

One of Curly Bill's informants in Mexico sent him word that a rich mule train was being put together by smugglers to bring into Arizona. He said that their route of travel would be through Skeleton Canyon, which twists and turns through the roughest parts of the Peloncillo Mountains. The mule train would come through San Luis Pass into the Animas Mountains, across the Animas Valley into San Simon, into the San Pedro Valley, and up through the Santa Cruz Valley. Once outside Tucson, the smugglers would set up their camp and purchase contraband merchandise with their adobe dollars to smuggle back into old Mexico.

Skeleton Canyon had long ago earned its grisly name because of the numerous murders that had been done there, and the bodies left without burial. Wild animals and vultures (nature's undertakers) had stripped the flesh and left the bones scattered about.

The smugglers led the line of small Andalusian mules through the narrow, rocky trails of Skeleton Canyon on August 1, 1881. They did not realize that other men, with robbery and murder in mind, lay in wait. Therefore, they were totally surprised when riflemen, hidden in the rocks and brush began to shoot them down. The Mexican smugglers were given no chance at all. Trapped in that narrow canyon of death, the only avenues of escape were up or down the trail. The concealed riflemen commanded the rocky canyon walls on both sides. As the Mexicans were cut down, the little mules stampeded up and down the canyon, carrying the leather bags of adobe dollars.

Curly Bill and his killer horde chased the heavily loaded little mules down and shot them. Mules and Mexicans were left lying where they fell in Devil's Kitchen. The killers took their ill-gotten gains to Cave Creek Canyon, where they divided \$4,000 in Mexican silver bullion and coin, plus mescal, horses, and cattle. It took several days for the outlaws to spend all their money on women and whiskey in the Galeyville and Charleston saloons. Ringo and Joe Hill won a big part of their loot in poker games.

Ringo later said that "Old Man", Ike, and Billy Clanton, Tom and Frank McLaury, Jim Hughes, Joe Hill, Curly Bill, Charlie Snow, Jake Gauze,

Charlie Thomas, and "Rattlesnake Bill" were with him at the Skeleton Canyon massacre.

Meanwhile, Curly Bill had sent six of his Cowboys, Alex Arnett, Jake Gauze, Bud Snow, John McGill, Jake McKenzie, and Milt Hicks, to Mexico to rustle a few cattle. They made a quick trip and stampeded about one hundred head of cattle through San Luis Pass and into the Animas Valley. Ringo, Curly Bill, Tall Bell, Charlie Thomas, Charlie Green, Jim Crane, Joe Hill, Billy Lang and John Greene, were at Roofless 'dobe ranch. They rode over and joined the men with the stolen cattle. All the men drove the cattle to "Old Man" Clanton's ranch, where they sold them to Clanton.

Clanton planned to rest and feed them well for a few days, then head them to the nearest cash market, which was Tombstone. The wily old man expected a quick sale and a big profit. The journey did not end in the manner he expected.

The route of travel that he laid out was from Clanton's ranch in the Animas Valley through the Sulphur Springs Valley, around the Dragoon Mountains to Tombstone. They set up camp the first night in Guadalupe Canyon about one mile south of the international border, near the Four Corners area.

Before that first night ended Clanton had six men keeping him company; Dixie Lee Gray, Billy Lang, Charlie Snow, Billy Byers, Harry Ershaw, and Jim Crane. The latter named was one of those who had held up the Contention stage, killing Budd Philpot and Peter Roerig in the process on March 15, 1881. Warrants were out for his arrest and Wyatt Earp wanted desperately to capture him.

(Authors note: Glenn Boyer, the foremost Earp historian, and many natives of that area insist that this was Skeleton Canyon and not Guadalupe. A highly defined map shows that what they say is entirely logical, probably the most logical location. However, the evidence presented here will stress Guadalupe Canyon because newspaper and other accounts of the time label that location.

From this point, many words have been written and a variety of versions have been presented. The author will attempt to relate the information available at the time of the ambush).

Episodes along the border coupled with the Skeleton Canyon massacre on August 1, 1881, set the stage for the entire border country to explode in gunfire. Explode it did on August 13, 1881, when "Old Man" Clanton and his men were shot down. The Tombstone Daily Epitaph on August 16, 1881, carried a full story:

"MORE BORDER TROUBLES"

*"Mexicans on a Raid - five men killed including
the notorious Jim Crane"*

"About half past four o'clock last evening news reached town that Dick Gray, youngest son of M. Gray of our city and well known here, had been killed together with four others by Mexicans near the town of Gillespie, New Mexico. The news caused considerable excitement and knots of curious inquirers gathered about the streets eager to hear the particulars. About an hour later Andy Aines and Joe Trebble arrived in town from the scene of the murders and confirmed the news. There are several reports as to the causes that led to this lamentable affair. The immediate particulars are about as follows: A party consisting of Wm. Lang, Dick Gray, Jim Crane, Charlie Snow, the senior Clanton, Wm. Byers, and Harry Ernshaw camped last Friday night in Guadalupe Canyon about one hundred and ten miles east from Tombstone and very near to the Mexican line. Early on Saturday the party was attacked by Mexicans and Lang, Gray, Crane, Snow, and Clanton were killed. Byers escaped with a wound in the abdomen while Ernshaw ran away amidst a shower of bullets, one of which grazed his nose. It is estimated that the Mexican party numbered from 25 to 30 men. The condition of the camp indicated that the attack was made just as the murdered men were about getting up; one had evidently been killed while yet laying down.

Jim Crane, it will be remembered, was involved in the murder of "Budd" Philpot. He joined the fated party, we are informed, at midnight Friday and was only camped with them for the night. He was a fugitive from Justice and an outlaw and the six bullets that struck him were certainly well expended. Wm. Lang was a young man about 22 years of age and had been in that section of the country with his cattle about three months. In conversation with his father last evening, our reporter learned

that the two came to Arizona from Kansas about five months ago. They are men of large capital, have had an extended experience in the stock business and intended putting about 10,000 head of cattle on their range had it not been for these border troubles. The son was bringing in some beef cattle for the Tombstone market when killed. Mr. Lang leaves today to see that his son's body is properly buried and to move the cattle.

It is certainly lamentable that the good should be slain with the bad and yet this was nothing more than was to be expected as a result of the raids from both sides of the line. For example, we understand that a party of "rustlers" as they are called, went down into Mexico last month and rounded up some cattle. They were followed by the Mexicans who got so close upon them that they were obliged to abandon the stock. This was done in the vicinity of the late murders. The Mexicans took the stock and started back for home; at the same time picking up such cattle and horses, as they chanced to meet. The stock was missed and a party of 16 Americans started in pursuit, overtook the Mexicans, had a fight with them, and retook the stock. This occurred during the latter part of July. If this is true, it is probable that the recent raiders were some of the same party defeated last month."

An excerpt from the *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, August 18, 1881,
read:

"Great excitement has prevailed in Tombstone and vicinity for the past twenty-four hours. A large party has been raised to avenge the murders, headed by Mike Gray and Mr. Lang (sic) who had sons (sic) killed. The Clanton boys, whose father was murdered, also have raised a body of men, altogether numbering over 200 as desperate a gang, as could be imagined. They (made a) rendezvous at Soldier's Home (sic), 25 miles east of this city, and will carry the war into Mexico. Great apprehension is felt for Americans in Sonora, as it will more than likely be a war of retaliation. We are hourly expecting a collision. Mexican Troops are in force on this line and will repel the invaders. Governor Fremont, being absent, there is no head to the American forces, and lawlessness seems to be the order of the day. Serious international complications will arise unless immediate steps are taken to put a stop to the movement on foreign soil. Blood will flow like water before another week rolls around."

The Record-Union, August 19, 1881, continued:

"Tombstone August 18th

"General Adolfo Dominguez has just arrived from the frontier of Sonora, where he holds the position of Adjutant under General Jose Otero, now in command of the troops on the Mexican frontier. General Dominguez said: 'Our people have been great sufferers. We have lost many citizens killed and much property stolen. We are therefore taking active steps to protect our citizens and repel raiders. There are 200 regulars, besides the militia, on the line, and three forts and supply camps are to be established at once. Every precaution will be taken to protect both our own citizens and such Americans as are engaged in legitimate industry within our lives. I hope to effect an arrangement by which a most thorough harmonious and efficient co-operation may exist between the American and Mexican troops operating on the border. We can only drive out these thieves and murderers by united action. We are not only willing but very anxious that such united action should exist.

Affairs have gradually been growing more desperate. It is estimated that within the last month more than ten citizens have been killed and upward of \$20,000 worth of property taken.'

Two companies of the Sixth Cavalry have been ordered from Camp Huachuca to Camp Grant, the nearest post to the scene of trouble.

General Otero has ordered Captain Carrillo, with his company, to the line where the raiders were expected to cross with their plunder, as the courier had ridden day and night, Captain Carrillo thought he must be some distance ahead of the raiders. It is not improbable that the killing in Guadalupe Canyon might have been done by the Mexican regulars under Captain Carrillo, as they were headed in that direction. Carrillo has about fifty men in his company."

It is apparent that the Mexican government meant business. Either the Americans would solve the problems caused by their outlaws or the Mexicans would and Crawley Dake did have an Earp posse in the Four Corners area. It would have been wise to use it.

The Arizona Weekly Star, August 25, 1881, revealed later information:

"Border Warfare!"

The recent massacre in New Mexico

"The Tombstone Nugget of the 16th inst., contains full details of the recent massacre of Americans in Guadalupe Canyon, New Mexico. Parties who were on the ground within a few hours after the murders were committed, are now in Tombstone. The following is the story of one of them; John Gray, brother of one of the victims of the horrible tragedy:

"A party of seven started on the morning of the 12th from Lang's ranch with a band of cattle for the Tombstone market. They camped that night in Guadalupe Canyon, and in the morning, the 13th, at about sunrise, while all but two of the party were asleep, they were surprised by a party of 25 or 30 Mexicans, who opened fire upon them, and killed my brother Dixie Lee Gray, Billy Lang, Old Man Clanton, Charley Snow and Jim Crane. Billy Byers was shot through the right arm and I think, through the stomach, and he will probably die, if not already dead. The seventh man was known as "Harry." I don't remember his other name. He says after the firing commenced, he concealed himself behind a large bear bush and emptied two revolvers at the assailants. At this time, he was joined by Billy Lang, and they concluded to try and escape, and started to run, when the Mexicans opened a full volley on them and Billy fell. The bullets whistled all around him, one grazing the bridge of his nose, but he succeeded in getting away without any further injury and made his way back to Lang's ranch. Immediately upon his arrival there, the boys at the place hurried to the scene of the killing and found the bodies of the five men. They then commenced to search for Billy Byers and found that he had been taken in by the rancher near by, but had in a fit of delirium, again wandered off. In a short time they found him in an exhausted condition, and took him to Lang's ranch.

The D. L. Gray, mentioned as among the killed, was a son of Col. Mike Gray, well known in Tucson and also throughout California. The prevailing impression in Tombstone now is that the murders were committed by Mexican troops. It is known that a company of soldiers, under the command of Capt. Carrillo, were scouring the country in the

vicinity of the scene of the massacre in search of a party of cowboys who had been depredating on Mexican soil. It is not unlikely that this affair may lead to serious complications between the two governments. At any rate, it will result in bloody border feuds between representatives of both nationalities, as the victims of the outrage were well known and have many friends and their deaths will not be allowed to pass unavenged."

The Arizona Weekly Star, September 1, 1881, printed even more:

"STORY OF AN EYEWITNESS"

"One of the ill-fated Lang party tells how they were murdered."

"Billy Byers, one of the two who were fortunate to escape at the time of the murder of the Lang party, near the Chihuahua line, by Mexicans, came into Tombstone Monday, bringing with him the wagon which the party had with them at the time. It had some 30 bullet holes in it, showing that a large number of shots were fired and that the attacking party were far from being good marksmen. Byers is rather under the medium size, has light hair, a fair complexion, and a quiet determined look. He came from Leavenworth, Kansas, last spring. A Nugget reporter interviewed Byers, who gave the following version of the killings.

We pitched our camp in a small swag between three low hills, which formed a sort of triangle around the camp, and at about daybreak the cattle appeared uneasy and showed signs of stampeding, when Will Lang said to Charlie Snow, who was guarding the cattle, 'Charley, get your gun. I think there's a bear up there, and, if so, kill it.' Charley then rode up one of the hills when the Mexicans opened fire, shooting him and pouring a volley into the camp. At the time they fired Dick Gray, Jim Crane, and myself had not got up, but Will Lang, 'Old Man' Clanton, and Harry Ernshaw were up or dressing. Gray, Crane, and Clanton were shot at the first fire, and almost instantly killed. When they first fired and killed Charley Snow I thought the boys were firing at a bear, jumped out of my blankets, and as I got up the boys around me were shot. As soon as I saw what was up, I looked for my rifle, and not seeing it,

grabbed my revolver, and seeing them shooting at us from all sides, started to run, but had not gone forty feet when I was shot across my body, but I didn't fall, and in a few more steps was hit in my arm, knocked the pistol out of my hand and I fell down.

When I went down, Harry and Will passed me both running for the canyon. Soon Will fell, shot through the legs and he then turned his revolver loose, and I think killed one Mexican and wounded another, as one man was killed and another badly wounded, and he was the only one that did much fighting.

You must remember that the reason we had no chance to fight was that the Mexicans had crawled up behind the low hills mentioned, and being almost over us fired right down among us. We could see nothing but little whiffs of smoke. Soon after, I saw some Mexicans coming from the direction Will and Harry had run, wearing their hats, and then I thought they had been killed or had lost their hats in getting away.

When I saw the Mexicans begin stripping the bodies, I took off what clothes I had, even my finger ring, and lay stretched out with my face down and I was all bloody from my wounds, I thought they would pass me by thinking I was dead, and had already been stripped. I was not mistaken, for they never touched me, but as one fellow passed me on horseback he fired several shots at me, one grazing my head, and the others striking at my side, throwing dirt over me. But I kept perfectly still and he rode on. They stripped the bodies, cut open the valises, took all the horses and saddles, and, in fact, everything they could, possibly getting altogether, including money, \$2,000.

The only way I can account for Harry's escape is that when Will began shooting at them, they turned most of their guns on him and that gave Harry a chance to get away. After they rode off I waited a long time, thinking they might come back or were watching. Finally, I crawled to where my pistol was and secured that, and then I heard someone and cocked my pistol determined to shoot if it was a Mexican, but it was one of the boys from the ranch, who having heard the shooting, rode over. He put me on his horse and took me over to the canyon, saying he would come back for me at night, but he didn't and I started for the ranch and was not found until the next day."

Byers told quite a story, one that showed him a master of quick thinking and sheer cold nerve to shed his clothes and lie still while they were shooting at him. At a later date he enhanced his story to include three men, who appeared to be in command, standing on a hill and providing direction to the others. He stated that he had no doubt that they were Mexican soldiers and he thought that they belonged to one of the companies stationed at Fronteras, as they buried one Mexican killed and took away another, badly wounded.

At a later time, John Pleasant Gray wrote and left a manuscript, concerning the Guadalupe Canyon affair, with the Arizona Historical Society. The author includes excerpts of information not included in previous accounts:

"A man by the name of Harry Ernshaw staggered into our camp in an exhausted condition, and it was some little time before he could tell the story.

He said he was with Lang's outfit, had come out from Tombstone with the object of buying some milk cows but not finding what he wanted, was returning with Lang's beef herd to Tombstone. They had driven a herd of one hundred steers into Guadalupe Canyon on Friday the day before, and made camp in the first clear spot they found which was near the rock monument which marks the four corners of Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora and Chihuahua.

It seems that during the night the herd stampeded and ran back up the canyon, and in rounding up the scattered herd some of the cowboys ran across my brother Dick, who had evidently been belated and had made camp. On learning of the trouble with the herd, Dick had saddled up and helped them drive the beeves back to camp. It seemed that a chain of circumstances was leading him blindly on to his fate.

Just before daylight, Charlely Snow, a cowboy who was on herd, rode into camp and Ernshaw heard him tell the cook, "Old Man" Clanton, who was starting breakfast, that he felt sure a bear had frightened the cattle and he was going to circle around in the brush in the hope of getting a shot at it. This move of Snow's evidently started the trouble.

The Mexicans must have been concealed in the surrounding brush, and Snow probably rode right into them, for almost at once a volley of shots rang out, coming from all sides. Ernshaw had no gun and like most any tenderfoot in that position would have done, he just got up and ran. He did not know even the direction he took; he just kept going with his boots in his hand. He did not see what happened to the others, except "Old Man" Clanton, the cook, whom he saw fall face forward into the fire he had started for breakfast.

Our ranch was about fifteen miles from the place, and when Ernshaw staggered in about dusk, he must have gone many miles out of his way, as he said he had never paused in his flight except to stop a minute to pull on his boots. How he happened to find us must have been pure luck for he had never been there before. There were only two of us at the ranch as the house had been finished and the builders had returned sometime before to Tombstone. So our only recourse for help was to go to a new mining camp on the east slope of the Animas Mountains, called Gillespie, twenty miles away.

I rode horseback over there that night, finding twenty-five miners at the camp. They, to the last man, nobly responded to my appeal for help. All had horses or mules to ride, and in scarcely no time at all were mounted and on the way back with me. We stopped at the ranch to get the wagon and team, loaded on the needed supplies, and pulled out for Guadalupe Canyon.

In a grassy glade, now so still and peaceful looking, lay four human bodies, probably just at the spots they had been sleeping when the first fire of the attacking Mexicans had caught them. All were perfectly nude, having evidently been stripped of all clothing by the Mexicans. The only thing left of the camp outfit was the buckboard standing near the ashes of the campfire, and that was probably left because it would have been almost impossible to take it over the mountain trail which the Mexicans had to travel in order to reach their home.

The dead lying there were: Billy Lang, cattle rancher; Jim Crane, the outlaw; (Crane being on his way in to surrender to the sheriff as we had talked him into doing); "Old Man" Clanton, the cook mentioned

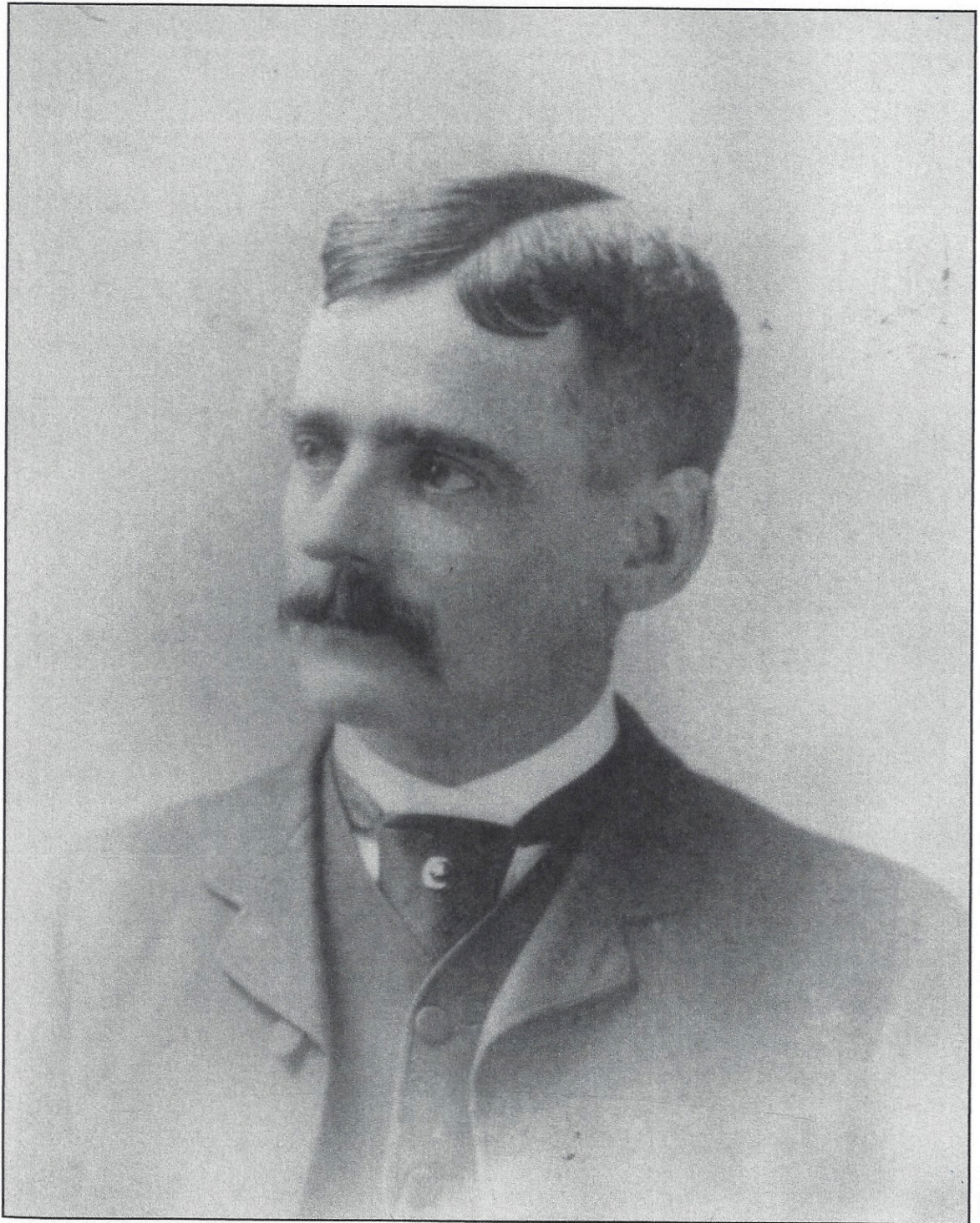
before; and my brother, Dick - just turned nineteen. There were still two of Lang's outfit missing and we spread out in search of them. We found one dead body of Charley Snow, the man who had told the cook he was going to look for the supposed bear. Evidently, he had made a gallant fight as his body was riddled. He lay about a half-mile from camp. The other cowboy, Billy Byers, we found alive some five miles away. He was shot through the front of the abdomen and the ball had gone clear through his body, but evidently not deep enough to penetrate any vital part, as he was walking along in a dazed condition, completely out of his head.

His wound was in a frightful condition from the heat and the flies, but some of our miner friends knew what to do, and they cleaned and dressed the wound.

With this wounded boy, all were present or accounted for. We had to bury Charley Snow where we found his body as it was too far gone to be moved. The other four bodies and the wounded boy were placed in the wagon.

We took our dead back to the ranch and in coffins constructed of lumber for which we tore up the flooring with the aid of our miner friends we buried the four bodies in a little square plot on the top of a nearby knoll, rendering an equal and honorable reverence to all. Jim Crane, the outlaw, had gone before a higher court and we were no more his judges."

[AUTHOR'S NOTE:] This burial location was in the Animas Valley, halfway between the ranches of Clanton and Lang, ten miles east of Cloverdale.



BILLY BYERS. Wounded in Guadalupe Canyon, but lived to tell his story. First published in "Wyatt Earp's 13 Dead Men", by Traywick, 1988. LARRY BYERS PHOTO, GRANDSON OF BILLY.

WYATT EARP: ANGEL OF DEATH



BILLY LANG. Killed in Guadalupe Canyon. First published in "Wyatt Earp's 13 Dead Men", by Traywick, 1998. COURTESY OF LARRY BYERS.

A reporter wrote about Warren Earp in Gunnison, Colorado. Excerpts from the story follow:

"Do you see that man standing over there?" said a well known business man to a News-Democrat reporter yesterday, pointing to a rather tall well-dressed, pleasant looking stranger who stood leaning against the counter, tapping his foot with his cane, while he remained a silent listener to the conversation that was going on around him. "If you want an item, tackle him. If you can get him to talk he can give 'em to you - dead - oodles of them."

"Who is he?" asked the reporter, his curiosity somewhat aroused.

"That's Wyatt Earp, from Arizona, and there's his brother Warren, 'the Tiger' they call him, sitting over there. They don't look like bold bad men do they? Well, they're not, but you bet your life they've got the sand. I've known 'em for a long time now, and I'd just like you to tackle 'em once. 'The Tiger' is a good one. He's a square man, but he will fight when necessary, and you just ought to see him turn himself loose. He'll just grab his two six-shooters and shut his eyes and wade in. He's a holy terror when he gets started. Wyatt is the general of the party, but the 'Tiger' is generally on hand when there's any fighting to be done."

"What are they doing here?" asked the reporter.

"Wyatt is a Deputy United States Marshal and is here on business partly, and then Tombstone got too hot for them just now. You see there's a big crowd of Cowboys out there that the Earp crowd has been fighting, and six of the Cowboys got killed within the last few months. Doc Holladay (sic) is a friend of the Earps and was with them in their fights, and that is why some of the people in Arizona were so anxious to get him back there. They didn't want to try him; not much. All they wanted was to get a hold of him once. None of these boys would object to going back and standing trial on any charges that could be brought against them, but they know that if they went back there now they would all be killed."

The reporter thought he would interview the 'Tiger' first. He found him a young man of perhaps twenty-eight or thirty, with clear blue

eyes and brown hair and mustache. He looked like anything but a fighter, and yet there was a look of firmness about the face that showed that the young man was not a man to fool with. He was neatly dressed and walks lame from the effects of a gun shot wound."

It was unbelievable that Byers, expecting to be killed at any second, could recognize the ambushers as Mexicans from Fronteras. And all the while, he was playing dead. It was thoughtful of them to leave him his pistol. This massacre left a lot of unanswered questions at the time. It appears that most of the men in Clanton's camp just happened by and stayed the night. Ernsshaw was out looking for milk cows and saw the camp. Gray was already camped alone, saw them gathering cattle and joined them. Then the most unusual appearance of all, a noted, wanted outlaw rode into camp at midnight.

That puts together an entire string of unusual occurrences; an unarmed tenderfoot, a politician's son and a murderer, all riding about alone in the most dangerous spot in Arizona Territory and all three found the same camp! Isn't that an unusual coincidence?

As evidence of his opinion in this entire event, George Parsons wrote in his diary on August 17, 1881:

"Am glad they killed him (Crane) - as for the others - if not guilty of cattle stealing, they had no business to be found in such company."

Jim and Tom Goldrup, Clanton relatives, state:

"Milt Joyce, owner of the Oriental saloon, believed that the Earps were anxious to silence Jim Crane before he got to Tombstone and that they were behind the ambush. That makes us wonder about the three men Byers saw standing on the hill directing the ambush. Could it have been Captain Carrillo with two of his officers? We believe that Mexican soldiers were involved, but do not know for sure."

On November 9, 1881, Will McLaury (older brother to Tom and Frank) wrote a letter in Tombstone to D.D. Applegate Esq., Toledo, Iowa, in which he referred to the Guadalupe Canyon Massacre. He wrote: "At the time they were killed, Doc Holliday was out of town-said to be visiting in Georgia."

Neither Wyatt nor the members of his posse had much to say about Guadalupe Canyon. A number of the townspeople knew that Doc Holliday and Warren Earp rode out with the posse on August 5, 1881, but did not come back with it.

Strangely enough, the Cowboys had little to say about Guadalupe Canyon not even the Clanton brothers. It was as if they did not hold the Mexicans accountable for the ambush.

AUTHOR'S VIEW OF THE GUADALUPE CANYON MASSACRE:

It was public knowledge by September and October of 1878, that U.S. Marshal Crawley Dake had used Wells Fargo, the U.S. Army and the Secret Service to capture outlaws who tried to cross the border and escape into Mexico. Dake had on seven separate occasions sent a deputy marshal with a posse into Mexico on a definite objective. So sending a federal posse into Mexico to chase down outlaws from the United States was nothing new to Crawley Dake. He was a "do the best you can with what you have" man, but he did get things done. This attitude had much to do with Guadalupe Canyon.

SOURCE:

1. Arizona Daily Miner, September 7, 24, October 8, 1878