

Yavapai Lions
DIME NOVEL

TALES OF THE
MEL CLACK
GANG

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Pulp Novelist



WANTED
IN YAVAPAI COUNTY FOR EYE CARE

THE LEGEND

The Old West was famous for many outlaw gangs who robbed

banks, trains and stagecoaches. Among the more notable and infamous were the Dalton Gang, James-Younger Gang, Hole in the Wall Gang, Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch, Tom Bell Gang and the Lincoln County Regulators. At the time, they became legendary through writings in dime novels. The legend of these outlaw gangs was first shown in the silent film, *The Great Train Robbery*. The romantic period of the outlaws was a favorite for television, especially in the '50s and '60s. Our interest in the outlaws of the Old West continues today.



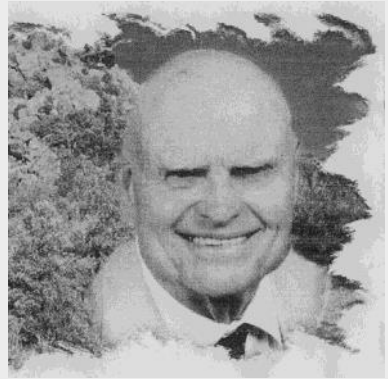
Although those days of outlaw gangs are long gone, there is one gang that is becoming famous today in Arizona. They are known as the Mel Clack Gang. Their territory is Yavapai County and their hideout is in the Prescott area. While some gangs of the past became infamous for their violence and thievery, others robbed from the rich railroad companies and were well liked by the poor settlers. Although the Mel Clack Gang doesn't rob from anyone, they've become famous for helping those people in need of eye care throughout Yavapai County.

Many people may know this band by other names including the Eye Care Gang, the I-Care Gang and the Yavapai Lions. Whatever name they are known by, their reputation spreads like tumbleweeds through the towns of Paulden, Mayer, Yarnell, Cordes Lakes, Cottonwood, Ash Fork, Bagdad, Wilhoit, Black Canyon City and as far yonder as Seligman.



THE BEGINNING

The namesake, Mel Clack, a prominent citizen of Prescott, was known for helping others. He joined the US Army Air Corps in 1941 and served in the Pacific during the war. In 1953, he moved to Prescott and was known for Mel's Café. A few years later he became a dealer with Goodyear Tire Co. Although he became blind, he had the vision to help others who were visually impaired. In 1980, he founded the Yavapai Center for the Blind. When Mel died in 2005, he left behind a treasure of money to help others with visual care. Thus was the start of the Mel Clack Fund.



Although the fund was specifically directed for the citizens of Yavapai County, it was administered by an agency at the state level in Phoenix. For years, the fund was underutilized. A fellow Lion, Paul Chastain knew Mel Clack and shared his vision to help others. In 2014, Paul set out to find a way to fulfill Mel's vision. Paul is an 'idea' man who knew how to relate to people of all positions in life. The best partner he needed was someone who could take those ideas and work with him to make them a reality. That partner was John Schmitt. Together they visited towns around Yavapai County meeting people and exploring possibilities. They formed a loosely defined group called the Yavapai Lions of Yavapai County.

Soon, John and Paul became a band with the addition of Doug George. A major step was taken in 2015. A bunkhouse rumor claims that Paul won an eye care van from the New Mexico Lions in a poker game. And he bluffed his way with just a pair of 'Dougs,' Doug Ruckel and Doug George to be exact. No matter how he got the van, it proved to be a real steal. The price was great and it came with lab equipment that was desperately needed.



THE GANG

The band of John, Paul and Doug George drummed up additional help from several others and eventually became a gang. They were joined by regulars: Jerry Neal, Tom Hubbard, Rudy Hernandez and Phil Weliky with his dog, Simba. They began hitting towns around the Yavapai territory with their special van. Occasionally, they were helped by others. Accompanying the gang on each trip was a different wrangler with the professional expertise of a doctor.

Gang members are known for some curious nicknames like Sundance Kid, Curly Bill, Texas Jack, Ringo, and Bronco Bill. The Mel Clack Gang is no different. Below are a few of those names.

Paul 'Tireless' Chastain.

Recently he acquired another nickname, 'Tireless,' due to his unbound energy and recent mishap. They say he has a wobblin' jaw and loves telling stories, some of them actually true. But his yarns put the local folks at ease. Paul's membership in the gang is odd since he is a retired lawman.



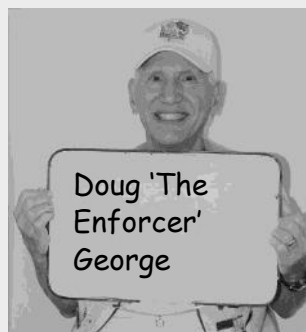
'Atomic John' Schmitt

John has the expertise to help in many ways. Most of what the gang does isn't exactly nuclear fission science. But if it was like that, John would be the one to figure it out.



Doug 'the Enforcer' George

He may be a dude from out East, but he ain't no greenhorn. Doug already knew about some lab equipment and thoroughly learned quickly about other equipment in the van. With an operation like this, it requires planning and running on schedule. Doug makes that happen.



Rudy 'Lucky' Hernandez

Like many of the others in the gang, Rudy is the type of guy who really enjoys life and truly feels lucky to be doing what he does for others. You can't help but feel that way, too, after getting to know Rudy.



Jerry 'Specs' Neal

'Specs' comes from his job working with people to select eye glasses after being tested. He is also the driver, which requires a certain toughness in order to handle the mammoth eye care van. Maybe it is the same toughness a cowboy needed to drive a thousand longhorns to Abilene.



Phil 'Shades' & 'Nine Lives'

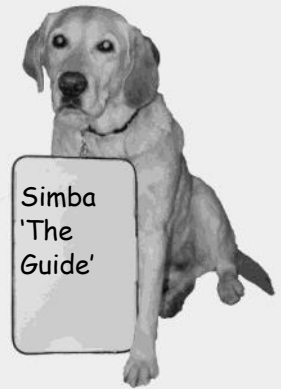
Weliky

Phil has a talent for conversing with clients and putting them at ease as he explains the process of eye care. Everyone always feels at ease, too, with Simba by him.



Simba 'The Guide'

He isn't exactly a guard dog, but looks can be deceiving. He could pounce on someone at anytime. After all, Simba has been known to give some people a pretty good lickin'.



Tom 'Cool Hand' Hubbard

Oddly enough, Tom is also a retired lawman. Maybe that is why he stays cool dealing with people and handling the non-contact infrared forehead thermometer 'gun.'



Other Gang Members

A couple of buckaroos in the gang are **John Regalado** and **Scott Armstrong**, who also have a hankerin' to help others.

Other gang members;

Isaac Acosta	Rhuno Nelson	Tony Hollins
Dick Beers	Jake Passer	Buz Williams
Bob Dressler	Rich Quintero	Ray Lee
Mike First	Doug Ruckel	John Meier
Ken Gantz	Ken Schlitz	

Several cowgirls ride with the men including:

Sandy Eubanks, Marcie Moody, Sue Neal, Vivian Hernandez and **Linda Schmitt**.

Nine members from other parts join on some rides too.



THE GANG'S M.O.

Gangs held up stagecoaches, banks, and robbed trains. However, the Mel Clack Gang strikes at unlikely places; public libraries and community centers. These are hardly the financial targets of most gangs, but the gang is on a different kind of mission. Instead of packin' shootin' irons, this gang loads the van with lab equipment.

The gang's operation would never succeed without the help of an inside man, or woman. With the persuasion of Paul and the coordination with Doug, they have been able to solicit the help of someone local. Usually, the inside help is on the library staff, or the center director.



You won't catch this gang burnin' daylight. They hit the trail before sunrise at times. With Doug's thorough planning, the setup has become routine. Although, each location requires special adaptations be made to accommodate to the circumstances. In addition to Doug, John is an expert with setup of the technical lab equipment in the van.



In the past year, the gang has donned masks. Some say it is to conceal their true identity. Others claim it is due to the virus going around.

In town the first step is to check each person's temperature. Tom has his hand on a triggered device aimed at a person's forehead. Contrary to some beliefs, the device does not erase a person's



memory. However, this hasn't been disproven yet. Gang members get checked first for any hot heads and then with local citizens as they show up. After answering a few sickness related questions, Cool Hand Hubbard directs clients' to 'Shades' Weliky.

Phil gives each person the lowdown of what to expect in the process as they visit with other gang members. Meanwhile, Simba looks bored lying under the table unless he finds an unguarded donut. After reviewing the different steps for eye care, Phil directs people to Paul for some friendly interrogation.



Paul's questions relate back to how a person can comply with the Mel Clack Fund qualifications. Although he is a former cop, there is no good cop bad cop routine. In fact, Paul has a way of making everyone comfortable and feel like a friend. Actually, all of the gang members are good at making clients feel at ease.



The next step for clients after Paul, is Rudy. After reviewing a medical history form, Rudy disappears into a dark closet with the client. His explanation is that the dark helps with taking a reading of a person's eyesight prior to seeing the doc.

Following Rudy, a client is ushered to the van by Doug who strives to keep everyone on schedule. Inside the van is where the real work is done by the professional Doc to test a client's eyesight to determine what corrections are needed.

After seeing the Doc, the fun part for a client begins with Jerry, who first takes a photo of the client to assist others with eyeglass measurements. Jerry takes more measurements with another device. Then the client peruses a catalog of eye glass frames to select the one they like.

At the end of the day, the gang carefully packs up equipment and gets away. Although the gang is gone, their work isn't complete. Information is sent to Phoenix



for others to produce new eyeglasses. Mysteriously, new eyeglasses arrive two or three weeks later in the mail for the citizens. Throughout this entire process, no greenbacks are exchanged. Expenses are covered by the Mel Clack Fund created years ago.

THE GANG'S LEGACY

This gang has hit many towns twice in the past couple of years. Their last town was Black Canyon City. As they say, this wasn't their first rodeo. During the first year, the gang kept getting better with each visit. Now they have it down to an art and are an efficient operation. They make it look simple, but pulling an operation like this requires careful planning. Already, word has spread among the towns in Yavapai County about the coming of the Eye Care Van and Gang. Undoubtedly, next year there will be more people awaiting the Yavapai Lions in the Mel Clack Gang.

Putting your trust in a outfit of masked strangers doesn't come naturally. One teenager was apprehensive about having her eyes tested. But everyone soon finds out that they are friendlier than a tail-wagging puppy. Doug George was able to convince the teenager to get her eyes tested and found out that she would benefit from new glasses. A few others discovered that they need more treatment. After every visit, the gang always hear people whole-heartedly say "Thank you" in many ways. "I'm so excited that I'll be able to see clearly again." "You're awesome" "It was great" were other comments.

There are always challenges in staging these actions. As they say "You can't keep trouble from visitin' but you don't have to offer it a chair either." Schedules and conditions of the sites can be different from expectations. Even a getaway can go wrong, as Paul encountered returning over a rocky road from Bagdad.

Mel Clack was a Lion who had a dream fifteen years ago about finding a way to help citizens of Yavapai County with eye care. With his inspiration and funding, fellow Yavapai Lions are fulfilling his dream and are making a real impact on the lives of many people. Hopefully, some tenderfoot Lions will join the Mel Clack Eye Care Gang and learn the ropes. Then the mission to help others with eye care will continue for the next fifteen years and more.

Cowboys followed an unwritten code of the west such as:

- ★ A cowboy always helps someone in need, even a stranger or an enemy
- ★ Be hospitable to strangers. Anyone who wanders in, including an enemy, is welcome at the dinner table. The same was true for riders who joined cowboys on the range
- ★ Real cowboys are modest. A braggart who is "all gurgle and no guts" is not tolerated
- ★ Be there for a friend when he needs you
- ★ Honesty is absolute – your word is your bond, a handshake is more binding than a contract

These are the same rules that Lions follow, especially the Yavapai Lions in the Mel Clack Gang.

Maybe years from now, Arizonans will tell tales of the Yavapai Lions and the Mel Clack Gang roaming the West and helping people with eye care needs.