



## AN ARIZONA TRAGEDY

Barnard was always thankful that he and Jane and the children had made their visit to the Fifes at the Oak Grove Ranch in Arizona. That was the last time Jane ever saw her mother, for Diana Davis Fife was murdered by a renegade Mexican from Tombstone the following September. Colonel Fife, his sons John and Walter, and his daughter Agnes, who was with her mother when she was murdered, have all told the tragic story to the family, but only Jane has left us a written account of this sad event. Diana Davis Fife was murdered September 12, 1884, at the Oak Grove Ranch, Cochise County, Arizona. Here is Jane's account of her mother's death:

"My Mother, Diana Davis Fife, died September 12 at Oak Grove Ranch, Arizona, age 48 years and four months. She was shot by a Mexican, lived two hours, didn't seem to suffer, very much pain. My sister Agnes was the only one with her when the end came, a sad time for her. Aggie was also shot at by the same villian, but he did not hit her. It happened to be a defective bullet. As the boy that was left to care for them heard the shot, he ran into the house in time to save Aggie. The Mexican shot at the boy, but the ball passed close to his arm and went out-of-doors. Then they had a fight for the pistol and the shells. The boy won the battle, drove the murderer to the hills, but when he came back Mother was dead.

"She talked to Aggie till she got too weak, told her she would soon leave her, and she wished Father to take her to Ogden as soon as possible to live with me or Diana, and to tell us she was not afraid to die as she had lived a good, pure and useful life and raised a large family, been a good devoted wife and mother, was not afraid to meet her God; but said that the villain who has shot her will have to suffer for this terrible crime.

"When the boy came back he notified the nearest neighbors and her two sons John and Walter, who were working for a rancher, Mr. White, four or five miles away. They came soon to their dear Mother, lying on the floor dead. It was a sad sight for Aggie was almost prostrated, in a bad condition, lying close to her Mother's side. The neighbors did everything they could and a number of men were soon out to search for the murderer. He was found the next morning. The whole neighborhood was searching for him. About nine, Italian Joie, a gardener, who was on his way with a load of vegetables for Fort Bowie, ran across the Mexican in Apache Pass. He unhitched one of his horses from the wagon he was driving, gave chase, and finally caught the Mexican. He tied him in the wagon and drove to the Riggs Ranch. All the men were away on the hunt for the Mexican, so he bound him with rope to the windmill tower and left the women to watch him. It was not long after that William Riggs and other men arrived and the Mexican was taken to the Fife Ranch. After the young boy and Aggie Fife identified him as being the Mexican that shot

at both of them and killed Mrs. Fife, who lived about two hours, the Mexican was ordered to be hanged by the sheriff and others.

This was done by tying a rope around his neck then on a tree limb in the oak grove. "My Mother was buried under a big oak tree on the Oak Grove Ranch. Agnes was brought to Ogden to live by her father William Nicol Fife."

In this somewhat prosaic account of her mother's death, Jane does not tell us of the circumstances leading up to the murder, nor does she tell us very many of the details that embellished the accounts of the event as told by Colonel William Nicol Fife, Aggie, and John and Walter, who were witnesses of the tragedy.

This is the way it has been told many times by members of the family:

On the hot summer day of September 12, Diana Fife was ironing in the kitchen. The room was reasonably cool in spite of the fire in the stove which was needed to heat the irons. The walls of the house were thick. The house, sheds, and barns were built in a hollow square, like a fort, as protection against the Apaches. Loopholes just under the eaves, were placed at intervals in the house, sheds, and barns. On the inside of the square a porch ran, the length of the house to provide shade for the interior of the house. All windows were opened out onto this courtyard, or patio. Since attacks by the Apaches were a constant hazard for the ranchers, all precautions possible were taken to ensure the safety of the family. The first night that Jane stayed at the Oak Grove Ranch one of the children awoke and wanted a drink. The well was in the patio, so Jane left her room to get the child some water. As she opened the door to the hall, she saw her brothers, Walter and John, sleeping on the floor in front of the outside door. Thinking that they had given up their beds for her and Barnard, she began to feel very guilty. When they heard her open her door, they awakened in alarm. As she began to apologize for taking their beds, they informed her that they always slept in the hall as a protection for the family. This was the house, then, where Diana Fife lived and tried to care for her family according to the standards of cleanliness and order that characterized her life.

Lying on the table near the ironing board was an ever growing pile of blue shirts. They were double-breasted, trimmed with white buttons. Nearly all the cowboys and freighters wore shirts of this type. Since they had to be carefully laundered to prevent shrinking, the cowboys and freighters usually tried to find a woman to wash and iron them. Diana Fife had the shirts for her husband and her two sons, plus a number of extra ones for the freighters who came by the ranch. It was a big ironing and these blue wool shirts, most of them done by now, made the majority of her work.

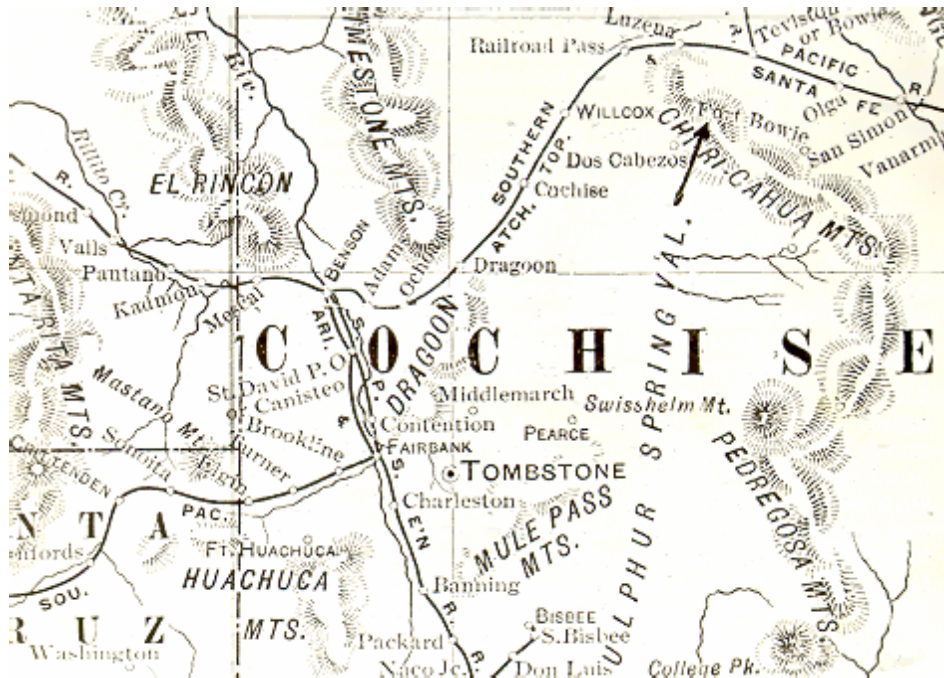
It was a peaceful day. Only Agnes, who was fourteen, and the nineteen year old Mexican boy who helped on the ranch were at home with her. John and Walter had gone over to the White Ranch to help put up hay and her husband had gone to Fort Bowie. She was not afraid, however, since Geronimo and his Chiricahua Apaches were now restricted to a reservation.



Agnes A. Fife, age 18, who escaped death, by the fight the loyal Mexican ranch hand, near Willcox, Arizona.



Diana Davis Fife, wife of William Nicol Fife, who was murdered Sept. 12th 1884, at the Oak Grove Ranch.



Map from an 1898 atlas, showing approximate location of the Oak Grove Ranch (arrow). Additional railroads had been built since 1884. Willcox was the nearest rail point to the ranch (twenty miles).

There was a pounding on the gate. Since hospitality was the accepted rule on the frontier, Diana Fife told the Mexican boy to open the gate and let the traveler in. He was a lone Mexican and he was on foot. Tired and thirsty though he was, he still displayed a demanding attitude. Aggie laid out a cold lunch for him on one corner of the kitchen table while Diana Fife continued with her ironing. He had very little to say but watched Diana Fife as she worked. He seemed especially interested in the blue wool shirt she was ironing and the shirts lying on the table. After finishing the food laid out for him, he demanded a watermelon. As they had no melons in the house, Diana Fife told Agnes to go to the garden for one.

Just as Agnes was coming into the courtyard with the melon, she heard a shot ring out. The Mexican boy leaped up from the porch where he was sitting and dashed into the kitchen. A second shot narrowly missed the boy as he grappled with the Mexican for the gun. As the two struggled together, Aggie pushed around them to get to her mother. The Mexican tried to shoot her, but the gun misfired because of a defective bullet. As the boy and the renegade Mexican battled for possession of the gun, Aggie reached her mother, lying by the ironing board, and stooped down to help her. Her mother's fears were not for herself but for Aggie. She instructed Aggie to drag her to the adjoining bedroom where she could barricade the door with some heavy furniture. Aggie did as her mother instructed her. Diana Fife did not lose consciousness, but her desire for water grew intense. However, she would not let Aggie go for water. For sometime they could hear the boy and the renegade fighting together, first in the hall and then on the porch. When all grew quiet outside, Diana Fife still refused to let Aggie go for water, for they did not know what had happened, and the Mexican might still be waiting for her. Diana Fife told Aggie that the Mexican took out his pistol and shot her without saying a word or giving her any warning.

What his motive was is still a mystery. As they had never seen him before, it was not for revenge. The only possible motive must have been robbery. He may have decided to steal the blue wool shirts Diana Fife had been ironing.

For sometime Diana Fife was conscious. During this time she continued to instruct Aggie about her plans for Aggie's future which included her returning to Ogden. She faced death calmly, saying that she had led a good life and would gladly face her Maker, since she had nothing to regret. Gradually her strength ebbed away and she was unable to talk. Aggie was numbed by grief and fear. After about two hours Diana Fife died, and Aggie lay by her side clutching her mother to her, white faced and tearless.

The Mexican boy had gone for help as soon as the renegade had broken away from him. Soon after Diana Fife's death, help arrived, but Aggie was speechless with grief. The ranchers gathered and organized a search for the murderer. Walter and John received the tragic news and returned to try to comfort Aggie. Still no tears or words came. Not until the murderer was brought before her for identification was she able to speak or cry. She seemed numb. When they brought him before her, she said, "Yes, he's the one. I could cut him into little pieces." Then she began to cry.

As soon as the ranchers of the Sulpher Springs Valley received the word of Diana Fife's death, they rode out in all directions in search of the Mexican renegade who had murdered her. By morning the tragic story had been carried from ranch to ranch and all the cowboys



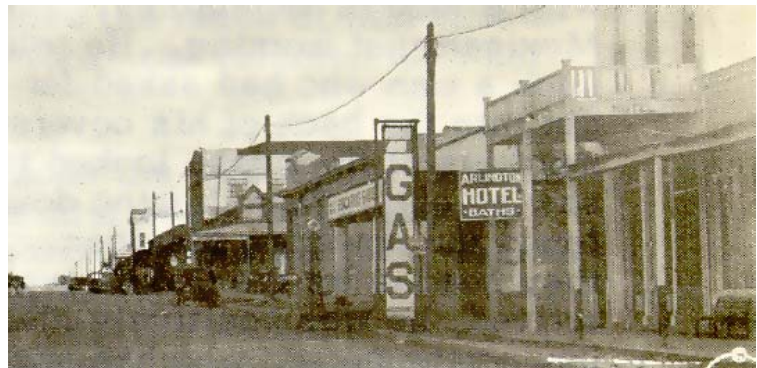
Cynthia B. Layton and Mr and Mrs T.B. Slack at standing at the head of Diana D. Fife's grave at Oak Grove Ranch (near Willcox), Arizona. About 1920.



Cochise County Court House at Tombstone Arizona, Built 1882



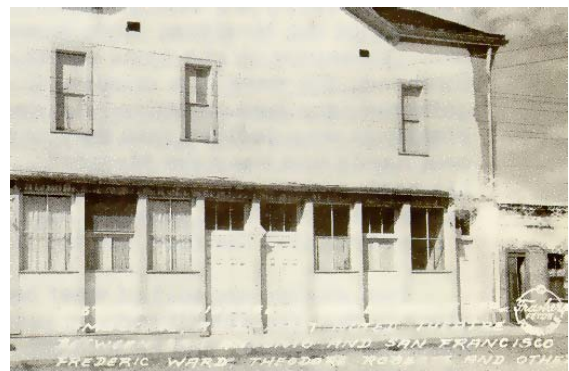
Famous newspaper "Tombstone Epitaph" office.



Main Street, Tombstone, Arizona. These are buildings of the 1880's. Tombstone was a city of 15,000.



Present day Tombstone. The Crystal Palace Saloon, and the drug store, formerly the "Oriental Saloon."



Schieffelin Hall, built 1882, at that time, most noted theatre between San Antonio And San Francisco, Mr. Schieffelin discovered the first Silver ore, that created this mining town.

and ranchers were searching for the murderer. About nine o'clock a posse came upon Joie, an Italian vegetable gardener, who was on his way to Fort Bowie with a load of vegetables. They asked him if he had seen a Mexican that morning. He told them that he had overtaken such a man who had asked for a ride. He had told him to get into the back of his covered wagon. Immediately the members of the posse looked inside the wagon. At first they saw no one. Then digging down among the cabbages, they found the cowering Mexican. Then taking him on horseback, they headed for the Oak Grove Ranch. As soon as they arrived, he was positively identified by Aggie and the Mexican boy as the person who had murdered Diana Fife.

Frontier justice was swift and not delayed by the evasions of legal proceedings. When Colonel Fife arrived shortly after the Mexican was brought to the ranch, for all he was grief stricken over the death of his wife, he was demanding vengeance upon his wife's murderer. A hurried parley decided the fate of the Mexican, who, it was found, was a renegade from Tombstone by the name of Jesus. He had a receding forehead, the mark of a criminal in their eyes. As the crowd gathered, the men demanded the death penalty for the murderer. Finally it was decided that they should take the law into their own hands and hang the Mexican. A rope was placed around his neck and he was conducted to the oak grove where an appropriate limb was selected and the rope thrown over it. A cowboy pulled the rope and the ill-fated Mexican was hanged.

Two stories are told of what happened at this point. One story is that the sheriff rode up just as they were going to hang the Mexican, and he told the cowboys and ranchers to go ahead with the hanging. The other story is that he rode up just after the Mexican had been hanged. When he asked who was responsible for the hanging no one answered. Since no one would take the responsibility for the hanging, he told the men to take the Mexican's body away. A friend of the Fife family, by the name of Jim Maxwell, cut the Mexican down and dragged him away. The murderer was buried in a shallow grave, covered by rocks in the lonely hills some distance from the ranch.

The coyotes dug into the grave. A few years later when Phebe Abbott Brown Fife, Colonel Fife's second wife, was living at the Oak Grove Ranch, her daughter Cynthia, who was out walking in the hills, found the skull of this Mexican. She brought it to the house on the end of a long stick. Colonel Fife kept the skull and brought it to Ogden. He gave the skull to Dr. Allen of Ogden. In later years, Dr. Ezra Rich had the skull, according to the last reports we have of it.

Diana Fife was buried under a big oak tree in the oak grove. The services had been simple but filled with sorrow. When word came to Ogden of her death, her oldest son William left Ogden for the ranch. He took with him the temple clothes needed for her burial. When he arrived he and his father opened the grave and had the doleful task of placing the temple robes inside the casket.

Colonel Fife was unable to leave the ranch at that time to return to Ogden with Aggie. Therefore, she returned with her brother William.

After a number of years in Arizona the Fife family returned to Utah. Colonel Fife had had the misfortune of having his leg broken by a runaway team of horses. This accident caused him to be lame for the rest of his life.

As the years went by, the grass was over-grazed and the Sulpher Springs Valley became a barren waste. Occasionally, Walter, who lived in Arizona, and other members of the family returned to the lonely grave in the dying oak grove. Jane grieved about her mother's being buried in such a forsaken place. Finally, in 1921 Jane hired an undertaker to go to the Oak Grove Ranch and remove her mother's remains so that she might be buried by her husband and family in the Ogden City Cemetery in Utah. Walter Fife, Diana's son went with the undertaker and they found the lonely grave. Colonel Fife had built the casket of native Chiricahua pine and the coffin was still in good condition when the body was removed after being interred for 37 years. Diana Davis Fife lies in the family burial lot far removed from the scene of her tragic death in the lonely ranch country of Arizona.



**Diana Davis Fife**