

## **BOLD BEN BLANCHARD: The Facts, The Fiction, The Family and the Legacy**

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There is no topic associated with salt in Reno County that creates more interest than the tales of Ben Blanchard. Would salt have been discovered in Reno County without Ben? Yes, but would all of the conditions have come together to establish Hutchinson as the salt city without Ben's discovery in 1887? Possibly not.

There has been much speculation about Ben's life, his business dealings and all aspects surrounding the salt discovery in South Hutchinson. It is my hope that this article will present the facts and dispel the myths about this fascinating and larger than life character. Ben truly was an original. Among other names, he was at times referred to as "Get Rich Quick Blanchard," "Bold Ben," and "Bill-ious Ben." His escapades dominated the Terre Haute Gazette from October 1885 to February 1886 and soon after his acquittal of charges of fraud, he rebounded to develop the city of South Hutchinson on June 1, 1886. In December 1887, Ben was responsible for the first salt discovery west of the Mississippi.

### **The Facts**

Much of the factual information that we have about Ben today came from research done by Mike McCormick, who wrote articles about Ben for the Wabash Valley Profiles in 2001. Mike used articles about Ben from the Terre Haute Gazette and other papers, and also interviewed Ben's descendants.

Ben Blanchard was born in Ridge Farm, Illinois in 1857. The family soon moved to Newport, Indiana and his father died in 1860. After his father's death, Ben's mother saw to it that he and his older brother James received a classical education. Ben was educated at the Vermillion County Seminary and became a lawyer. Deciding to sell real estate instead of practice law, Ben relocated to Terre Haute, Indiana in 1882 and became known as "*...one of the most imaginative - as well as charming - con men in America.*"

According to writer McCormick, the young man drew lots of attention in the Terre Haute Gazette. "In July 1882, after opening his first office in Terre Haute, Ben began placing anonymous daily block advertisements in the Terre Haute Express declaring in large bold type: 'WHAT'S NEXT?' The nameless announcement raised reader's curiosity. On July 22, 1882, 'WHAT'S NEXT?' was answered with a large ad announcing 'Ben Blanchard Real Estate Agency. Lands Bought and Sold on Commission.' Ben was only 25 years old, but no one else matched the scope of his advertising, which he did profusely, offering land throughout the mid-west, Texas and Kansas. He was the only realtor to place a full-page ad in the 1883 city directory, listing satellite offices in Newport and Hutchinson, Kansas."

Ben married his first wife, Martha "Mattie," in 1881 at the age of 24. In 1884 she died of consumption (tuberculosis.) Ben's mother, Vesta and sister, Alma, moved to Terre Haute to take care of Ben and Mattie's two children. Ben then focused his attention on promoting land in Kansas close to Garden City in Finney County and Hutchinson.

In those days the most luxurious way to travel was by private rail car. Ben hired the Pullman Car Company to construct what he described as a "Palace on Wheels" which he named, Le Paradis. He also used custom made elegant Pullman cars to entertain and impress wealthy capitalists to his ventures. On September 16, 1885, Ben first arrived in Kansas in the Paradis, purchased from the Pullman Co. for \$25,000, which carried a \$1,000 piano. He brought a big party of land buyers who purchased Reno County land as reported in The Hutchinson News, April 1931.

From October 1885 to February 1886, Ben was involved in legal battles in Terre Haute and his story received much coverage in the Terre Haute Gazette and New York Times. Ben's wheeling and dealing investment practices finally caught up with him and several warrants were issued for his arrest. He became the focus of scandal and speculation in Terre Haute, New York and even Chicago and he was named defendant in several civil cases for fraud, mostly involving investments in Finney County, Kansas. Below are excerpts from the Terre Haute Gazette chronicling the surprising disappearance of Ben, his reappearance, arrest and trial.

## BEN BLANCHARD'S BIG SCHEMES COME TO AN END.

The Bold Real Estate Operator Dodging the Law Officers and Leaving Heavy Debts Behind Him.

*"...the collapse finally came, Blanchard's debts in Terre Haute are estimated at \$200,000 and in Chicago at \$100,000. He has been evading the officers of the law since Friday morning. How Blanchard managed to let so much money pass through the fingers is a mystery to many people. He would take \$500 from one man for investment and \$600 from another, give the five-hundred dollar man \$550 and spend the remainder in lavish living. The five-hundred dollar man would come again and his \$500 would go to pay a four-hundred dollar man \$450."*

(The New York Times October 19, 1885 "A Terre Haute Sensation")

He disappeared allegedly disguised as a woman only to show up again in Terra Haute on Christmas Eve, as confident and cheerful as ever, thus gaining the moniker "Bold Ben." I believe that this is where the Hutchinson arrival legend originated. The story is below:

IN PETTICOATS Bold Benny Blanchard was here all day Saturday

And Left on the Eleven o'clock C. & E. L. Train Clad in Skirts

*Blanchard. Some curious Facts about His Flight: After all, Ben Blanchard did not leave town Saturday morning, but was here or in this vicinity secreted and probably read in the Gazette the account of his escape. The following story of his escape is quite authenticated and shows that Ben's fondness for petticoats hung to him to the last. Mr. Courtwright, night operator for the C. & E. L. whose office is in the yard north of the city, says that on Saturday night when the north bound 11:00 train stopped in front of his office to register that his attention was called by the express agent and operator at Hillsdale who happened to be down here to a man and woman standing near the water tank. They both thought the parties, who were rough looking, intended to steal a ride and the train's brakeman was put onto them. The Hillsdale man got on the train also and when he headed home telegraphed back to Mr. Courtwright that the person dressed as a female was Blanchard and that he had taken off his skirts and thrown them off the train.*

(Terre Haute Gazette, Monday, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1885)

The next day's story debunked the previous one.

## BOLD BAD BEN

His Brother Tells What He Knows of the Erratic Ben. He tried to Dissuade Him From the Purchase of Le Paradis, the Palace Car.

*It seems a pity to spoil the story that Blanchard went away in petticoats and that other story of his discovery lying on the front platform by a brakeman but if what C. & E. L. Baggage man says is true, they must both go. He boarded the train at the crossing and went right into the baggage car, apologizing and saying that he intended to get in the sleeper but it stopped too far down. He stayed in the baggage car for several stops and then got off the train. He was said to be very cheerful and when someone asked him how business was, he said "Booming."*

(Terre Haute Gazette, Tuesday, October 20<sup>th</sup> 1885)

BILLIOUS BEN Blanchard Comes Back and Gives Himself Up

Appears in Answer to the Charge of Embezzlement. He said He Promised to Come Back in Sixty Days but Couldn't quite make it.

(Terre Haute Gazette, December 24, 1885)

The Terre Haute Gazette continued to follow Ben's legal difficulties throughout the end of 1885 through his final acquittal in February 1886. The Gazette reported on February 27,

*ACQUITTED The Jury finds Blanchard Not Guilty.*

*After a Deliberation of an Hour and a Half. Scene in the court Room When the Verdict Was Returned...A Black Eye For the State.*

The jury came to a decision after 10 minutes. This was the one case out of four filed that the State had felt had the best chance of conviction.

In May 1886, Ben formed the Inter-State Investment Company with \$100,000 capital to buy 280 acres across the Arkansas River from Hutchinson and platted South Hutchinson that he touted as "The fastest growing town in the west." On June 1, 1886 the company obtained a state charter for South Hutchinson, Kansas. During the first six months of the town's existence, the company sold over \$160,000 worth of lots and it became necessary to plat several additions.

Ben married his second wife, Avis in February 1887, and in August of that year, Ben began drilling for oil near South Hutchinson. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, he struck a huge rock salt strata which initiated Reno County's "Salt Boom of 1888." He was only 30 years old.

In 1901, while working for the American Copper Company, Ben founded the town of Blanchard, Arizona and in 1906, he platted Monarch, Nevada. In September 1906, "Get Rich Quick" Blanchard disappeared from newly platted Monarch, allegedly taking with him \$45,000 from the sale of 2,400 lots. Today both are ghost towns.

From 1910 to 1920, Ben lived in London where he managed the British International Bank. He was also a financial advisor to the financier J. P. Morgan. Howard Blanchard described his grandfather's life in London and later life to Michael McCormick in 2001.

*"For a period of time, Ben and Avis were housed at Buckingham Palace. Mementoes including a silver tea set and handmade lace are family heirlooms, gifts from the King and Queen. After moving back to the States, Ben lost his wealth in the 1929 stock market crash. He became a recluse, caring for a herd of goats in the Chesapeake Valley."*

Howard Blanchard recalls that in 1935, he and his parents visited Ben at his home near the Chesapeake Bay. There was no flooring, water, electricity, doors or windows. *"He had a small herd of goats with a few kids that he took care of. When we got back home, I asked dad what all the black thread was on Granddad's stomach. Dad said that Granddad often had hernias that broke through the skin and he just pushed the intestines back inside and sowed up the opening with gut."* Eventually brought back to Terre Haute by his son Clyde, Ben died March 24, 1942. He is buried with his first wife and their two children at Woodlawn Cemetery.

## **The Fiction**

There have been many legends and stories told of Ben Blanchard's exploits. Below are some of the most pervasive.

**Myth #1:** One popular local legend states that Ben arrived in Hutchinson by rail, wearing crinolines while being pursued on the same train by a detective from Terre Haute in 1886. Lore has it that the detective helped "a lady," actually Ben in disguise, off of the train. This story was told in a history written and recited by Janice Brown at the 1986 South Hutchinson Centennial Celebration: *"A strange appearing creature in female garb rode the Sante Fe into Hutchinson, Kansas, and was assisted off the train by a detective. The detective was seeking Ben Blanchard. After the detective departed, Blanchard stepped out of the petticoats which had so effectively disguised him from the officer and emerged as his true self, a real estate promoter from Terre Haute, Indiana."*

My research convinces me that this story is false. The story originated in Terre Haute in October 1885 when Ben was alluding capture on fraud charges. While this deception was originally reported in the Terre Haute Gazette, it was recanted the following day. The Gazette account can be read previously in this article. Far from arriving as a fugitive, Ben first arrived in Hutchinson on September 16, 1885, on the luxurious Pullman "Paradiso" railroad car; along with him came a large party of investors that purchased Reno County land.

**Myth #2:** One of the most frequently told stories is that in the midst of drilling for oil, Ben poured a barrel of oil into the hole so that he could convince investors that he had discovered oil. Although several stories have circulated surrounding Ben's actions while exploring for oil, gas or coal, I could find no concrete evidence confirming this action. Like all good tales, the truth of this tale may have to remain shrouded in a bit of a mystery.

**Myth #3:** Another frequently told story is that either Ben never realized that he had discovered salt or that he left town either under duress because of business deals gone bad and that he never received recognition or profit from the salt discovery.

I think that I can debunk all of these myths. For this, I will reference a fascinating book, "A Trip to the Rockies, by Major B. R. Corwin." This book is a first person account of a two-week excursion from Brooklyn, New York on Ben Blanchard's Pullman Palace, the "Dalmatia." This trip occurred in 1889, two years after the salt discovery while Ben was President of the Empire Loan and Trust Company of Hutchinson, Kansas. He had outfitted the seventy-foot Pullman car to accommodate bankers, investors and their wives (a total of twenty-two people) for a trip across the county to a banking convention in Kansas City. From there the group was to tour Kansas and go on to Colorado. This book clearly shows that Ben continued to work and find investors for at least two years after the salt discovery and was lauded for this. The manuscript gives a fascinating look into the lives of business tycoons in the late 1800s. Excerpts from the book are below:

*"The car was decorated with silk flags and flowers and every possible provision was made for not only the comfort but royal entertainment of the tourists. An excellent library, beautiful portfolios, dainty note-books bound in Russian leather, checkers, chess, dominoes and other games and in fact every thing that could possibly be thought of to fan the leaden wings of time were placed at the disposal of the party...One of the sets of dominoes that were in the car was made of genuine shell pearl and is the costliest set in the county."*

The group visited Topeka, Emporia, Newton and Hutchinson where a large group of dignitaries met them, including E. L. Meyer, Cashier of First National Bank.

*"After a night at the Brunswick Hotel, guests boarded elegant carriages and set off to the salt works (Riverside Salt Works) where the pure white salt was admired by all...Standing by the side of one of the leading bank presidents of Hutchinson, at one of the great salt wells, one of our party, not knowing whose energy and enterprise discovered and developed the great industry, made the remark: 'I should be willing to take off my hat to the man who first struck salt here.' The bank President replied: Well, you may take off your hat to Mr. Blanchard, the President of the Empire Loan and Trust Company."*

The group was driven past all 12 of the salt works, the ice factory, toured several farms and visited the Hutchinson Daily News. When interviewed about their trip to Hutchinson, Edward Merritt, Esq., President of Long Island Loan and Trust Company said: *"We have been delighted and surprised at the wonderful development of the State of Kansas. The growth and progress of Hutchinson are marvelous. The discovery by Mr. Blanchard of the salt fields underlying this section of the country must certainly add largely to the wealth of the city and its inhabitants."* After returning home, the party selected a beautiful present of sterling silverware, inscribed as follows: *To Mrs. Ben Blanchard, from the Dalmatia Party, Sept. 23, 1889."*

From these accounts, it seems clear that Bold Ben really had received some recognition during his lifetime for his salt discovery and perhaps, in some small ways, enjoyed some of the profit.

## **The Family**

In June 2010, Karen Peters from Wichita Falls, Texas called and talked to KUSM staff member Tonya Gehring. Karen said that she had heard about KUSM and wanted to visit. She then shared that she was the great - great granddaughter of Ben Blanchard. Tonya immediately engaged her in conversation and even read her the script that the docents use when telling Ben's story to guests. Karen booked a tour on June 26<sup>th</sup> for herself, her son Mathew and her mother, Terri Utz. Terri's father, Howard Blanchard was a major contact of Michael McCormick (writer for the Wabash Valley Profiles) and actually knew his grandfather Ben.

By contacting South Hutchinson officials, we helped arrange a wonderful reception for the three generations of Blanchards that included a visit to the Salt Discovery Site, a tour of South Hutchinson and lunch with invited city and county officials. In the afternoon, the family received a tour of Underground Vaults & Storage, a trip into the Hutchinson Salt Mine and a VIP tour of the salt museum. They were surprised and delighted by the warmth and excitement surrounding their visit. We were thrilled with the Ben Blanchard artifacts that they brought to donate to the Reno County Historical Society. These included an original copy of the book "A Trip to the Rockies," pictures of Ben at different stages of life as well as his family members, a copy of the Blanchard Coat of Arms, and a passport from the time that Ben was in London. Terri also told family stories and was able to fill in some gaps in Ben's life. Of particular interest was the news that her grandfather Clyde was actually born to Ben and Avis in Hutchinson in 1888, after the salt discovery. Terri related that Ben was generally estranged from his children and that although she knew Clyde, he never spoke of Ben. Terri's father, Howard, spent time with Ben as a child visiting his mining sites in Arizona and Nevada.

## **The Legacy**

Although small of stature, Ben Blanchard was larger than life. With his charismatic personality, Ben charmed his way into investors' pocket books and many a young ladies hearts. He reflected the entrepreneurial and often cavalier spirit that emerged during the booming times that were raging across the land as the population raced west across the nation. Ben has left his indelible mark on Reno County for many generations to come. As that Hutchinson bank President suggested in 1889, "You may take off your hat to Mr. Blanchard...."

## **PHOTO CAPTIONS**

2010.03.01 – Photo of Ben's family from left to right: Avis, Ben, Beryl, "Grandmother Vesta Blanchard," Clyde, Ralph & Nellie. Nellie & Ralph were from Ben's first marriage to Mattie; Beryl & Clyde were from Ben's second marriage to Avis. Ca 1900.

2010.03.02 – Copy of the Blanchard family crest

2010.03.03 – Vesta Blanchard, Ben's mother

2010.03.04 – Ben at his office in London while general manager of the British International Bank, ca. 1916

2010.03.05 – 1887 marriage photo of Ben.

2010.03.06 – 1887 marriage photo of 2<sup>nd</sup> wife, Avis Isley

2010.03.07 – 1887 marriage photo of Ben & Avis (Isley) Blanchard

2010.03.08 – Copy of a photo of Clyde & Howard Blanchard standing behind their father Ben (and goat!) near Chesapeake Bay

2010.03.09 – Front cover of the book, "A Trip to the Rockies" by Major B. R. Corwin, 1889

From 2010.03.09 – Illustration of the Riverside Salt Works, Hutchinson, Kansas printed in the book, “A Trip to the Rockies” and visited by the group of investment bankers organized by Ben Blanchard.

2010.03.10 – (11 page identity book for Ben Blanchard allowing him to work in London) Front cover shows a July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1916 issuance date to Ben at Cannon Row Metropolitan Police Division, London.

Pages 2 & 3 show Ben’s birth date as October 24, 1857 and as being the General Manager for the British International Bank

Pages 4 & 5 show Ben as being 5’4 ½” tall, with a medium build and light brown hair “turning grey” and having a small mole on his chin

Blanchard Ad Hutchinson News 9/29/1887 – Ben advertises for main street lots and residential lots in South Hutchinson early on in its development.

Blanchard Ad Terra Haute Gazette 7/22/1882 – Ben teases his reader with the question of ‘What’s Next?’ in his early ad for real estate in Indiana.