

# Storylandia

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Cover: "View from Maricopa Mountain near the Rio Gila," by Henry Cheever Pratt, oil on canvas, 1855 (<http://bit.ly/2lx231m>)

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Alias Chicken Smith

Bob Carlton

Alias Chicken  
Smith

By Bob Carlton

# Alias Chicken Smith

## Prologue

### I

He's got pluck.

Sure does...pluck.

Yeah, pluck, like a chicken.

Haw Haw

Guffaw Guffaw

What's your name, son?

Smith he lied.

Smith...Chicken Smith. Well boys, we got us a blacksmith, a silversmith, and a gunsmith. And now we got us a chickensmith. Haw Haw

The origin myth, preserved in the notes, apparently taken while playing poker at the Rusty Pick Saloon, by Penwick Gathright, founder, editor, and publisher of the *Silvercliff Bugle*. Never developed into an article so far as anyone is able to ascertain. Odd, given Gathright's later fascination with the exploits of the notorious badman.

## II

A thought confounds me—what if men are not what they always do, but rather always do what they are?

What if I write everything I have ever done, and it ends up explaining nothing?

What if a man is not the sum of his acts?

His acts only some of what he is?

Found in a leather-bound notebook, on the first page of which is an apparent title, "The True Account of the Life and Exploits of the Much-Maligned and Misunderstood Outlaw, Chicken Smith, as Written by Himself." There appear to have been several other proposed titles, all of which were blotted out. If any of this memoir was written, its whereabouts are unknown. Aside from the title page and this note, the entire notebook is blank.

## III

Of his final resting place, we know this much: he lies in a plot at the Oakpark Memorial Cemetery in Silvercliff, Arizona, next to his wife, Marisol. A small, plain, upright stone marks the spot. On it is carved the following inscription:

BARNABUS CHANTWELL  
1860-Aug. 6, 1945

The only mention of his death ran, fittingly enough, in the *Silvercliff Bugle*, where more momentous events relegated this news to the back page: "We also note the passing yesterday of saloon keeper Barney Chantwell, the man who was once better known as infamous local outlaw Chicken Smith." This tantalizing item is the first mention of Smith's real identity.

### Biography

The most extensive biographical sketch, quoted in full below, is found in *The Encyclopedia of Shootists*, by Wes Carroll, Blue Frontier Press, 1978, where he sits immortalized between Bill Smith and Jack Smith. Though he merits mention in a handful of other secondary sources, with one minor exception, none contain any information that cannot be found in Carroll.

The lone exception can be found in the four paragraphs devoted to him in *Showdown at Dawn*, by Clancy Yeager, also from Blue Frontier Press, 1989. There is made the assertion, which is not borne out by any of the sources cited by Yeager, that "Smith, while on a self-imposed 'vision-quest' in southwest Texas, encountered the great Mescalero Apache warrior-chief Alsate, headed for Mexico with a herd

of stolen ponies." While entirely possible, given what is known of the outlaw's mercurial nature and the activities at the time of Alsate, it must be stressed that the episode remains conjectural, and is quite likely apocryphal.

Since the publication of Carroll's work, the papers of the Gathright family have become available to researchers. When Chester Gathright died in 1978 without issue, the extensive family archives passed to Chester's aunt, Caroline Gathright Adams, who sold them to the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin. Among them are numerous letters from Smith to the family, as well as many additional references to him in documents written by the Gathrights. Should any intrepid researcher piece all of them together, it would no doubt enlarge our view of Smith's character, as well as possibly give some idea of what was going on in the "lost years."

Chicken Smith (1860-Aug. 6, 1945): Born Barnabus Chantwell, St. Louis, Missouri. Of his father, little is known outside of his name, Spencer Chantwell, and his service in the U.S. Army from 1856 to circa 1861. He may have died during the Civil War, or he may have simply abandoned his family. All that can be said with reasonable certainty is that Barnabus was raised from an early age, with his sister Collette (born

1858), by his mother, Penelope Chantwell, and her spinster sister, Camellia Roberts. While little evidence for his upbringing remains, much can be inferred from a surviving letter written to him by his mother, and dated Feb. 27, 1875. The mere fact that it was found, carefully preserved among Smith's effects at the time of his death, is a clear indication of the close bond between mother and son. That she speaks to her teenage son, working as a cowhand on Chester Throckmorton's Lazy J Ranch in Texas, as one would to a reasonably well-educated adult certainly implies a level of schooling no doubt peculiar among his rusticated peers of the time. At any rate, it is from this letter that we learn that Smith was raised in St. Louis, where his presumably widowed mother and her unmarried sister supported themselves by taking in boarders. He and his sister Collette were very close, and it can be fairly surmised that her tragic death by drowning in the Mississippi River, an apparent suicide resulting from a romantic disappointment, had the effect of setting Smith, then aged thirteen, on his way southwest. Within a year he was in the employ of Throckmorton, who noted the fact that his new ranch hand, though slight of stature and beardless of chin, was a quick study, a hard worker, and utterly fearless. It is this combination of a disciplined intelligence and physical courage that many people would remember most about him. It soon became apparent that he also possessed a manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination that few of his contemporaries could match. He quickly became a crack shot with a quick draw. This stood him in good stead with Throckmorton until he left off driving cattle after arriving in Ellsworth, Kansas, in 1876. It is at this point that Barnabus Chantwell exits the

stage of history, not to re-enter until some thirty-five years later. His whereabouts and activities from this time until his arrival, in 1880, in the mining town of Silvercliff, Arizona, where he assumed the sobriquet by which he is best known, are a matter of conjecture. There is the intriguing possibility, based on the recollections of an Indian warrior named Broken Fang, that Smith was living among a band of Cheyenne during at least part of this period. Why Smith came to Silvercliff in the first place is something of a mystery, since he appears never to have engaged in any activities related to mining, gambling, pandering, or law enforcement. At any rate, his first known altercation that involved gun-play occurred soon after his arrival. It would seem that Smith, always slight of build and youthful in appearance, often bore the brunt of the crude and drunken jokes that tended to run rampant in a rough and tumble mining town. While most who met him described him as a quiet man, given to melancholy, and slow to anger, he was known, when sufficiently prodded, to display a caustic wit that would almost invariably provoke physical violence in those who were not equipped with the intellect to answer him. Such appears to be the case when miner Calvin Jenkins drew down on him in the Rusty Pick Saloon on May 17, 1880. Smith dove for cover behind a table as the inebriated Jenkins fired off two wild shots, one hitting the ceiling, the other grazing the arm of a prostitute named Gloria. Meanwhile, Smith had unholstered his Colt, and quickly fired two shots of his own. The first hit Jenkins in the right shoulder, the second splintered a nearby wooden support beam, a sliver of which caught Jenkins in the right eye. Though he would recover from his wounds, Jenkins would never be

able to fire a pistol again and wore an eye patch for the rest of his life. Smith's outlaw status was confirmed when, the next day, Sheriff Townes Marshall and a group of citizens deputized for the occasion attempted to apprehend Smith. It was well-known that Marshall was a good friend of Jenkins, and that his "deputies" were little more than drunken rabble bent on causing Smith bodily harm. Smith, barricaded in a stable where he boarded his horse, held the posse to a stand-off for seventeen hours, aided, it is said, by the same prostitute Jenkins had shot. At the first opportunity, when many of the participants on the sheriff's side had either gone home, went for liquor, or gone to sleep, Smith galloped out of town and into the Arizona countryside. History has not recorded the fate of the prostitute Gloria. Following this embarrassing episode, Sheriff Marshall began his pursuit of Smith, largely by way of what would today be called propaganda. It seems there was no criminal act committed throughout Silvercliff and environs that did not feature Chicken Smith. While Penwick Gathright, a political foe of the sheriff and editor of the *Silvercliff Bugle*, exposed Marshall's tactics through his satirical coverage of Smith's exploits, he simultaneously, and perhaps unwittingly, grew the outlaw's legend as well. Some of Gathright's more unsophisticated readers may even have taken much of what he wrote at face value. Smith's popularity reached its peak in 1889, with the publication of *The Blazing Guns of Chicken Smith* by Garrett Hartley. Essentially a dime novel masquerading as biography, it can safely be said of it that not a single kernel of truth rests amidst Hartley's western-fringed purple prose. While Sheriff Marshall's accusations against Smith were largely unfounded, the outlaw did seem

to support himself, at least in some measure, by larceny at the expense of the sheriff and his close supporters. Such would have been the case during the daytime robbery of the Silvercliff Savings and Loan, the president of which, John “Crying Jack” Stanton, was a close friend of Sheriff Marshall. Smith, who was never a man to court attention, rode unnoticed into town on June 16, 1882, and entered the bank alone. Having caught employees and customers alike by surprise with his brazenness, Smith quickly cleaned out the vault. A verbal altercation arose between Smith and one Clem Wiggins, during which an enraged Wiggins attempted to pull a small Derringer hidden in his cummerbund, only to have two of his fingers blown off by Smith. In the ensuing panic, Smith made off with roughly \$15,000. While no one who was present doubted that the Silvercliff robbery was Smith’s work, and certainly worthy of a long prison term, for some reason Sheriff Marshall felt it necessary to implicate Smith in a stage hold-up that same day near Standish Wells, in which a group of four masked highwayman killed the driver and a guard before robbing the passengers. The fact that Standish Wells was a two hour ride from Silvercliff and the two robberies were committed only thirty minutes apart cast doubt on all sides. In fact, between Sheriff Marshall’s overzealous manufacturing of Smith’s criminal acts and the *Silvercliff Bugle’s* lampooning of the same, much of the local citizenry either saw Marshall as a buffoon, Smith as a hero, or both. The only other incident of gun-play involving Chicken Smith for which we have primary documentation occurred Oct. 7, 1883, near the home of a sheriff’s deputy named Tiberius Lee. It seems Smith had ridden with all due stealth onto Lee’s

property that morning with the apparent intent of stealing some chickens. The commotion of such an activity roused Lee from slumber, whereupon he appeared on his front porch brandishing a shotgun. Still half-asleep and possibly half-drunk as well, Lee fired wildly in Smith's general direction, causing little damage beyond blowing several of his own chickens to bits. Smith wheeled his horse around and fled, firing his pistol over his shoulder in Lee's general direction to cover himself as he fled. Lee stepped off the porch and prepared to fire again. In so doing, he tripped and fell, his shotgun discharging into his left foot, with the result that he lost several toes. This incident is the basis for the most well-known of the Chicken Smith legends, in which he fires his pistol over his shoulder from a galloping horse with such preternatural accuracy that he incapacitates his foe and picks off half the man's livestock at the same time. Both the *Silvercliff Bugle* and Hartley recount the event, and both make for wonderful comedy, the former piece intentionally, the latter not so much. Finally, in November, Sheriff Marshall was able to apprehend Smith. Acting on a tip from an informant, Marshall found Smith playing cards at Green's No. 6 Saloon. Seeing that the Sheriff, accompanied by several cohorts, had the drop on him, Smith surrendered without incident. Justice at the local level being what it was at the time, the outlook for Smith was not good. However, Penwick Gathright secured the services of noted attorney and former federal prosecutor for the Territory, Clifford Bunting. Bunting argued before a county judge that one of the crimes of which Smith was accused, namely the shooting of Tiberius Lee, actually occurred outside the county, and should therefore be tried in a different

venue. Because of the political influence of Gathright and Bunting, Smith was removed from Sheriff Marshall's custody by the rather intimidating Deputy Federal Marshal Jake "Stand Alone" Allenby, and transferred to a jail in Cullahoolah, from which he promptly escaped, but not before trying his case in the press in a jailhouse interview with the *Silvercliff Bugle*. It might be pertinent at this point to address the question of why Penwick Gathright, a respected businessman, civic leader, and law-abiding citizen would take such a personal interest in the fate of an outlaw, even one who provided such good copy. Some have seen Gathright's interest in Smith as politically motivated. In this view, Smith is little more than a pawn used by Gathright and his friends to further their agenda against Sheriff Marshall, the mining interests, and the corrupt political machine they had assembled. However, it makes little sense given the amount of personal expense, as well as exposure to physical danger, to which Gathright put himself. The matter became clarified by way of the author's personal correspondence with Chester Gathright, the grandson of Penwick Gathright. It seems that in July, 1882, a fire broke out at an abandoned miner's shack on the edge of town. Several boys had been playing in it, and one, Granville Gathright, the nine-year-old son of Penwick Gathright, was trapped inside. As luck, or fate, would have it, Chicken Smith was in the vicinity and heard the shouts of the boys for help. At the risk of his own life, Smith rescued young Granville, receiving a severe burn on his left upper-arm which left a distinctive scar, one which he was able to conceal, but which was known to the Gathright family. The grateful father would ever after help Smith in any way he could, or in any way the latter

would allow. This included favorable press, paid legal expenses, and possible assistance in the Cullahoolah jailbreak. This familial debt was honored through three generations, discharged only upon the death of Smith himself. At any rate, after escaping from jail, Smith essentially vanished. Beginning in 1884, there is not a single credible source which makes any mention of him. This is all the more remarkable since, from approximately 1885 to 1899, Smith is constantly making his movements public by way of communication with the *Silvercliff Bugle*. He is almost like a traveling correspondent, sending his posts from all across the United States. His letters to the paper continued to fuel the old rivalries between Gathright and his opponents, as Smith's continued freedom became symbolic of the latter's incompetence. The fact that Smith remained remarkably well-informed on the constantly shifting political landscape of Silvercliff suggests either regular communication with Gathright, which is highly unlikely given Smith's peripatetic lifestyle, or more likely, a conscious effort by Smith to keep up with current events. Whatever the case may be, Smith's continued presence in the civic life of Silvercliff cemented his local legend and, it may even be plausibly argued, helped pave the way for the land and banking reforms that saved Silvercliff from the fate of other mining boomtowns of the era. It may not be overstating the case too much to say that Penwick Gathright and Chicken Smith are the fathers of modern Silvercliff. Beginning in 1899, there is once more a gap in what we know of the life of Chicken Smith. Where he was and what he was doing are a matter of pure conjecture. All that can be said with certainty is that by 1911, Chicken Smith had once again become Barnabus Chantwell. He

returned to Silvercliff, where he resided in anonymity. With the exception of Penwick and Granville Gathright, most old friends and foes had either died or moved away. He purchased the now-defunct Rusty Pick Saloon and reopened it as the Second Chance Saloon. In March of that year, at age 51, he had married Marisol Castillo, age 24. Little is known of his wife; she was the daughter of a Mexican army officer and a woman named Pilar, formerly a captive of Apaches. Marisol herself seems to have been raised in a convent near the Texas-Mexico border after the death of her father, Capt. Manuel Castillo, when she was an infant. It is believed Smith met her here, and that the two of them decided to start a new life together. His domestic bliss was short-lived however, when his wife died two years later giving birth to a stillborn son. From this point forward, there are mainly passing references to Chantwell in the *Silvercliff Bugle*, usually in connection to his presence or participation in some civic function. His later life seems to have been quiet and uneventful until a hot July evening in 1938, when a fight broke out in his saloon. A local tough named Benny Compton, drunk and belligerent, attacked another man, Stanley Thursby. At almost the same moment that a knife appeared in Compton's hand a shot rang out, and Compton immediately dropped to his knees, clutching his bloody right forearm. Everyone in the crowded bar turned to see old Barney Chantwell, holding a Colt pistol in one hand and dialing the phone to call the police with the other. Witnesses later marveled at the lightning-fast speed with which the entire incident occurred, and the calm, steady, almost serene manner of the old bartender. The last time Chicken Smith is known to have handled a gun he was no longer even



Bob Carlton lives and works in Leander, TX. For those willing to navigate a minefield of broken links and a sea of literary obscurity, more about him and his work can be found at [www.bobcarlton3.weebly.com](http://www.bobcarlton3.weebly.com).

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