours, they would be murdered by the men whom they had fed—at a location 25 miles away.

In a Holbrook eatery, Houck swore publicly that he would be grazing his sheep on Jamie Stott's Aztec Springs Cattle Ranch, at T11N-R18E-Sec. 22. And, for the next 12 to 15 years, Houck did exactly that.

Ranch hand James Scott was brought from Young, Arizona by Houck and had spent the night of August 10, 1888 at Jamie Stott's Bear Springs Camp, two miles away.

A former homestead consideration, newcomer cowboy Jeff Wilson of Texas, had been working for Jamie Stott for only a few days. He, too, would be murdered.

A Prescott newspaper had reported that the quarter section homestead would be granted legal title to the Aztec Springs Ranch in a couple of months as Jamie Stott had "proved it up," with work accomplished during the three previous years.

Everyone wanted the Stott ranch.

At the hangings

James Scott and Jeff Wilson were begging for their lives and crying out for their mothers as they were being hanged from a Ponderosa pine at FR 300 and FR 86. The stated location now bears the name Hangman's Trail.

Jamie, the third to be hanged, challenged the cowards, stating that if they would untie him he would fight all of them—with fists, clubs or guns.

Houck ordered masked guards to keep the bodies hanging in the hot August sun, at the junction of the three trails, until August 15.

Lamotte Clymer and Alfred Ingham, both of whom suffered from tuberculosis, were witnesses to the abductions. Ingham walked 47 miles, from the Aztec Ranch to Holbrook, to report that which had taken place.

The first responding deputies to arrive at the scene of the hangings were prevented by the guards from accessing the area.

A second group of responders, from Snowflake, were able to lower the bodies down into a wagon drawn by mules and they were taken down the hill to the gravesite in the Black Canyon Middle Fork of the West Fork, at T10-1/2-R15E-Sec. 27.

Snowflake responders were led by Deputy Sheriff Sam Brown who stated that Jamie was wearing the gold ring of James Stott, Sr. when he was buried.

Though each of the young men's bodies was in an extreme state of decomposition, they were identifiable.

James Scott had one blue eye and one brown eye. He was 5' 2" in height.

Jamie Stott was 6' 2" and always had a gold ring on his left hand.

Jeff Wilson was of medium build.

Confusion exists concerning the crime. Why is Jeff Wilson buried in Jamie Stott's mock gravesite and why is there no body in Jeff Wilson's grave?

Why is the author of *Crooked Trail to Holbrook* (Leland J. Hanchett, Jr.) pictured standing over Jamie Stott's true grave (along with Hanchett's wife), one and three-fourths miles away? That gravesite being in a different canyon, close to the gravesite of a shepherd who had worked for Deputy Sheriff Houck.) The gravesites are within a few feet of each other.

Serial killers usually keep a trophy from each victim. A published source states that Houck had 31 notches in his pistol grip—not counting Native American killings. And Apache County Sheriff Commodore Perry Owens allegedly bragged of having about the same number of notches.

The foregoing research is based upon information available at the time of this writing.

A second part of Hutchison's story will be published in the September 2016 issue.