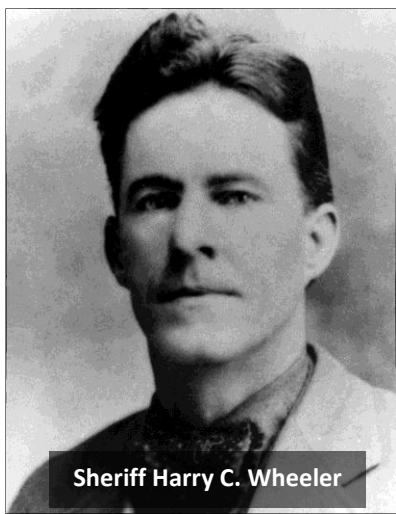


WHEELER'S LAST GUNFIGHT

The first bullet shattered the windshield of the county's 1915 Oldsmobile Touring Car, sending shards of plate glass in all directions. In the middle of the night, Cochise County Sheriff Harry Wheeler and his Gleeson deputy Lafe Gibson awoke with a start, threw off their blankets and grabbed their guns, inching their way up the railroad grade to the top of the track, to try to see their assailants without getting their heads blown off.

March 5, 1917 had seen Wheeler and Gleeson driving around the rugged Chiricahua Mountains, scouting for bootleggers who were smuggling liquor from "wet" New



Mexico into "dry" Arizona. After a long day and a longer night without much success, they headed back towards Gleeson, where Deputy Gibson lived. Too exhausted to drive the car safely in darkness, they pulled off the road a couple of miles east of Gleeson, pulled out their blankets and lay down

next to the car for a couple hours of shut-eye before the sun came up. Their "short rest" turned out to be shorter than they'd anticipated.

Sheriff Wheeler, a champion marksman of national reputation, grabbed his rifle and one box of ammunition. Lafe Gibson had only his revolver and whatever ammunition remained in the holster's belt. As they reached the high ground of the railroad tracks, shots rang out, kicking up dirt and making ricochets sing off rails and rocks. Fanned out ahead of them, best they could tell, were at least four attackers, shouting taunts and insults in Spanish and English. "We'll fix you gringos!" and "Come and get us now!" reached their ears as they assessed their predicament.

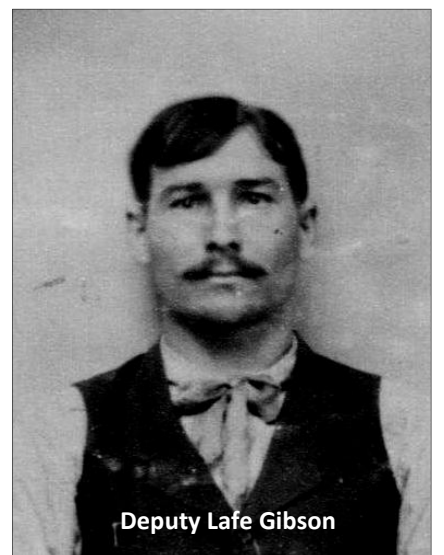
The full moon was low on the horizon behind them, silhouetting them perfectly as targets for the bootleggers, while giving them no view whatsoever of their attackers. The officers returned fire as best they could, lying prone behind the railroad bed, and decided to make the best of a defensive position until the moon went down and they could charge the Mexican position with better odds. Fully a hundred shots were exchanged by the time the lawmen hunkered down to wait out the attack. With each passing minute, the attackers drew nearer, closing from 200 yards to less than 50. Shots kicked up sand at their feet and in their faces, and when one of the outlaws just missed Sheriff Wheeler, he'd had enough. Wheeler noted the location of the muzzle flash from the Mexican's gun, and raised his own rifle just above the tracks. Then the champion marksman fired six shots in rapid succession in the Mexican's direction.

Wheeler and Gibson could hear the groans and knew that Wheeler had hit his target. While shots continued to come their way for a while, the advance of the outlaws had been halted. When the moon finally dipped below the horizon about an hour later, Wheeler and Gibson charged the Mexican camp, but found it empty. Only four burros loaded

with ten cases of whiskey were there, the Mexicans having fled back into the desert. When the sun came up, Wheeler and Gibson found a large pool of blood, and knee and elbow prints in the sand. Horse tracks led away east toward the Chiricahua's, but the lawmen decided to send for reinforcements before continuing the chase.

Driving to Courtland in the damaged Oldsmobile, they telephoned Wheeler's chief deputy in Tombstone, Guy Welch, who brought guns, ammunition, and deputy Rafferty to aid in the pursuit. They could not find the bootleggers in the rugged mountains, but knowing that the only way out was through Apache pass, and confident that his Oldsmobile could outrun their horses and burros, Wheeler and company returned to Tombstone with the confiscated whiskey. The next day, Wheeler picked up Deputy Gibson in Gleeson again and the two of them set out with more arms and ammunition for Apache Pass, where two of the Mexicans were caught. They were lodged in the Gleeson jail, and the two officers headed toward Mexico to find the others before they crossed the border. They were unable to catch the other

bootleggers before they escaped to Mexico, but were immediately taken up with the discovery of a murder victim near Bisbee and the murder of another man in Douglas. All in all, a busy week for the lawmen...being ambushed and shot at, driving the bootleggers away and confiscating ten cases of whiskey, capturing and incarcerating two of the outlaws, finding a three-week old body near Bisbee with a bullet in his ear, and using footprints to track down and arrest a murderer in Douglas.



The Gleeson gunfight was Harry Wheeler's last. The *new* west was not like the *old* wild west days of Tombstone's infancy, and Sheriff Wheeler was only involved in four gunfights during his law-enforcement career. He was victorious in all four. His opponents in the first three did not survive. It is unknown if the Mexican bootlegger in this gunfight made it back to Mexico alive or not. Wheeler was not quick to draw his gun, but when he did, he was one of the deadliest shots in the west, old or new. He won contest after contest, including representing Arizona in national shooting competitions. Less than a year after this showdown, Wheeler resigned his office to join the army and fight in World War I. Upon his return, he ran for the office again, but did not win the election. He purchased a peach orchard in Cochise Stronghold, about 20 miles north of Gleeson, and travelled between his home in Douglas and the farm in Cochise Stronghold. Wheeler died of pneumonia in 1925, and is buried in Douglas.

As for Deputy Lafe Gibson, he high-tailed it out of Arizona for Colorado just ahead of now-sheriff Guy Welch in June of 1918, but that's another story.