

Once upon a time on the quiet Sunday morning of September 4, 1887, a 35 year-old man, only eight months a full-fledged Arizona sheriff, stepped up on the porch of a frame house in the town of Holbrook in northern Arizona--knowingly confronted two armed desperadoes--and made Western history, as guns blazed for a brief and tragic five minutes.

This is not a fictitious Western tale. It's a true story, a legend in the Southwest now, repeated in numerous books, manuscripts and magazine articles on the history of the Arizona Territory. The sheriff was Commodore Perry Owens, a man who spent eight troubled years in the Cartersburg area; a man whose parents and some brothers and sisters are buried in Cartersburg's Spring Hill cemetery. Some say the Owens-Blevins shootout in Holbrook rivalled the more famed gunfight at the Ok. Corral in notoriety. Certainly it was marked by Commodore Perry Owens' bravery...marked, too, by the fateful, terrible suddenness of its events.

At least four present Hendricks County residents have personal ties to the Owens story, for they are great-nieces of Commodore Perry Owens. Dorothy Bayse and her sister Mary Frances Snodgrass and their cousin Carla Jean Halfaker share a grandfather (Marion Carter Owens) who was a brother of Commodore, and worked for him in the West at one time. And Margery Hufford Clay's grandmother, Mary Frances Owens Hufford, was a sister of Commodore Perry Owens. Margery's father, former Hendricks County sheriff Robert Hufford, was an under-sheriff to his uncle for almost two years in Arizona...

First, I'd like for you to see six slides of our subject, slides furnished to us by Susan Carter at the Plainfield Public Library. I believe most of these were copied from photos owned by Commodore's great-nieces. YOU'll see why "Uncle Com", as the family knew him, was known as the long-haired sheriff of Arizona. Actually, he was just ahead of his time.

SIX SLIDES

Commodore Perry Owens, named after the famous naval hero, was born in 1852 in East Tennessee, probably in or near Rogersville, Tennessee. His father's name was Perry Owens and his Quaker mother's name was Fanny Owens. They may have both been Quakers--we

Lane, 2

are not certain of this. Commodore was one of ten children--the family moved to Hendricks County in 1857, camping out at first on what became known as the Martin farm (at its farthest south point) just northeast of Cartersburg. Later they moved a mile west of town.

Family legend has it that Commodore ran away from his Cartersburg home at the age of 13, in 1865, because of abusive treatment by a family member. Be that as it may, he did leave and drifted West and Southwest. We're not sure what he did in those years between the time he left Indiana and arrived in Arizona Territory in his late twenties. Family information passed down to this generation is that he almost lost his life when he was in Oklahoma Territory, when he was scalped ~~and~~ by Indians and left for dead...then nursed back to health by a couple who befriended him.

We can first really document his activities in about 1880 when he was in northeastern Arizona in Apache County, at a place near Navajo Springs (on one of the predecessors of the Santa Fe railroad). This was --I think--about 60 miles northwest of St. Johns, the seat of Apache County, in the White Mountains. I think Navajo Springs was near what is now the site of the visitor center of the Petrified Forest National Park. But don't hold me to that.

Commodore was a ranch foreman--we know that--and we also know he had a ranch of his own where he raised horses, in spite of raids by Navajos and rustlers. He called it the ~~X~~ Bar ranch, and in 1960, at least, his two room, dirt floored shack was still standing there at a place called Commodore Springs.

Just a little aside--some Logansport men had a ranch in that area called the Wabash Land and Cattle Company in the late 1800's. I'm told that it was called the "old Commodore Place."

We know Commodore Perry Owens was skilled with the six shooter and the Winchester rifle, and the Indians held him in quite a bit of awe. This story may illustrate why. A man once camped with him who said later that one morning Commodore was baking biscuits when two Navajos started shooting at his cabin. They persisted, shooting from the left

and then the right, in cross-fire. Owens grunted, picked up his Winchester, walked out the door, shot one Indian and then the other. Satisfied by a long silence, he came back in and finished his baking. True? Who knows.

Apache County, Arizona was in great turmoil in the 1880's. Organized bands of desperadoes rustled and stole horses. Drunken cowboys shot up Holbrook and St. Johns any time of day or night. The curator of the present really lovely Apache County Historical Museum at St. Johns may have recognized two gullible Hoosiers a couple of years ago, but he said his father told him that there was hardly a day when he went to work in the old days in St. Johns when he didn't find a body on the street in the morning. Well, it makes a good--if somewhat grisly--story, anyway. There was a range war going on between two feuding families, the Grahams and the Tewksburys (like the Hatfields and the McCoys), and they almost succeeded in completely extinguishing each other. The county seat of Apache County was St. Johns ...and the county government was said to be so corrupt there was practically no law enforcement.

The people were upset. They wanted something done. So they practically drafted Commodore Perry Owens to run as sheriff in the election of 1886. He'd achieved quite a reputation as undersheriff by then, using his gun effectively against several varieties of undesirables. The Holbrook paper predicted that Owens would "add as much glory to the warfare for freedom from an infamous county government as did the old commander of the flagship Lawrence for American honor and glory." Actually, although Commodore Perry Owens was known as an excellent shot, he had not done anything yet which touched on greatness. But he was honest, apparently a distinction shared by few officials of the time.

Owens agreed to run, was elected, and took office in January, 1887.

The first order of the day was a ball for the new officers, according to Commodore's deputy, one Joe McKinney. The Plainfield Library has excerpts from McKinney's "Reminiscences." Commodore didn't dance at this "grand" affair. McKinney said he did the dancing for the Sheriff's office. "There were many handsome ladies at that ball," Joe McKinney wrote later, "and as I was young and jolly, I enjoyed it."

This is not to say Owens objected to female company. McKinney has some words to say about that. Although Commodore didn't marry until he was middle-aged, he was said to have

Lane, 4

been a favorite with the ladies.

Apparently he did a business-like job as a sheriff, doggedly collecting the business license fees he was supposed to collect--like liquor license fees, accounting for every cent brought into and spent by his office, even to postage stamps. He made improvements in the county jail, which he said was in horrible condition, and travelled all over the country escorting criminals to trial or to the territorial prison at Yuma.

He may have spent his spare time target practicing, but someone has written that he wasn't as trigger happy as most of the West's renowned sheriffs--remember, the line was thin between the good guys and the bad guys in the West at that time. Commodore is said to have usually brought in his prisoners with little trouble, if he could find them. Two members of one of the feuding clans, expecting him with a warrant, left a note on the door informing him they had departed for parts unknown.

I like the story about the Apache County Board of Supervisors allegedly withholding money from Commodore Perry Owens, bounties for bringing in some men. He was living in a hotel in St. Johns at the time. He wanted his pay, so one day he packed all his belongings on a horse, acted like he was leaving town, and rode over to the Courthouse. He strode into the Supervisor's meeting, drew his six-shooter, and quietly demanded his money. They paid him, (immediately), he walked out, got on his horse, rode back to the hotel, and unpacked his belongings.

In September, 1887 Commodore had not yet become a hero, but he was soon to become one--on the 4th--with the Holbrook shootout. His foil was one Andy Blevins, a man who went (somewhat inexplicably) by the name of Andy Cooper--a member of a family of known horse thieves and gunmen, several members of which had already spent some quiet time in jail. It was said that Cooper had killed two men on the second of September. Rightly or wrongly, he was one of those blamed for the murders. Commodore already had several arrest warrants for Andy...and had long been under pressure to bring him in...It is said Owens had been warned two months before by officials of the Apache County Cattle Growers Association to either arrest Cooper at once, or they'd see he was ousted from office.

Andy Cooper rode into Holbrook sometime in the late morning of Sunday, September 4,

Lane, 5

placing his horse in a livery stable just a few doors from his home on the north side of the railroad tracks which still ^{today} split this cow town. He went in his house, ate his noon meal, strapped his six shooter around his waist, and walked across the tracks to where most of the town's stores were to talk to his cronies.

In a very short time, Commodore Perry Owens rode into town, stabling his horse in the same livery barn. Andy Cooper's brother, John Blevins, saw the sheriff arrive, and as inconspicuously as possible, sought out his brother to warn him. Andy was actually saddling his horse--beside his house--getting ready to flee when Commodore Perry Owens, with a rifle in his hand and a six shooter at his side, slowly walked across the tracks to the house. Cooper quickly went inside.

When Commodore stepped up onto the wooden porch there were eleven family members inside the Blevins cottage--including babies, women, Andy's brother John, and his teen-age sister and brother. Commodore looked in a window, and saw both Andy and John standing in the west room, with shotguns in their hands. Cooper had partially opened a door that led onto the porch; John Blevins had partially opened another door. Owens thus stood between two armed men, both of whom were considered capable gunmen. It was a precarious situation, one in which the odds were in their favor. It is no wonder Commodore did not stand there long, trying to talk to Cooper. Let me tell you how things went then, in Owens' own words, digested from an inquest a few days later:

"I say to Cooper, I want you. Cooper says, what do you want with me? I says, I have a warrant. Cooper says, wait. I says, Cooper, no wait. Cooper says I won't go. I shot him, This brother of his jerked open the door and shot at me, missing me. I whirled my gun, and shot at him. Then I ran out into the street where I could see all parts of the house. I could see Cooper through the window on his elbow, with his head toward the window. He disappeared to the right. Some man jumped out of the house on the northeast corner, out of a door or window, with a six shooter in his right hand. There was a buckboard between he and I. I jumped to one side of the wagon and fired at him. Didn't see him anymore.

I stood there a few moments. A boy jumped out of the front of the house with a six-shooter in his ~~right hand. There was a buckboard be~~

lane, 6

hands. I shot him. I see no other man. So I left, when passing by the house I see no one...I left and come on up town."

It has been estimated that no more than five minutes passed from the time Owens left the livery stable to make the arrest until he was back there getting his horse.

The death toll for that tragic--and certainly it was tragic--episode was as follows:

The 15 year old boy died immediately. Andy Gooper passed away during the night. And the man who jumped out of the house and was shot through the shoulder died about ten days later. The sole surviving male in the Blevins family, John, was seriously wounded, but eventually recovered. And this is ironic--John Blevins became a deputy sheriff in 1901, himself, and is said to have died a respected citizen. The Blevins house, incidentally, is now owned by the city of Holbrook and maintained as a historical attraction.

I don't mean to belittle Commodore Perry Owens by reading that clipped account of his testimony. He was a brave man, facing unbelievable odds at a time and in a place where men's actions were violent. He was completely exonerated, even for the death of the fifteen year old. The jury reasoned that a shot fired by a fifteen year old could be as deadly as that fired by a man... There are many testimonials in Arizona historical files to Commodore's actions in cleaning up Apache County--in helping make it a decent place in which to live, where decent people could go about their business. A Mormon pioneer in Arizona stated emphatically later that "our property was not safe until Commodore Perry Owens came!"

The remainder of Owens' life as a lawman and subsequently as a businessman was less eventful. We know he came back to Indiana for a visit in 1889, from a note in Margery's grandmother's diary, and we know he became the first sheriff of Navajo County Arizona in 1895. During most of that two year term Margery's father was his "jailor and janitor"; according to records still in Holbrook. That was where her mother, Nettie Allen Hufford, met her father, while visiting a sister who was the wife of a Holbrook publisher. Nettie and Robert Hufford came back to Indiana to stay shortly after their marriage, but it wasn't until 1917, I believe, that he became Hendricks County sheriff.

Around 1900 Commodore moved to Seligman, Arizona, some fifty miles west of Flagstaff, purchased some lots and ran a bar, where his brother Marion Carter Owens worked for him

lane, 7

for a while. Marion later said there was a sign above the bar urging patrons not to drink if "neglecting wives and children." He said Commodore never took a drink himself.

Thanks to Dorothy Bayse, the Plainfield Library has a copy of a very revealing letter that Commodore Perry Owens wrote to his niece, Molly Keith Douglas, in 1900 inviting her to come and stay with him in Seligman. I ask you if these excerpts from that letter sound like they were written by a hardened gunman. "You had better come out and make me a visit," he wrote, "and see if this climate won't do you a lot of good. I will pay your way"...etc..."I am going to have me ~~a~~ lots of pets. I must have something around me to love."

In 1902 Commodore did find someone to love --a widow from California, Elizabeth Barrett, or "Aunt Lizzie" as the family called her, who kept up correspondence with Hendricks County family members long after Commodore's death. She said once that after he died she was besieged with requests from writers for information about him.

We know that Commodore Perry Owens must have returned to Indiana several times before he died. Dorothy has a wonderful little card which indicates he had a storefront museum in Indianapolis, maybe in about 1907-08, where he displayed such things as Navajo blankets and puma hides (this was in the first block of north Alabama street.) About that same time one of the Hendricks County papers said he brought a boxcar full of horses back to the Cartersburg Old Settlers picnic and sold them. On a visit in 1917 or 1918 he and Aunt Lizzie checked up on some deer they gave to old Fairview Park in Indianapolis at an earlier date.

Commodore Perry Owens was only 66 when he died in 1919. He is buried in Flagstaff. His grave was unmarked for many years, but it has had a suitable marker now for about ten years.

The sentence that concludes the Arizona Highways article must sum up this many-sided, paradoxical man so well. "The flesh and blood Owens is dead," it says, "But the legendary Owens lives on! They are really two people. Like most of us, he was neither good nor bad, but did have the qualities and the opportunity which made him a hero of American folklore."

PRESENTED BY BETTY J. LANE, May 1980, before the
Hendricks County Historical Society



Commodore Perry Owens in Hendricks County

Parents Oliver Hazard Perry Owens, b. 9/15/1822
d. 12/11/1891

Fanny Conner Owens, b. 4/7/1822
d. 9/10/1910

married

Children

Sarah Elizabeth b. 12/16/1838

Nicholas Arthur b. 9/26/1845

Amanda Jane b. 1/18/1846

John Clinton b. 8/11/1847

Mary Frances b. 6/20/1850

Commodore Perry b. 7/29/1852

m. Elizabeth Barrett 4/30/1902

Martha Susan b. 1/8/1853

Marion Carter b. 6/4/1857

William b. 11/18/1863

*1855 came to
H. Co.*

San Diego, Calif.
Nov. 30 44.

Dear Grace:

Here I come again, On the card you wrote me you said, If in any way you could help to let you know. I have had three letters from Mr Cline, the Man who is assembling material for his book he is to publish, some time in the future, In his last letter he has asked me if I would mind giving him the names of surviving relatives, Brothers and Sisters if any, Nieces & Nephews, etc. and also if I could without too much trouble, He would like to have the names of Commodore's Brothers & Sisters, & when they died. Also asked me if I could give him the present addresses of Nephews and Nieces, In my last letter to him, I gave him the names of all the Brothers & Sisters, but sorry, I could not tell him when they died. I gave him your address, & told him I was quite sure you could ~~find~~ give him or get

for him the information he has asked. You will, no doubt hear from him, you could send it to me, or send direct to him. I had wrote him the Brothers and Sisters had all passed on, also some of the Nieces & Nephews. I could give him part but not all the information he has asked, Yours was the only address of the Nieces & Nephews I could give him.

This is my day off, (Sunday) & am trying to catch up with my writing. I'm taking care of a little boy whose Daddy is over seas, & whose mother is working sewing shift in a plane factory. I've gotten too old to do real hard work - So care for children, last night I cared for 3- till one o'clock in the morning - It is not much work to care for small children on swing shift, as they go to bed early & rarely wake up while I'm on duty.

Well, Grace, hope you can give Mr Cline the data he wants, without any trouble.

And hoping you & yours are keeping well -

Best of wishes from

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Owens.

FAMILY RECORD.

BIRTHS.

BIRTHS.

Mary Frances Owens, was
born June 20th 1850

Commodore Perry Owens
was born July 29th 1852

Martha Susan Owens
was born Jan 8th 1853

Marion Carter Owens
was born June 4th 1857

William Owens was
born Nov 18th ~~1862~~ 1863

FAMILY RECORD.

BIRTHS.

BIRTHS.

Perry Owens was born
Sept 15th 1822

Fanny Owens was born
April 7th 1822

Sarah Elizabeth Owens was
born Dec 16th 1838

Nicholas Arthur Owens
was born Sept 26 - 1845

Amanda Jane Owens
was born ~~Sept~~ 18th 1846
Jan.

John Clinton Owens
was born Aug - 11 - 1847

FAMILY RECORD.

DEATHS.

DEATHS.

William Owens died
August 19th - 1879

Oliver H. Perry Owens, died
December 11, 1891.

Amanda Jane Beth died May 26. - 1908.

Fanny Owens died. Sept 1910

John Clinton Owens, died

Martha Susan Powers, died

Commodore Perry Owens, died

Nicholas Arthur Owens, died, Aug. 1930.

Sarah Holt died December 26 1931.

Mary ~~Hufford~~ died March 24 - 1931.

Family Record

Perry Owens was born Sept 15th 1822

Fanny Conner was born April 7th 1822

Sarah Elizabeth Owens was born December 16th 1838

Nicholas Arthur Owens was born Sept 26th 1845

Amanda Jane Owens was born January 18th 1846

John Clinton Owens was born August 11th 1847

Mary Frances Owens was born June 20th 1850

Commodore Perry Owens was born July 29th 1852

Martha Susan Owens was born January 8th 1853

Marion Carter Owens was born June 4th 1857

William Owens was born November 18th 1863