

HISTORY OF THE HASHKNIFE POSSE

When the West was beginning to grow and develop, a need was acquired for mounted groups to assist the law in finding criminals, doing rescue work, and performing many other vital activities.

As the country grew and prospered the need for these groups became less. It wasn't until 1955 when the need for a search and rescue group was again seen.

This paper was prepared in an effort to acquaint the reader with the history, operations, and organization of the Navajo County Hashknife Sheriff's Posse.

"To the northwest above the Verde River range stretched the great Hashknife outfit with its 60,000 head of cattle, and the unsavory reputation of having 'the thievinist, fightinest' bunch of cowboys in the United States," it was reported by Frazier Hunt.

The Aztec Land and Cattle Company, organized about 1883 or 1884, had its headquarters situated across the Little Colorado River from the present site of Saint Joseph, Arizona. One of the largest cattle companies that ever ranged the Southwest, the Aztec Cattle and Land Company, better known as the Hashknife Outfit, was not basically successful.

By 1885 the Hashknife transferred its headquarters to Holbrook, Arizona. At that time the outfit claimed a range of ninety miles long by forty miles wide which extended from Holbrook to Flagstaff and was principally on the southern side of the P. and P. Railroad's right-of-way.

The size of the Hashknife outfit required the efforts of a variety of men many of which were wanted by the

law. Hunt has stated in his book, "Cap Mossman, Last of the Great Cowmen," that as two men, one a veteran hand the other a new recruit: "We ain't had a killin' in there since last summer. One more'd make it seventeen. Most of 'im been Hashknife boys or old hands that used to work for the outfit."

Although the cowboys were rough this famous cattle outfit is remembered for its size rather than its hands; therefore, this name and brand was chosen for the Navajo County Hashknife Sheriff's Posse. The brand is registered to the Spur Land and Cattle Company of Flagstaff and is used with the name by the posse with the permission of Mr. John Babbitt.

The incident requiring an organized mounted posse occurred in the winter of 1954. Hunters were stranded in three feet of snow which fell unexpectedly in Northern Arizona. The efforts of many scattered rescue groups were not enough to save the lives of many of the lost elk hunters. Through the loss of many lives Northern Arizonans were opened to see the need for a search and rescue group.

The origination of the posse itself came in 1955 when Mr. Roy Downing moved to Holbrook. He was willing to help organize a rescue group with his knowledge of being with the Long Beach Mounted Posse.

The Navajo County Hashknife Sheriff's Posse was organized primarily as a search and rescue group, but through the years it has gained more and different fame through its other activities.

Averages of sixty-five members compose the posse, its officers, and its board of directors. The election for

officers is held in the fall of the year. Those elected are: Captain, whose duty is to supervise the posse under the approval of the board of directors; first lieutenant, who acts in the capacity of the captain when he is not present; second lieutenant, who acts in capacity of first lieutenant when he is not present, and is in charge of equipment; and sergeant who is the secretary. The treasurer is appointed by the captain with the approval of the board of directors.

The governing body of the Hashknife Sheriff's Posse is the board of directors. The board consists of eight members elected for alternate terms, and a chairman who is elected by the members of the board. The past captain serves on the board for one year and the present captain is an ex-officio member who along with the treasurer can vote to break ties.

Most men are willing to work when called on. The men all take the oath of a deputy sheriff of Navajo County and are only deputy sheriffs when on call. The sheriff has the authority to call them out and he directs them when called out in service.

Both the sheriff and the undersheriff are members of the posse. When on duty, the men are expected to furnish their own firearms, horses, saddles, and other equipment necessary for the performance of their duty.

To become a member, a person must be sponsored by a member of the posse, a legal resident of Navajo County, and must fill out an application which has been approved by the board of directors, then passed on to the body of the posse for final vote. The person then serves a probationary six months membership

before he becomes a full member of the posse.

The Navajo County Hashknife Sheriff's Posse is often called on to perform a variety of services. One of their rescue operations was January 27, 1957, when a Navy bomber went down north-northwest of Joseph City. Eleven men were on the plane and bailed out when the motor discontinued to function and the snow kept coming down. Because the Navy had lost contact, they called Winslow and they in turn called the Holbrook Sheriff's Office who sent Harvey Randall and Cephas Perkins out to investigate. Mr. Randall had a radio in his pick-up they could use to call out more posse members as needed.

The mud was virtually impassable and in the old Marshall Ranch on Cottonwood Wash the men stopped. They could see the burning plane and Mr. Randall stayed with the radio as Mr. Perkins went to see what he could find. As he walked toward the wreckage every once in awhile he could see a small light flash in the distance. He started toward the light and when he finally met up with it, it was one of the men who had bailed out who was flashing his pen size flashlight. The man was the last one out of the plane and the others were in a line as they had bailed out.

The man told Mr. Perkins just where the rest should be. Mr. Randall had his pickup lights on and Mr. Perkins sent the man on down to the pickup. Mr. Perkins continued down the row and came upon four of the men that had grouped together and sent them down the road they were on. One of the men he came upon had a broken leg but walked one and a half miles with the rest of them. After all was over, Mr.

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Perkins had gotten all eleven back to the pickup and loaded in. As they were on their way back to town they met the rest of the posse on their way to aid them.

Before long the men received a letter from the Defense Department thanking them for their efforts.

As the posse serves more rescue operations, the people of Navajo County became more appreciative of the efforts of this organization. They seem to have their fun and people might get upset with them, but the people that are first to seek their aid are the same people who ridiculed them.

When there was a series of micro-wave towers being blown up, the posse was called out to protect the towers and keep communications open.

Often times the possemen are called into the hospital to guard felons that could possibly be a danger to others.

The posse have hunted lost children, wanted men, lost hunters and many others.

They have often spent many days and much of their time hunting people thought to be lost, but some were only hiding out in caves.

One of the highlights of the year for this group is their annual Pony Express ride from Holbrook to Scottsdale, carried on in the tradition of the Old West.

Although the last of the original Pony Express horsemen are long since dead, "They have left a record of daring loyalty and devotion, unsurpassed in our natural history," wrote Samuel Hopkins Adams.

The pony express is a great part of our natural history. As short as its life was, the people of America can never

forget how the men of the 1800's risked their lives to keep communications alive between the Western and Eastern parts of our country.

Abraham Lincoln once said of the Pony Express: "Some may equal but never excel." The men are truly great.

In keeping the spirit of the West alive the Hashknife Posse makes this annual Pony Express ride to the Valley of the Sun.

This part of our heritage is kept vividly alive through the enjoyable ride of the Hashknife Sheriff's Posse.

The slogan, "the mail must go through," was used by the Pony Express of the old West and is used by the Navajo County Hashknife Sheriff's Posse as it makes its Pony Express ride to the valley.

The Pony Express ride began in 1957 for the Posse. The first year was the most memorable one, mostly because of the hardships encountered. The three feet of snow was an obstacle that had to be overcome. The men would oftentimes wade through drifts up to 10 feet to break trail for their horses.

Because of the snow their first year, the posse went through Pine and Payson. Now the trip takes them through Heber, but a side trip is still made to pick up the mail at Pine.

The first rides were made to Phoenix to the Rodeo of Rodeos Parade, but because they were just another riding group, they were ignored. When the posse was invited to take part in the Parada del Sol they accepted. Now they are something special.

On the average, three dozen members of the posse go on the ride. Their route takes them through Holbrook, Heber, Payson, and side trip

to Pine, Sunflower, Rye and Scottsdale.

The postmaster at Pine teaches school and when the Pony Express comes to town, school is let out. One year the Pony Express riders had to go to school with the children. Ben Pearson couldn't go without his horse, Blackie, so as the children lined up, the possemen and Blackie fell into line and the teacher rang the bell.

The men enjoy making the Pine trip; cookies and refreshments are always served.

The posse now stops at night, but when the ride was first started the mail didn't stop at night. Because of possible accidents the mailbag now stops at night, but only then. The first night of the ride is spent in Payson, the second on the Verde River, and the third day they ride into Scottsdale.

Vic Gerwitz is the cook, and a good one, too. But as everyone knows, "Only a fool would argue with a skunk, a cook, or a mule." So if they don't like how Mr. Gerwitz cooks, nobody cares if they go without.

The Hashknife Riders usher in the three-day Parada del Sol, the big event of the winter tourist season.

The posse, without a sign of weariness, rides into Scottsdale proudly with the mail sack they carry from Holbrook, which they deliver to Mr. O.C. Wilson, Scottsdale Postmaster.

Each member of the posse is sworn in as a mail carrier by the Holbrook postmaster. All riders must take the oath of office. The contract is signed by the posse captain or trail boss.

The Hashknife Sheriff's Posse is the only group in the United States with a contract for Pony Express.

Many people send mail Pony Express. One year Ralph Smith sent a letter and kept giving some of the riders a bad time about making sure his letter got there. When the mail sack got to Scottsdale a collect telegram went to him stating his letter got there safely.

When Dutch Rupkey got hung, the Forest Service made them take him down for littering the forest.

All in all the Navajo County Hashknife Sheriff's Posse was created to save and protect lives. As it has grown and prospered it has helped Navajo County to grow and prosper.

In keeping alive the spirit of the old West, the Posse has done much to keep alive the spirits of the old and new generations alike.

Editor's note: This article was written by Paula Ellsworth, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Ellsworth. The cover page shows that the article was originally published on April 17, 1967.