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Shootout In Stephens County:

The "Wal" Williams Story

By Mary S. Redmond

Three miles south of Marlow, in the middle part of Stephens county, at a spot on Highway 81 which is called the Marlow-Duncan-Lawton "Y," there is a monument. Hundreds of motorists pass it every day, but few, of course, stop to read it.

If they did, however, here is what they would learn about that monument. Its inscription reads as follows:

"Erected in honor of the services of all peace officers and dedicated to the memory of W. A. ("Wal") Williams. . .

1869 - 1930

Who gave his life in the courageous performance of his duty May 13, 1930."

Wal Williams was an Oklahoma lawman, and a good one. His monument sits on the very spot where he received the gunshot wounds which would kill him in a bloody shootout which, 54 years ago, rocked this sleepy rural area. This is the story of that shootout — and the story of Wal Williams.

He was born in Colorado, just four years after the close of the Civil War. But he grew up in Kansas, where he married Minnie L. Powers. Theirs were farming families, and farming is what brought the couple to Comanche

country in Oklahoma in 1901. There, four miles west and one-half mile south of Marlow, Williams established his farm and became known throughout the country for the Duroc pure-bred hogs he raised. Perhaps his most famous sale was to the fabled 101 Ranch: a single boar with a price tag of \$5,000.

This kind of background doesn't sound much like one that could be attributed to a lawman-in-the-making, but Wal Williams was always interested in public service and politics: he was a Republican who frequently served as a state convention delegate. And this, indirectly, is what led him to his career as Stephens County Sheriff. During World War I, Herbert Hoover, at that time serving as Food Administrator under President Woodrow Wilson, appointed Williams as chairman of a committee which would represent the entire swine industry of this country in Washington. It was a great honor, and it made Wal Williams an official public servant.

He took time out to run the Marlow Auto Company in 1924, but that lasted only until 1928. Williams knew that Stephens county Republicans had other plans for him, and in November of the same year those plans were realized. By a margin of 2½ votes to 1,

Wal Williams was elected sheriff.

Now, those who are wont to believe in portents might well have taken some meaning from the bout with illness which struck Sheriff Williams down in early January of 1929. It was pneumonia, and Williams, who was to be sworn in on Monday, January 7, was confined to his home at 505 West Kiowa in Marlow. But his recovery was going well, and he had no doubts that he would be there for his swearing-in ceremony.

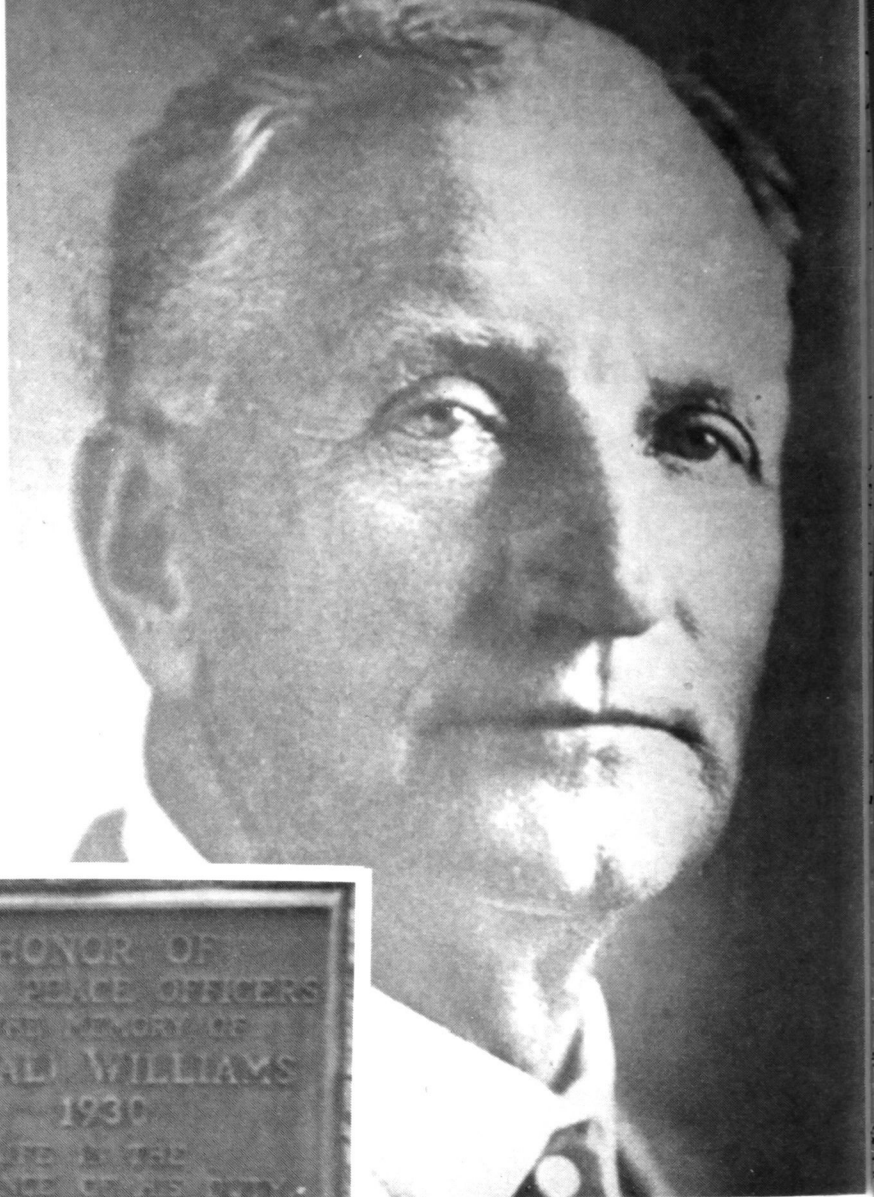
Somebody, however, had other plans.

Hours before he was to be sworn in, just before 1 A.M., as the Williams family lay sleeping in the house, a bomb blast devastated the surroundings. One local rancher would later claim that he heard the explosion on his farm 14 miles east of Marlow. It was a crude bomb — home made — but it did plenty of damage, blowing the family bathtub in two and wrecking the west portion of the house. Even the nearby Cumberland Presbyterian Church was damaged from the blast.

But Wal Williams was unhurt.

His bed, which he was occupying at the time, was lifted off the floor. Mrs. Williams, who was sleeping in the opposite end of the house, was out of danger — but the soon-to-be Sheriff actually could have lost his life. In fact,

Sheriff W. A. Williams
1929 - 1930



Commemorative plaque at the site of the shootout.



according to the Marlow Review story, he would have, save for the ineptness of those who placed the bomb under the bathroom window:

"Placing of the bomb or other explosive used in the attempt to end the life of Sheriff Williams is believed to have been bungled by persons who have visited the scene of the explosion," the newspaper said. "Thick vines cover the window of Mr. Williams' room on the west of the house. Had the blast happened immediately under Mr. Williams' west window, there is little doubt but what it would have proved fatal to him."

And so the life of Sheriff Williams was saved only by a case of mistaken windows. His would-be killers simply put their bomb under the wrong window.

This incident did, apparently, have the effect of hastening Wal Williams'

recovery from pneumonia. By Sunday, January 13, he had this to say to the press:

"So far as anyone's trying to intimidate me for one minute, now or ever, in my duty, they certainly made a mistake."

Clearly, the new Sheriff of Stephens county was a man who meant business.

Who was responsible for the attack on the Williams house? History has not revealed this. The post of Stephens County Sheriff was never an easy one to hold: of the five that held the office between Statehood and the death of Wal Williams, three were killed while serving out their tenure. Only a fearless man would have taken that job in a county which even the Duncan *Eagle* wrote was "infested with rapists, murderers, hi-jackers, thieves and illicit peddlers."

But Wal Williams did take the job, and the year of 1929 was an unusually quiet one for Stephens county. A Williams deputy was felled in the line of duty, but, aside from that and the bouts of illness which continued to plague Williams, it looked like his regime was going to be a successful one.

Until 10:30 P.M. on May 12, 1930. That's the date which Stephens county would remember as the night that all hell broke loose.

The Duncan police had received a call about a filling station robbery in east Lawton. It wasn't a big robbery by any means, but the men, four of them, had certainly looked dangerous. And dangerous they were: The Cunningham brothers, Forrest, John, Emanuel, and Jess were already responsible for a string of state robberies, although at

this time, no one seemed really to suspect it. They were known generally in the area as good farm boys.

But on this May 12, the "good farm boys" had held up a Lawton filling station and claimed the princely amount of 80 cents for their troubles. They had been reported heading east when Undersheriff Ed Sumrill got the report. He went to the courthouse in Duncan and picked up a sub-machine gun. When he returned to his sedan, Wal Williams was there, ready to ride, as were Duncan Police Chief I. B. Gossett and Deputy W. F. McKinzey. They piled into Sumrill's car, heading west to look for the Buick sedan the bandits were supposed to be driving.

Sumrill later told the story to the *Marlow Review* in this way:

"We drove out to the 'Y' and turned west. About a mile we met the bandit car but didn't recognize it as it was driving slowly and went on a half mile and met a new Buick sedan going fast and followed it until we saw it was driven by a Duncan man, in the meantime driving past the bandit car. At the 'Y' we turned around and waited for the bandit car. "It turned toward Duncan and we followed, driving about a half mile south when the bandits saw us, and speeded up. We didn't catch up with them until we were about two miles farther down the road. We drove up and blew the horn. Somebody threw a flashlight on the car and I. B. kept them covered with his shotgun."

At this point, Sumrill reported, the bandit car was crowded off the road and the occupants of both vehicles got out.

"Why didn't you stop?" I. B. Gossett asked the Cunninghams.

"We thought you were hijackers," one Cunningham told him.

"We're not," Gossett came back, "but that's the kind of fellows we're looking for."

At this point, Sumrill, who had been looking into the interior of the Buick, saw, by checking the reflection in the window glass, that one of the Cunninghams was holding a pistol on Deputy McKinzey. He shifted the safety down on his machine gun.

"I started around behind the Buick to where Mr. Williams and I. B. were," Sumrill said. "The

fellow near the right door of the Buick saw me and shot back through the glass at me and I let go at him with my machine gun.

"Then I saw a man around in front of the Buick and I dropped back near the right front door of my car. This fellow shot back a couple of times and I let go at him through the glass. Then another came around the front end to the left of the Buick. He ran across the road and I shot at him several times. He fell out in the field. Then another started up the road and ran about 100 yards. I shot at him several times and think Mac (McKinzey) was shooting at him."

In truth, everybody seemed to be shooting in the brief but lethal fracas which followed. I. B. Gossett got his shotgun up only to have its barrels knocked down by Forrest Cunningham. But even as the shotgun exploded into the dirt at their feet, Gossett brought out his sixshooter and shot Forrest, who at 27 was the oldest of the Cunninghams, dead. Gossett himself was then shot in the stomach.

Sheriff Williams sustained the next wounds, but the posse gave back more than it was getting, and John and Emanuel Cunningham both fell. Only the kid brother, Jess, escaped, hot-footing it across the fields to the east. He stole a car from George Miller, a farmer who lived nearby, at that time confessing to Miller that it was he who had shot Gossett. Jess was 18 years old.

The group which returned to Duncan was a bloody one. Sheriff Williams lived until 2:30 P.M. the following day. Gossett's life was saved because he received a direct blood transfusion from Dr. A. J. Weedn. And John and Emanuel would live to stand trial and be sentenced to life imprisonment. About two weeks later, on May 25, Jess Cunningham was apprehended near Gunnison, Colorado. Back in Oklahoma, however, his own father, B. Cunningham, had led the posse which scoured the area where the crime took place.

Stephens County mourned Sheriff Williams, but was not quite done with his family. On May 15, in a surprising action, the county commissioners of Stephens County appointed Mrs. Williams to serve out her husband's term of office, keeping Wal Williams' complete roster of deputies.

And though surprising, the action was hardly without precedent, as an area newspaper pointed out:

"The appointment of Mrs. Williams has a precedent in the case of the late Bill Cates who died while serving as sheriff of the county and his widow was appointed to serve out his unexpired term. This act of the county commissioners should meet public approval."

It did. The county was grateful to Wal Williams, and treated him in death as he should have been treated: like a slain hero.

Businesses in Marlow and Duncan were closed for the Williams funeral: all of them. Someone counted the sprays of flowers at the funeral and found that there were 167 of them. It was a major event. And well it should have been. Wal Williams was sheriff at a time when there truly were elements of "lawlessness": a time which would usher in the decade of Bonnie and Clyde and Pretty Boy Floyd. Stephens County knew this, too. On May 22, 1930, the *Marlow Review* ran a front page editorial which said in part:

"The price paid to break up one of the worst quartets of bandits in Oklahoma was an enormous one. It cost the life of a beloved man of strength and character, and brought serious wounds to another, a pioneer respected and fearless officer. It has been said that the people elected the administration, then sat back and did not give all the assistance possible in bringing about the desired results.

"Be that as it may, Stephens County now has the opportunity to go further than the already many expressions of grief over the loss of Sheriff Wal Williams. The suggestion of a suitable monument in his memory and in honor of the bravery of I. B. Gossett, Ed Sumrill and W. F. McKinzey, as representative of fearless peace officers, has spread favorably into the far corners of the county where it has been heard."

That monument, cut from native granite stone of the Wichita Mountains, now stands at the Marlow-Duncan-Lawton "Y" on the spot where Wal Williams lost his life. It is a tribute to a man who believed in the law...in times which were indeed lawless. ■

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