

JESSE JAMES

and the First Missouri Train Robbery



Marker erected at the Gads Hill robbery site in 1962 by the Piedmont Lions Club.

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Ronald H. Beights



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*Dedicated in loving memory to my father
Hugh F. Beights
who worked more than thirty-seven years
for the Missouri Pacific Railroad*

In all the history of medieval knight errantry and modern brigandage, there is nothing that equals the wild romance of the past few years' career of Arthur McCoy, Frank and Jesse James and the Younger boys. . . . Their fame has become national, aye, world-wide. . . . They have captured and pillaged whole railroad trains. . . . They have dashed into towns and cleaned out banking-houses in broad daylight. . . . Detectives, who have undertaken to ferret them out, have been slain. Sheriff's posses have been routed. The whole State authorities defied and spit upon by this half-dozen brilliant, bold, indefatigable rough-riders.

—*Lexington (Missouri) Weekly Caucasian*, September 5, 1874

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Preface

In the summer of 1947 I was a boy traveling with the family on a northbound Missouri Pacific passenger train from Poplar Bluff, Missouri, to visit my grandmother in Kansas City. We were passing through the Ozark foothills less than an hour from home when our friendly conductor pointed out a place called Gads Hill, site of one of Jesse James' famous train robberies. Wide-eyed, I peered from the coach window as we rumbled past the all but extinct settlement.

"Better hold on to your pocketbooks, folks," the conductor jokingly warned. "Jesse James and the boys might still be lurking out there in the brush somewhere!"

Although I was only eight years old, I knew the trainman was kidding us. Old Jesse could not have been lurking in the brush at Gads Hill nor anyplace else. He was dead. A "dirty little coward" had shot him down some years ago in a Tyrone Power movie. I'd seen it myself. Content in that knowledge, I settled back and returned to doing whatever it is eight-year-olds do to tolerate the boredom of travel. We later changed trains in St. Louis and, I am happy to report, made it safely to Kansas City and Grandma's house without being molested by outlaws.

That first glimpse of Gads Hill, Missouri, fleeting though it was, made an impression on my young mind that lingered long

after we returned home. The rail line that had carried the plundered train south after the robbery in 1874, and us back home to Poplar Bluff in 1947, passed within two miles of my house. Oftentimes after our trip, I would lie in bed at night listening to the distant roar of modern trains traveling down that same old track and imagine the one of long ago, its hapless passengers still shivering with excitement over their recent confrontation with robbers. In boyish fantasy I could see the fabled Jesse, his brother Frank, and the Younger brothers, their pockets bulging with train loot and the sheriff's posse nipping at their heels, as they escaped on horseback over the timbered hills of northwestern Wayne County. Entertained by those mental images of railroad trains, outlaws, and pursuing lawmen, I would drift quietly off to sleep.

In time the childhood fantasies passed, but my interest in Jesse James and Gads Hill did not. The fact that this famous badman of the Old West had robbed a train so near my home continued to intrigue me. During my teenage years, I listened intently as the old folks told wild stories about Frank and Jesse; of the boys generously sharing their ill-gotten wealth with poor families along the escape route; of local caves where they were supposed to have hid out or stashed loot; and of the gnarled old tree, then still standing at Gads Hill, where legend claimed Jesse tied his horse. How many of those tales were true, and how many were folklore, I had no idea.

Wishing to know the facts, I read numerous books on Jesse James, but they were somewhat confusing. While most presented interesting versions of the Gads Hill robbery, the details were usually very brief and varied widely from one account to the next. Several years ago, still hounded by a lingering curiosity, I began doing my own research on that historic raid, and unexpectedly an old boyhood enthusiasm was reborn. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. Before long a casual interest had grown into a mild obsession, and at some point I decided to write my own Jesse James book—one focusing primarily on Gads Hill and events related to the crime.

In 1989 while visiting St. Joseph, Missouri, I had the great privilege to meet the well-known historian Milton Perry, then director and curator of Clay County Recreation and Historic Sites. Mr. Perry was a former curator at the U.S. Military Academy's West Point Museum and from 1958 to 1976 held the position of curator at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum in Independence. He was also a leading authority on Jesse James. When I told Mr. Perry I was considering writing a book about the Gads Hill train robbery, he liked the idea. He said he had long believed there was ample material to warrant books on each of the James brothers' robberies and felt that "sprightly written" documented histories would not only be of interest to the general reader, but would serve as scholarly works for future researchers as well. Inspired, I returned home and began my study in earnest.

Determined to produce an honest and factual account, I turned to the most authentic sources available—recorded statements from passengers, trainmen, farmers, detectives, and others who had confronted the bandits before, during, or after the robbery. There was also much to be gleaned from contemporary news articles, period maps, old letters, county history books, field trips to locations the outlaws supposedly visited, and even stories handed down from local old-timers. Countless hours were spent poring over stacks of ancient materials, checking and cross-checking information, using both fact and logic to separate the reliable from the not-so-reliable. It was a monumental task, this research, but the rewards came. Slowly, from the mist of the past emerged details of an exciting Jesse James outlaw adventure as it had actually happened—without the glamor and romance of a Hollywood movie nor the embellishment of imaginative writers. Here, at the peak of their careers, were Jesse and his notorious gang on a month-and-a-half-long, 700-mile horse-back romp across Arkansas and Missouri, robbing, running from the law, stopping to eat and sleep at farmhouses, and engaging in deadly confrontations with pursuing detectives.

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It was a story that had never been fully told, and I was eager to tell it.

The train raid at Gads Hill proved to be a major turning point in the careers of the James and Younger brothers. Robin Hood-like incidents that occurred during the robbery, retreat, and pursuit not only brought these bandits worldwide attention but became a major source for much of the Jesse James legend we know today. To explore some of the facts behind that legend and, more importantly, to preserve as accurately as possible the historic details of Missouri's first train robbery, this book was written.

Acknowledgments

Researching and writing even this small bit of Jesse James history was no easy task, and I daresay that without the interest and generous help of a number of special individuals it could never have been accomplished.

First and foremost I wish to thank my dear sister Saralie Morgan, for neatly and professionally typing the manuscript and for so patiently making the multitudinous copy changes I dumped on her over a period of several months. She also assisted enormously in various phases of the research and from time to time offered suggestions that proved invaluable. Thanks, Saralie!

Another extremely important contributor to the completion of this work was my very good friend, former high-school English teacher Harris Maupin. Harry was kind enough to take time from his busy retirement to proofread the manuscript carefully and make a great number of much-needed corrections in sentence structure and punctuation.

Long before the writing, typing, and proofreading, however, came the research, and that research would have been utterly impossible without the numerous libraries and historical organizations that have been so helpful to me over the years. In particular I wish to thank the accommodating staffs at the St. Louis Public Library; the State Historical Society of

Missouri, Columbia; the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; the Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock; the Illinois Historical Society, Springfield; the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; and the Carondelet Historical Society, St. Louis. I would especially like to thank (in spirit) the late Dale L. Walker, archivist of the Missouri Pacific Historical Society in St. Louis, for sending material and answering scads of questions regarding railroads and old-time trains.

I also owe a big debt of gratitude to the many who shared old stories, articles, family records, and photographs and to those who helped in other ways with information or material often unattainable from any other source. Listed here in alphabetical order—although not necessarily in order of importance—are most of those people. Hopefully, each knows his or her contributions and how grateful I am for the help received. With apologies for any omissions, the list includes: Velma Adams; Gilbert K. Alford, Jr.; Brick Autry; Virgil Clubb; Harry Diesel; Brian Driscoll; Tim Eaton; Fern George; Mike Holifield; Charlene Hopkins; Robert Howell; Norman Keele; Carl Laxton; Amel Martin; Coker Montgomery; Hamil Montgomery; J. L. Moss; Jack Myers; Kent Dean Nichols; Cheryl Oberhaus; Richard Owings; Jeanette Parker; Gary Parkin; my sister Carolyn Ponte; Marjorie Mason Robinson; Bill Royce; Bob Ruble; Bill Saenger; Marty Schuster; Leona Sutterfield Skelton; Angie Smith; Ray Smith; Floyd Sutterfield; Richard Thaler; J. J. Tinsley; Cameron E. Ward; Julie Warren; Alice Fitz White; Tom Williams; and Kati Wylie of the Butler County (Missouri) Historical Society.

Another group of individuals I truly appreciate are the Jesse James writers and historians who have preceded me. Although our interpretations of facts may sometimes differ slightly, their documented accounts have been for me an abundant source of information and inspiration. They all have my utmost admiration and respect. I specifically want to thank Marley Brant and Wilbur Zink for answering questions regarding the

Younger-Pinkerton gunfight and Phillip Steele for assisting me with book publishing information.

Also, I am much indebted to a friend of many, the late James historian, Milton F. Perry, who first encouraged me to write this book. For our chance meeting in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1989, and for our correspondence afterward, I will always be grateful.

I, of course, want to say a very special thank you to Nina Kooij and the folks at Pelican Publishing Company for seeing potential in this true story of Jesse James and for giving me the opportunity to tell it.

To family and friends: Thank you for your continual support, encouragement, and prayers.

And finally, on a lighter note, it is probably fitting that I should give a tip of the hat to Frank and Jesse James for choosing to live outside the law. Obviously, had they not been so ornery, this book would never have been written.

INTRODUCTION

The Missouri Outlaws

A great war leaves the country with three armies—an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves.

—German proverb

Of all the bank and train robbers in American history, Frank and Jesse James were without a doubt the most famous and successful. The tools of their trade were the horse and revolver, and they became masters of both while riding as mere boys in Confederate guerrilla bands during the Civil War. Under the tutelage of such notorious leaders as William Clarke Quantrill, “Bloody Bill” Anderson, and George Todd, these young farm lads from Clay County, Missouri, developed the reckless hit-and-run fighting tactics that would remain their trademark throughout the many years of civilian banditry that lay ahead.

When the South surrendered in 1865, Missouri’s defeated ex-Confederates returned home to an uneasy peace. Wounds of bitterness wrought by the war were slow in healing, and readjustment to civilian life proved extremely difficult—for some more than others. To add to rebel woes, the Radical Republican Party, then in control of Missouri’s provisional government, had adopted a new state constitution that weighed heavily against Missourians who had fought for the South. Under this new law the state’s former rebels were forbidden to

vote, seek public office, attend college, engage in principal professions, become ministers of the gospel, or even serve as church deacons. And while amnesty was provided to Union boys for any atrocities they might have committed during the war, Southern boys were still held accountable for such acts and subject to prosecution. This one-sided law would remain in effect for several years.

Most ex-Confederates in western Missouri, even those who had ridden under the "black flag" of Quantrill, Anderson, and Todd, were somehow able to turn the other cheek and settle down peaceably. Others refused. Within a year after their surrender many had returned to the saddle and were back at their old habits of raiding and pillaging. Now, however, it was done not in the name of the Confederacy, but solely for personal gain.

The first of these postwar raids occurred February 13, 1866, when a dozen or so of the old Quantrill bunch rode horseback and armed into Liberty, Missouri, and cleaned out the Clay County Savings Bank of more than sixty thousand dollars in currency and negotiable government bonds. That historic event, America's first daylight peacetime bank robbery, took place just fifteen miles from the James boys' home. It would be followed by a long series of spectacular bank, stagecoach, and train robberies charged to these outlaw brothers spanning a sixteen-year period and encompassing at least eight Midwestern and Southern states. Frank and Jesse James, Cole Younger and his brothers, and the many who rode with them would forever blame the Civil War for their troubles, claiming that mistreatment by Northern radicals had "driven" them into outlawry.

By 1873 the James-Younger gang, as they came to be called, were already the most hunted outlaws in America. Besides robbing Liberty, they were suspected of bank raids at Lexington, Missouri; Savannah, Missouri (a failed attempt); Richmond, Missouri; Russellville, Kentucky; Gallatin, Missouri; Corydon, Iowa; Columbia, Kentucky; and Ste. Genevieve, Missouri. Also on their list of crimes was the

ticket-gate holdup at the Kansas City fair, during which a shot fired at the cashier missed and inflicted a painful flesh wound in the leg of a little girl.¹ In all, outlaw gunfire had injured eight citizens—five of them fatally.

The first peacetime train robbery charged to Jesse James—he would do six in all—took place July 21, 1873, about four miles west of Adair, Iowa. At dusk that day a band of men masked as Ku Klux Klansmen loosened a section of track on the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad and hid in nearby brush. When the slow-moving train rounded the curve, they drew the rail out of line by pulling an attached rope. As expected, the train jumped the track and ground to a stop, but, tragically, the locomotive toppled onto its side killing the engineer. The bandits reportedly extracted about two thousand dollars from the express car and finished the job by collecting cash and valuables from the shaken passengers. A sheriff's posse trailed them southward into Missouri but came back empty-handed. The *St. Joseph Morning Herald* accused Jesse James of being the gang's leader.²

By that time, hired detectives were searching high and low for the brigands, and large rewards were being offered for their capture. Yet, through it all, Jesse and his followers continued to evade all pursuers and to raid and plunder almost at will. As they did, their legend grew.

While most citizens rightly viewed the Missouri outlaws as thieves and murderers, many actually saw them as bigger-than-life heroes of the Lost Cause, misunderstood and fighting against social injustice and persecution. Southern-minded journalists began comparing them to the knights of old England and their exploits to those of such celebrated outlaws as Dick Turpin, Claude Duval, or the fictitious Robin Hood, who robbed the rich and gave to the poor. Some, like *St. Louis Dispatch* editor John Newman Edwards—himself a former Confederate major and, not coincidentally, a close personal friend of the James brothers—even claimed that Jesse, Frank, and the Younger boys had, for the most part, been falsely

accused and he wrote strongly in their defense.³

On December 29, 1873, a letter bearing Jesse James' signature appeared in the *Dispatch*. It insisted that Jesse and Frank were guiltless of all recent crimes, offered alibis for same, and stated they would be willing to surrender if the governor would only assure them a fair trial and protection against lynch mobs. Probably written with Edwards' help, the letter claimed that Jesse was then living in faraway Deer Lodge, Montana Territory, a story that was as unlikely as his innocence.

But wherever Jesse James might have been in late 1873, his whereabouts in early 1874 is all but certain. During the first two months of the new year, a number of horse and revolver robberies occurred in the middle Southern sections of the country, and the James brothers appear to have taken part in at least two of them. One was a stagecoach holdup near the popular resort town of Hot Springs, Arkansas. The other was the infamous train raid at Gads Hill, Missouri—the focus of our book.

The reader is invited to come along now on a long journey into America's past as we travel by stagecoach, train, and horseback over old roads and long-forgotten trails to the days when the James and Younger boys rode and pillaged the land. Our story begins not with the robbery at Gads Hill, but many miles to the south, in Arkansas, eighteen days earlier.