

Jerry McKelvy's
SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

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END OF WATCH

Being a law enforcement officer is a dangerous job. Officers must deal with all types of people and all kinds of situations. Some of the people they deal with are on drugs, some are drunk, and many have a weapon. Some are known criminals who have committed previous crimes and are on the run from the law.

I know of nine law enforcement officers in Nevada and Ouachita counties who lost their lives in the line of duty since 1900 and another officer who was seriously wounded. Below are their names and a little information about the situation that resulted in the death or injury:

**CONSTABLE WARNER GARNER
END OF WATCH – MARCH 15, 1923**

Constable Warner Garner of Ouachita County was shot as he and another officer were attempting to arrest a man at Millville between Camden and Bearden on March 15, 1923. He died the next day at a Pine Bluff hospital. He was survived by a wife and four small children.

**CITY MARSHAL FRED MURRAH
END OF WATCH – SEPTEMBER 26, 1923**

Fred Murrah was a well-known citizen of Prescott. At the time of the incident, he was city marshal of Prescott. He and several other officers were in the process of arresting some bootleggers who were operating a still near Lackland Springs. During the raid on the still, Marshal Murrah was shot in the chest by one of the bootleggers and died instantly. Sheriff J. D. Parker and Deputy Steele McLelland were wounded. (See the article entitled "The Battle of Lackland Springs" in the December, 2003 issue).

The funeral for Fred Murrah was probably the largest funeral for anyone in Nevada County. Cars were parked along the highway at the cemetery for about a mile. It took two trucks to haul all the floral arrangement to the grave site in DeAnn Cemetery in Prescott. All the stores in town closed for two hours for the funeral. A large group of Ku Klux Klan members attended the funeral dressed in their robes, placed a wreath on the grave, said a prayer, and then left.

Fred Murrah's grave marker at DeAnn has these words engraved on it: "Fred gave his life in law enforcement". He was almost 42 years old at the time of his death.

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DEPUTY ZACK HORTON END OF WATCH – JANUARY 25, 1927

Deputy Zack Horton was killed January 25, 1927 during a raid on a family bootlegging operation at Miller's Bluff in Ouachita County. The head of the family involved suddenly appeared and opened fire with a shotgun, striking Deputy Horton in the back. Other family members then began attacking the sheriff and other officers. The sheriff was able to shoot the man and fend off the other attackers. Deputy Horton had worked in law enforcement for six years and was survived by his wife.

MARSHAL EDWIN REESE MARSH END OF WATCH – JULY 7, 1929

This incident also involved bootleggers. Edwin Marsh was a deputy sheriff and city marshal of Chidester. In July of 1929, officers made a raid on the home of Walter Patterson, a suspected bootlegger. Officers found liquor stored in the smokehouse at the home and arrested Patterson. Patterson's mother and sister objected to the arrest as they led Patterson to the car. Patterson was able to get Officer Marsh's gun and started shooting. Marsh struggled with the suspect to try to regain possession of the weapon and was shot in the chest during the struggle. The suspect then tried to shoot the other officers, but the gun was out of bullets. He then tried to hit Deputy John Pruitt with the weapon. The mother and sister of the suspect tried to hold Deputy Pruitt while the man was trying to hit him. One of the other deputies, Luther Meeks, managed to get a clear shot and killed Patterson.

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Marsh was 50 years old and was survived by a wife and three children. He had been the marshal at Chidester for several years and was born and raised in that community. He was buried at Chidester Cemetery. An investigation of the incident concluded that Officer Luther Meeks was justified in shooting Patterson after Patterson had fatally wounded Deputy Marsh.

DEPUTY JOHN PRUITT INJURED IN 1937

Deputy Pruitt was a former marshal at Gurdon and was also one of the deputies in the incident at Chidester in 1929 involving the bootlegger. In 1937, he was serving as a deputy in Nevada County and was living at Bluff City. He was shot and seriously wounded by three Negroes near Bluff City. Joe Wilson shot Pruitt in the small of his back while his brother held Mr. Pruitt and another brother stood guard. Pruitt was shot with a shotgun loaded with squirrel shot at close range. His wounds were not fatal.

NIGHT CHIEF FRANK E. WILLIFORD END OF WATCH – DECEMBER 8, 1951

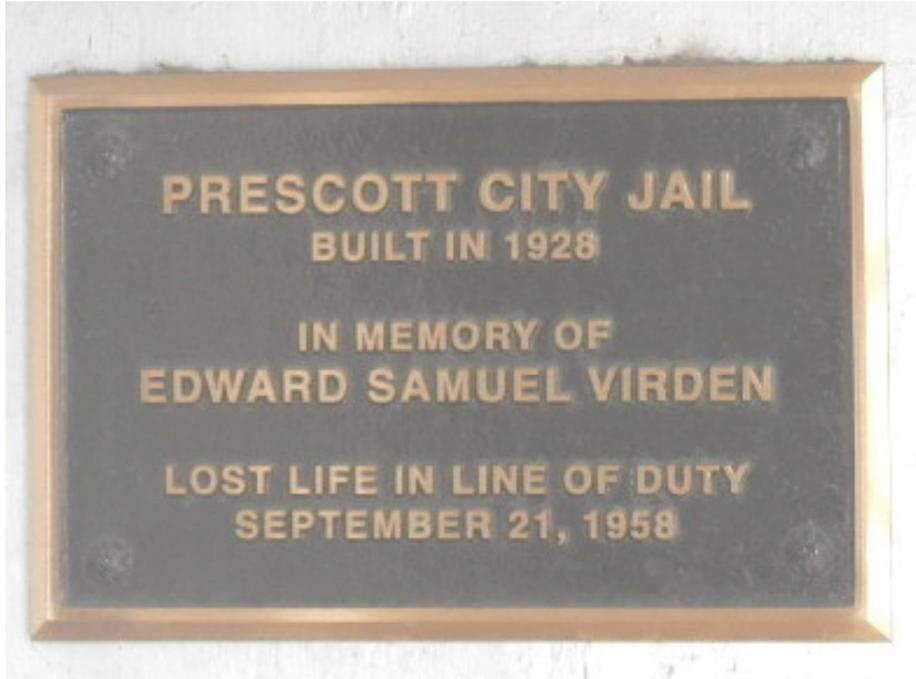
Officer Williford was responding to a disturbance at a hotel in Camden on December 8, 1951. The disturbance involved a transient whom Officer Williford recognized because of previous dealings with him. As he was escorting the man from the hotel café through the hotel lobby, the man suddenly turned and fired a semi-automatic pistol several times at Officer Williford. The man then ran, but was later apprehended. Officer Williford died at the hospital from his wounds. The suspect was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to death, but his sentence was later commuted to life in prison.

PATROLMAN EDWARD S. VIRDEN END OF WATCH – SEPTEMBER 21, 1958

Edward Virden was a city patrolman in Prescott who made a traffic stop for a traffic violation. The occupant of the vehicle was a man named Kenneth Nicely who was wanted in Kentucky for murder. Officer Virden made the arrest and took him to the old city jail which had no other prisoners at that time. Somehow the suspect came into possession of a gun and shot Officer Virden and escaped. Other officers later found Officer Virden's body inside the jail. The suspect was later stopped for speeding in Kingsville, Texas. During that stop, shots were fired and Nicely was wounded. Investigators determined that the bullets the suspect used in that incident matched the bullet that killed Officer Virden and Nicely was returned to Arkansas and tried for murder. He was sentenced to life in prison, but was granted a temporary furlough in 1968. He failed to return from the furlough and was charged with escape. He was recaptured in Kentucky June 27, 1974 and returned to prison where he is still serving his sentence at age 79.

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A plaque was placed on the wall inside the old city jail to honor Officer Edward S. Virden.



Officer Edward S. Virden was 35 years old. He was buried in DeAnn Cemetery in Prescott. He was survived by a wife and three small children.

LT. JOHN C. TATE END OF WATCH – SEPTEMBER 12, 1964

Lt. Tate died as a result of an auto accident. His patrol car was struck by another vehicle which had run a red light in Camden. Lt. Tate was thrown from his vehicle and struck a fire hydrant. Before he died he requested that no charges be filed against the other driver. He was survived by a wife and son.

PATROLMAN GRADY VAN WILSON END OF WATCH – JUNE 18, 1973

Patrolman Grady Wilson of the Camden Police Department was accidentally killed while attending a training course at the Arkansas Law Enforcement Training Academy in East Camden. After the class, he and his roommate were practicing techniques they had learned in their room. The roommate, thinking his gun was not loaded, pointed his revolver at Wilson and pulled the trigger. Wilson was hit in the abdomen and later died at the hospital. He had been with the Camden police department for one year. He was survived by his wife.

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DEPUTY R. D. PURIFOY End of Watch –November 12, 1992

Nevada County Deputy R. D. Purifoy was responding to a family disturbance call when he was beaten to death with some type of iron object by a former mental patient. When the sheriff arrived at the home later, he found the suspect holding something behind his back. The sheriff ordered him to drop the object when the man produced a handgun and began firing. The sheriff fired three shots at the suspect. The suspect, though wounded, responded by firing five shots before he surrendered. The suspect pled guilty to capital murder and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Deputy Purifoy had served with the Sheriff's department for 26 years and was survived by his wife.

The last figures I have seen show 122 officers killed so far in 2017. For some reason, the highest number of officer deaths occurred in the 1970s. Eight of the top ten years were in the 1970s. Since then the number has been somewhere between 125 and 150 per year except for a higher number due to the terrorist attack in 2001.

Even one death is one too many. We are living in a time when there is much hatred directed at police officers who are just trying to do their jobs. There are some bad cops out there just as there are some bad doctors, teachers, lawyers, and every other profession. The great majority of them are dedicated to their work for which they receive little recognition. I for one am grateful that we have police officers willing to do the job to serve and protect us. I don't think we would like our society if we had no law enforcement officers.

I CAN'T EXPLAIN IT

During the last half of December in the year 2000, the south half of Arkansas was hit by two major ice storms. The highways were mostly clear, but ice accumulating in the trees and on the power lines resulted in widespread power outages. Whole towns were without electricity for a long period of time. Gas pumps couldn't pump gas and most businesses had to close down, including grocery stores, restaurants, and banks.

Our town of Camden, Arkansas was almost totally without power for about three days in both ice storms. We lost power at our house and we didn't have any alternate source of heat. Our furnace wouldn't work to keep us warm. Our electric range wouldn't work, so we couldn't cook food. All we had was a camp stove and about a gallon of fuel which we used to heat up cans of chili. That was not bad for one meal but eating chili and Vienna sausage for every meal soon gets old. Of course, we had some snack foods like chips, candy, peanut butter, crackers, etc. to go along with our chili and Vienna sausage, so we didn't go hungry. We even had plenty of Cheerios cereal to eat and the milk we had on hand stayed good because of the cold temperatures.

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The temperature hovered around 32 degrees and the highways in town were mostly free of ice. We spent the first night at home wearing our clothes to bed and covering up with heavy quilts. We made it through that first night, but it was not too pleasant.

There was not much we could do during the daytime to relieve the boredom. There was no TV to watch or radio to listen to. It was too cold to just sit around and read a book. We had a gas water heater so we had plenty of warm water, but stepping out of the warm shower into an ice cold room was not too pleasant. I drove around in our neighborhood to see if I could see any progress being made on restoring the power, but there was no sign of any electric company trucks anywhere. We had no idea of how long we might be without power.

By the next night, our house was very cold and we didn't think we could stand to sleep while freezing. We spent the second night in our car. We would run the engine long enough to take the chill off, and then turn the engine off while trying to get a little sleep. We knew better than to leave the engine running due to the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning. I was glad I had filled the car with gas before the storm hit since all the stations in town were closed. We didn't want to waste too much gasoline just driving around. We slept very little that night.

The third night we drove to our cabin about 20 miles from home and were surprised that the power was on there. That was a lot better than sleeping in the car.

Finally, our power was restored after being off for 80 hours. We had survived the worst ice storm we had ever experienced and were glad things were finally getting back to normal. It was back to work for me after being off during the storm. I spent the next few days driving around the area checking to see how the company's timber fared. Everywhere I went I found heavy damage especially the young pine plantations that were not strong enough to bear the weight of the ice. Timber companies and private landowners suffered great damage from the ice storm.

A few days later on Christmas Day, we started having freezing rain again. We decided to cancel our traditional family Christmas because of the icy roads. We had a slow drizzle of freezing rain all that day and into the night. About midnight, our power went off again and we woke up cold. When daylight came, we learned that the whole city was without power once again and we were told conditions were even worse further west. The whole city of Texarkana was without power and some said it might be two weeks before it could be restored. People were stranded on the Interstate. There was no power anywhere in Nevada or Ouachita counties. It was said to be the worst ice storm in history. Even more timber broke from the weight of the ice. There were shortages of generators, flashlights, batteries, bread, milk, and matches. Anyone caught unprepared was in serious trouble.

I went to the office where I worked near the paper mill and found power was also off there. For some reason I checked one of the outlets in my office and found that it had power. This is what I have never been able to explain. Why did one outlet in my office

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have power when the rest of the building didn't?

For the next two nights my wife and I camped out in my small office. The local McDonald's had power by that time so we were able to get some food there. We took our electric heater and some old quilts and slept on the floor in my office. We had heat while practically the whole town was without power. All I can say about this is that the Good Lord was looking out for us. He knew we needed some help and directed us to that location.

Driving on the county roads was like driving an obstacle course. Trees were down everywhere and light poles were broken. Some people living in the rural areas were without power for many days. We attended church at Bluff City on Dec. 31st, and the power was still off there. We used a portable generator for light during the service. Our song leader led us in the hymn "Let the Lower Lights be Burning". Snow started falling in the afternoon and by nightfall the ground was covered with snow. We started off 2001 with three inches of snow on the ground. Bluff City finally got power back on January 2, 2001 after being off since Christmas Day.

December of 2000 was a very stressful month for everyone in south Arkansas. Fifty-two counties in Arkansas were declared a federal disaster area. After enduring those two ice storms, I installed a gas heater in case something like that ever happens again. We may not be able to cook, but at least we can stay warm when the power goes off.

It was common in the old days for a family member or someone in the community to write a memorial for those who had passed away to be published in the county newspaper. Here is one such memorial for a young man who died in 1908 from a disease called erysipelas (a bacterial skin infection). This young man lived in the old community of Foss which was located about four miles southeast of Bluff City. No evidence remains of that community today.

Willie D. Gillispie 1885-1908

The grim monster of death visited our community Sat. the 8th about 3:00 and laid his icy hands on one of the most noble and robust young men in our midst. W. D. Gillispie, of Foss, Nevada County, was the son of "Tunk" Gillispie. Dardy, as we called him, would have been 23 years old the 16th of this month. He was a loving, obedient son who was much devoted to his afflicted mother, who had been confined to bed for 8 years. He was of great comfort and solace, ever ready to speak a kind word or do a good deed for his mother. He had been sick for 2 weeks with erysipelas. Saturday morning he seemed to be doing nicely. Dr. Shell dismissed him that morning and soon after noon Dardy said he was feeling well and was going to sit up some Sunday, and in a few minutes he fell over the bed speechless for 5 or 10 minutes and then told his brother to raise him up. He began shouting and praising God; said he loved everybody and was going home to glory and asked the family to meet him; said nothing hurt him and clasped his hands and asked the Lord to take him; that he was ready to go. He

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threw his arms around his mother's neck (who by this time had crawled to him) and told her goodbye and then kissed his only sister Rose goodbye and said, "Rose, there is one more angel in Heaven tonight. Death does not excite me. I am just going to rest." He then told Gordon goodbye and died in his brother's arms. The father had been out about the place and his dear boy was nearly gone before he returned. O what a trying time with this invalid mother and children all alone in this sad home. Yet not alone, for it seems the Lord and the angels were hovering around.

Dardy had never made a profession that we know before his sickness. We are so glad he made peace with mankind and went shouting home to glory. He had the faith that takes no denial, even in death. This should be great consolation to the bereaved family who have our deepest sympathy. We all regret to give Dardy up. Let us prepare to meet him in his beautiful home above. For some wise purpose, the good Lord saw fit to call him to his heavenly home.

E. E. Epperson



The grave marker for Willie D. Gillispie at Holleman Cemetery in Ouachita County

The inscription reads:

Willie D. Gillispie
Born February 16, 1885
Died February 8, 1908
Son of I. B. and H. S. Gillispie
Aged 22 yrs., 11 mths., 21 dys.
"In the heaven above is one angel more"

The name was spelled Gillispie on this marker and two or three others in that cemetery, but most are spelled Gillespie.

RAINFALL RECORD

I had one more inch of rain at my house in November. That brings my total for the year to 46.2 inches at the end of November which is still about six inches below our normal yearly rainfall. The last few months have been very dry. We will need a big rain in the last two weeks of December if we make our normal annual rainfall. This is Arkansas. It could happen.