

BANDITS ROAMED SPAVINAW HILLS

In Old Territorial Days
Name Brought Vision
of Night Battles

WYCKLIFFS NOTORIOUS

Federal Officers Spend Many
Days Trailing 'Night Hawks'
in Wooded Uplands

By the Associated Press.

NOWATA, Dec. 6.—The name of Spavinaw means pure water to Tulsa citizens, but to men who have resided in Oklahoma since the days of the Indian Territory, Spavinaw conjures up pictures of the conflict between the law and the renegades that lived in northeastern Oklahoma in the old days.

Along the banks of the clear stream in the Spavinaw hills there is a huge cavern, according to J. A. Cansdell, former United States deputy marshal and now a deputy sheriff here. This cavern was the retreat of a group of bandits known as the "Night Hawks of the Spavinaw." The same group also was known as the Wyckliff gang, Cansdell said.

The story of how three United States officers, in charge of Ike Gillstrap, a deputy United States marshal, followed a wounded man through the many winding passages in the cavern and how Gillstrap finally captured the refugee was told by Cansdell.

"Gillstrap, accompanied by Vaden Wickett, a quarter blood Cherokee and Jim Veir, a well known man hunter, were searching for three of the Wyckliff gang in the Spavinaw hills near where Spavinaw lake now is located, Cansdell said. "This was about 1906, when the Wyckliff gang, known as the 'Night Hawks' were giving the government a lot of trouble.

Trailed Wyckliff Gang.

"Gillstrap had become separated from his two companions and while wandering along through the timber, happened to come upon Jack Wyckliff, one of the men he was seeking. He got the drop on Wyckliff, disarmed him and then handcuffed him to a tree. He then went back to his camp to get his companions before bringing in the prisoner.

"The three officers had returned to within a short distance of the scene of the capture when they heard the rasp of file on steel. They broke into a run but arrived too late. The shackled man had escaped. A friend is believed to have filed the handcuffs while Gillstrap was away seeking aid.

"The trio then returned to their camp as it was after sundown. They made plans to take up the trail in the morning. Rolling into their blankets they fell asleep.

"Wickett was awakened about midnight by a snort of a horse. He rolled out of his blankets and away from the light of the fire. Crawling upon his hands and knees, he came upon a man who was trying to loosen the horses. Wickett sprang at him and the two men rolled over in a clinch. As they struggled, they slipped over the side of a bluff and in the fall, Wickett was temporarily knocked out and the man escaped.

Discover Bandit Cave.

"Gillstrap and Veir immediately started after the mysterious prowler. They were upon a bluff some distance from the camp and here they discovered an opening to the cave. Returning to camp, they obtained food and lights and prepared to explore the cavern.

"They entered the hole in the bluff and after going down a dark passage, they came upon a room, equipped with bunks and tables and with evidence of recent occupation. The place apparently was the stronghold of the 'Night Hawks.' Large stores of canned food were found.

"The officers continued on and found another passage leading away from the room and following it discovered a crystal-clear underground stream. By the flickering lights they saw a man standing on the other side of the stream. He fled as he saw them coming and they gave chase.

"While exploring side passages Veir and Wickett became separated from Gillstrap. Wickett saw a form loom up in one of the caverns and fired at it. As soon as the smoke had cleared away the two officers ran to where they had seen the man standing, and found bloodstains but no sign of the man.

Shot Horse Under Fugitive.

"Following the spots of blood the officers started to trail the wounded man. Finally they saw a light ahead and a man's form outlined against an opening. As they ran forward the man opened an iron barred door, stepped out and closed it after him. It took the officers some time to find the bolt that held the door and when they emerged into the open, there was no quarry to be found.

"In the meantime Gillstrap became lost. He left the cave and started in what he thought was the direction of the camp. Walking through the timber he came upon a man riding a horse whom he recognized as his escaped prisoner. He opened fire, killing the animal. The rider was knocked unconscious when he fell and Gillstrap had him bound before he came to his senses. The broken handcuffs still were on the wrists of the prisoner.

"The bandit was taken to Vinita by the three officers and was later tried and convicted."

Veir later was killed in a fight with the Wyckliff gang, according to Cansdell. In a still later conflict in the Spavinaw hills with the "Night Hawks," Gillstrap was killed and Wickett seriously wounded.

The gang finally was subdued about 1907, Cansdell concluded.