



10-15-1988

The Engaging Life of Al Jennings

Gwen Jackson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

Recommended Citation

Jackson, Gwen (1988) "The Engaging Life of Al Jennings," *Westview*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol8/iss1/8>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



Varied Life

Lawyer — Outlaw — Politician — Author — Actor — Chicken farmer



THE ENGAGING LIFE OF AL JENNINGS

By Gwen Jackson

He boasted that train robbers were more honest than the Democratic establishment.

In the late 1800's, families surged into Oklahoma Territory from all walks of life looking for free land and new beginnings. J. D. F. Jennings, a physician, Methodist minister, and attorney, infiltrated his family into this unsettled area and served as probate judge in Pottawatomie County. He taught his sons — Ed, Al, and John — enough about law to pass bar examinations.

Al Jennings' political career began in 1892 when he was elected to the office of Canadian County attorney. He ran for re-election in 1894, but he was defeated. He then moved to Woodward to enter legal partnership with his brothers Ed and John. John and Al rode the circuit of Western Oklahoma courts defending ranchers in land disputes and taking various clientele.

On October 8, 1895, Temple Houston, spirited Woodward lawyer and youngest son of General Sam Houston, appeared in court representing Santa Fe Railroad against Jennings brothers' clients accused of stealing a keg of beer. A heated argument erupted in the courtroom and guns were drawn. Officers quickly restrained the men. The attorneys apologized to each other, but tempers boiled beneath the surface. That night, Houston and a close friend, ex-sheriff Jack Love, entered Garvey's Cabinet Saloon. Shortly, John and Ed Jennings appeared and the courtroom quarrel resumed. According to an account in THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN, the lights were shot out. When light was restored, Ed Jennings lay dying from a gunshot wound in the head. John Jennings fled, clutching a seriously wounded arm. Houston and Love were unharmed.

People in Woodward supported Houston and Love. Their defense lawyer suggested in court that John Jennings had accidentally killed his brother, Ed. Houston and Love were acquitted; the jury ruled self-defense. Al Jennings left the courtroom cursing the court decision and swearing revenge.

The topsy-turvy events in Woodward prompted Al to abandon the law practice. Younger brother Frank, who is said to have been a card dealer in a Woodward saloon, joined Al to organize a gang. In a whirlwind of lawlessness, they sought to avenge the injustice bestowed upon the Jennings brothers.

On August 16, 1897, the robbery of a Santa Fe train outside Edmond failed, and the express car messenger recognized the Jennings brothers' voices. A train robbery near Muskogee and train depot robbery at Purcell also failed.

Ben Tilgham, deputy U.S. marshal, heard that the Jennings gang planned to rob the Minco bank. He wired C. B. Campbell, president of the bank. Campbell organized area cattlemen to protect the bank day and night. When gang member Pat O'Malley went into Minco, he saw that the robbery would not be practical.

On October 1, 1897, Morris and Pat O'Malley, Al, Frank, and Dick West, stopped a Rock Island train north of Pocasset. There was supposed to be \$100,000 being sent to Ft. Worth, but the express car messenger couldn't open it. The gang tried dynamite but blew the side out of the train without opening the safe. Hungry and desperate, the gang

lined up passengers and took about \$300, watches, and other valuables.

In December, after considerable trailing by U.S. deputy marshal James Ledbetter and several posses, the Al Jennings gang was captured. Four indictments were filed in U.S. Court in Indian Territory, Southern District, at Chickasha. There were two counts of robbery, shooting into a railroad train, and robbery of U.S. mail.

The gang was held in the old jail that is now located in Shannon Springs Park. According to the CHICKASHA EXPRESS, there was a ten-foot-high stockade around the jail. Federal guards patrolled the area, and prisoners were chained together with leg bands.

A. C. Cruse of Duncan defended Al, free of charge as a gesture of love for Al's father and mother. Al was tried and found guilty of robbing U.S. mail. His sentence was imprisonment in the Ohio Penitentiary for the "rest of his natural life."

In October, 1899, the other three indictments were dismissed against the Jennings gang, and they were never punished.

In 1900, Al Jennings' sentence was reduced to five years, less good behavior; and two years later, President Theodore Roosevelt gave him full pardon.

Al returned to Oklahoma to practice law in Duncan and Lawton. Mary Bailey remembers Al visiting her father, Judge Bailey, in their Chickasha home. Mary says her sister Frances nearly fell off their divan when she learned that the man seated next to her was Al Jennings, the outlaw.

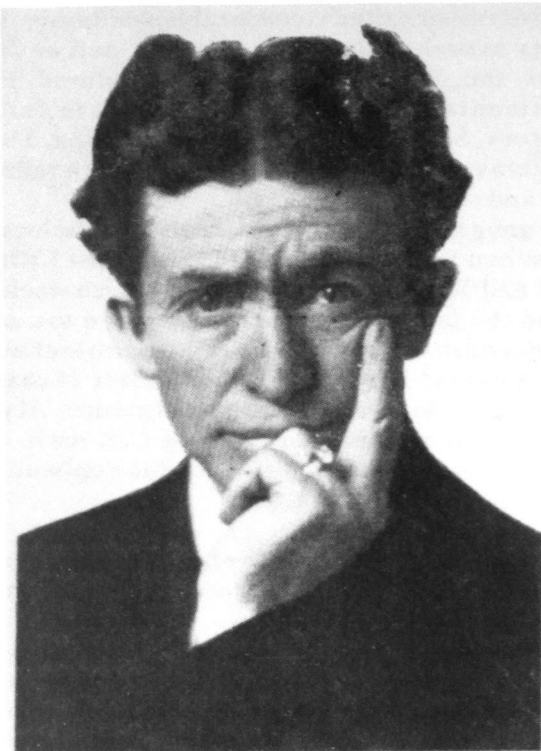
Once Al and his former defense attorney, A. C. Cruse, teamed on a case against a lawyer Al had robbed of ninety cents during the Pocasset robbery.

On January 6, 1904, Al married Maud Elizabeth Deaton, who lived in Lawton. A family newspaper clipping indicated that Maud was from Iowa and "nationally known on Chautauqua circuits."

In 1911, Al moved to Oklahoma City and ran for county attorney. He won the Democratic nomination but lost the general election.

Shortly afterward, Jennings wrote BEATING BACK, his autobiography. It told of his start in outlawry, his life in prison, and his comeback after release. This romantically written account was published in the SATURDAY EVENING POST in seven installments — from September to November of 1913. It contained eight Charles M. Russell illustrations.

In 1914, Al staged an aggressive campaign for Governor of Oklahoma. His campaign card stressed commitment to honesty. In the middle of campaign efforts, Al traveled to New Jersey to star in the movie about his life called BEATING BACK. When he returned to campaigning, he boasted that train robbers were more honest than the Democratic establishment. Voters and political leaders liked Al's rebellious nature. Final balloting was so close that results were in doubt for two days. He carried Oklahoma, Logan, and Stephens counties. His total vote of 21,732 was third in running.



**Absolute Honesty in Office will Reduce Taxes.
Hundreds of Thousands will be Saved by
Real Honesty**

AL. J. JENNINGS

**Candidate for Governor
State of Oklahoma**

119½ N. Broadway,

Oklahoma City,

**Subject to the action of
Democratic Primary, Aug. 1**

Okla.

Looking for a chance to begin again, Al and Maud moved to California. He worked as a movie advisor on correct handling of sixshooters. He retired to a peaceful life on a chicken ranch.

In 1951, Dan Duryea starred in the movie **AL JENNINGS OF OKLAHOMA**. According to the **CHICKASHA EXPRESS**, Al said that the picture was a disgrace. He also laughed at television Westerns, claiming the villains were ridiculous.

In later years, Frank Decker asked Al how it felt to be a bandit. Al reminiscently replied, "One feels as if he is isolated from the whole world and acts from that standpoint. Man in that business becomes accustomed to the hardships of it and gets to believing in his business as others who are skinning the public, but in a different and more legal manner. All fear and regard for human life leaves him, and he goes as a soldier to battle invulnerable to its danger, disaster, and death."

Several newspaper accounts state that Al Jennings shot his last man when he was ninety years old. A reporter came to the Jennings home for a fast-draw demonstration, and Al accidentally wounded him.

After such a life of varied experiences, Alphonso J. Jennings died in his San Fernando Valley home on December 26, 1961, at the age of 98. His death certificate listed him as a self-employed guest speaker. □

GWEN JACKSON, formerly of Port and now of Amber, has been teaching on the Elementary level for twenty-five years. She is an older sister of Pat Kourt, another WESTVIEW writer.