

1992

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### Recommended Citation

Stone, Spessard (1992) "The Outlaw Long John Whidden," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 18 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol18/iss1/12>

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# THE OUTLAW LONG JOHN WHIDDEN

By SPESSARD STONE

South Florida in its pioneer days, like the "Wild West," had a wide-open range with a number of infamous outlaws, one of whom was John L. Whidden, commonly known as "Long John" Whidden.

A member of the prominent Whidden family, John L. Whidden was born in 1836 in Florida. Early Hillsborough County, Florida records of guardianship show that on January 11, 1855 James Whidden, Sr. and others petitioned that James Whidden, Jr. be appointed as guardian of John, William, Mary, James, and George W. Whidden, "minor heirs of Lucinda Whidden, late of said county." On September 26, 1859, however, James and George W. Whidden, minor children of William Whidden," citing the failure of James Whidden, Sr. to perform his duty, requested that their brother, John Whidden, be appointed their guardian.

Thus orphaned with the care of his siblings, John L. early learned, as President Jimmy Carter was later to observe, "Life isn't always fair." How John was to react, however, was to set him apart from other members of his clan and the community-at-large.

During the Third Seminole War, John enlisted as a private in Capt. Leroy G. Lesley's Company. Here John L. first began to evidence that nonconformist conduct which would later lead to his downfall. Capt. Lesley, who was also a Methodist minister in the Old Testament warrior tradition, on November 25, 1857 requested that Private Whidden be discharged for disobedience and insolence, and he was drummed out of the service.

It appeared, however, that John was ready to settle down from his rowdy ways as on January 14, 1858 he took as his bride 17-year-old Artemissa Driggers. It seemed only an aberration when he in April was charged with "willfully marking the calf of another." His mavericking was settled, and John and his wife started anew at Fort Hartsuff.

The Whiddens were living in the Fort Hartsuff area (now Wauchula) when the 1860 census of Manatee County was enumerated in June. Besides their one-year-old son William and one-month son James, living with the young couple was John's 18-year-old brother, James, and 16-year-old brother, George W. Neighbors included the families of: Daniel Douglas, Isaiah Smith and Ann Driggers.

During the Civil War, John enlisted as a private at Key West on December 8, 1863 in Company A, Second Florida Cavalry, United States Army. After the war, he settled near Fort Ogden, where he resumed his livelihood as a farmer/stockman.

1869 found John again in trouble with the law. In May 1869 he was charged with larceny. Owen R. Blount and David D. Whidden became his sureties, which action they would later regret when on November 11, 1872 John L. was declared in default, and they were ordered by the State to pay the recognizances.

While in Manatee County court, John L. burned his bridges with his religious neighbors when on May 7, 1869 he filed an affidavit in which he alleged:

"That on or about the third day of April 1869 one Wm. P. McEwen did create a disturbance at a place of worship in the vicinity of Fort Ogden -- by loud and abusive language addressed to the deponent, and by threatening and drawing a weapon upon him."

Wm. P. McEwen was the Rev. William Penn McEwen, a beloved circuit-riding Methodist minister. No further legal action could be found on the absurd allegation.

On March 7, 1870, Frank Griffin gave a deposition before John Bartholf, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Manatee County, in which he charged that on February 7 in the vicinity of Fort Ogden he was assaulted "with the intention of killing him" by F.C. M. Boggess, John L. Whidden, Joseph Brooker, and David Whidden. A cowhunter employed by Simeon Hollingsworth, Griffin is believed to have been an ex-slave. (See pages 205 and 408 of Canter Brown, Jr's *Florida's Peace River Frontier*.)

Whidden next added manslaughter to his crimes.

Francis A. Ivey, who'd served with John in Company A, Second Florida Cavalry, lived in Fort Ogden township with his wife, Barbary, and two daughters, Mary Francis and Caroline. (On February 9, 1871 in a double ceremony, they married respectively James A. and Oliver A. Albritton, sons of Thomas H. Albritton of Lily.)

The nickname of "Long John" was first applied in print to Whidden in the *Florida Peninsular* of June 29, 1870:

"Francis A. Ivey was killed by John Whidden (Long John) near Fort Myers, Monroe County, not long since, under the

following circumstances as we have heard them:

"The parties were minding a drove of beef cattle, and fell out as to which had control of them. High words ensued; Ivey advanced upon Whidden, threw sticks and trash in Whidden's face; whereupon Whidden, after repeatedly warning Ivey to stand off, drew his knife and stabbed him in the abdomen. Ivey lived about a week after he was stabbed.

"Whidden had not been arrested up to latest dates."

Ivey died on June 11, 1870. Long John fled and was never arrested. A later account had that Ivey had killed a brother of Long John so it would seem frontier justice chose to call it even.

Long John Whidden was soon heard of again when the *Florida Peninsular* of October 5, 1870 chronicled a further altercation in Manatee County:

"We learn that a difficulty occurred between a young man named Parish and a man called Long John, in which the long gentleman was stabbed. The wounds inflicted upon Long John are supposed to be mortal, and Parish has left the county."

Described by one paper as a giant in size and in appearance as strong as Hercules, Long John arose from his "death-bed" and fled the (for him) hostile environment for Sumter County.

But trouble and Long John were synonymous. Returned to Manatee County, he had taken sick and was lying in bed at the home of Jackson and Frances Prine when on the evening of August 7, 1878 he heard a gun fire. Going to the shed, he found Jackson lying dead at the feet of Frances,

who had suffered a whipping with a strop of leather by the assailant who, apparently, was never apprehended. Long John fled back to Sumter County.

The Whiddens were enumerated in the 1880 census of Sumter County. Listed in the household, besides John and his twenty-one-year-old second wife Mary, were seven children, ranging in age from eighteen to two years. Not recorded with the family was his eldest son, William.

Long John and his son, Irvin, in May 1882, provoked a fight that led to murder, which placed them beyond the pale of the law to become outlaws with a bounty on Long John.

The *Florida Daily Times* of May 21, 1882 reported:

"Tampa, May 16-

"The news reached Tampa Monday (May 14) of the murder of Mr. Tom Jones, formerly a citizen here, in Webster, Sumter County, last week. The circumstances appear to be about as follows:

"Two rowdies came to the mill Mr. Jones was employed at, and started the machinery of the mill while the workmen were at their dinner. Jones immediately stopped the moving machinery, and ordered the men to desist and leave. The rowdies then knocked Tom down and left. Tom, being a small man, of course, could not defend himself against two giant, drunken bullies.

"At the close of the day's labor, Jones returned to his boarding house, and there he encountered the men who so cowardly assaulted him at the mill. However, being a peaceful turn of mind, he overlooked the occurrence of the morning.

"At the supper table the two rowdies commenced again to renew the quarrel, and threw a plate at Jones and cut him up pretty badly. Even then Jones would not fight, and went down to the store of the mill-owner. He did this in order to keep out of their way. He was fearful the men might follow him still, so he took his gun and loaded it.

"To protect his life he loaded his gun with buckshot. Soon his tormentors followed him, this time on trouble bent. Jones called to them to leave, but they still advanced, threatening him. He fired a load at one, and then another load at the other. The loads were well aimed, but a lack of powder made them ineffective.

"The ruffians advanced and shot him down. He was killed at the first fire. This was not enough. The murderers advanced and emptied their six shooters in the dead body of their victim, and then coolly walked off."

Declaring they would not be taken alive, Long John, now called "Black John," and Irvin eluded capture by a sheriff's posse to flee to the Ten Thousand Islands. There they were joined by others of the family and secreted themselves on Ramrod Key, opposite Torch Key. An enticing \$1,000 reward was offered for Black John.

In 1888 H.H. Herndon, deputy sheriff of Sumter County, having learned of Whidden's hideout, journeyed to Key West. Posing as desirous of purchasing land somewhere on the coast to engage in the breeding of sheep, goats, and poultry for the Key West market, Herndon engineered a "sting," maneuvering Long John to come to Torch Key to discuss selling his improvement on Ramrod Key and with the assistance of a Mr. Johnson and Garry Nile captured the fugitive, but only after a desperate struggle with Whidden and the

seizure of Long John's trusty rifle from his twelve-year-old son who was in the act of firing when Johnson snatched the rifle.

Then, Herndon went to Ramrod Key and arrested Irvin, who offered no resistance. Thus, after three or four weeks, the lawman had finally snared his prey. On March 31, 1888 he arrived at Key West with his prisoners and from there they were sent via mail boat to Tampa and then to the Sumterville Jail. Left behind at Ramrod Key were Long John's wife and three children.

Sumter County sheriff Chapman subsequently carried Long John to Gainesville on April 11 where he was imprisoned awaiting the next session of the circuit court. Irvin, deemed less dangerous, was left confined in the Sumterville jail.

On March 15, 1889, Long John Whidden for murdering Tom Jones was sentenced to life imprisonment. The 24-year-old Irvin also received a life sentence. Long John died in prison November 11, 1891. Irvin, due to his youth when the murder occurred, drew sympathy from a number of prominent citizens in Sumterville, including the jury who convicted him, and a petition was circulated for his pardon. On March 15, 1897, Irvin was released. Thus did mercy season justice.

*Acknowledgment: Canter Brown Jr. researched most of this article.*

*This article originally appeared in the **Wauchula Herald-Advocate**, Jan. 9, 1992.*