

# Photo of the Month

Hanging Tree



Hang Man's Tree, c.1890  
Callahan Springs, Rogers, Arkansas  
Neg. # N007653

The specter of a hanging tree on the frontier represents a popular notion of justice in the nineteenth century. References abound today in movies, literature, and legends of criminals meeting their maker at the end of a rope. This was usually accomplished from a tree limb or on the gallows. In truth, hanging was the primary form of capital punishment for many years and citizens often clamored for the chance to witness such an event.

Hangings were a part of the public consciousness and were influenced by strong political, religious, and racial beliefs. Abraham Lincoln even once quipped that a political opponent reminded him "...of the man who murdered both his parents, and then when sentence was about to be pronounced pleaded for mercy on the grounds that he was an orphan." The image of a hangman's noose must have been a terrible vision for those individuals condemned of crimes.

Ft. Smith's Federal Court with jurisdiction over the Indian Territory embodied the notion of the pursuit of justice. Judge Parker presided over this court for 21 years and judged cases to "permit no innocent man to be punished, but let no guilty man escape." In fact, the execution of 86 condemned prisoners occurred on these gallows between 1873 and 1896. All of these prisoners were convicted of murder or rape.

Locally, the Benton County Court handed down death sentences to several people convicted of murder during the nineteenth century. In 1842, Wat Foreman, simply identified as an Indian, was convicted of murdering another Indian. He was hanged the following year on the public gallows. In 1852, Doghead Glory killed fellow Cherokee David Scoutie and was also hanged.

The last legal hanging in Benton County occurred in 1876. Cornelius Hammon was convicted of murdering Columbus Hancock, but his alleged accomplice Grisham Hoytt was found innocent of the charge after a change of venue trial in Washington County. The sheriff ordered the construction of a gallows at the present day location where U.S. 71 leaves the U.S. 71 business route. Accounts of the event reported that businesses opened early in anticipation of the large crowd that gathered to witness the execution and Hammon protested his innocence even as the trap door dropped below him.

The Hangman's Tree that once stood near Callahan Springs east of Rogers is pictured at right. Much legend surrounds this particular tree, but it is doubtful that it was ever used for bringing villains to justice since official records of such events do not exist. It grew along the west side of the road to Electric Springs during the Civil War and lived until 1902, with the main trunk extending over the road at a height of 15 to 20 feet.

A chef working at the Harvey dining hall in the 1880s or 1890s is credited with perpetuating the myth of the Hangman's Tree. Known as an excellent amateur photographer, Domino Danzero, persuaded an African-American porter from a Frisco dining car to pose as the victim of a lynching. Unwitting newspaper and magazine publishers printed the realistic images and readers had no reason to doubt their authenticity. This unfortunate stunt served as the basis of a local myth and was illustrative of the tense nature of race relations in the nation.

By 1913 in Arkansas, legally sanctioned executions had swung away from hangings in favor of the new technology of electrocution. But, hangings are a part of our history and symbolic of notions of justice in a bygone era. Death was less separated from life in the nineteenth century than it is today and often harsh and swift justice was seen as a means to preserve society.