

Murder In Apache Junction

The events leading up to the murder of Mrs. Katherine M. Gohn at her home on December 29, 1947, relives an early part of Apache Junction's history. The murder of the Apache Junction widow is a sad story of a pitiful man who was willing to take an innocent life to live a brief moment of success. His actions led to the first execution in Arizona's new gas chamber at Florence in 1950.

You might say this story began at the King's Guest Ranch near Dinosaur Mountain in the area we know today as Gold Canyon. Julian and Lucy King had begun construction on their guest ranch in 1945 and continued to improve the place. During the summer of 1947, they were asked to give Angel "Rocky" Serna a job. The county probation officer, a friend of the Kings, explained to the Kings that Serna was an ex-convict and needed another chance to go straight. The Kings gave Serna the job.

"Rocky," as he liked to be called, helped the Kings put in their water system at the guest ranch. He worked all summer without any problems. When the weather cooled off, Rocky usually went to town on the weekends. He was very interested in horses and wanted to become a jockey and own his own racehorse. Early in September of 1947, Rocky found the racehorse he wanted to buy. The only problem was the horse cost \$400. Rocky didn't have \$400.00 or anyway of obtaining it. Julian King tried to explain to him that it was a lot of money for a horse. Rocky insisted he would earn or find the money to buy the horse somehow. He quit working at the King's Ranch near the end of October and took a job in Apache Junction, almost ten miles from the King's Ranch.

Serna spent most of the fateful morning at the Apache Junction Inn. His first trip down to the Superstition Mountain Shell Station was to borrow the \$400 from Mrs. Gohn to buy a racehorse in Chandler. Johnny Baker, the cook at the Apache Junction Inn, drove Rocky down to the service station, but Mrs. Gohn wasn't at the station.

Rocky was intelligent enough to know he could not earn \$400 no matter what he did. It was on his second trip that he decided to rob the Superstition Mountain Shell Station. Rocky stole a pistol from Grady Haskins and walked down to the station on Monday morning, December 29, 1947. He then walked into the station and demanded money with a gun in his hand. Mrs. Fairy Thompson, 32, the daughter of Katherine Gohn, knew Rocky and thought he was joking around. When Mrs. Thompson laughed and said, "You're kidding, Rocky," he shot her in the left side of the chest. Mrs. Thompson's two young daughters ran out the back door and toward Jack Anderson's Apache Junction Inn to summons help. Bonnie Thompson, the older of the two Thompson girls, stopped a motorist and sought help for her mother.

After shooting Fairy Thompson, Rocky proceeded to the home of Katherine Gohn. He shot Mrs. Gohn in the hand, then dragged her into the bedroom where he raped her and then shot her in the head. He then stole her car and headed east on Highway 60. For some reason he turned up King's Ranch Road and got stuck in a wash. Serna walked to King's Guest Ranch and confronted

Paul Marchand, asking him for a ride to Safford. He further told Marchand he "just killed two women." Marchand refused to help and Serna then wandered away on foot. Marchand immediately drove to Sand Tanks Station and reported the incident to the Pinal County Sheriff's Office.

Serna was captured several hours later by Earl Parrish, a Chandler constable, and Highway Patrolman Coy Beasley. When arrested, Serna had fifty dollars in his possession. He was booked into Pinal County Jail at Florence.

Serna was born in a small town near Douglas, Arizona, called Franklin. He had been in trouble with the law before. He was on parole from the Arizona State Prison for robbery at the time he shot Fairy Thompson and murdered her mother, Mrs. Gohn.

Angel B. Serna was tried and found guilty of Murder in the First Degree and the punishment was set at death. The Pinal County Superior Court set the execution date for Serna on May 22, 1948. The Arizona State Supreme Court then gave Serna a temporary stay and then ordered Serna to be executed on January 21, 1950. Governor Dan E. Garvey granted Serna a Reprieve of Execution on December 10, 1949, and another on April 13, 1950.

Angel "Rocky" B. Serna's luck ran out at 4:05 a.m. on July 29, 1950, when he became the first man to be executed in Arizona's new gas chamber.

I received a letter several years ago from a retired librarian named Patricia Shively Elmore who inquired about the killer that murdered her grandmother in Apache Junction in 1947. She and I began researching the topic and the foregoing information surfaced.

Today is a lot like yesterday. The victim is often forgotten and the criminal is remembered. Katherine Gohn, her daughter, Fairy Thompson, and Superstition Mountain Shell Service Station and their work has not been forgotten, nor was it in vain. Let's hope that good will triumph over evil. My friend, Lynn Early, who was Sheriff of Pinal County in 1947, told me this story several decades ago and how tragic it was.

Ironically, the wheels of justice move much more slowly today and it is much more difficult to bring criminals to justice. Our court systems today are overtaxed with criminal cases therefore incapacitating them from administering justice like it should be. The court system of our county needs much stronger support from its citizen. We need more Superior Court judges to handle the huge case load the courts now deal with.

The Apache Junction Inn, circa 1929.



Mrs. Thompson's two young daughters summoned help from Jack Anderson's Apache Junction Inn. Bonnie Thompson, the older of the two Thompson girls, stopped a passing motorist.



Apache Junction 1961.