

# THE TUCUMCARI HISTORICAL EXAMINER

RAWHIDE EDITION

TUCUMCARI MAINSTREET

## DEATH, DIAMONDS, AND THE DARING HEROES OF TUCUMCARI

### Death and the Disappearing Diamonds at the Depot

A recent visitor to the Tucumcari Railroad Museum shared a great story about an unsolved mystery of a diamond heirloom that disappeared from the depot over 100 years ago. This visitor said his great great grandfather, Frank Silvernail, was a veteran conductor on the Golden State limited between El Paso and Chicago.



*Diamond Deceiving Cousins: Phillip Arnold and John B. Slack, photo from www.whiteoaksnmgoldrush.com/slack-john-burcham/*

### Diamonds, Dead Bodies, and Dunn's Funeral Home

What does the Great Diamond Hoax of 1872 that involved two Kentucky cousins tricking numerous bankers, a U. S. Representative, and the founder of Tiffany & Co. have to do with Dunn's Funeral Home in Tucumcari? It's a story that goes back about 150 years.

Undertaker John Burcham (J. B.) Slack (1820-1896) arrived in White Oaks, NM in 1880 with a secret past that he took to his grave.

Nine years earlier, John and his cousin, Philip Arnold, had traveled to San Francisco to report a diamond mine and produced a bag of diamonds.

The cousins led investigators to a field in a remote location in the Colorado Territory where various gems were found on the ground that were reported to be worth over \$150,000. More and more investors became interested, including Charles Tiffany of Tiffany and Co. They later led a group of investors just north of what is now called Diamond Peak in Colorado where just enough diamonds were found in the soil to satisfy more investors. The cousins had bought cheap cast-off diamonds (refuse from gem cutting) and scattered them to "salt" the ground. By the time it was discovered that the entire thing was a hoax, Arnold and Slack were long gone. It was known around the world as *The Great Diamond Hoax of 1872*.

Arnold returned to his home in Kentucky and became a successful banker but no one knew what happened to Slack until 1967. Bruce Woodward published a book in 1967 stating his research had uncovered that Slack had taken a job in St. Louis building caskets and by 1880 had moved to White Oaks, New Mexico as an undertaker, working and living alone with his secret until he died at the age 76 in 1896.

Max B. Koch (1850-1933) took over Slack's White Oaks undertaker business in 1896. Max expanded the business, doing services for those in San Jon, Santa Rosa and ended up moving to Tucumcari by 1905. Max was the undertaker in Tucumcari until 1917 when he sold the business to O. G. Reeder.

Elton Dunn was the Tucumcari City Clerk working next door to the undertaker parlor. He helped Mr. Reeder during the 1918 flu epidemic. Reeder eventually came down with the flu and shortly thereafter and decided to sell the business to Elton. Elton's wife, Fidelia Powell Dunn, attended mortuary college in California and became the first woman to be licensed as an embalmer and funeral director in the State of New Mexico (around 1918-19).



*Evans Opera House built in 1910 which is Dunn's Funeral Home to this day. Photo courtesy of Tucumcari Then and Now Facebook group.*

By 1920, the business was located in its present building, which was the original Evans Opera house (originally operated by the Evans brothers) built in 1910.

In the Tucumcari Library you can view the undertaker logs that Elton Dunn received from Reeder. The book includes the undertaker entries from 1880s White Oaks (including numerous gunshot killings) as logged by diamond hoaxer and original business owner, John Slack. Slack's business predecessors, Max Koch and O. G. Reeder, also logged their reports into the same book.

*References: Charles Dunn, A History of New Mexico: A Mark of Time by Mary Grooms Clark and Quay County 1903-1985 by Lynn Moncus and Marian Knapp editors.*

### The New Deal Courthouse

The present courthouse was constructed in 1938 /1939 as a federal Public Works Administration (P.W.A.) New Deal project.

Two striking reliefs representing the area: "Cowboy" and "Train Engineer," are carved into the stone, to the left and right above the front entrance to the courthouse.

### A Corner of Family History and Heroes



*Phillips 66 Gas Station: Photo courtesy of Tucumcari Then and Now Facebook group.*

A unique street corner park near the Railroad Museum now displays names of Tucumcari Veterans, our local heroes who served. It was also once the location a family business, a Phillips 66 gas station.

The station was owned by the Newman family, who moved to New Mexico in 1912 when they homesteaded near San Jon. Jim lived most of his adult life in Tucumcari running Newman's Phillips 66 Station for 34 years.

## Arch Hurley and a Flood of Movies

Soon after Arch Hurley (1880-1956) and his family arrived in Tucumcari, he worked at the Evans Theater. A few years later, around 1913, the family built the New Theater (where Sands Dorsey Drug would later be located as part of Federal Building) for showing silent movies. Music for the shows was furnished by the operator in those days, who was Mrs. Hurley. She played piano while her daughter, Loreen played violin. Milas, their son, played drums. Sometime around 1915-1916 a heavy rainstorm occurred, and Hurley's theater along with other buildings were flooded.

As the story goes, the theater filled with water so quickly while people were watching a movie that some had to swim out. The theater was significantly damaged.

Around 1917 Arch Hurley and Gene Hawkins formed a partnership, the two men decided to build the H & H theater (which later became known as the Princess theater). Hurley also owned the Odeon by 1936.



Princess Theater: Photo courtesy of Tucumcari Then and Now Facebook group.

## Arch Hurley Conservancy

According to local lore, Arch Hurley originally only had a passing interest in water development issues, until other town leaders encouraged him to combine a trip to Cleveland for a motion picture owners conference with a stopover in Chicago, whose mayor was rallying support for an ambitious western irrigation endeavor.

From that time on, Hurley was hooked.

Hurley made over 34 trips to Washington. He met with New Mexico's New Deal Governor, Clyde Tingley, to help secure support. With the availability of New Deal funds from the Roosevelt administration, the dam became financially possible.

After completion of Conchas Dam, the system of irrigation canals surrounding Tucumcari was named the Arch Hurley Conservancy District in his honor. Reportedly, it was the first time such a federally constructed project had been given the name of a person.

## Royal Prentice: Tucumcari's "Indiana Jones"



Royal Prentice, Rough Rider: Photo from Harvard College Library

Royal Prentice's family moved to Las Vegas, N. M. in 1879, when he was just two years old. Growing up, Royal spent time wandering the area, searching for Native American artifacts and photographing the area. Early on, this daring adventurer had a curious mind. He attended Purdue University, studying engineering, and soon returned to Las Vegas to study law. He was admitted to the New Mexico Bar in 1898.

When Theodore Roosevelt came to Las Vegas to recruit for his "Rough Riders" volunteer army, Prentice was the second New Mexican to enlist.

As a Rough Rider, Prentice was involved in five major battles in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, including San Juan Hill. Known to always have a camera by his side, he photographed each of his battles and his photographs were published in the New Mexican Historical Review. In 1899, he personally gave an album of Rough Rider photographs to Teddy Roosevelt.

In 1902 he was working for the railroad as a brakeman. Always having a camera in tow, Prentice documented many of these trains, including a notable wreck in eastern N. M. Tucumcari was just barely being formed when he was living in the area and he was one of the first citizens.

In 1908 President Taft appointed him as the Federal Land Register which he held until 1914. In this position, he distributed land to the many homesteaders that came to Tucumcari for a new way of life.

He doesn't stop there, his contributions to archaeology were abundant as well in eastern New Mexico. In an article from El Palacio, it's noted that without his dedication, we might know little about the archaeology of the area or the significant rock art of the region. He discovered and recorded over 1,100 glyph sites. His written records of sites and over 9,000 photographs are found in the NM Archaeological Records repository and the Palace of the Governors.

In 1918, he assisted Gen. George Goethals, the Army General who had been head of the Panama Canal (that opened in 1914), to site the location of a dam. That area became Conchas Dam.

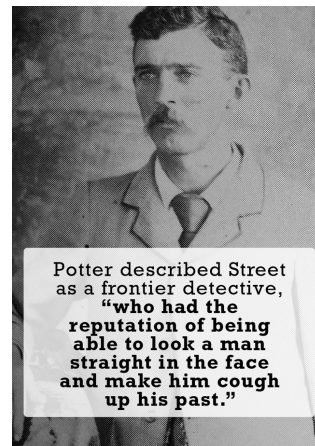
## Alex Street: Tucumcari's "Wyatt Earp"

Alex Street, was born in Mississippi in 1868 but made his way west where he started serving as a lawman by the 1880s. He has been described as a man with a reputation equal to Bat Masterson or Wyatt Earp.

This brings us to a real-life Rawhide cattle drive story, a mysterious murder that occurred in 1885 under the watch of trail boss Col. Jack Myers Potter.

Potter, a Union County, New Mexico legislator during the 1930s, wrote numerous stories and articles of his early experiences on the cattle drives through New Mexico. In a 1941 Clovis newspaper story, Potter recalls the old west trail mystery that spanned his friendship with Street for over 50 years.

As the story goes, Potter had happened to run into Street sometime during the 1930s. Potter ended up telling Street of the cattle drive murder involving a fugitive who bullied one too many on that drive.



Potter described Street as a frontier detective, "who had the reputation of being able to look a man straight in the face and make him cough up his past."

Alex Street: Photo from *A History of New Mexico: A Mark of Time* by Mary Grooms Clark

Street along with his friend and business partner Lee Smith, were two of the founders of the new town-site of Tucumcari. The two had been partners of a bar in Liberty and then established Tucumcari's Legal Tender Saloon. In 1902, Smith was killed in a bloody saloon shoot out in an argument with liquor distributor Eakin from Albuquerque.

## Sheriff to Federal Agent

By 1903, Alex Street was appointed as the Quay county's first sheriff and was elected for 12 more years. He also was Tucumcari's first mayor in 1908.

Then, between 1920-1937, Street had achieved a national reputation as a man-hunter while working as a federal agent for the Bureau of Investigation (later known as the FBI). In 1926, he was a critical investigator in the famous Osage murder case, where five Osage Native Americans were slain involving oil rights. In 1933 Agent Street ferreted out the Apache killer of Henrietta Schmerler, Columbia University student, on the White River Reservation in Arizona.