

Museum News: "I am a poor man and need money!"

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

These were the words of Tom "Black Jack" Ketchum as he held up the train near Lozier, Texas, on May 10, 1897, some fifty miles east of Sanderson.

When one thinks of train robbers in Terrell County, Ben Kirkpatrick and Ole Hobek and their infamous robbery at Baxter Curve, not far from Sanderson, quickly spring to mind. It ended in gruesome death for the perpetrators and public display of the carnage at the Sanderson GH&SA Depot, propped against a baggage cart. That iconic photo can be found in western anthologies and across the internet.

Despite claims to the contrary, theirs was not the last train robbery in Texas, nor was it the only one in and around Terrell County. The last train robbery in Texas occurred at Zilcher Park in Austin, Texas, in 1980, when two inebriated felons held up the miniature train ride and relieved patrons of their wallets and jewelry. They were caught almost immediately.

Actually, there were numerous train robberies near Sanderson. Some were successful, and some ended tragically for the robbers and caused great anxiety for the hapless train crews and passengers.

The first train robbery in Texas occurred at Allen, Texas, on February 22, 1878, committed by Sam Bass. He thought robbing a train might be more lucrative than robbing stagecoaches. He had such a good haul that he robbed three more, but, a turncoat in his own gang sold him out and he was ambushed and killed in a shootout in Round Rock, Texas, in July, 1878. Robbing trains became very popular throughout the United States, but, innovations in security by Wells Fargo and others made it increasingly hard for robbers to make a good living. Except for some high profile cases in England in the 1970s and '80s, the practice of armed robberies on railroads in the U. S. had practically disappeared by the mid-1910s. Today, the trend is toward hijacking boxcar-loads of merchandise.

One of the earliest train robberies in the Terrell County area occurred in August of 1889. A westbound passenger train was held up near Pumpville by three robbers, Wellington, Three-fingered Jack, and Lang Staff. All were Big Bend residents. When Texas Rangers tried to take the miscreants into custody, one robber was killed by a co-conspirator and the remaining two were tried and convicted. One received a life sentence in state penitentiary, but the other, gravely ill with "consumption" (tuberculosis) and contemptuously dubbed a "weakling" by the local press, was released and died very soon afterwards.

A westbound GH&SA passenger train was robbed on December 20, 1896, near Cow Creek, just a mile west of Comstock, Texas. Bud Newman, Frank Gobble, Alex Purviance and Rollie Shackelford boarded the train, and, after furious gunfire, captured the train crew and tied them up. They got some money, but, were unable to open a safe that was equipped with a timer lock. The robbers rode off with next to nothing, and the train continued on.

When word reached Val Verde Sheriff W.H. Jones, a posse was formed that included Thalys Cook and several other Texas Rangers. Ranger Cook, an expert tracker, picked up the trail quickly, and by December 27, the four men were in custody. In a humorous note, the only thing taken besides the little money available was a package from the Express car which turned out to be Rollie Shackelford's own pocket watch, which was being returned from a repair shop in San Antonio. Shackelford was well-known in the area, and as one local comic quipped, all he got was his own pocket watch and five years in the pen.

Ranger Cook and Captain Hughes' Ranger Company D stopped a robbery before it could happen, in the fall of 1896. Word had reached the railroad of an impending train robbery at Altuda, west of Sanderson in Brewster County, by Art and Jubel Friar and Ease Bixler. The rangers picked up their trail, leading from the Glass Mountains north of Marathon, Texas, to a cow camp at Nogalitos Pass. In the ensuing battle, the Friar brothers were killed and Bixler took off. He was caught a few days later, choosing wisely not to engage the crack-shot rangers in gunfire.

Black Jack Ketchum's robbery in 1897 took place west of Lozier, Texas, on a now-abandoned section of railroad. Tom Ketchum, who hailed from San Saba County, Texas, was once misidentified as "Black Jack Christian," a notorious outlaw at the time. The name stuck and he became more famous than his namesake.

Ketchum and one man boarded the train at Lozier station, while another waited with horses and dynamite at the first road-cut west of the station. Crawling over the coal pile in the tender, Ketchum and his man forced the engineer and fireman to stop the train, then sent them back to the baggage car. The Railway Express Messenger wouldn't let them in, so, Ketchum fired a shot through the door, angering the Messenger's bulldog. The bulldog growled and barked and paced the baggage car.

Having had enough, Ketchum threatened to kill the engineer. Seeing the seriousness of the situation, the Messenger chained his dog and let Ketchum in.

Cursing and using much abusive language, Ketchum demanded that the Messenger open the two Wells Fargo safes. "I am a poor man and need money!" he exclaimed. The Messenger could not open the large safe because it was on a timer, so Ketchum placed the smaller safe on top of the larger and dynamited both to open them up. The blast blew the smaller safe through the roof and wrecked the baggage car. Ketchum and his man gathered up about \$6,000 in loot, mostly Mexican silver, and disappeared into the darkness. Ketchum and his men did not bother with the mail and the passengers were not robbed. The passengers didn't know what was happening until the explosion was heard. Ironically, the Messenger gathered up an additional \$30,000 that the robbers missed when it fell through the floor boards after the explosion.

When the train got to the next station, the Texas Rangers were summoned to the site of the robbery. They spent several days searching for the robbers, but never caught them or retrieved the missing money. This was one of the few robberies that went unresolved.

Black Jack Ketchum, however, was not to escape the long arm of the law. He met his end after holding up a Santa Fe passenger train at Folsom, NM, getting captured and wounded in the process. The conductor shot Ketchum with a shotgun, blowing away most of his arm.

Ketchum was tried, sentenced and hung on April 26, 1901, at Clayton, NM, the only time a train robber was executed for “felonious assault on a railroad.” That judgment was rendered unconstitutional after Ketchum was put to death.

The hanging, the first and only in Union County, NM, was botched. The novice hangman made the rope too long, and when the trapdoor was sprung, Ketchum’s body plummeted to the ground, separating the head, cloaked in a black hood, and sent it flying into the pit beneath the scaffold. The head was stitched back on for public viewing, but not before a lurid postcard photo was made.

And, what were Black Jack Ketchum’s last words? "Good-bye. Please dig my grave very deep. All right; hurry up."

Perhaps a more fitting answer would have been as Cherokee Bill Goldsby gave to that same question: “Hell, no, I came here to die, not to make a speech.”

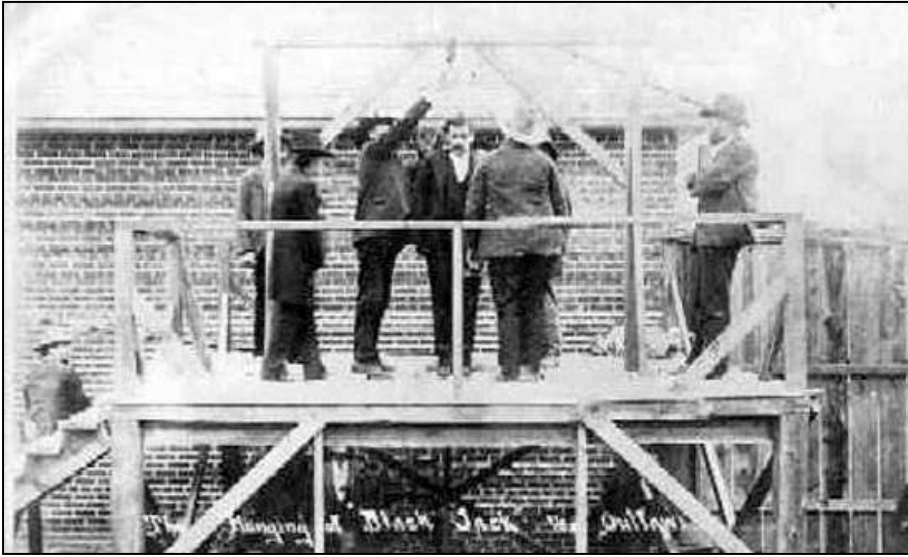


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