

Mysterious Fort Sullivan

In 1894 the Gila Valley was aflame with excitement. Mr. William Garland had organized the Gila Valley, Globe & Northern Railway with the express purpose of connecting the rich mining area around Globe with the Southern Pacific line at Bowie. The RR would, undoubtedly, pass through the communities of Solomonville, Lone Star, Safford, Thatcher, Pima and Ft. Thomas. Farmers and merchants all wanted the line to be built as quickly as possible.

Since Mr. Garland was more of a doer than a planner he often surveyed, cleared and laid the track before negotiating for right-of-ways. This caused few problems until he crossed a wheat field owned by one Nellie Sullivan.

Described as a cross between Carrie Nation and an Apache Chieftain, Nellie got no satisfaction from Brother Garland when it came to negotiating right-of-way across her wheat field near Lone Star. She and her milquetoast husband owned the Osborne Machinery Company. They had contacted Mr. Garland a number of times requesting a sit-down to negotiate terms for the land over which he had trespassed. Good Mr. Garland was in no rush, he had more important negotiations to accomplish.

On the morning of January 28, 1895 Mr. Garland boarded his private car in Bowie to ride to the end of the line. He was startled to find the train stopping, even before reaching Safford. When he disembarked and walked toward the engine he realized what had caused the engineer to stop. George Kelly of the Arizona Bulletin, Solomonville, described the obstruction as a medieval fort. "Architecturally speaking it is a compromise between the Medieval and Doric styles: a culvert serves as a mot, with railroad ties (belonging to Mr. Garland, no doubt) placed vertically and others horizontal, backed by mesquite poles bound with barbed wire. These constitute the outer wall. About ten

yards in the rear is found the citadel; the garrison consists of Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan; that they are in earnest no one doubts when they view the armament of the fort. It consists of a brass-mounted revolutionary musket and a much needed shotgun. Whether the approaches are mined or not is an unsolved question."

Mr. Garland was not one to be trifled with. He ordered the fortress to be dismantled and even started to do it himself when he heard Nellie yell, "Stop, or I'll blast you." He complied, boarded the train and had the engineer back all the way to Solomonville where he swore out a warrant for the arrest of the Sullivans who had already been taken into custody by Sheriff Wight. The Sullivans were placed under a \$100 Peace Bond and ordered to dismantle Ft. Sullivan.

The very next day the Garland Express was bound for Pima. When it reached Nellie's wheat field the train again abruptly stopped. The Fort has mysteriously reappeared overnight. This time, however, Sheriff Wight was on hand and deftly held the Sullivans at bay while Garland's train-crew razed the fantastic structure.

Garland's return to Solomonville was unhampered so he assumed the affair was over. However, he underestimated the determination of the Irish. For a third time his progress to Pima was halted by a diminishing but sturdy "Fort" thrown across the track at the same location. This time the Sullivans were quicker than Garland and swore out a warrant for his arrest for trespassing. Garland backed the train to Solomonville where he too swore out another arrest warrant. This time they all ended up in court, but the "Fort" remained across the tracks until the issue was settled. When the Sullivans entered the court they were greeted with shouts of, "Don't give up the Fort! Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." Clearly, the townspeople were greatly amused.

They settled their claims against each other to no ones satisfaction. However, they left

us a fine record of the age old battle of property rights vs. the rich and powerful. They have given us, as well, a delightful insight into the minds and actions of those who came before us.

Fortunately, one of the court documents saved by Jerry Nichols (see February 2, 2005 issue of *The Arizonian*) was the original complaint by William Garland against P. Sullivan. The indictment charged the Sullivans with a felony, stating that they “intentionally and feloniously, without any legal justification or excuse therefore, did place a certain obstruction upon the rails, tracks and road-bed of a certain railroad...the Gila Valley, Globe and Northern Railway...: said obstruction consisting of wire stretched across said road-bed and a house and quantity of wooden railroad ties placed upon said track...” The complaint was signed by Wm Garland and sworn to Justice of the Peace W.J. Parks. Along with the complaint are two subpoenas for four witnesses and a chronology of the legal events issuing from the complaint.

The chronology concludes with the defendant, P. Sullivan, being held to answer for the charges and bail was set at \$250. The last document in the file, dated April 11, 1895, is the District Court finding that the Grand Jury had recommended that the case be dismissed. Accordingly, it ordered that the “charges be and they are hereby dismissed and the defendant be released and his bail bonds exonerated.”

According to Ryder Ridgeway a photo was taken of the infamous "Ft. Sullivan" and was in the private collection of Mrs. Hy Coombs of Clifton, now deceased. She remembered that her father, James T. Hildreth, early day photographer of eastern and southern Arizona Territory, took a photo of the Sullivan's sitting in front of their shack, guns across their laps and smoke pouring from the house's chimney. She also recalled a fence of sorts around the fence which created a small yard. Mrs. Coombs

regretted that she was unable to locate the photo for Ryder when he inquired about it.

If any reader has any idea as to the whereabouts of Mrs. Coombs photo collection or of the specific location of the photo in question, the author would greatly appreciate hearing from you.

Article and court document submitted by historian Hal Herbert.

