

JESSE JAMES

and the First Missouri Train Robbery

PART I

The Journey to Gads Hill



Frank James at about twenty-one years of age. (Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia)

CHAPTER 1

A Bit of Mischief in Arkansas

The Feats of Dick Turpin Eclipsed—One of the Most Daring
Highway Robberies Ever Committed
—(Headline) *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, January 18, 1874

On the morning of Tuesday, January 13, 1874, five mysterious horsemen, now believed to have been Frank and Jesse James, two of the Younger brothers, and perhaps either Clell Miller or Arthur McCoy, were seen riding out of Arkadelphia, Arkansas, northeast along the Cairo and Fulton Railroad.¹ Witnesses would later recall that each man was equipped with several navy revolvers, one wore a cartridge belt, and three carried breechloading double-barreled shotguns. All wore blue Federal Army overcoats. Their horses were of fine thoroughbred stock, sleek and built for speed. Behind their saddles were bedrolls, extra clothing, maps, and other gear common to overland travelers.

Although the strangers attracted some attention, the townspeople were not overly concerned. After all, the men seemed peaceable enough, and it was not unusual in those post-Civil War days for travelers to go armed. The good people of Arkadelphia watched them pass and then casually returned to their various activities. Only later would they learn that five days earlier, five similar men had robbed a stagecoach near

Arcadia, Louisiana, a hundred miles to the south, and fled north in their general direction. It would be speculated, though never proven, that these Arkansas travelers and the Louisiana stage robbers were one and the same group.²

That evening, the party reined up at the home of a Mr. Easley, who lived near the railroad line twelve miles southwest of Malvern. In those days, traveling men often stopped at rural houses along the way and paid for food and lodging. Farmers were usually happy to have the company and were always able to use the extra cash. When the men asked for those accommodations, Easley obliged. After a comfortable night's sleep and breakfast the next morning, they resumed their journey.

A few miles farther up the track, they turned their horses northwest into the Ouachita foothills and by nightfall were eating supper at the Price home about ten miles east of Hot Springs. After supper the menfolk retired to the parlor to smoke and talk. Mr. Price later said that his heavily armed guests told him they were trailing horse thieves and sometime during the evening's conversation asked about the old stage road from Benton.³

According to news reports, the men left Price's home at sunup and continued to ride west toward Hot Springs. They apparently spent a few hours in that resort town relaxing and taking in the sights, and it is believed that while there Jesse went to a photography studio and had his picture taken.⁴ The men would not be heard from again until midafternoon, when they were seen crossing Gulpha Creek about five miles from Price's. They were then traveling back east in the direction of Malvern. It was Thursday, January 15. The state of Arkansas was about to be officially introduced to the outlaw Jesse James.

At noon that day a four-horse Concord coach of the El Paso Stage Company had set out from Malvern on its routine westerly run to Hot Springs, a distance of twenty-four miles. Accompanying the coach were two ambulances (light road wagons), the seats of which could be folded into beds to



This photograph of Jesse James is believed to have been taken at a studio in Hot Springs, Arkansas, just hours before he and his gang robbed the west-bound stage. A witness to the robbery said "the chief of the gang wore a belt filled with cartridges." (Courtesy of Phillip W. Steele)

accommodate the “invalid” passengers. The window curtains were drawn to keep out the cold. On board were the drivers, eleven male passengers, an express box, and a few sacks of United States mail.

At shortly past 3:00 P.M. the stage and ambulances reached Gulpha Creek and the valley farm of a locally prominent family named Gaines. There beside the road, about five miles from Hot Springs, was a rest area where drivers regularly stopped to water their horses. Contemporary writer J. A. Dacus, who was obviously familiar with this bit of geography, described it as “a narrow dell, shut in by abrupt hills, clad with a dense forest of pine and tangled underbrush and evergreen vines.” He continued, “At this particular place the valley widens, and there is a beautiful farm and lovely grounds bordering the roadside on the east and north side of the stream. West and south the deep, tangled forest crowns the hills, which rise to a great height.”⁵ The Gaines mansion stood about two hundred yards to the northeast. Because of its proximity, stage drivers commonly referred to this rest area simply as the “Gaines Place.”

There the vehicles stopped. As the horses drank their fill and the passengers stretched and walked about, five armed riders passed coming from the direction of Hot Springs. They were well mounted, it was noticed, and all wore Federal Army overcoats of the late Civil War. The unsuspecting stage travelers paid little heed to these blue-coated strangers and were soon refreshed, back aboard, and off on the last leg of their journey to the Springs. Each man no doubt was eagerly looking forward to the comforts of a warm hotel room, a leisurely evening meal, and a soothing mineral bath at one of the town’s numerous thermal spas.

The cavalcade had proceeded only about half a mile when the stage driver heard a rumble of horses’ hooves approaching from the rear. Looking back, he saw the same five riders who had passed them at the creek—and they were coming now at full gallop with guns drawn! One man was masked, a witness later said; the others were only partially. As they overtook the

stage, the lead rider leveled a double-barreled shotgun at the driver and reportedly shouted, "Stop, or I'll blow your head off!"

At the time it mattered not to the stage driver that this shotgun wielder who threatened his life might have been the notorious Missouri outlaw Jesse James—or Satan himself for that matter. Of greater concern to this master of whip and reins was the fact that a loaded shotgun, with hammers at full cock, was pointing squarely at his bewhiskered face. Leaning back on the reins, applying the brake, and shouting the most sincere "whoa" of his stage-driving career, the shaken driver brought the team, himself, and his whole entourage to a skidding halt.

And there they sat, unarmed, helpless as so many sheep before their shearers.

One of the stage passengers was George R. Crump, a tobacco representative from Memphis. When Mr. Crump heard the commotion outside and raised the window curtain to have a look-see, he was rudely greeted by a man pointing a cocked navy revolver. Using a few rough adjectives appropriate to the occasion, the gunman ordered Crump and his fellow passengers to step out quick. One gentleman, badly crippled with "rheumatism," was allowed to remain in the coach, but the others promptly obeyed. The *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette* gave this account from Mr. Crump's testimony:

They got out, and, as they did so, were ordered to throw up their hands. Three men were in front of them with cocked pistols and another with a shotgun, while on the other side of the stage was still another—all pointing their weapons toward the passengers and the driver. After getting the passengers out, they made them form in a kind of circle so that all of them could be covered by the pistols and gun. The leader then "went through" each passenger, taking all the watches, jewelry and money that could conveniently be found, that were of special value. . . . While the main party was engaged in this work, another took out the best horse in the coach, saddled him, rode up and down the road about fifty yards two or three times, and remarked that "he would do."⁶



Cole Younger, as a young man. (Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia)

The stolen horse became at that moment a spare mount to be used by the robbers in their planned retreat back to Missouri.

The express box was next looted, adding another \$435 to the plunder. Several mail bags were also torn open as the robbers searched for registered letters containing money.

When the heist was at last completed, the leader, apparently wishing to find out if he had any enemies in the crowd, began interviewing his captives. Each passenger was asked his name and occupation, and judged accordingly. Some were treated kindly; others were subjected to a bit of verbal abuse.

George Crump later said that the “captain” asked if there were any “Southern men” among them. The *Arkansas Gazette* told it this way:

TRANSPORTATION.

FOR HOT SPRINGS

EL PASO STAGE COMPANY

Have now stocked the road with good

Four-Horse Concord Coaches

—ALSO—

Two-Horse Hacks for Invalids

And plenty of good Horses,

From Malvern,

On Cairo and Fulton Railroad,

TO HOT SPRINGS, ARK

Making close connections with trains.
There will also be

Day Coaches Leaving Malvern

On arrival of the train from Little Rock, every
day except Monday.

As the Company have now made ample provisions for all that may come, and as our agents and drivers are cautious and attentive, no trouble or detention need be apprehended by visitors or others going over the road.

Returning stages leave Hot Springs every day (except Saturday) at 7 a.m.

From Malvern to Hot Springs, 24 Miles.

Tickets from Little Rock to Hot Springs will be sold at the Cairo and Fulton railroad ticket office.

3148

JOHN BARTHOLOMEW, Sup't.

This ad appeared in the Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, January 15, 1874, the day Jesse James and his gang robbed the Hot Springs stage.

Mr. Crump spoke up, as did one or two others, that they were southern men. They then asked if there were any who had served in the confederate army during the war. Mr. Crump answered that he did. They questioned him as to what command, and remarking that he looked like an honest fellow, one who was telling the truth, handed him back his watch and money, saying they did not want to rob confederate soldiers; that the northern men had driven them into outlawry and they intended to make them pay for it.

Next approached was William Taylor of Massachusetts. The leader asked where he was from, and Taylor, perhaps concluding that being a genuine Northern Yankee would not be in his best interest at the moment, chose to lie.

“St. Louis,” he responded.

The outlaw eyed him suspiciously.

“Yes,” he said, “and you are a newspaper reporter for the *St. Louis Democrat*, the vilest paper in the West. Go to Hot Springs and send the *Democrat* a telegram about this affair, and give them my compliments.”⁷

The interviewer moved on, but the other robbers continued taunting Mr. Taylor. Referring to him as the “*St. Louis Democrat* man,” they laughingly remarked “about the exact parts of his body they could put lead through.” The one wielding the shotgun was quoted as saying, “I’ll bet I can shoot his hat off, without touching a hair of his head.” They all seemed to be jolly fellows, according to Mr. Crump, and enjoyed the fun very much.

The passengers, on the other hand, enjoyed the fun very little, and the one who probably enjoyed it least was John A. Burbank, former governor of Dakota Territory. This distinguished gentleman had been forced to fork over \$840 cash, a diamond stick pin of some value, and a monogrammed gold watch. Also snatched was his satchel containing important papers. When Burbank asked if the papers might be returned, the leader again became suspicious. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported:

The “captain” squatted down on his knees, and commenced examining them. Turning round to his followers he said, “Boys, I believe he is a detective—shoot him!” and forthwith, he was covered with three pistols. “Stop,” said the chief, looking further, “I guess it’s all right,” and handed the governor his papers.

As the stage robbers mounted to leave, an unidentified passenger from Syracuse, New York, asked if five dollars of his money might be returned so he could telegraph home. His humble request was denied. “If you have no friends nor money,” the outlaw chief allegedly said, “you had better go and die—you will be little loss anyway.”

And on that cheery note the robbers galloped away, leaving the passengers to count their losses—and their blessings. The *Arkansas Gazette* gave the losses as follows:

From Ex-Gov. Burbank, of Dakota, they obtained \$840 in money, a diamond pin and gold watch. A gentleman named Taylor, from Lowell, Mass., went up for \$650 in money. A passenger from Syracuse, N. Y., gave up his last nickle, \$160. Mr. Johnny Dietrich, our boot and shoe merchant, lost \$5 in money and a fine gold watch. He had \$50 besides this in the watch pocket of his pants that they did not find. Mr. Charley Moore, of the ice house, gave up \$70 in money and his silver watch, but they returned the latter, stating they did not want any silver watches. A Mr. Peoples, who resides near Hot Springs, lost \$20. Three countrymen lost about \$15. The express package, containing about \$435 was also taken.

Mr. Crump initially surrendered his watch and about forty-five dollars in money, but it was all returned because he had served in the Confederate Army. The crippled passenger, who was allowed to remain in the coach, was not robbed.

Assuming the pilfered cash amounts were listed correctly, the total take in this robbery, excluding watches, jewelry, and the stolen stage horse, would have amounted to roughly \$2,200. (The Friday morning *Little Rock Republican* reported the total figure at \$2,000.)

Within an hour after the holdup, the stagecoach and its accompanying road wagons pulled up to the Sumpter Hotel in Hot Springs, and the Rice County sheriff was notified. He immediately organized a posse, but, due to the early darkness of winter, a meaningful search did not get under way until morning. By then the robbers were miles away.

And who were the robbers? No one knew yet, of course, but a reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette* had a pretty fair idea. He wrote, "From the talk of the 'Captain,' it is thought they were from Missouri. They took breakfast on the road between Malvern and Hot Springs . . . and, from the description, it is thought the chief is a celebrated Missouri brigand (whose name we now forget), who has been outlawed by the authorities of that state, and for whom there is a standing reward of \$10,000."⁸

Reward or not, the "celebrated Missouri brigand" and his band of thieves were on their way back to the old home state—and a place called Gads Hill.

One final note: If there was ever any doubt that Jesse James had participated in the Hot Springs stage robbery, the question was surely put to rest when Jesse was shot and killed in St. Joseph, Missouri, eight years later. While searching through the dead outlaw's possessions, authorities found John Burbank's stolen watch. The recovered timepiece was eventually returned to Burbank, who was then living in Richmond, Indiana.⁹