

# **ZIP WYATT: THE CHEROKEE STRIP OUTLAW**

by **Michael Koch**

One of the most well known outlaws of the Territory of Oklahoma was Zip Wyatt, also known as Dick Yeager and Wild Charlie. The outlaw was born Nathaniel Ellsworth Wyatt in the year of 1864 or 1868. Some writers have listed his first name as Nelson and the exact date of birth or location is unknown. He was probably born in Indiana.

His father, John T. Wyatt, served in the war between the states in the 85th Indiana Volunteers. He married Rachel J. Quick, then just 16 years of age, in Clay County, Indiana in 1860. Their first born was known as "Six Shooter Jack" and was apparently an expert gambler. Jack Wyatt was killed over a gambling table at Texline, Texas in 1891.

In all, 8 children were born to the family, seven boys and one girl named Mollie. The family appears to have moved around a lot and lived in seven states before settling on Antelope Creek on Cowboy Flats northeast of Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory in 1889. Nathaniel's parents were poor and almost illiterate. Young Wyatt acquired the nickname of Zip from a man named Myers who lived near Ft. Smith, Arkansas. Two of the children of John and Rachel attended the Victory school in what is now Logan County, Oklahoma.

Zip's mother, Rachel Wyatt, died on February 3rd, 1890 on their farm fourteen miles northeast of Guthrie. The next year, Zip married Annie Bailey near Mulhall, Oklahoma. Zip and Annie had one child, a girl.

## **Wyatt Becomes a Killer**

On June 3, 1891 Zip shot up the town of Mulhall and wounded two citizens. He escaped north into the Cherokee Outlet, then into Kansas. Sheriff John Hixon of Logan County, Oklahoma now had a warrant for the arrest of Zip Wyatt.

At Greensburg, Kansas on July 4, 1891 Zip stole pieces of riding equipment from a livery stable. Deputy Sheriff Andrew W. Balfour trailed Zip about ten miles north to Pryor's Grove, where a plug-horse race was in progress. When Balfour attempted to arrest the outlaw, Zip whipped a revolver from his coat and shot Balfour in the stomach. The bullet passed into the spinal column and broke Balfour's back. He died within minutes. Zip had been shot twice, receiving flesh wounds in the hand and in the left side of his body.

Kansas now had a \$1,000 reward out for Zip, so he fled to his native Indiana. He stayed with an uncle in Indianapolis for a while. Later, Zip went to visit an aunt near Cora, Indiana. Several months later Terre Haute police finally captured him. After a long extradition proceeding, Zip was brought back to Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory for a fighting case against him in Mulhall based upon "right of first warrant." The governor of Kansas was also holding a writ of habeas corpus charging Zip Wyatt with murder.

## **Jail Break**

Zip escaped briefly, but was captured. However, on December 31st, 1892, he escaped again in a mysterious manner. He apparently crawled through a sewer pipe in an unfinished section of the jail during a Salvation Army service. Some people at the time believed Zip bribed his guards to let him go or was assisted by the Salvation Army. They even claimed his wife Annie brought him a hacksaw blade in a cake to help him escape.

A short time later, Zip joined with Isaac (Ike) Black. Black's wife, Belle - and a couple by the name of Matt and Jenny Freeman - had provided Zip refuge before his flight to Indiana and after his jailbreak in 1892. The women aided the newly formed gang by carrying messages and supplies to their various camps in caves and canyons of the "Gypsum Hills." Both women frequently travelled in male attire, and it was believed the gang were those responsible for the Hightower Store and post office robbery at Arapaho in November of 1893. Zip and his gang were blamed for every crime that was committed in the territory. He was now wanted in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas with a \$5,000 reward for his capture.

## **False Information**

On January 20th, 1895 word came from Hennessey claiming that Zip Wyatt had joined forces with Bill Doolin. A dispatch had claimed that

Deputy Sheriff Abel Washburn had shot and killed Zip Wyatt and Tulsa Jack Blake. It also reported that a posseman had shot and killed Bill Doolin. However, a newspaper report on January 22nd reported this dispatch to be untrue and that no such battle had occurred.

That same day, Fred Hoffman, the treasurer of D County (now Blaine County) Oklahoma was killed and his body was found in a sand bank. Deputy U.S. Marshal Chris Madsen and a posse arrested three men for murder. All the men were cleared of charges or acquitted in a trial. It was never proven who was actually the murderer of Mr. Hoffman. Mrs. Hoffman identified a revolver that was stolen from Hoffman at the time of his murder. The gun was reportedly traced to Zip Wyatt, who had given it to a farmer as a bribe to aid Zip in eluding officers in August of 1895.

The local newspaper in Enid offered a suggestion to hang the next individual that reported any false information concerning the deaths of Bill Doolin or Zip Wyatt.

### **Zip Joins Doolin Gang**

On April 3, 1895 the Rock Island train was held up at Dover, Oklahoma by the Doolin gang. This led to a massive manhunt by Chris Madsen and twelve other deputy U.S. marshals. Tulsa Jack (William Blake) was the first of the gang to be killed. It was just after this that Zip Wyatt and Ike Black are believed to have joined the Doolin gang.

They all met at Vilas in southeastern Major County, which was Wyatt-Black country. Madsen and his posse returned to El Reno on April 5th after losing the trail near the Glass Mountains. It was here that the Doolin gang split up, never to be together again as a gang. At the time, it was felt that Wyatt and Black had helped the Doolin gang in the Dover train robbery. The truth may never be known for sure.

### **The Terror Begins**

On June 3rd, 1895, a gang of outlaws raided a store and post office at Fairview. They took everything of value and three horses. Deputy Marshals Gus Hadwinger and J. K. Runnels, riding with Sheriff Clay McGrath and Deputy Marion Hildreth of Woods County, took pursuit after the robbers. The next day, June 4th, they apparently surprised the gang in a cave near the county line.

The lawmen fought the outlaws for the entire day, killing a horse, and capturing another. Zip was shot and wounded in the left arm and Ike Black was hit in the left side of his right heel. The two wounded men escaped into the hills. One of the saddles from the dead horse belonged to Zip. It had nine bullet holes in it where previous lawmen had come within inches of Wyatt in the past.

The next day, the two women who had been with Wyatt and Black attempted to escape from a dugout near the outlaw cave. They were caught, and when searched were found to have money and valuables taken from the Fairview post office. The hunt for Wyatt and Black now reached its peak, with a posse of over 200 armed men looking for the two desperate outlaws.

### **The Rope Tightens**

On July 26th, the two outlaws stopped at the Oxley post office in Blaine County. A. B. Laswell, postmaster and proprietor of the store, recognized Wyatt and Black. The two outlaws took food, tobacco and \$35 in cash from the post office and store. A courier went to Okeene, twelve miles to the north, to tell of the bandits.

By daybreak, a posse of farmers from Homestead found Wyatt and Black six miles northwest of Oxley, near Salt Creek. When the posse demanded a surrender, the answer was a volley of bullets. A man named Richardson was hit in the left shoulder. Black was hit in the head but it was only a flesh wound. Both bandits were bare footed and bleeding from apparently walking over rough terrain. Their horses got scared during this gun battle and ran off.

On Saturday, July 27th, the outlaws had walked about five miles west of Okeene and took some horses and a cart from a farmer. That evening, an Anti-Horse Thief Association meeting was being held at Lacey, thirteen miles west of Hennessey, when word came of the outlaws stealing a horse and cart and heading north. Robert Callison, the constable of Forrest Township, and Jack Ward - an old soldier and excellent shot - were attending the Anti-Horse Thief Association meeting too. Callison organized a party of nine men to go after Wyatt and Black.

The posse found the two outlaws in a canyon the very next morning, July 28th. John Suit went into the canyon with Jack Ward guarding him. The bandits opened fire on Ward and some other men holding the horses. Frank Pope was shot in the right leg. The gunfight lasted about 25 minutes. When the bandits ran out of the canyon near Ward's position, they shot at Ward. Ward fired three times at Zip Wyatt, who was evidently wearing a shield over his body. Ward felt sure that he had hit Wyatt twice because Zip had fallen two times. Both bandits escaped on the horses that had broken loose from the possemen. By this time another posse from Alva arrived, led by Deputy

Sheriff Hildreth, with five men. They continued the chase for Wyatt and Black. Both bandits headed southeast across Cottonwood, Elm and Gypsum creeks.

### **Battle at Cantonment**

Late in the day on Thursday, August 1st, the two outlaws decided to stop at a shack, due to their horses being exhausted. Inside the shack was a widow and her son named Jones. The place was located about four miles east of Cantonment. Soon the posse rode up and saw the horses of the bandits hitched near the shack. When Wyatt and Black came out they were ordered to throw up their hands, however they reached for their guns. The posse opened fire, hitting Ike Black in the head. Zip ran into a nearby corn field, however he too was hit near his left nipple. Zip ran east into the sand hills and escaped the posse.

Black's head wound killed him. He had \$1.50 in silver on him and a picture of Belle Black, his wife. The body was taken to Alva and buried at the county's expense.

Wyatt, meanwhile, had found a doctor's house a mile away and had forced him fix his wound and give him a horse. Zip rode off and went northeast for about seven miles when he had to stop. The pain of riding a horse was too much for him. He let the horse go back to the doctor. Zip was now on foot again and a very desperate man. Near Homestead, he jumped into a cart a boy was in, and forced the boy to drive him 25 miles northeast and crossing the Cimarron River before letting him go. Zip continued in the cart.

At around 4:00 pm on Saturday, August 3rd, Zip was seen crossing the Rock Island railroad at Waukomis, just five miles south of Enid. He was travelling east.

### **The Capture of Zip Wyatt**

Garfield County Sheriff Elzie Thralls got word of Zip's location and put deputies S. T. Woods and A. J. Poak, along with many volunteers, to capture the elusive bandit. Zip had now deserted the horse and vehicle about 14 miles east of the railroad at Skeleton Creek valley. Here he was tracked south through a cornfield and then the trail was lost.

By sundown, Wyatt ran to a shack owned by John Daily, who lived alone on Skeleton Creek. Here he picked a horse and ordered Daily to mount another horse and accompany him. A mile down the way, Zip spotted a big roan draft horse in a pasture owned by Will Blakely. Zip told Daily to catch the horse. Zip mounted Blakely's roan, and the two men went southeast until they came to the home of John Pierce. It was now night time and nobody was home, but they pressed on until they stopped late in the night. Zip then decided to let Daily go. Daily galloped south to spread the alarm. He came upon the home of Horton L. Miles and a group of men who had just adjourned a local meeting of the Anti-Horse Thief Association, Daily told them Zip Wyatt was near, and plans were made to capture him. A posse was mustered consisting mostly of men from Sheridan. They decided to take the trail at daybreak on August 2nd.

The posse went along a trail three miles southeast of Sheridan. By 10:00 am, they were joined by the Enid posse. Wyatt apparently had been trying for a ranch owned by a man named Taylor, where he could get a fresh mount. However, he missed his mark, going about one mile east where a road crossed Skeleton Creek into Logan County. Here the posse found Blakely's roan grazing in a bend of the stream and the outlaw's footprints were followed into a cornfield on the Alvin G. Ross farm, five miles southeast of Marshall.

The posse now divided and surrounded Zip. Enid deputies Poak and Wood, plus Tom Smith of Sheridan, were picked to track Zip through the cornfield. Finally, deputy Poak saw the bandit sprawled on his stomach near a sand patch with his Winchester on his right and a revolver on his left. Poak signalled Smith to come up on the left. Then Poak called to Zip to "throw up your hands!" Wyatt grabbed for his guns as Poak and Smith fired at the same time. Both bullets struck Zip, one shattering his pelvis, the other tore through his stomach. Zip could only raise one hand in surrender.

It was a hot Sunday morning on August 4, 1895 when Zip was finally captured. Poak, Smith and Wood cared for the wounded bandit as best they could, for it was an hour before they got him into a wagon. They took him to a small church at Sheridan, where doctors C. R. Jones and Frank Love gave Zip first aid. Sheriff Elzie Thralls and his posse arrived to take the prisoner to Hennessey. There the deputy marshals from both Kingfisher and Guthrie found them. Several men wanted jurisdiction and to claim the rewards. It was finally agreed to take Zip to Enid and that Daily and the Sheridan men would share in any rewards.

### **A Long Time To Die**

On the evening of August 4th, under heavy guard, Zip was jailed in Enid and charged with felonies committed in Garfield County. Local jurisdictions continued to argue over who would try him, but doctors told them Zip was a dying man.

Deputy marshal Ed Kelley was one of Zip's first visitors. Kelley came to identify the outlaw for the federal government. Kelley knew Zip well, since he had arrested him several times while serving as police chief of Guthrie. Wyatt recognized Kelley as soon as he saw him from his jail cell, and they shook hands. Hundreds of others came to see the now notorious outlaw, and Zip seemed to enjoy all the attention. He told people of killing eleven men in the Cherokee Outlet, along with various other crimes. His cell was extremely hot in the August sun and his wounds began to smell of gangrene. Doctors kept him under the influence of morphine and hung wet blankets around him to reduce the heat. Zip was 5 feet 10 inches tall, and weighed about 190 pounds. He had a medium build. He stated that he was 27 years old, but to many he looked to be around 35 years of age.

John T. Wyatt, Zip's father, arrived to visit him on Wednesday, August 7th. He told the reporters from the Enid Daily Wave that his son was not in the Dover train robbery. He told the reporters that Zip had been with him that very night. The elder Wyatt stated that his son was 24 or 25 years old and that his son was not a regular companion of Bill Doolin or Bill Dalton. However, Zip knew them when he saw them. The old man talked quite freely of the Doolin, Dalton, and Cooks gangs whom he met at different times. It appears even the elder Wyatt liked all the attention he was getting.

On August 12th, the Enid Daily Wave reported Zip had a "bad couple of days and nights. His mind seemed to leave him at intervals." Zip was not eating anything worth speaking of, but did drink a lot of milk. His pulse quickened and there were signs of blood poisoning beginning to appear in the area of his stomach wound.

By August 28th the Wave reported that "his pain at times is almost unbearable.....He still lives, a bunch of suffering humanity....He is reduced to a mere skeleton and bed sores are beginning their work." On September 6th at around 6:30 pm, Zip was taken with a septic chill or putrescent decomposition of the body through blood poisoning. By 9 pm he was no longer awake. At 12:06 am on Friday, September 7th, 1895 death relieved the suffering of Zip Wyatt. He had died in great agony.

### **Autopsy of Zip**

The next day, no relatives came to claim the body of the outlaw. Doctor Champion and Doctor Woods decided to dissect the dead body of Zip Wyatt to locate the bullets that had entered his abdomen. One of the bullets went through the inner half of the femur and pubic bone, and was found resting just over the pubic-arch. The other bullet was not located altogether, but enough was discovered to place its location close to the kidneys. The bullet had passed through the pelvic bone, shattering it into about 50 pieces, and ranging back along the vertebrae column. Zip's inner lining of the stomach had turned black. In fact, Zip was in a state of decomposition for several days before he died.

Mrs. Pricket, Zip's sister, arrived on Saturday morning to claim only his effects, such as guns, watch and any other items he had with him at the time of his capture. However, the Sheriff refused to turn the materials over at that time. In fact, he did not have all of the items of the dead outlaw. Tom Smith of Hennessey had Zip's Winchester rifle. The Colt's revolver was still in the Enid jail, and the officers claimed to not have found a watch on Zip.

### **Laid to Rest**

The funeral of Zip Wyatt was held on Sunday morning at around 11:00 am on September 8th, 1895. It consisted of a spring wagon, the driver, the grave digger, and little dog trotting along behind. He was buried in a cheap pine coffin in a pauper's field south of the city. He was placed to rest without any ceremony and the county had to pay the small expense. The cemetery at the time was located on school land where the Kidner Addition is located today, southwest of the Oklahoma Hiway Patrol station in Enid. Many of the bodies from the old cemetery were moved to the Enid Cemetery when it was opened, but not Zip Wyatt. His casket was left in an unmarked grave, where he rests today.

**THE END**