



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California
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Chief Willow And The Roses Thief - 1894

By Gilbert Gia
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On a late April night in 1894 Ed Willow was almost to his home when he saw a figure lurking in his rose garden. What happened in the next few moments was written up the next day in the newspaper, but “Paid for His Roses” improves with a little background about Ed Willow.¹

The time it happened, E.L. Willow was single, 30, and chief of Bakersfield's volunteer fire department. He was raised in Bakersfield and went through the grades here. As 16 year-old he carried the mail, and when he was 17 he joined the Alerts Hook & Ladder Company. Jacob Niederaur hired Willow as a cabinet makers and apprentice embalmer, but Willow's interests lead him to higher education. He graduated in business from the University of Southern California and returned to Bakersfield where he opened a cabinet shop at 1219-19th Street. ²

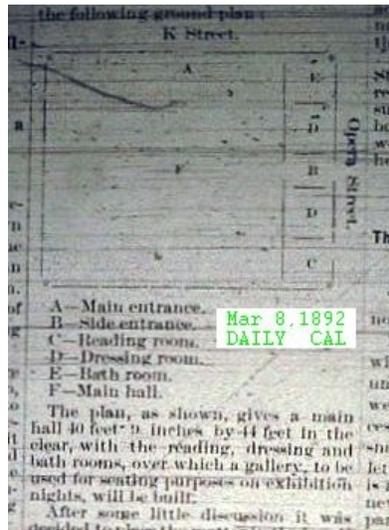
From about 1885 to about 1910 Willow acted and sang in Bakersfield theater, but he was also a sportsman. In 1892 he helped found Bakersfield Athletic Club, and in the city flood of 1893 he ferrying a rowboat over the streets to rescue stranded residents.

Willow's life was jolted in 1896 after he helped in the arrest of a local bad-player and all-around town bully named Percy Douglass. Douglass threatened to kill Willow.³

¹ *Daily Californian*, Apr 23, 1894

² Morgan, *History of Kern County*.

³ *Daily Californian*, Jan 30, 1897, p1, 3. The author thanks John D. Codd of the Kern Genealogical Society for his transcription of the newspaper story. Douglass threatened the lives of others. The newspaper story said he'd also threatened an Annie Hicks. The Feb 3, 1897 *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “He always fastened himself



Plan for Athletic Club building

On Friday January 29, 1897 at about 7:00 PM, Ed Willow and Annie Hicks (alias Annie Rooney) were in an upstairs lodging-house room at the Athletic Club.⁴ Annie was cooking supper, and Ed was in the front room reading. Percy Douglass was at a nearby saloon, and he had been drinking heavily for several days. This evening Douglass' drunk was particularly ugly.

He climbed the stairs of the Athletic Club, and smashed in the door of Willow and Hicks's room. Willow faced off with him, and Douglass threatened Willow with a pistol. Willow, who then the acting manager at the club, was ready. He blasted Douglass with a double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun.⁵

upon some wretched woman of ill-fame and made her give up her sinful earnings to support him in idleness."

4 The plan shown in the Mar 8, 1892 *Californian* did not indicate rooms above. On Apr 13, 1892, the *Daily Californian* noted that the building had been recently completed. Its main entrance faced K Street, but the the club was at the "corner of Twentieth Street and Opera Street." That places it on Lot 1, Block 206. The club had a side entrance on Opera alley behind today's Woolworth's building at 1400 19th Street. Niederaur's Opera house was at that location.

5 Geo Weeks wrote, "...[H]e and I remained good friends until the day I dropped into the fire engine house and saw him lying flat on his back, an undischarged 44-Colt in each hand, and a hole in his chest large enough to accommodate both of one's fists, made by the impact of a charge of two buckshot cartridges fired from a

Willow turned himself over to Officer Oswald, and Oswald lodged a complaint of murder against Willow. The coroner's jury ruled that an unknown person killed Douglass,⁶ and while that took place the town rejoiced at Douglass' demise.⁷ A criminal jury concluded that Willow acted in self-defense. Ed Willow continued with his business, his theater, and his work with the fire department. In 1901 he was appointed Bakersfield Fire Chief.⁸

Forty year-old Ed Willow probably settled down some after he married school teacher Frances Foran. In 1905, while Willow was fire chief, he was named chairman of the town's Fourth of July celebration. A few months later while firemen were out on drill, Chief Willow got a call that a hen house was burning. He was afoot as he ran down K Street from the station, and crowds parted as he jumped on a moving street car on Nineteenth. He made it to the fire.⁹

In 1907 he and most of the firemen resigned in protest over the firing of a Mike Argy. Willow's resignation might have been easier on him than it seems. By then the 42 year-old had been around fire suppression for 16 years, and the work could have lost much its original appeal.

He continued on with his furniture business. In 1911 he was a stockholder in Kern Valley Bank; he became treasurer of Bakersfield Merchants Association; and in 1915 he

sawed-off shotgun. Incidentally, the shots had been fired in self-defense by the fire chief, the coroner's jury found, and were thoroughly justifiable. 'Got what he went after,' was the popular verdict." George F. Weeks, *California Copy*. Washington, D.C., Washington College Press, 1928. (p 176)

⁶ *Daily Californian*, Jan 27, 1897

⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 3, 1897.

⁸ Bakersfield incorporated Jan 4, 1898. Lynn Hay Rudy notes that Willow was the first paid fire chief. Rudy is author of two eminently researched, privately-printed books on Bakersfield history: *Old Bakersfield: Sites and Landmarks, 1875-1915*. 2000. Jenner, CA; *Granddad: Hugh A. Blodgett in Early Bakersfield*. 1999. Jenner, CA. Much of the background in this article about Ed Willow's life from Lynn Hay Rudy's personal database.

⁹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 3, 1906. Many details about Ed Willow's life came from Lynn Hay Rudy's personal database.

was elected to the Bakersfield City Council. Among Willow's first efforts was a recall campaign (unsuccessful) against District Attorney Barclay McCowan.¹⁰

By knowing that much about Ed Willow, this roses story shouldn't come as much of a surprise.



On Saturday April 23, 1904, at about half-past eleven at night, Willow was returning home from the train depot when he saw a figure among his rose bushes. Ed crept closer, but whoever it was saw him and ran. Willow suspected a confederate, so he stole into the garden and crouched down. A moment later a darkened figure appeared from around the corner of the house, held out a flower to Willow's figure, and whispered, "Here's one for you." Willow reached up for the rose, announcing, "And here's one for you, too!" and launched a solid right-hander into the man's face. The next day's newspaper wrote, "After the man got his second wind and took part of his senses back, he apologized humbly and wanted to pay for the flowers he had taken. But as interest on the investment had just been taken out of his hide, Mr. Willow made no further charge except the emphatic one, 'If I ever catch you here again ...'"¹¹

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¹⁰ *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 14, 1915

¹¹ *Daily Californian*, Apr 23, 1894.