



Museum News

"I am a poor man and need money!"

Train robberies on the GH&SA

Such 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, the mind quickly goes to the much celebrated Ben Kirkpatrick and Ole Hobek and their infamous robbery gone wrong at Baxter Curve, not far from Sanderson. It ended in grie-

photo can be found in western anthologies and old west websites throughout the world.

It is sad that one of Sanderson's claims to fame is a botched robbery attempt and two bodies in one grave at Cedar Grove. And despite claims to the contrary, it 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.)

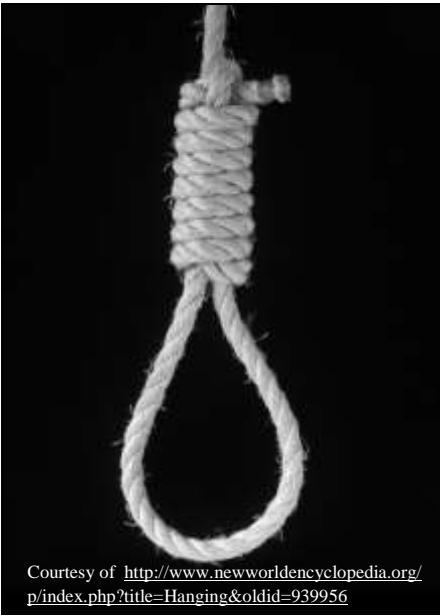
Actually, there were numerous train robberies near Sanderson. Some were successful, and some ended tragically, both for the robbers and for hapless train crews and passengers.

The first train robbery in Texas was at Allen, Texas, February 22, 1878, by Sam Bass. He had held up stage coaches and thought a train might be more lucrative. He made such a good



Ice mallet that killed Ben Kilpatrick
Courtesy of National Museum of Crime and Punishment Washington, DC

some death for the perpetrators and public display of the carnage at the Sanderson GH&SA Depot, propped against a baggage cart. That iconic



Courtesy of <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Hanging&oldid=939956>

haul that he robbed three more, but his crime spree was cut short when a turncoat in his own gang sold him out and he was ambushed and killed in a shootout at a bank in Round Rock, Texas, in July, 1878.

For the next 35 years robbing trains became very popular throughout the United States. Innovations in security by Wells Fargo and others made it increasingly hard for robbers to make a good living. Except for some very high profile cases in England in the 1970s and '80s, the practice of armed robberies on the railroad had practically disappeared by the mid-1910s. Today, the trend is toward hijacking boxcar-loads of merchandise.

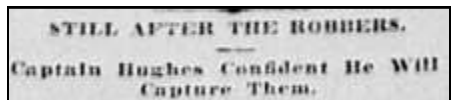
One of the earliest train robberies in the Terrell County area occurred in August of 1889. A westbound passenger train was held up near Pumpville by three robbers, named Wellington, Three-fingered Jack, and Lang Staff. All had lived in the Big Bend country south of Marfa. After several days the Texas Rangers caught up with the three robbers. While trying to take the miscreants into custody, one robber was accidentally killed by one of his co-

conspirators 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 dubbed a "weakling" by the local press, was released and died very soon afterwards.

A westbound Southern Pacific 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 took money from the strong box but were unable to open a larger safe that was equipped with a timer lock. The robbers rode off with next to nothing, and the train continued on.

When word reached Sheriff W.H. Jones a posse was formed that included Thalís Cook and several other Texas Rangers. Ranger Cook, who was 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 a well-known cowhand 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 men of 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 brothers Art and Jubel

Friar and Ease Bixler. Very soon 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, and chose wisely not to engage the crack-shot rangers in gunfire.

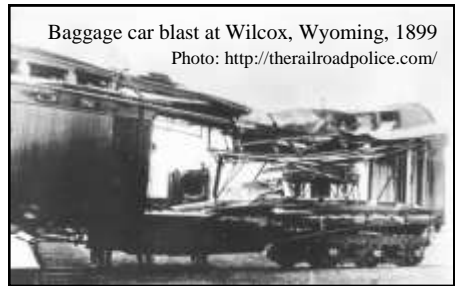
Black Jack Ketchum's robbery in 1897 took place west of Lozier, Texas, on a now-abandoned section of railroad. Ketchum and one man boarded the train at Lozier station, while another waited with horses and dynamite at the first road-cut west of the station. Crawling over the coal pile in the tender, Ketchum 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, awaking and angering the Messenger's bulldog. The bulldog growled and barked and paced up and down the baggage car

Having had enough, Ketchum pointed his rifle at the engineer and threatened to kill him. Seeing the seriousness of the situation, the Messenger relented, chained his dog and let

Ketchum in.

Using much abusive language and cursing, Ketchum demanded that the Messenger open the two Wells Fargo safes. "I am a poor man and need money!" he said. 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, however, 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, then disappeared into the darkness

To their credit, 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.

As soon as the train got to the next station, Captain Hughes and his Company D of the Texas Rangers were summoned and proceeded 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 finally met his end after holding up a Santa Fe Railroad passenger train at Folsom, NM, getting captured and wounded in the process. The conductor, having been held up three times before, finally had had enough and took matters into his own hands. He shot Ketchum with a shotgun, causing him to lose his arm.

He was tried, sentenced and hung on

April 26, 1901, at Clayton, NM. It was the only time a train robber was hung for “felonious assault on a railroad,” and that judgment was rendered unconstitutional after Ketchum was executed.

The hanging was the first (and only) in Union County, NM, and the novice hangman miscalculated the length of the rope required. When the trapdoor was sprung, Ketchum's body plummeted to the ground, separating the head, which was cloaked in a black hood, and sending it flying into the pit beneath the scaffold. The head was stitched back on for the public viewing, but not before a lurid postcard photo was made.

Black Jack's last words? "Good-bye. Please dig my grave very deep. All right; hurry up."

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



References

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