

GUNFIGHT AT WAGONER SWITCH

As far as the history of Wagoner, Oklahoma is concerned, 1871 was an important year. The first railroad, the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (Katy) was under construction from Kansas to Texas. That same year Belle Reed's second child, James Edwin Reed, was born. Wagoner and "Ed" as he became known would become entwined many years later.

During the summer of 1871, as railroad construction progressed south through Vinita and passed what would become Pryor, it extended to a switch called Lelietta, then further south to a second terminus known as Gibson Station. Henry "Bigfoot" Wagoner, a dispatcher for the railroad, recognizing the need for another stop in the area, pushed for a switch for the loading of lumber from walnut trees and cattle. Wagoner proposed a point about half way between the other two and, when his idea was accepted it became known as "Wagoner's Switch." Because of the activity that surrounded it, a switch often encouraged businesses to develop and, when the Kansas and Arkansas Valley Railroad from the northwest crossed the Katy in 1887, that made Wagoner Switch even more attractive.

While the fortunes of Wagoner Switch were on the rise, Ed Reed's situation was not so bright. His father Jim, who had married Belle Shirley in 1866, had fallen in with the Starr clan, who were notorious for whiskey, cattle and horse thievery in Indian Territory. Then in 1874 when Ed was four, Jim became involved in several robberies and was killed by lawmen. At that point the Widow Belle Reed put her two children in the care of relatives and took up with the Starr clan, marrying Sam Starr in 1880 and was involved in various criminal activities. until her murder in 1889. In the meantime, Wagoner Switch or just Wagoner as it had become known, was growing into a prosperous community, augmented by rail traffic from two directions and surrounding farms and ranches.

Railroad terminus towns in Indian Territory were known to be wild. One Baptist minister complained that "Wagoner's economic progress had not been equaled in the realm of morality." A rebuttal by the local newspaper editor countered, "Wagoner has the name of having her whiskey peddlers, gamblers, prostitutes and an occasional horse thief, but there never has been but one murder committed here since it was a town." And despite occasional criticisms about law and order, community leaders were touting the town as "Queen City of the prairies."

However, during the early 1890's, a series of robberies occurred in the Wagoner vicinity that bode ill for the community. On September 15, 1891, the Dalton Gang descended on the Katy Switch at Leliaetta, north of Wagoner, and escaped with \$3,000.00 in silver. Other incidents occurred for the next couple of years, but during October of 1894 the Bill Cook Gang waylaid a train south of Wagoner, robbing passengers, killing one and wounding another. And the following November, just ten miles south of town, Texas Jack Reed and his gang were foiled by lawmen when they attempted to rob an express car of \$60,000.

However, during the summer of 1895, the community was treated to a law enforcement victory when authorities allowed the train carrying the infamous Cherokee Bill to be stopped. Locals were allowed to view and photograph the infamous Cherokee Bill who would be hung in Fort Smith the following spring. Two captors, posse members Dick and Zeke Crittendon, posed on either side.

While Wagoner suffered its growing pains, so did Ed Reed, now 24 and so alienated from Belle that some suspected him of her murder, But Ed had taken a different path and become a law man. The same year Belle Reed Starr was killed, 1889, Ed was appointed a Deputy Marshall by "Hanging Judge" Parker and, on October 25, 1895 would be called upon by Wagoner city officials to resolve a problem. The problem was the Crittenden brothers, former posse members Dick and Zeke, who had spent the day in Wagoner drinking. Both men, stocky and very strong, were terrorizing citizens, even pistol whipping an old man. When contacted by city fathers, Reed pointed out that the Crittendons "could not be taken alive," to which he was directed, "to take them dead or alive." Armed with a Winchester rifle, Ed met Zeke on Main Street, just south of Cherokee and, in an exchange of gunfire, killed him instantly. When Dick was told his brother had been killed, he went in search of Reed, and at approximately the same location, Dick shooting with two pistol's was also killed by the Deputy Marshal.

Although there were sporadic incidents afterwards, for all practical purposes this gunfight put an end to violence in Wagoner and the town prospered. Unfortunately, Ed Reed who had taken a different path than his infamous parents, did not fare as well. On August 6, 1896, he was gunned down in Claremore while attempting to arrest two men for selling whiskey.

