

Museum News: The Cimarron Kid

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No, we are not going to discuss the 1952 Audie Murphy movie, an above-average horse opera and one of his earliest films after his autobiographical "To Hell and Back." Murphy, at 21, became the most decorated U.S. soldier in World War II, and his first movie told that story.

No, we are going to talk about the "real" Cimarron Kid, who had a connection with Sanderson and Terrell County.

Robert Longabaugh was one of those "braggy" guys, always telling improbable tales and boring people with his youthful exploits and brushes with the law. One of his biggest stories was a boast that he was the son of Harry Longabaugh, the Sundance Kid, and that he was a pallbearer at Robert Leroy Parker's (aka Butch Cassidy) funeral in 1937. He also claimed that his father did not die until 1967.

The only problem with this story is that historians generally agree that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid died in Bolivia in a shootout with government troops in 1909.

Of course, when Hollywood got hold of the story, it was highly fictionalized in order to dramatize the narrative and sell movie tickets. The truth of the story was lost in a cloud of hype and melodrama.

According to Longabaugh, he was born from a love affair between Harry Longabaugh and Annie Marie Thayne in 1901. He claims that she was a school teacher in Marion, Oregon, and was a half-sister to the more famous Etta Place, who took up with Longabaugh after his mother became pregnant. His mother's name was lost to history and only Etta was known as Longabaugh's paramour. Thayne raised the young Longabaugh and gave him his father's name, even though Harry was Etta's man and there was no benefit of marriage license.

The young Longabaugh led a hard life, spending time in and out of jail. Early in that life of crime, he said that at the age of 11 in 1912 he fell in with two train robbers in Texas, Ben Kilpatrick and Ole Hobek, and became one of their gang. He did not say how many robberies he participated in with them, but that his life of crime took a turn for the worse when the two bandits were killed by a Wells Fargo Agent on board the train at a little known area on the GH&SA railroad known as Baxter's Curve in Terrell County, Texas, just eight miles east of the town of Sanderson. When they did not return to the place where he was left watching the horses, he took off for parts unknown, as he said, "a very scared little boy." That part of the story is borne by physical evidence at the scene that someone had been holding horses at trackside near the robbery. But there is no solid evidence that this person was Harry Longabaugh, the self-named "Cimarron Kid."

According to Longabaugh he fell in with another gang and robbed a bank. Two of the robbers were killed in the attempt, and he and the third robber split the take. The law eventually caught up with him and he spent time in prison, bragging about his exploits and his supposed ancestry to anyone who would listen.

Longabaugh's most sensational claim was that the Sundance Kid and Butch Cassidy did not die in Bolivia, but had escaped the Bolivian troops sent to catch them and returned to the US to live out their lives here. Robert said that Cassidy died in 1937 and that he served as a pallbearer at his funeral, and that his father, the Sundance Kid, survived until 1967.

After his father's death, Longabaugh fell heir to his father's maps, which he claimed showed the hiding places of loot taken in several robberies, and that he had used one map to recover \$6000. He wanted to retrieve \$300,000 in gold that Sundance and Cassidy had buried from another robbery, but he said that Treasury Agents watched him like



Famous photo of The Wild Bunch, taken in Fort Worth in 1901. Seated are the Sundance Kid - Harry Longabaugh, the Tall Texan - Ben Kilpatrick; and Butch Cassidy - Robert Leroy Parker. Standing is Will Carver and Kid Curry - Harvey Logan.

a hawk and he couldn't risk losing it to them. He even offered to dig up the gold and give it to Viet Nam veterans, but he didn't trust the government to uphold their end of the deal. And so, he faded into history.

Harry Longabaugh was quite a storyteller. His last years were spent in a hotel in Missoula, Montana, where he regaled his fellow residents with tales of his father and Butch Cassidy. Unfortunately, his stories were impossible to corroborate with researchers and were discounted as the wild ravings and inventive clap-trap of a man, desperate for attention.

In December, 1972, at the age of 71, Harry Longabaugh lost his life when the hotel caught fire. Everything he owned was burned, including the map to the \$300,000 in gold bullion. He left behind a very hazy tale of hear-say exploits with conflicting dates and improbable events. He had been writing a book about the true story of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, but even that burned in the fire. Nothing was left, not even his dream of proving his kinship to the Sundance Kid. It was a sad end for The Cimarron Kid.