Museum News: Wanted, Dead or Alive!

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The January, 2014, issue of the Terrell County Memorial Museum News featured a first-hand account of the so-called "Baxter Curve Train Robbery." That was the robbery that produced the infamous photo of two dead train robbers at the Sanderson, Texas, GH&SA train station, surrounded by curious onlookers, including hero David Trousdale himself, directly behind Ben Kilpatrick, dead man on the left.

Determining who the robbers were was not an easy task in a day when modern technology was limited to telephones and telegraphs.

Although the first crime solved by use of fingerprints took place in Argentina in 1893, the system was still in its infancy at the time of the 1912 robbery. A consolidated, nation-wide database of criminal fingerprints was not established until the 1920s, so, identifying the two cadavers was not easy.

Still, there were procedures available, and use of photographs was a widely accepted method of identification.

When the train carrying the dead robbers arrived at the Sanderson station, express messenger David Trousdale, hero of this saga, calmly rolled a baggage cart up to the express car and slid the bodies out the door onto the cart, just as he would any other express delivery. The El Paso Herald reporter remarked on Dave Trousdale's cool demeanor at the Sanderson depot: "He was not at all excited over his part in the holdup and acted as if he was delivering express matter instead of dead robbers at the Sanderson station."

Once free of the express car the cart and its cargo was rolled over to the southwest corner of the depot and the two dead robbers "tilted" off the cart and stood upright, leaning against the cart. No doubt rigor mortis (stiffening of a dead body in the first three or four hours after death) simplified the act of display, since the living participants in the photo do not seem to be having trouble holding the bodies upright.

A photographer by the name of Nogle took the photos, and reportedly, there is one taken from farther back that shows the whole area.

The next step was to have the photos processed and then distributed to local law enforcement to see if any-one could identify them. If the robbers were relatively unknown, proper identification could take many days.

However, good old detective work can solve a case, as well. Based on the brands on the robbers' horses found at the scene, officers were led to a ranch near Sheffield, which, as it turns out, belonged to the tall robber Ben Kilpatrick's relative.

In addition, a telegram was sent from Sanderson to a man named Kilpatrick in Sheffield, saying, in part, " ... your brother, B. was killed here this morning."

It is also interesting to note how thoroughly the men were examined after their deaths. Sent along with the photos of their bodies were these descriptions:

"First man: complexion dark, hair brown, height six feet and one-half inches, weight 180 pounds, wears No.8 button shoes and No. 7 1/4 hat; has two gold upper teeth and two capped across end, all uppers and on left side; has vaccination mark on left arm and also has scar between elbow and wrist, about an inch long on same arm, age 30 years.

"Second man: complexion light, hair light brown, slightly bald over forehead, height five feet, nine inches, weight about 150 pounds, wears No.6 1/2 shoes and No.7 hat; has mole on left side one inch from backbone, below shoulder blade, has vaccination scar on left arm and small scar on right corner of mouth, extending slightly down, one upper tooth out on right side, laundry initialed H. C. B., age about 40 or 45 years."

Ole Beck, the second man, was a man of a thousand aliases. Although he often went by Ed Welch, his real name, supposedly, was H. O. Beck. However, from his laundry initials, we see his middle name began with a "C." Does that throw into contention his real name? Even a hundred years later not all the questions have been answered.

Courtesy Photo

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