

ERVIN BOND--"MR. COCHISE COUNTY"

by Larry D. Christiansen ¹

In 1926 two individuals came to Douglas, Arizona with different motives, intentions, and both planned short stays. The first was the most famous woman evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson, who began making history apart from her ecclesiastical robes. The second came for health reasons and his stay lengthened into a lifetime, and he became a recorder of history in his new home area. Although the history-maker caused a tremendous stir and turned the eyes of the nation on Cochise County for a short time, her total contribution to the area was fleeting. While the second individual caused no splash, he served in his quiet way by helping preserve the heritage of his adopted homeland. Thus, the history-recorder proved the more important of the two 1926 visitors to Cochise County.

What follows is not designed to be a biography of a fine person but a few words of tribute. The author asks the indulgence of his readers for the inclusion of his personal comments.

The subject of this article, Ervin Bond, was born in southern Mississippi, a good twelve hundred miles from Douglas, Arizona, on January 24, 1906. Three things occurred in his life in Mississippi that had a significant impact on his future. First, his father told him while still very young that he was part Indian. This aroused in him a concern to know more about the Indians. Next, when about fourteen, someone gave him a little nickel magazine which featured an article on Arizona and the Chiricahua Indians. The article claimed that artifacts and signs of these Indians still abound in their old stomping grounds. Ervin had sought these evidences around his Mississippi home but found none of his Choctaw heritage. The last factor came five years after the magazine article and seemed to be a negative element, but in the mortar of his life would prove otherwise. In July of 1926 he contacted a light case of malaria fever, and his doctor recommended a short stay in a higher and drier climate to remedy it.

Ervin had an aunt and uncle in Douglas, Arizona, and by coming to visit them everything would line up. He could resolve his health problem and satisfy his interest in the Indians and find some of their signs. So he came to Douglas in the summer of 1926 and witnessed the aftershocks of Sister McPherson's last visit to Cochise County. More impressive to the Mississippi low-lander were the mountains, and he immediately wanted to climb one. His relatives lived on 19th Street which provided a grand view of Saddle Gap in the Perilla Mountains to the east. It became the object of his attention, and his initial measuring of his first mountain placed it as smooth and only two miles away. After lunch

¹ Beth Noland Willis, who married Bond in 1983, graciously assisted with the material for this article by conducting a taped interview of her husband for this author.

on his first Sunday in Douglas, he informed his uncle he was thinking of walking out to Saddle Gap that day. His uncle quickly informed him his calculations were off, and he had better plan for a two day trip rather than an afternoon hike if he intended to walk all the way.

A short time later Ervin climbed his first mountain and met his first Cochise County character. He went more prepared as he included an early start, water, lunch and drove a car out closer to his objective. He carried a small shotgun since his aunt had cautioned him to take a gun and look out for rattlesnakes, mountain lions or even a wandering Indian. Instead he encountered rough terrain, a momentary scare from some pigs and discovered "the dirtiest human being" he had ever seen. Ervin ran into the old cave-dwelling hermit, Capp Watts. Both took stock of each other, and apparently Capp thought his company needed a cup of coffee. Ervin considered the hermit's appearance and his residence far from appealing but the coffee was the final straw. Capp dipped his coffee pot into a muddy pond or puddle of water, and Ervin quickly announced he did not drink coffee, which he admitted was his "biggest lie." The full appreciation of Bond getting out of this predicament can only be envisioned by those who know how much he loved his coffee.

Ervin returned to his aunt and uncle's home late and they were relieved that one of their warnings had not occurred. Instead he had received his initiation to the mountains and interesting personalities, thus planting a seed for later germination. Unknown to Ervin at the time, he was not through with Capp Watts. Ervin lived a year with his aunt and uncle until his family moved to Douglas. Ervin went into the grocery business and Capp bought his groceries from Ervin the last six years of Capp's life. To Ervin's credit he saw more in Capp than dirt, long hair and coarse manners. The coffee and lodgings of the hermit were repulsive, but he was quite an individual and had a fantastic story if one looked deeper than his physical appearance. Capp was an important link in the development of the quarter horse and he provided the inspiration for one of the great western ballads. Ervin measured Capp and did not find him wanting. He has told Capp's story many times and put it into print. The best written account of the whole experience is Ervin's article "Ghost Riders In The Sky--Stan Jones and Capp Watts" published in **The Cochise Quarterly** (Summer/Fall 1972). Without Ervin's efforts, Capp's story would have been lost; instead we have it with a personal reflection.

Ervin decided to stay in Cochise County and good fortune smiled on him again. In the fall of 1928 he and a companion went deer hunting in Turkey Creek Canyon. They arrived in the evening and set up camp and around the fire Ervin received a lot of tips about his first deer hunt. After retiring he had a hard time going to sleep as two thoughts kept going through his mind--the next day's hunt and John Ringo the outlaw who died in the canyon many years before. The next morning the hunters separated and before long Ervin bagged

his first deer. He field dressed it and then experienced some difficulty in trying to pack the deer out. While so engaged a fellow on a horse came by and asked Ervin if he was a "greenhorn." Ervin admitted he was, and the tougher-than-nails cowboy showed him how to pack the deer out. Ervin may have had "buck fever" earlier, but a new fire burned within him as he pumped information from the cowboy Henry Smith. He wanted to know more about John Ringo's death, his grave and who the cowboy thought killed Ringo. From Smith and those to whom Smith directed him, Ervin received the stories of Turkey Creek pioneers, who, except for the killer, were the last people to see Ringo alive, heard the fatal shots, and viewed the body before the coroner's jury. The "greenhorn" with his easy manners made friends with the cowboy and the others involved in the Ringo story. The deer hunt paid a bonus and when the opportunity came, he made the most of it. Ervin has told the Ringo story countless times and put it into print in his "John Ringo's Death--Murder or Suicide?" in **The Cochise Quarterly** (Spring 1973). Forty-five years after the deer hunt, he served as a prime mover in upgrading the Ringo gravesite and erecting a historical monument at the site.

If his historical experiences had ended with these two encounters, he would have been well rewarded for coming to Cochise County. We share in the good fortune because he has shared them with others. Ervin had the opportunity to play several baseball games with the local club which had some former Chicago Black Sox players on the team. They had been banished from the Major Leagues due to the famous scandal and were in Douglas playing for pay. Right from his earliest years in Douglas Ervin ran across or sought out many of the county's pioneers. At first he just talked to them; the recording would come later. Besides those already mentioned he met Mrs. John Slaughter, John A. Rockfellow, Lillian Riggs, Bill McDonald, and a host of others. The list goes on and on--fifty-eight years' worth. Besides the people, he sought out interesting places, ranches, springs, mountains, buildings, trees and other things of note throughout the length and breadth of the county. His formal education ended after the eighth grade but his inquisitive spirit and thirst for knowledge gave learning a high and continuing priority.

In 1933 Ervin married Irma Dalton and they had three daughters, Lenore, Leona and Carol. (Irma died in 1981.) His girls proved the inspiration to move him deeper into what had only been the shadow of a hobby. Around 1960 he decided to "make some notes" of his visits with the county's pioneers for his daughters, hoping they would enjoy them someday. Previously he had taken many pictures as he believed a good photograph was worth a whole page of writing. Mrs. Opie Burgess Lea, author of a book on Bisbee, suggested he take pictures and write a short account for each. So evolved a history hobby that grew to magnificent proportions. His film processor gave back two copies so he put a picture or two on a sheet of paper, wrote his text and put it in a plastic cover. Then he made a duplicate copy. He retained one copy and gave the second

copy to the people it concerned or the ones who helped him research it. This thoughtful duplicate became a trademark of Ervin Bond.

As the hobby grew, the Bond family began giving Ervin film for Christmas, his birthday or other occasions instead of another necktie or pair of socks type presents. He kept his articles in large ring binders or albums. There came to be twenty-two albums as he divided the county from his home city by the routes used to see the county. He entitled his collection "My Five Ways to See Cochise County." They contain today more than 6,000 pictures and over 2,000 articles. This collection cost him in out-of-pocket money approximately \$20,000 with nothing counted for his time and energies. It did take time. Prior to his retirement very few, if any, weeks went by without his working on his history. During this period he would average at least twelve hours a week working on it. If he was not out in the county gathering material, he worked at home putting it together. A large number of his weekends, especially Saturdays, were spent in the field tracking down stories. Quite often he set up a half dozen appointments for his field day but seldom made it to more than two or three as the people he interviewed were never rushed. So he would have to reschedule the missed appointments. After his retirement in 1973 he had much more time to devote to his work of gathering history. It was not unusual for him to labor six or seven days a week on it; as Ervin put it, "I really got with it for a few years."

All was not fun and good times; it took determination, dedication and a love for the work to stay with it so faithfully over the years. Everyone he sought out was not pleasant, co-operative, or even considerate. Some points eluded the researcher even after his diligent efforts, requiring him to dig deeper to unravel it. The routine and disappointments took a toll, but only momentarily as he concluded he had too much in his hobby to quit. Then three years of illness sidetracked his labors somewhat.

Somewhere along the way his hobby took on the added dimension of a history of a county rather than a "few notes" for his daughters. In the late 1960s more and more people became aware of his history and he was called to ever widening circles. The historian began giving talks about his beloved county. He shared his experiences and research with school students, ladies groups, service clubs, retired people, and all that asked anywhere in the county. He was ready, willing and very able. He has spoken to the same group more than once, a compliment to the man and his story. Besides the spoken word, he began writing articles for publication thereby sharing and preserving what he had discovered over the years.

Because he had done his work well, a story finally sought him out and gave him an opportunity denied all others. Percy Bowden, an old lawman in the county and long time chief of police in Douglas, had an eventful and fascinating career. He knew of or was involved in many of the important events that

transpired in Cochise County from the late 1910s to 1970. Many tales and innuendoes arose around him and these along with his personality caused him to be extremely tight lipped about his life and experiences. Many tried unsuccessfully to get him to relate his story. Even Ervin experienced a couple of rebuffs. Initially he asked Bowden for permission to take his picture and write a short article to accompany it which would go into Ervin's albums. Percy refused and declared that hundreds had asked for his story but he would not give it. In 1971 a writer from **Life** magazine came to Douglas and offered Ervin money if he could get him an interview with Bowden. They went to Bowden's home and Percy almost threw them out when he learned what they wanted. Bowden said, "You know better than to bring someone up here, Bond; I'll never tell anyone my story!"

Two years later Percy asked Ervin to come to his home and do his life's story. The details of this and the problems encountered in getting Bowden's story are related in the introduction of Ervin's book **Percy Bowden: Born to Be a Frontier Lawman**. Percy told Ervin he had chosen him over professional writers for a couple of reasons. First, he had read Ervin's article on Capp Watts; he had known Capp and liked the way Ervin had written it. Secondly, he knew of Bond's integrity and how he would keep the story as told and not gloss it up. Bowden's ill health and death terminated the story gathering before Ervin had half as much material as he would have liked. However, he had more than anyone else had been able to get.

Ervin had earlier published a book on the history of Douglas, Arizona and followed the Bowden book with his latest--**Cochise County, Arizona, Past and Present**. The first and last books drew heavily upon his initial "My Five Ways to See Cochise County" compilation. These albums contain even more history than his published works. They are priceless. Those who have had the privilege of thumbing through its pages perceive its value, while those who study each picture and read every word truly know of the treasure. They also assure us that he learned much about the Indians and saw evidences of their being in the land. Not as much as he would have liked, but more than he envisioned while in Mississippi and thus he was not disappointed.

In 1975 Ervin was elected Historical Advisor for the Douglas Bicentennial Commission. The commemoration of the nation's birthday with its focus on the past gave Ervin the opportunity to share some of his material via the radio. His work came to receive even greater attention and he personally received a shower of tributes and honors richly deserved. This article's design is to add another laurel to his list. The author of this article has known Ervin since the late 1960s. I have had the privilege of working with him on activities for the Cochise County Historical and Archaeological Society plus going out into the county

researching history. I have seen first hand his technique, heard his talks and looked into his collections. At every opportunity I quizzed him about his experiences, especially with the pioneers of the county. How I would have liked to have been with him when he first met Capp Watts, interviewed Henry Smith, drove Viola Slaughter to her ranch, talked with John A. Rockfellow, listened to Percy Bowden and the list goes on. I tried several time to interview Percy Bowden. Shrewdly, so I thought at the time, starting with a group of photographs of Aimee Semple McPherson and asking for his comment on them, thinking I would eventually win him over and get his story. I never got into his house. I do cherish the historical experiences we enjoyed together, and appreciate Cochise County pioneers more because Ervin shared his encounters with them. Ervin is a very good friend of mine, but it is not his friend who wrote this article. The author is a colleague in the history and love for Cochise County. From that standpoint I write and make the best judgments I am capable of making out of my association with the best historian of the county.

More than any person, past or present, Ervin Bond merits the title--"Mr. Cochise County." The appellation is not given lightly but after due consideration of the man, his works and contributions to the county. We thank him for the memories--his talks, articles and books--and for all he has done and is still doing. He has searched and shared the county's past like no one else in its history, and in so doing became a part of its fabric. Without being presumptuous the author feels he is just the spokesman for numerous Cochise County residents and others who know the man and his works. The poet Sam Foss wrote: "Bring me men to match my mountains." Ervin measured his first mountain back in 1926, fifty-eight productive years later he truly matches the mountains he loves--both grand, majestic and "OURS."



Ervin L. Bond in 1975