

A PRICE ON HIS HEAD

Every good family has one that goes wrong

The Price family has one of the more productive and stable histories in Cochise County. Jim Price and Mary McDonald produced a family whose name and good reputation was widespread, well beyond Cochise County. The Price family ranches on Turkey Creek supplied beef to stores, restaurants, and hospitals from Bisbee to Douglas and all the way up the Sulphur Springs Valley. Members of the Price and McDonald families were businessmen, ranchers, farmers, and even included one Pony Express rider...and the first governor of the state of New Mexico. But every family also has at least one scion destined to test the family patience...and society's limits.

On July 10, 1917, Luther Price spent the night in the Gleeson branch county jail. It was the last stop on a trip back to Tombstone, and back to the state penitentiary at Florence. This is the long and convoluted story of the thorniest tenant of the Gleeson jail.

Price had grown up on a ranch in the Chiricahua mountains owned by his mother. She was a hard-working woman, a single parent with 10 kids. At the age of 18, Luther was sentenced to three years in the prison at Yuma for stealing horses. He got out in 1910, and headed for home. In 1912, he found himself in the mining and ranching town of Pearce, Arizona. There he befriended a man named Tol Wilson. Tol's sister Mary and her husband John Prindiville ran a dry goods store in that quiet town.



John Prindiville died on January 5, 1913 of myelitis, an inflammation of the spinal cord, leaving his wife and four kids behind. As Mary was a fragile person, it looked like her brother Tol would end up running the store, which no doubt suited Luther just fine. Several months later, Mary received a \$3,000 check from John's life insurance company. This would allow her to keep the store running, which spelled an easy life for Luther, as he used to "help" Tol run the store, and at the same time "helped himself". But Mary fell in love and went off to Tombstone to get married. Watching his cash cow leave was too much for Luther, who convinced Tol to have Mary and her fiancé arrested in Tombstone before they got married. Together, they devised a plan to get Mary Prindiville out of the way and leave the store to them.

On June 1, 1913, Tol and Luther went to Tombstone to testify against Mary at a hearing to determine her sanity, saying she was too distraught after the death of her husband. They succeeded in having her committed to the insane asylum at Phoenix. With Mary out of the way, Tol was left to tend the Prindiville store and to care for her four children. Luther and his brother-in-law Clyde Terry stopped by often to "help". Clyde was later found in possession of stolen goods from the Prindiville

store, although whether he actually took them himself or had only received them from Luther is unknown.

The "help" that Tol got from Luther was apparently limited to refilling his glass and bringing him another bottle. Tol was reportedly on an extended booze binge from the time his sister left until he and Luther set out on a "camping trip" to the Chiricahua mountains, east of Gleeson. The story to which Luther later confessed is as follows:

Luther had kept Tol drunk or hung-over for two weeks, while pilfering goods from the store. At the end of that period, he convinced Tol that what he really needed was some fresh air and a mountain camping trip. Luther knew just the place. Near his mother's ranch in the Chiricahua mountains was a great place called Cottonwood Canyon, and it was perfect for camping. There was even an old well dug there which they could use for water.

Taking Wilson's horses, the two of them set out for a camping trip. Luther convinced Tol to tell no one of their plans, so that nobody would come and "bother them" while they were camping. On the evening of June 16, 1913, Luther produced a bottle of whiskey and got Tol drunk enough to fall asleep. Luther then hit him twice on the back of the head with the butt of his pistol, dragged the body over to the 150-foot-deep well, and dumped him in. The coroner's report stated that Tol's neck had been broken (not surprising, since he would have hit the water at nearly 90 miles per hour!), and that he died from a broken neck and not from drowning. Luther then secured the cover on the abandoned well, and took their stuff, including the horses, back to his mother's ranch two miles away.

Back in Pearce, and leading Tol's horses, Luther was asked about Tol's whereabouts, and claimed to have purchased the horses before Tol left the country. He could produce no bill of sale, however, and was found with several hundred dollars on him which he could not adequately explain. Knowing his larcenous history and reputation, they accused Luther of foul play. He responded that unless they had Tol's body, they couldn't prove he'd done anything wrong.

A search was begun which led them to the well in Cottonwood Canyon. Although it was covered, it showed signs of having been recently tampered with. When they opened it up and shone their lights down, they could see a body floating on the surface of the water, 120 feet below.

On Monday, June 23, 1913, the body of Tol Wilson was pulled up from the well. It took several attempts to do so, because the stench overpowered the first two men who attempted the descent. Finally, Robert Jordan, a rancher from nearby Light, Arizona, braved the grizzly confines and secured ropes around Tol's body, and hauled it to the surface. Because of the condition of the week-old corpse, it was buried nearby, although it was exhumed a few days later to determine the exact cause of death.

When they found Wilson's body, Luther was arrested and had to change his story about Tol taking a trip to Mexico. In his first garbled account, he implicated his brother-in-law, Clyde Terry, along with another local resident George Tucker. Both were arrested and the trio was brought to a preliminary inquest at Light, the jurisdiction where the body was found.

Upon examination in Light, Luther retracted his accusation against Terry and Tucker, who were both released on that charge. Terry was immediately re-arrested, however, on the charge of taking the wagonload of goods from the Prindiville store. Tucker was found to have no evidence against him at all. Luther was bound over for a murder trial at Tombstone.

A week later, awaiting trial in the jail in Tombstone, Luther and several others attempted a jail break. They lured the lone guard over to the cell door, grabbed him and held him there and went through his pockets to get the keys. They'd just opened the cell door when Deputy Harry "Guy" Welsh walked in, drew his revolver, and forced the group back into the cell.

Knowing that both the evidence and his own escape attempt had doomed his case, Luther Price confessed to the murder of Tol Wilson, saying that he had acted alone. Judge Lockwood sentenced him to life in prison, and Luther was sent to the state prison at Florence.



This was not, however, the end of the story of Luther Price. It was customary in those days for prisoners from Florence to be assigned to chain gangs, working to build and repair roads in the area. On May 13, 1917, Price and two others escape from a work crew, and Price high-tailed it to Mexico where he hid out for almost two months.

An outbreak of smallpox in that corner of Mexico, however, sent Luther scurrying back to his mother's ranch in the Chiricahuas, where he became feverish. Fearing that he was coming down with smallpox, and knowing that he needed a doctor in order to get vaccinated, he sent word through his upstanding brother Ike to Constable Lafe Gibson of Gleeson that he would like to surrender. Gibson traveled to the Price ranch across the valley and picked Luther up.

On July 10, 1917, they stopped overnight in Gleeson, where Luther was locked up in the branch county jail on the way back to Tombstone. In Tombstone, his infection with smallpox bloomed, and he was sent with another prisoner to isolation. The other jail prisoners, guards, and clerks were all vaccinated in response. Sheriff Wheeler wrote to the Florence prison superintendent: "Luther having reached that stage where the pus is running profusely, we have rented a house on the outskirts of town" for his isolation. One month later, after Luther's recovery, he was returned to the prison at Florence.

Luther Price was released to his mother from the state prison in Florence on August 22, 1923, the record noting that he was: "allowed to return home to die." He died of meningitis, in his mother's arms, on October 4, 1923 at the age of 32.