

ORANGE CHIEF KILLED IN 1935 CRIME SPREE

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Americans during the Great Depression in the 1930s were enthralled by the stories of gangsters. By 1935, the most famous ones, Bonnie and Clyde, Pretty Boy Floyd, Baby Face Nelson and John Dillinger were dead.

Clyde Dawson, 21, and B.L. Thompson, 23, weren't infamous gangsters, but they went on a crime spree that included a murder in Orange. They pulled off the first of two jail escapes, a couple of car jackings and a kidnapping. They were on their way to Louisiana on the Old Spanish Trail (Green Avenue) in Orange when the police stopped them.

That's when Dawson fatally shot Orange Acting Police Chief Johnny Godwin and then kidnapped a couple on a date to steal their car. He was captured in Lake Charles.

Godwin was shot on Green Avenue about 9:30 on the Saturday night of August 10, 1935. He died the next day at Frances Ann Litcher Hospital, which was about a block away from the where he was wounded.

Godwin's murder came less than three months after Police Chief Ed O'Reilly was shot and killed by the minister of the First Baptist Church. The O'Reilly shooting is one of the most notorious in Orange's history, but Godwin has not been forgotten. A photograph of him, O'Reilly and Captain Danny Gray, who was killed in 1974, hang in the lobby of the Orange Police Department.

Police Major Don Sullivan, now retired, researched the history of the police department and wrote about it in 2000 in *Las Sabinas*, the Orange County historical journal. He later found Godwin's daughter and interviewed her and others who knew Godwin for a story that appeared in a 2001 edition of *Las Sabina*.

The Orange City Commission appointed Godwin to be acting chief on May 31, two days after the death of O'Reilly and a few days after he had been hired. City Commission meeting minutes show Godwin had been appointed on May 14 to serve as a night policeman (no women in those days).

However, a *Beaumont Enterprise* story in April of that year reported that Godwin had been employed for the night shift to succeed Eddie Barker, who had resigned for other employment. O'Reilly may have hired him in April and the commission formally appointed him later.

At the time, the city had a chief, who patrolled during the day, and two night officers. All three worked Saturday nights when people from all over the county would travel to town to shop, watch a movie, eat or simply stroll through the streets to visit.

Godwin and Officer George LaFitte were patrolling on the Saturday night when word came that a taxi had been stolen in Beaumont. The two saw a taxi coming

from Fifth Street and turning eastward on Green Avenue. According to testimony in Dawson's trial, Godwin blew his whistle (it doesn't explain whether the car had a whistle-like siren or whether Godwin physically blew a whistle from his mouth).

After hearing the whistle, the taxi stopped on Green Avenue between Fourth and Third Streets (where the Lamar State College-Orange Student Center is today).

Witnesses said Godwin walked up to the driver's side and LaFitte went to the passenger side. Dawson was the driver and had a pistol in his hand, which was covered by a handkerchief. When Godwin got to the car, Dawson fired once and hit the acting chief in the abdomen.

Major Sullivan interviewed Godwin's cousin, Herman Bowler. Bowler said he had heard Godwin had approached the car with his revolver drawn, but he thought he recognized the man and put the gun back in his holster.

Dawson then ran away southward. Godwin was on the ground, mortally wounded, but he urged LaFitte to keep the passenger, Thompson, in custody rather than chase Dawson. LaFitte held a shotgun on Thompson.

Jessie Webb, an auto mechanic, and Miss Rosalie Patterson had a Saturday night date and were driving downtown on Front Street. Miss Patterson worked as a clerk in the Orange County Rehabilitation Program of the Depression. Dawson pulled his gun on them, got in the car and ordered Webb to drive him to Louisiana.

During Dawson's murder trial, Miss Patterson testified that little was said during the drive to Lake Charles. At the time, the Sabine River Bridge into Louisiana was at the end of Green Avenue, not far from the shooting and kidnapping. Law officers stopped the car as they drove on the Calcasieu River Bridge in Lake Charles. She said Dawson had crouched down in the car at the bridge.

Godwin had a wife and two young daughters, Johnnie Lou and Betty Jean, when he was killed. Sullivan in a Las Sabinas article said the community raised \$137.50 (\$2,465 in 2017 buying power) to help his family. The Orange City Commission voted to give his widow \$50 a month for a year. Of that, \$15 a month was to help

her pay rent by applying the amount to the delinquent taxes owed by her landlord.

In addition, the city paid for Godwin's hospital bill, which was a total of \$59.50 (\$1,067 today) for his care on Saturday into Sunday, when he died.

Sullivan reported in Las Sabinas that a honor guard of eight motorcycles driven by officers from Beaumont, Port Arthur and Lake Charles rode at Godwin's funeral. City Hall, the county courthouse and businesses closed at 4:30 p.m. out of respect for the slain officer.

Dawson and Thompson, though, weren't finished with their crime spree, even though they were in the Orange County Jail. They made a fake gun and escaped here. Sheriff W.P. Brown later reported they fashioned a pistol out of washing soap and colored it with shoe polish.

They were stopped by Archie King, who the Orange Leader described as a "one-armed world war veteran." King fought the two from stealing his car. Sheriff Brown then came up with his gun drawn the outlaws got no further.

Dawson's murder trial was in October 1935 with County Attorney James Neff and District Attorney Hollis Kinard prosecuting. It was held at the Orange County Courthouse two months after the shooting. The trial for Chief O'Reilly was moved to Houston on a change of venue and held a year after he was killed.

In the opening statements against Dawson, Neff asked the jury to give "the supreme penalty." Defense attorney Raymond Stark, though, said the death penalty would not "serve and social or legal purpose."

The defense, which also had attorney H.A. Watts, questioned whether the murder of Godwin was an accident. The pistol had a quick trigger and Dawson had not intended on it firing.

The Orange Leader reported Dawson closely watched everything during the trial and his mother attended.

During the trial, the story came of Dawson taking the pistol from Bexar County Sheriff's Deputy Ernest H. Macias. Thompson had been in the jail and the deputy had taken him to a hospital. While returning him to the jail, Dawson grabbed the gun. Macias said the six-shooter had been handed down to him from his father.

On cross examination of the defense team, Macias said he knew nothing about the pistol that could make it tricky. However, he admitted the pistol had accidentally fired in his house before he became a deputy. The shot from the gun seriously wounded his young daughter.

Sullivan's research showed that the deputy had taken the two to a hospital for medical treatment. Dawson had a gunshot wound in a leg after he was shot when he robbed a San Antonio jewelry store.

As the deputy was taking them back to the jail, the two were carrying on a conversation with him when suddenly they reached over the front seat and grabbed his gun.

Ralph McNee of San Antonio testified at Dawson's trial about how the two used the deputy's gun to steal his Ford car. The two traveled to Southeast Texas. The Old Spanish Trail (or Highway 90) ran from San Antonio to Houston, Beaumont, Vidor, Orange and on into Louisiana.

The outlaws abandoned the Ford in Houston and then hijacked a taxicab. They also stole \$10 from the driver. Then they robbed a "filling station" of \$15. They spent the night in Houston and decided on a little vacation in Galveston. On the fateful Saturday, they took the bus to Beaumont.

While in Beaumont, they ate watermelon and went to a "picture show." They also stopped at the Kress store and bought a toy pistol, yellow paint and a paint brush.

Fred Thomas, a Beaumont taxi driver, testified that the two had talked him into giving them a ride to Vidor. Instead, they forced him to give them the taxi. Then they drove him to "a lonely spot just south of Vidor and tied him to a tree with his hands behind him," the Leader reported.

Thomas managed to free himself in three or four minutes. He then found a place with a phone and called police. That's when the bulletin went out to Orange police to watch for the stolen taxi.

The two had used the yellow paint and paint brush to cover the wording on the cab. An Orange County deputy later found the discarded paint and brush on the side of a rural Vidor road.

The Leader listed all the names of the white men serving on the jury (women and blacks were not allowed in those days). They were Fred Stephenson, farmer; Harry Bishop, carpenter; C.C. Briggs, oil well driller; Arthur Smith, log specialist; T.C. Malone, insurance agent; J.B. Blanda, market man; Asa Duhon, a furniture store employee; J.N. Stephenson, farmer; Allan Peveto, oil field worker; Leopold Hogg, laborer; Albert Judice, an employee at a packing plant; and Meade Graves, a clothing store employee.

The jury spent 19 hours to decide Dawson was guilty and give him a life sentence instead of the death penalty.

Thompson's lawyer had his trial separated from Dawson's and he was tried for the kidnapping and robbery charges. He was found guilty and sentenced to 35 years in prison.

Godwin is buried in Evergreen Cemetery between Border and Tenth streets in Orange. He was 31 years old when he died.

-Margaret Toal, KOGT-