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George Hance: Majordomo of the Verde Valley



Courtesy Camp Verde Historical Society George Hance is best remembered for his 30 years as Justice of the Peace for the Camp Verde area. Hance was known for his abilities as a mediator and peacemaker, having boasted he never judged a civil case because they were all settled out of court.

Steve Ayers

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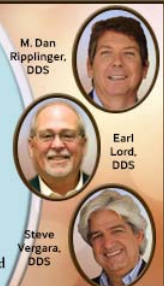
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Of all the deaths George Hance witnessed, it was his own that left the most lasting impression.

A Civil War veteran, Hance mustered out of the Army at Fort Union, N.M., in 1868 and immediately set out for Prescott along with his two brothers, Jim and John, and 14 other men, one woman and two children.

Within the a year, eight of the party would be killed by Indians,

Roughly 20 years later, on May 2, 1888, Prescott's Weekly Arizona Journal-Miner, reported that Hance had succumbed to an injury received while on a roundup in Bloody Basin.

According to the account, he was injured when the fence rail he was sitting on broke and he fell onto a cow skull. One of the horns impaled his rectum. The account noted, "He was an old resident of the county and universally respected."

The account was factual, except for the part where he had died. Although he would suffer from the injury for years, the rumors of his death were, like Mark Twain's, greatly exaggerated.

George Washington Hance wasborn Oct. 7, 1848, in Savier County, Tenn. He died July 30, 1932, in San Bernardino County, Calif.

In the intervening years he was a soldier, rancher, sutler, storekeeper, miner, justice of the peace, postmaster, census official, road superintendent and unquestionably one of the most respected men who ever lived in the Verde Valley.

As soon as he and his brothers arrived in Prescott in November 1868, they left for the Verde. Hance's first job was on the Wales Arnold ranch cutting wild gramma grass, which was sold to the Army at Camp Lincoln (later Fort Verde).

Of the Verde Valley in 1868, Hance would later write, "There were two ranches, two ditches, two hundred acres under cultivation and barely a dozen citizens."

He eventually went to work for Hugo Richards, the fort sutler at Camp Lincoln. He continued to work for the sutler even after Richards sold the franchise to William "Boss" Head in 1872.

It was during this tenure at the sutler's store that George Hance gained a reputation for level headedness and trust. In 1872, then territorial Gov. Anson Sanford appointed him as a notary public.

Notary publics, which can be found at almost any real estate office, bank or businesses today, were nowhere near as prolific in the state's early days.

It was a government appointment that said, in essence, your reputation for honesty is beyond reproach and you are therefore the state's official witness within your community. Hance would hold his commission as a notary for 56 years, once noting his word had never been challenged in court.

In 1873 he became Camp Verde's first postmaster.

As practical as he was honest, Hance saved his money and soon purchased the Cienega Ranch, located south of Camp Verde, near the Interstate 17 and State Route 169 intersection.

By 1877 he had built himself a fine home, barns, stables and corrals and was preparing to open a traveler's way station. He had also established himself a post office at the ranch serving about 20 area families.

"The only thing we would recommend him add to his well regulated establishment is a Mrs. Hance," reported the

Miner-Journal.

The next year George Hance married Partheny Rutledge, an attractive woman from Lower Verde (as Camp Verde was known then), seven years his junior.

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In 1880 he was named the census marshal for the Verde district. In 1890 he was elected as the Justice of the Peace for the Camp Verde area, a position he would occupy for 30 years.

In 1891, when the Camp Verde School District was organized, Hance was named as the district's first clerk of the board.

By 1893, Hance had sold his ranching and mining interests and was living in the former surgeon's quarters on the abandoned Fort Verde property.

Of all his official positions it was as justice of the peace that Hance is best known. In one of his letters, Hance noted that he had never tried a civil case. The reason, he stated, was because he chose to mediate disputes out of court.

His skills as a mediator, and peace maker, combined with a good deal of common sense and, in spite of his reputed squeaky voice, a commanding presence, saved his court volumes of paperwork and uncounted hours.

It has also been stated that for almost 30 years, George Hance served as the unincorporated community's unofficial mayor, a role he would no doubt have relished. He was, along with everything else, a political animal, and a lifelong Republican.

When Omar Turney, a well-known historian and irrigation engineer, passed through the Verde Valley in 1901, while surveying the local irrigation ditches, he declared Hance to be the "Major Domo (sic)" of the Verde Valley.

But for all his reputation as an upstanding and God-fearing citizen, there is a side of George Hance that defies such a clear-cut label.

On the subject of God, Hance could hardly be counted among the devout churchgoers. He went to church, but railed against the hypocrisies he witnesses both before and behind the pulpit.

A life-long member of the Masonic Lodge, he often vented his disgust with preachers who criticized the many "secret societies," of the time, the very ones Hance saw as "benevolent orders."

"They (the preachers) should do as Christ did. When He was in Nazareth and Capernaum, nineteen hundred years ago, He attended strictly to His own business," wrote Hance, "He did not meddle in other people's affairs."

As Justice of the Peace, Hance swore in witnesses on a thick black copy of "Dana's Mineralogy," instead of a Bible, feeling both books "were of equal importance."

Then there was his stance on alcohol.

As Arizona approached statehood, a full-scale battle was being waged between the "wets" and the "drys." George was a "wet," through and through. It is said he did not drink, but was a regular visitor at local saloons and a firm believer in keeping both church and state out of people's private lives.

As prohibition began to rear its head, Hance drafted anti-prohibition letters and actively debated the "drys" wherever the opportunity arose. To his dismay, Camp Verde voters chose prohibition in 1911. The rest of the state went dry on Jan. 1, 1915.

His stance may have cost him his job, for he lost his last election for justice of the peace in 1920, following nationwide Prohibition, by two votes.

Hance was also reputed to have had a fondness for the ladies. By all accounts he remained true to his wife, who, after raising his four children, passed away in 1916. However, contemporary accounts noted his great fondness for kissing the young brides at weddings he performed.

And, although 68 years old at the time of Partheny's death, he married a "much younger woman" the following year. Her name was Evelyn Grace Jassby, and she was a handful. She made him buy a car, and by all accounts he had even less control over it than he had over her.

At some point George also built Evelyn a new house after she protested the lack of running water and other amenities in the Surgeon's Quarters.

There is some question as to whether they ever spent a night in it. Less than a year after they married, Evelyn road out of town and out of George's life -- presumably in George's car.

A notice posted in the Journal-Miner in January 1918 stated he was no longer responsible for her debts or obligations because Evelyn had "left my bed and board without just cause or provocation."

In 1920 he married a woman by the name of Frances, called "Fanny" (the Camp Verde Historical Society is searching for her maiden name). George and Fanny moved to California following a stroke he suffered in May 1928.

They lived together until his death, in spite of the fact that few people from his past, including his own children, had much good to say about her.

For all George Hance's accomplishments, the most lasting by far are his letters. A prolific writer, he left a considerable collection of correspondences, some of the most significant written after his stroke and after he moved away.

It is from these letters, some of which were addressed to and archived by Yavapai County historian Sharlot Hall, that much of the Verde Valley's early history was documented.

And it is from them we owe George Hance a collective debt of gratitude for having survived another 44 years after he was declared dead the first time.

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