

# The Battleground Shootout—Arizona Rangers Fight Smith Gang

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*Editors Note—Ray McKnight wrote this article for the Bulletin.*

At the turn of the twentieth century, when many Americans were enjoying urban life and the new inventions brought about by the power of electricity, most of the territory of Arizona was still a vast and untamed frontier. One of the last vestiges of open rangeland and unexplored mountain wilderness where adventurers could still find a sense of freedom. This last frontier also attracted train robbers, murderers, and horse thieves, whose outlaw ways were being curtailed in the more populated areas of the nation. By 1901, it appeared to the outside world that the criminal element in Arizona was getting the upper hand. The law-abiding citizens of the territory, struggling to gain statehood, began to pressure the governor to form a special force of lawmen, modeled upon the Texas Rangers and the Mexican Rurales, to combat this lawlessness.

On March 21, 1901, a bill was passed through the territorial legislature creating a 14 man force of Arizona Rangers, consisting of one captain, one sergeant, and 12 privates. Each member of the force was to provide his own firearms, horses, and all necessary accouterments. The territorial government would provide ammunition, food, and forage. Enlistments were for a 12-month period, governed by the regulations of the United States Army, where applicable. The pay for a private was \$55.00 per month. Each Ranger was empowered to arrest lawbreakers anywhere in the territory and deliver their prisoners to the nearest peace officer in the county where the crime was committed.

Burton C. Mossman, former superintendent of the vast Hash Knife Ranch, was commissioned captain of the Arizona Rangers on August 30, 1901. He set up his headquarters in Bisbee and began to organize his force. He was looking for outdoorsmen with the instincts of man hunters—men who had experience as cowboys or peace officers who could ride, trail, and shoot. The names of the rangers Mossman recruited were not announced to the general public, thus guarding their identities from lawbreakers. Recruitment began during the first week of September. The fifth ranger to volunteer was Carlos Tafoya of St. Johns. Duane Hamblin of Neutroso enlisted on September 20th.

Before Captain Mossman completed his 13-man roster, the first big ranger shoot-out took place on the White



Mountain Apache Reservation, October 8, 1901, involving rangers Tafoya and Hamblin against a treacherous band of rustlers known as the Smith Gang. This family of thieves made their headquarters in northeastern Graham County at their mother's home ranch on the Blue River. Bill Smith, the oldest brother, was the leader, followed by his younger brothers, Al, George, and Floyd, a brother-in-law named Adam Slagger, and two unidentified men.

Bill Smith had come to Arizona from Oklahoma Territory, where it was rumored he had been involved in rustling and



Figure 1. Duane Hamblin, Arizona Ranger.

robbery with the Dalton Brothers. By the turn of the century, he and his gang had become notorious horse and cattle thieves along the eastern end of the Mogollon Rim.

In 1898, the brothers were arrested for stealing unbranded calves out of the open range cattle herds belonging to Henry Barrett and Bill Phelps. Bill Smith assumed full responsibility for this theft, so his younger brothers were released. Bill was locked up in the county jail at St. Johns, AZ to await trial; however, he did not stay there very long. With the help of his brother, Al, who smuggled a pistol into his cell, he overpowered the jailer and escaped to New Mexico, where he was reportedly involved in a train robbery. After a year's absence, he returned to Arizona with enough cash to start his mother and brothers in the cattle business.

Bill Smith still held a grudge against Henry Barrett, and with his brothers would make an occasional trip over to the open rangeland at Big Cienega looking for Barrett and any stray horses or cattle he could steal to increase his own herd. On one of these excursions, Bill and his brother, Al, waylaid Barrett and a cowboy, named Frank Brinkley, near Sheep Springs. The Smith Brothers let Brinkley go but threatened to kill Barrett. Barrett, being a "tough old rooster" from Texas did not back down to the Smiths' threats and bluffed his way out of the tight spot he was in. He then caught up with Brinkley and the two of them rode into St. Johns to confront the sheriff of Apache County. Henry Barrett was mad. He had enough of the Smith brothers and volunteered to lead a posse to either capture them, kill them, or run them out of the territory.

The next morning, Hank Sharp, a sworn deputy of Apache County, and ranchers Henry Barret, M. "Pete" Peterson and Elijah Holgate, rode out of St. Johns headed for the small community of Greer, AZ where rangers Tafoya and Hamblin joined the posse. They trailed the Smiths to Sheep's Crossing on the west fork of the Little Colorado River, then proceeded east to Lorenzo Crosby's ranch and store on the North Fork, of the East Fork of the Black River, at today's Crosby's Crossing on National Forest Road 285. Lorenzo Crosby



Figure 2. A typical posse. Photographed at St. Johns, Arizona, circa 1900.

was not at his ranch; only his wife, Molly, and her two small children were there. She told the posse that the Smith Gang had been there the night before, demanding food and shelter. Molly and the children had to sleep in the loft of her log home, while the gang spread their blankets on the ground floor. They left her the next morning with a warning not to say anything about their whereabouts. Meanwhile, the word had been spread throughout the area that the Smith gang had been seen near Pat Knoll, driving a herd of 15 or 20 saddle horses, probably stolen. Some of these horses belonged to Lorenzo Crosby and the Maxwell brothers, Will and Arch. The Maxwells were noted for their tracking ability and knowledge of the wilderness areas along the Black River and were summoned from their home in Neutroso to join the posse. The posse left the Crosby Ranch, following the outlaws' trail southwest past Big Lake, over Deadman's Crossing, on the West Fork of the Black River to Reservation Corral, near the shoreline of today's Reservation Lake. Here Lorenzo Crosby and the Maxwell brothers caught up with the rest of the posse.



Figure 3. The P.S. ranch house.

The outlaws' trail led southeast to the P.S. Ranch, on the West Fork of Black River, near Buffalo Crossing. The ranch house was abandoned when the posse arrived, but there were indications that the thieves had camped there the night before. They were just one day behind the outlaws now and gaining ground. Early in the morning of October 8, 1901, this determined band of lawmen continued to follow the bandits' trail southwest toward the Pair-O'Dice Ranch on Milk Creek, just inside the White Mountain Apache Reservation's east boundary line. From this ranch, the trail led south toward the deep canyons of the Black River.



**Figure 4. Ruins of the ranch house on the Pair-O'Dice, Cienega, Fort Apache Indian Reservation.**

It was late afternoon when the posse heard several gunshots and knew they were near the outlaws' camp. They rode cautiously in the direction of the shots, dismounted, and then crept the last few hundred yards toward the outlaws' location. Most of them crawled up to positions overlooking the rim of a deep, narrow ravine where the outlaws had made their camp.

Some of the Smith gang had shot a bear and were unaware that they were being followed. The hound dogs that had accompanied the outlaws were prowling around the perimeter of the camp when one of them barked out an alarm. Bill Smith, with the instincts of a hunted animal, sensed danger and slipped up to the rim of the ravine



**Figure 5. The ridge where the posse positioned themselves for the fight with the Smith gang.**

where he spied the approaching lawmen. Hurriedly returning to the camp, he alerted his companions and ordered his brothers to get the horses out of the open area where they were grazing.

Rangers Hamblin and Tafoya, with Will Maxwell, boldly approached the outlaws' camp from the open end of the ravine. Will Maxwell called out that they were law officers and for the gang to surrender. Bill Smith replied, "All right, which way do you want us to come out?" Maxwell answered, "Come right out this way." A tense silence fell over the scene.

Henry Barrett, realizing the danger that the three lawmen had put themselves in by boldly exposing themselves to the outlaws, yelled out for them to lie down. Ranger Hamblin took his advice. Tafoya and Maxwell remained standing and were cut down in the volley of fire that erupted from the dark depths of the ravine. Bill Smith had shot first! A bullet from his Savage lever-action rifle hit Bill Maxwell square in the forehead. He was dead before he hit the ground. The crown of his big hat was torn out by the force of brains and bone fragments, as the bullet exited his skull. Tafoya was shot twice through the middle but gamely returned fire until the magazine of his Winchester was empty.



**Figure 6. The ravine where the Smith Gang shot it out with the posse.**

Both sides began firing simultaneously. Bullets were whizzing through the air like angry hornets, ricocheting off rocks and ripping the bark off trees. This was a real frontier shootout. Every man, outlaw and lawman, was hiding behind a tree or a big rock for protection, presenting as small a target as possible for his opponent to shoot at. Henry Barrett had a high-powered Spanish Mauser bolt-action rifle, captured in the Spanish American War of 1898. The metal-jacketed bullets he was shooting would penetrate right through the trees and downed timber that was shielding the outlaws. One of them or maybe two were wounded. During this firefight, Ranger Hamblin had worked his way around the outlaws' position and drove away their horses, putting them afoot.

The shooting died down as the gun smoke, like a thick fog, settled into the tangled brush and fallen trees of the ravine. Darkness was closing in, giving the outlaws a covering screen by which to escape into the wilderness of the Black River Canyons. As the posse closed in, they found the hound dog that had warned his master of danger; dead. Saddles, bridles, camping gear, and personal belongings of the thieves were scattered everywhere. Trees, stumps, and logs throughout the area were scarred with bullet holes. The scene looked like a battleground and from that day forward it would be known by that name—*The Battleground*.

Back at the mouth of the ravine, Tafoya lay on his back, asking for water. Will Maxwell was dead. His body was laid

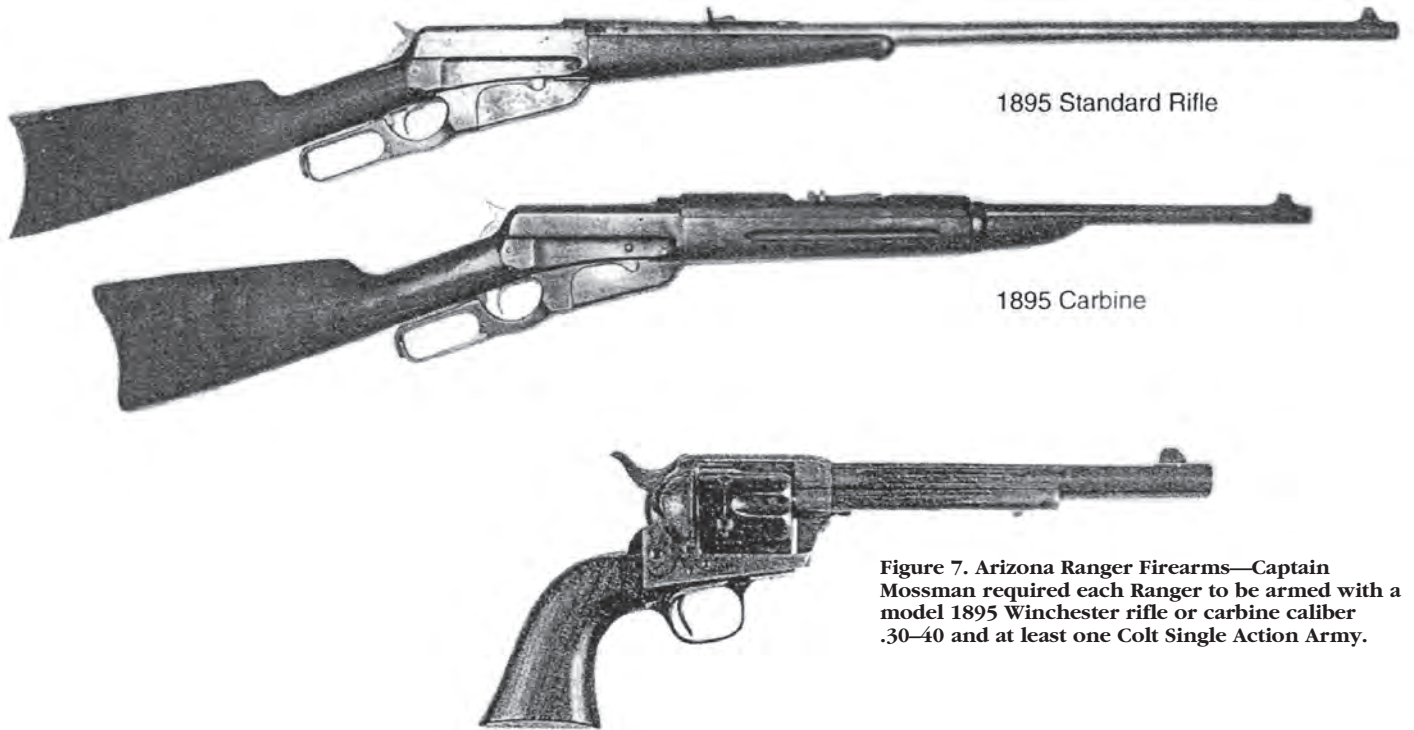


Figure 7. Arizona Ranger Firearms—Captain Mossman required each Ranger to be armed with a model 1895 Winchester rifle or carbine caliber .30-40 and at least one Colt Single Action Army.

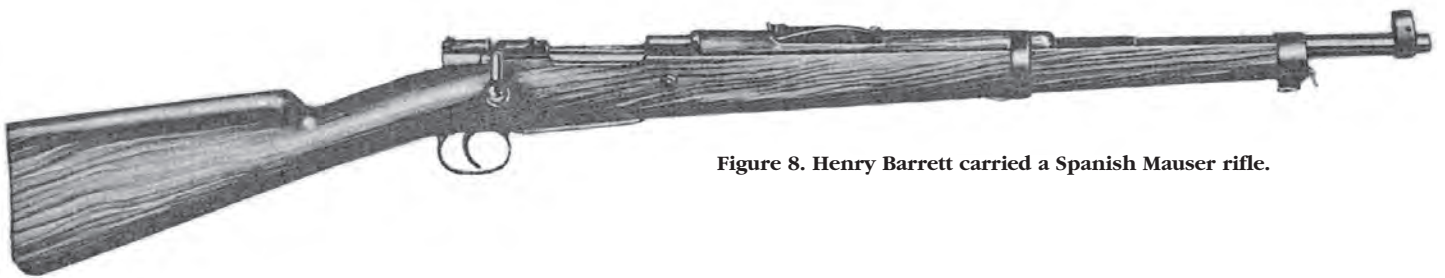


Figure 8. Henry Barrett carried a Spanish Mauser rifle.

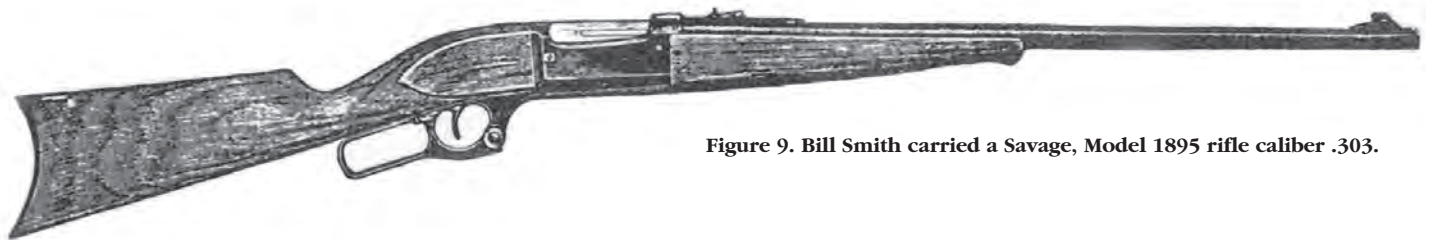


Figure 9. Bill Smith carried a Savage, Model 1895 rifle caliber .303.

out on two saddle blankets. Hank Sharp and Arch Maxwell rode off into the night, headed for the village of Neutroso, 20 miles away, to fetch Dr. Rudd and spread the news of the fight. The rest of the posse stayed behind and gave what aid and comfort they could to the wounded ranger. Carlos Tafoya realized that he was dying; before losing consciousness, he pulled a silver dollar from his pocket and gave it to Henry Barrett. "Give this to my wife. It, and the month's wages coming to me will be all she will ever have." He died around midnight.



Figure 11. The grave of William Maxwell at Neutroso, Arizona.

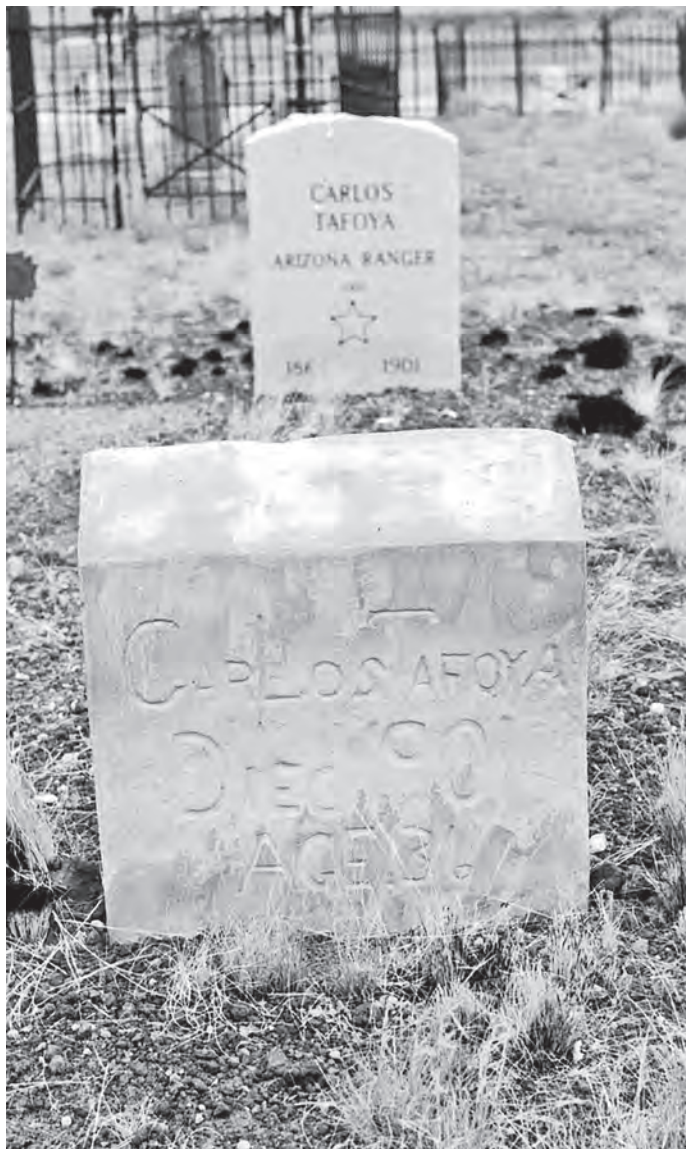


Figure 10. The grave of Carlos Tafoya at St. Johns, Arizona. He was the only Arizona Ranger killed in the line of duty.

In the darkness the outlaws stumbled down the narrow, steep ravine until it came out onto Pacheta Creek, which flows into the Black River. They made their way on foot through what is today the Bear Wallow Wilderness area and showed up the next night at a cow camp on Beaver Creek, northeast of Hannigan Meadow. Bill Smith warned the cowpunchers to lie still in their blankets. He recognized one of them, Marion Lee, and ordered him to get up and fix something to eat. The cowboys had heard about the fight. When Bill Smith was told that Will Maxwell had been killed, he was shocked. "Well, I'm sure, sure sorry," was his reply. "When he stood up that way we thought he was Barrett. Barrett was the man we wanted. We feel mighty sorry over killing Will Maxwell, he was a good friend of ours. Tell his mother for us that we're very sorry we killed him."

The fugitives took the horses they needed from the remuda of the cow camp and continued east into the Blue River Wilderness, avoiding their mother's home place, and turned up again at the ranch of Hugh McKean, near the New Mexico border. They offered to trade horses. When McKean refused, they held him at gunpoint, rounded up his best mounts, took all his firearms and food, then headed deeper into New Mexico.

Captain Mossman received a telegram at Solomonville, AZ from Henry Hunig, a St. John's merchant, informing him of the shootout. After sending orders to headquarters at Bisbee, instructing the rangers there to cover the routes into Mexico, he rode off with three of his rangers toward the scene of the fight. They reached Clifton, AZ by nightfall and arrived at the scene of the shootout late the next day, where Henry Barrett described the fight to them. Two Apache scouts, sergeants Josh and Chicken, were sum-



Figure 12. Apache Indian Scouts Chicken and Josh on the Mexican border in 1916.

moned from Forth Apache and given orders to assist the rangers in tracking down the Smith gang. These scouts led the rangers to McKean's Ranch. Heavy snow hindered the search, but the Apaches, man hunters, followed the cold trail north to Reserve, New Mexico, then east across the Saint Augustine plain to Magdalena, and Socorro. The trail was lost along the banks of the Rio Grande. The Smith boys got away!

Arch Maxwell and his younger brother, Lorenzo, returned to the scene of the shootout, with a light spring wagon and brought the body of their brother back to Neutroso, where he was buried in the family graveyard. Will's bullet-torn hat was left on the ground where he was shot down. Superstitious cowboys who occasionally rode through "The Battleground" refused to touch it.

The body of Carlos Tafoya was returned to St. Johns. The whole town turned out for his funeral. A grand procession followed the horse-drawn hearse out to the Catholic Cemetery on the east side of town, where his body was put to rest. His widow finally

received a small pension, after two years of wrangling in the territorial legislature.

October 8, 1901 was a tragic day for the newly formed Arizona Rangers. Their mission was accomplished. The Smith gang was broken up and run out of Arizona, but it cost the lives of two honest men. The good guys didn't always win in the real Old West! Let us not forget the sacrifice they made for law and order.

# The St. Johns Herald.

ST. JOHNS, APACHE COUNTY, ARIZONA TERRITORY, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1901.

## Posse and Bandits Have An Encounter.

### Two more innocent men fall at the hands of those fiendish, brutal being called out-laws.

(Supposed to be the Smith gang.)

The report came in that a posse following 6 outlaws ran on to them at sundown last Tuesday night, where a hot battle took place and the report claims Will Maxwell who was with the pursuing party was shot thru the head and killed.

Carlos Tafoya was shot thru the right side below the ribs. Perhaps fatal.

Owing to the darkness coming on the posse was unable to go nearer the outlaws' possession. But it is supposed that there was one outlaw killed and one wounded. The posse afterward gained possession of the outlaws horses.

Mr. E. T. Holgate a member of the posse who met the Smiths on the evening of the 8th, returned home yesterday. Mr Holgate says he was in the fight and was near the side of Mr. Tafolla when he was shot. Tafoya is in a very serious condition. The hole in his side is so large that when he drinks the water runs out thru it. He was not expected to live over an hour or so when Mr. Holgate left.

Mr. Maxwell had the top of his head shot off and instantly killed, he was also but a short distance from Mr. Holgate.

They run the outlaws from their camp which was situated in a hole and gained possession of their camp and horses but he did not think any of the gang was hit.

Just as we were ready to go to press the lifeless body of Mr. Tafoya was brought into town

Figure 13. A newspaper account of the gunfight from *The St. Johns Herald*.

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