NELSON A. "COONEY" MITCHELL
1796 - 1875

Only man ever legally hanged in Hood County

Contributed by Jay C. Follett

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After I graduated from college last June and moved to Texas, I began to develop an interest in genealogy. I lived in Texas for a year as a child and my mother was born in Texas. When we moved to Fort Worth I noticed how close I was to the places where my ancestors lived. The search for my ancestors led me to discover my 4th great-grandfather, Nelson Mitchell (nick-named "Cooney Mitchell").

Nelson Mitchell was born in Granville County, North Carolina in 1796. After his first wife died, he remarried and had several children. Among his children were Georgia Ann or Georgiana (my 3rd great-grandmother). Dan, Bill, and Jeff Mitchell. The family moved to Texas in the 1860s, and to Hood County in the 1870s. They purchased land along the Brazos River at a place later to become known as Mitchell Bend, about 7 miles south of Granbury.

While living in Mitchell Bend they met a family named Truitt who became their neighbors at the bend. Nelson aided the Truitts in settling the bend by carrying the note for the Truitt property. A dispute developed over money owed on this note and this dispute developed into a feud that was to end in murder and tragedy for both the Mitchells and the Truitts. T.L. Sonnichsen wrote a book about this feud titled Outlaw on the Dodge with Baldy Russell. This book recently came back into print and details the story.

The lawsuit created ill feelings between the families and these feelings came to a boil on the 28th of March, 1874. The families had been to court in Granbury where a lawsuit over the note was being held. After the proceedings of the day were completed the families headed south for Mitchell Bend. While on the journey home Bill Mitchell and Mit (or Mint) Graves met up with three of the Truitt boys: James, Sam, and Isaac. What happened next no one can be sure but it appears that the Mitchell boys gunned down Sam and Isaac and wounded James Truitt. At the time of the shooting Nelson Mitchell and William J. Owens (Georgia Ann's husband) lagged behind. After the shooting Bill Mitchell and Mit Graves fled, and Nelson and the remainder of his party returned to the bend.

The news swept through the community and the next day Nelson Mitchell, William Owens, and others were arrested. Nelson appears to have been innocent of the crimes, but he was up against an inflamed jury and an outraged community. He was sentenced to hang and William Owens was sentenced to life in prison. While Nelson was in jail his son, Jeff Mitchell, attempted to "bring him a gun to be used for an escape attempt and some poison to be used on himself if the attempt failed." While attempting to deliver these

articles in the night, Jeff was shot and killed. On October 9, 1875, Nelson Mitchell was hanged in a public ceremony in Granbury. At the time of his hanging he was 80 years old. He was the only man ever legally hanged in Hood County. Both Nelson and his son Jeff were buried in Mitchell Cemetery at the bend. After five years in prison William Owens was pardoned.

Bill Mitchell wound up in New Mexico and lived under the alias of Bill Russell, more commonly known as Baldy Russell. After 17 years at large, he traveled back to Texas, found James Truitt, walked into his house and gunned him down in cold blood, and again fled to New Mexico where he remained at large for several years until he was apprehended and sent to prison. After a short stay in prison, he escaped and fled to New Mexico where he died.

As a boy, my grandfather, Jimmie Hamilton, was acquainted with Dan Mitchell. He was always curious as to why Dan always wore a gun everywhere he went, but the family never discussed the matter. Apparently bitter feelings in the family prevented the story from being told. Fortunately for those of us interested in our personal and family history, the story has been preserved.

For more information, go to another accounting of this incident.

~ Web Page by Virginia Hale ~

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