

Terrell County Memorial January, 2014 Sanderson, Texas Museum News

BRAIN-BESPATTERED EXPRESS CAR, IN WHICH ROBBERS MET DEATH, IS HERE

**Express Messenger, Hero of the G. H. Holdup, Remains at Sanderson, However, For the Inquest—Passengers and Trainmen Pay Tribute to His Bravery
Two Messengers in Car at Time of Holdup.**

Photo: Terrell County Memorial Museum

A brain spattered mallet, a blood covered corner of an express car and two bullet holes in the end door of the car were the gruesome reminders of the heroic work done by express messenger David Trousdale when train robbers held up the Sunset limited train No. 9 near Eldridge, Wednesday morning.

So blares the lurid headline from the *El Paso Herald* for March 14, 1912, scarcely a day after the bloody and infamous Baxter Curve Train Robbery. This newspaper account contains one of the earliest published descriptions of the event from an actual eyewitness, Mr. J. K. Reagen, an employee of the Wells Fargo Express Agency who worked with hero David Trousdale in the express car on that fateful night.

Reagen, a rather large man from Beaumont, Texas, had worked with Trousdale for some time, and his account was given while Trousdale was still in Sanderson giving testimony for the coroner's inquest.

Hardly a person with even a passing interest in western lore is not familiar

with the story of the two star-crossed felons who met a grisly end at the hands of the heroic hostage David Trousdale.

The iconic photo of two dead, would-be train robbers propped up against a baggage cart by a group of grim-faced bystanders at the Sanderson, Texas, G.H.& S.A. Railway depot is often included in western anthologies, histories, articles and websites. The photo can be purchased on eBay and from other vendors, and is probably more familiar than the event itself.

The tale has been dissected, discussed and chronicled for years. Reams of paper have been expended telling the story, and research has turned up an unimaginable amount of detail on the lives of the miscreants. A quick search of the internet reveals tens, if not hundreds of articles on the subject. But, there is much misinformation about the event, especially in early articles on the robbery.

The value of this newspaper article is that it was written from a first-hand account, from someone who actually saw



Photo: Terrell County Memorial Museum

sounds like a large group of men, but in reality, these were some of the many aliases for one man who usually went by Ole Hobek, but whose real name was H. O. Beck.

Not much is known about Hobek, but, he had a long history of misdeeds. There is no proof that he was connected with the Butch Cassidy gang or the Black Jack Ketchums, and as far as is known, Hobek did not participate in a train robbery until after his release from Atlanta in 1907.

Becoming friends at Atlanta, Hobek and Kilpatrick hatched a plan to commit robberies upon their release. There is some evidence, though circumstantial, that they participated in at least two train robberies near Memphis, Tennessee, and in a few bank holdups elsewhere in 1911 and early 1912.

Eventually, they ended up in Sheffield, Texas, north of the Sanderson area, where Kilpatrick had family. It was from here that they

staged their last robbery.

On the night of March 12, 1912, Kilpatrick and Hobek, (along with at least one accomplice down the line, reportedly a kid who only held the horses) successfully boarded the engine at Dryden, Texas and some ten miles east of Sanderson at a place called Baxter's Curve, made the engineer stop the train. The porter was forced to uncouple the passenger cars from the train, and the engine, baggage car and mail car moved on ahead, some two miles. Railroad officials put the holdup at 12:05 a.m., March 13.

Picking up the account from Reagen's point of view, two men with rifles, sporting black cloths over their heads, forced him, Dave Trousdale and the mail clerk, a Mr. Banks, out of their cars and back to the engine at gunpoint. They rode in the engine to the spot of the robbery, then disembarked and moved back to the mail

the events unfold and play out to their gory end. Of course, eyewitness accounts can be terribly skewed.

For someone who might have been on another planet for the last fifty years, the backstory goes like this.

Ben Kilpatrick and Ole Hobek (we'll use that name, but he had dozens of aliases) were career criminals who met while in the federal penitentiary at Atlanta. Both had a history of petty crime, grand larceny and generally bad behavior.

Kilpatrick had run with Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and was pictured in a classic photo of their gang sitting for a portrait in Fort Worth. He had a history of robbing trains and hailed from Knickerbocker, Texas near San Angelo.

Old Beck, Ed Walsh, Ed Welsh, Ed Welch, Ed Beck, Ed Becker, Nick Grider, Ole Beck, Ole Becker, Ole Oldbeck, Mr. Magner, Mr. Flood and Mr. Benson

car with the shorter of the two robbers.

This robber began to handle the hostages roughly, jabbing them sharply with his rifle and talking to them in a nasty, demeaning way. Trousdale's family maintains that the robber's actions angered him. They think he might not have been so daring if he had been treated better.

Once at the mail car, they were directed to slit open the mail sacks so the robber could rifle through the mail for valuables.

At this point they were forced to move back into the express car to plunder its contents. However, the robber foolishly led the way, with Trousdale and Reagen following.

Once inside the car Trousdale spotted the mallet used to break up ice for the shipment of oysters, and stealthily stowed it in his jacket. According to Reagen, when Trousdale got the chance, he wacked Hobek over the head once, causing

the man to stagger, then proceeded to hit him again and again until his brains spilled onto the floor of the car.

Reagan's account differs slightly from Trousdale's own statement. Trousdale claimed he only hit the man three times. According to Reagen, "The first blow, he hit the man and he staggered to the floor and tried to get up, but Trousdale was too quick for him and was on top of him and hammering away at his head with the mallet. He must have hit him a dozen times." Better safe than sorry!

Trousdale picked up Hobek's rifle and Reagen got his own gun, which he



Photo: NOLA

David A. Trousdale

kept in the car for protection. Together they waited in the darkness for an hour for Kilpatrick to return to the car.

Here, again, the versions differ. Trousdale said that Kilpatrick came to the door and called out, "Frank! Frank! Frank?" Then, he waited about five minutes. Finally, he came into the car, and when Trousdale saw him stick his head out from behind a trunk, he fired one shot, a kill shot.

According to Reagen, "We sat there for more than an hour waiting for the man to come. I was on a row of boxes higher up than Trousdale, who was near the door in

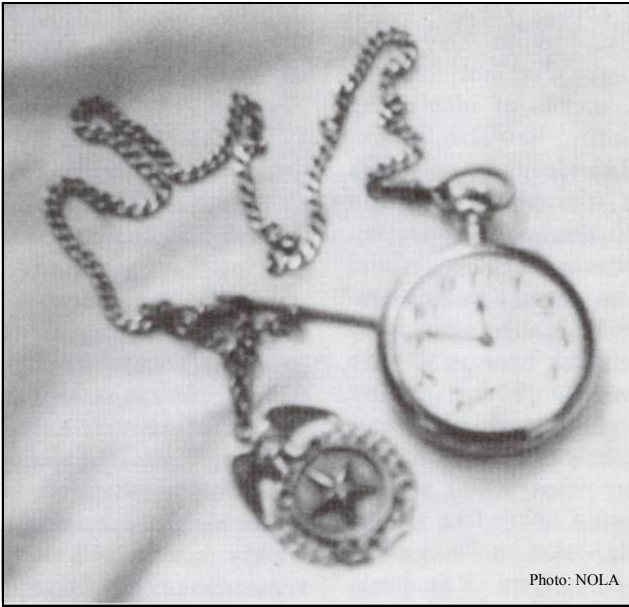


Photo: NOLA

Texas from the grateful passengers. This was quite generous, considering that the going rate for dead train robbers was \$300 per head.

There were several ironies with this failed robbery. The Winchester rifle that Trousdale confiscated from the dead Hobek was new and had never been used. The only time it was fired was to dispatch Kilpatrick.

Another irony was the similarity of this robbery to one in 1887 that took place in El Paso. In that robbery, the Wells Fargo messenger was named "Windy" Smith, and he used his six-shooter

to kill the first robber, who was also named Smith.

Then, Windy Smith retrieved his shotgun and blew away the second robber, whose name was Maher. For his day's work he received gifts totaling in excess of \$2000.

As an added bonus, Trousdale was offered \$500 per week to go on tour as a vaudeville act to tell his story of the hold-up. His family said he also received some very lucrative play and film offers. He did not take the offers, however, and eventually retired from Wells Fargo/Railway Express Agency with 43 years of service.

Finally, the 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."



References

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