

The Murder of SHERIFF JOHN T. OLIVE

Prepared for the Williamson County Historical Museum

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A single shotgun blast tipped through the side of Williamson County Sheriff John T. Olive as he stood on a Bell County railroad platform in September 1892. Twenty-seven hours later, the popular lawman would become the only elected Williamson County sheriff to be killed in the line of duty.

Since taking office in 1884, the former Taylor city marshal had developed a statewide reputation as a tough, yet fair, lawman. Often accompanied by U.S. Marshal John Rankin of the 27th District Court, Olive roamed the Southwest and Indian Territory tracking down outlaws. In 1888 he was called upon by President Grover Cleveland to go to Mexico and arrest the notorious gunslinger George Gladden.

Now barely clinging to life, Sheriff Olive was placed on a northbound train and taken to Temple, where a team of doctors determined that his wounds were fatal. Accompanied by his friend Marshal Rankin, the 41-year-old sheriff was then placed on a southbound train and taken to Taylor, where he later died at the Taylor Hotel.

He was buried after a full Masonic ceremony held at Taylor's First Christian Church, which was packed to overflowing. A three-mile funeral procession, led by a marching band and the Taylor fire department, accompanied the sheriff's body to Taylor's City Cemetery. Businesses in Taylor and Georgetown closed for the afternoon in honor of the fallen sheriff.

An investigation into the sheriff's murder began immediately.

Williamson County Commissioner W.S. Brookshire was sworn in as acting sheriff, and a roundup of suspects began with the help of City Marshal Charley Brady and Deputy Sheriff H.C. Purl, father of Georgetown educator Annie Purl.

High on the list were Theodore and Noah Armstrong, prominent Bell



County citizens, because in 1880, then Deputy Sheriff John Olive had arrested two of their brothers for livestock theft. After their release from jail, Neally and John Armstrong were killed in a shootout with Olive during a moonlit confrontation on a dark road 13 miles southeast of Taylor.

Since revenge was a common cause for murder in 19th-century Texas, Theodore and Noah

Armstrong were attested and charged with Sheriff Olive's murder. Noah was tried for murder in February 1893 but was acquitted. Charges against Theodore were dropped due to a lack of evidence.

Years passed and the murder of Sheriff Olive was forgotten. However, 23 years later a witness came forward and told Williamson County Sheriff Lee Allen that Theodore Armstrong had bragged about killing Sheriff Olive. Theodore was once again arrested and charged with murder.

Here the story takes several twists. Although Armstrong never admitted to the media that he killed Sheriff Olive, a story appeared in a Fort Worth newspaper reporting Armstrong's confession. Also, the surprise witness, on whom the entire case was built, refused to testify at Armstrong's May 1915 Georgetown trial. However, Armstrong's close friend, Texas Governor "Pa" Ferguson, did testify on his behalf, and after a 15-minute recess Armstrong was found not guilty. He then sued the Fort Worth newspaper for libel and received \$1,000 in damages.

Log on to Williamson County Historical Museum's website at www.wchm-tx.org for more information about Sheriff John Olive. ■

