

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 306: FRANK FITCHUE

Early Pioneer Foils Bank Robbery And Stands Up To Notorious Durango Gang

Born the oldest son of freed slaves in St. Louis, MO, in 1855, Frank Fitchue and his family make their way west to Kansas shortly after the end of the Civil War. By 1883 Fitchue comes to Durango on his own where he finds work as a porter/night watchman at the newly formed First National Bank of Durango.

He lives in the basement of the bank where one wall of his bedroom contains the back of the bank's large, ornate metal safe.

He is an impressive man even for the times – he is literate, described in Marion Jarvis' "History of the Strater Hotel" as a "learned Negro." He has a responsible job, is a trustee of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and he is an astute businessman, buying and selling real estate in Durango as well as owning several gold and silver mines in the area.

The Robbery

In November 1883 Fitchue is approached by Cellas Hawkins, described in the Southwest Newspaper as "a Negro who worked at Philpot's Saloon." Hawkins and four other members of a "notorious gang" try to induce Fitchue to help them rob the bank. Knowing

Fitchue works and lives in the bank, the gang wants him to stay away from home on the night



Frank Fitchue

Photo Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College

they plan to break into the safe from inside his bedroom, threatening him if he doesn't comply.

Showing incredible courage by standing up to a gang of men who are terrorizing the townspeople of Durango, he contacts A.P. Camp (who will later become president of the bank) to warn him about the robbery and the gang's plan to set fire to nearby buildings as a diversion. Mr. Camp, along with

Sheriff Barney Watson and the town marshal, ask Fitchue to help set a trap by going back to Cellas Hawkins and his gang, telling them he will leave the back door of the bank open for them.

On the night of December 16, 1883, Hawkins enters the bank and begins chiseling into the safe which holds \$30,000 in gold and currency. Hidden in the bank are the sheriff, the marshal and several others, all armed. Hawkins chisels away but the rest of the gang, forewarned, never arrive.

A gunfight ensues; six-shooters blaze and bullets fly. In the dark and the confusion, a popular merchant, Bruce Hunt is shot in the heart. He staggers into the arms of the sheriff who carries him across the street to Parson’s Drug Store where he dies. Hawkins is chased

by a posse and in a wild moment throws himself off a cliff, breaking his neck and dying two days later.

Fitchue is called as a witness at the trial of the four other gang members, but they are acquitted. He receives no recognition in 1883 from the bank for his efforts to save their money.

Fitchue goes on to live a good life. He is active in his church, wealthy from his real estate investments, and well liked. This handsome man, standing so proudly with his cane in the photograph here lives until the age of 61, dying on October 29, 1917. His obituary reads, in part, “Frank Fitchue, a colored man, was highly re-spected in the community because of his unfailing courteousness, thrift and integrity.”

Some Recognition At Last

In 2007 the First National Bank of Durango recognized Fitchue’s “loyalty and courage” by commissioning a plaque with a photo of Fitchue along with a statement of what is known about his life. In addition, the Tonganoxic Community Historical Society in Tonganoxic, Kansas (where Fitchue grew up) featured a gallery exhibition of Fitchue’s life. As a result of the newspaper article written by Esther Greenfield about Fitchue in the Durango Herald entitled “The Importance of Being Frank,” long lost members of his family were found and they received a plaque from the bank as well.



Frank Fitchue Plaque as seen today at the First National Bank in Durango Colorado