

CHEYENNE BEGAN AS A VIOLENT CITY

2 THE GUNNYSACK GANG

By Richard T. Ammon

With Cheyenne's population swelling to over ten thousand in its first six months, the "Gunnysack Gang" was formed just after the start of 1868 to help the Sheriff and his two policemen. Eventually, over 200 hooded citizens of Cheyenne called themselves members of the Vigilance Committee that hung around till the end of that summer. It's said city officials and lawmen by day were part of the Vigilantes by night along with merchants and everyday citizens, all wearing burlap gunnysacks over their heads to avoid identification. As many as twenty men were lynched for various crimes, but the story of Charlie Martin stands out as the first reported in Old Cheyenne.

In early January 1868, Charlie and his unsavory partner, Andy Harris, robbed an old soldier of his life's earnings. He was from the new Fort Russell (now Fort Warren) and they took over \$5000! This money was used to buy the Beauvais Hotel in the 400 block of west 16th Street. Martin and Harris turned a very respectable hotel into a gambling joint, dance hall, saloon, and brothel.

Two months later, Martin's partner confronted him and made accusations that Charlie was taking more than his share of their profits from the Beauvais, which lead to Harris's untimely death at the hands of one, Charlie Martin. Charlie was taken to court for the shooting and was found innocent by a jury of his barroom cronies.

Celebrating his brush with the law, Martin was in the Keystone "dance house" about one o'clock that night. He was called outside by a man who wore his hat very low, his rain slicker collar very high, and stood in the very dark shadows away from the saloon's door. It was the editor of the Cheyenne *Leader* newspaper who was just standing beside the door when the mysterious man requested a favor. The editor asked why he couldn't go in and address Martin himself. The man in the shadows told him he'd started a fight in the saloon only the day before and was kicked out. The owner of the Keystone had told him not come back and that was the reason he needed the message taken inside. He said he was a friend of Martin, owed him some money, and wanted to pay him back that night. The editor of the paper in a later article said he reluctantly agreed to the request.

While others were being prevented from going out of the saloon, as soon as Martin stepped over the doorsill, several hooded men came from around the corner out of the darkness, grabbed and pistol whipped him. Martin was last seen being dragged down an alley while he begged for his life. It was obvious some citizens of Cheyenne hadn't taken to that day's verdict. From the *Leader*, it was reported, Martin was telling friends earlier that night, he'd "soon furnish another man for breakfast for the citizens of Cheyenne, little thinking however, he himself would so soon be the victim".

The next morning, rumors were abound that Vigilantes had come to the Magic City and a couple of men had the displeasure of welcoming them to town. About eight o'clock that morning, according to the *Leader*, "the bodies of two men were brought to City Hall just as they had been cut down, with the ropes still on their necks."

Martin's body was found "just east of the city", now at the corner of Morrie and 18th Streets on the west side of Holliday Park. He was found swinging by a piano wire from a crudely made tripod of wooden poles. Vigilantes said Martin admitted, before the wire tightened, that he and Harris had robbed the old soldier of his life's worth earlier in the year. However, even though Martin thought it would help his cause, the admission didn't save his neck!

Because of his actions that night, citizens of the city thought the newspaper editor was in cahoots with the Gang. In an extensive front-page article, he provided a moment-by-moment replay of why he aided what would be the Vigilantes' kidnapping of Martin. His plea of innocence must have been convincing because he was never run out of town.

The second man who ran afoul of the Gang that March 20th night was Morgan. No one knew his first name or even bothered to get it. He was found at the end of a taunt rope near the rear of the Elephant Corral on 19th Street, where the old Laramie County courthouse is today.

Someone accused him of stealing a few mules, taking them into Colorado, and selling them. He was found on the road from Denver, according to the *Leader*, with “a man named Kelly who after being taken into custody, confessed being in with other parties from whom they bought the stolen mules, knowing them to be stolen”. One of the owners of the mules, W. G. Smith, had caught them and was taking them back to the Cheyenne “officers of the law”, when, in the darkness of nine o’clock, they were met by a group of about a dozen men near Crow Creek. The gang took the two men away from Smith and that was the last he saw of the pair. It was thought Kelly met the same fate as his companion, however, his body was never found.

“It seems to be general opinion that the hanging last night was not done by the old Vigilance Committee”, the *Leader* concluded about the demise of Morgan, “but by a new and temporary organization gotten up for this occasion”. By the end of that summer, it appeared, after more than several dozen hangings, the Gang was disbanded. The action was taken after it finally was determined one of their first lynchings, Morgan, had been an innocent man!

However, an article in the newspaper in 1883 indicated to-date at least thirty-seven men had been hanged by the Gunnysack Gang since the founding of the Magic City!

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