

The Adair Train Robbery

When John Rafferty climbed into the high cab and opened the throttle of his fast Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific engine, he little dreamed that he was pulling out of Council Bluffs for the last time. Ahead were shadowy ravines and the swales of the Iowa prairie, and far against the western sky the July sun stretched out long fingers of heat. As Rafferty glanced back along his train he counted two baggage and express cars, four coaches, and two sleeping-cars. In one of the express cars stood a heavy iron safe containing nearly two thousand dollars in currency. Silver bullion completed the treasure cargo.

For three and a half hours on that sultry evening of July 21, 1873, Rafferty's fireman, Dennis Foley, shoveled coal into the flaming firepit. Outside, fields and villages fled past. When the train came to a grinding halt at its scheduled stops, Conductor William A. Smith strolled forward to compare watches with the thirty-five-year-old engineer. Then, too, the express guard unlatched his heavy sliding doors to load mail and packages and to catch a breath of air. In the coaches, thirty Chinese, come to the United States

to be educated in New England universities, stuck their queued heads from windows to gape at prairie towns. Village loafers made bold and uncouth comments concerning the Orientals.

A few miles west of Adair, a sleepy little village where the general store served more idlers than customers, the track swung shortly around a sharp curve. Rafferty's watch pointed to eight-thirty when he reduced his speed to about twenty miles an hour. Behind was safety and security, while ahead lurked Jesse Woodson James and his band of border ruffians. By their side stood Death.

Jesse James was a two gun man,
(*Roll on, Missouri!*)
Strong-arm chief of an outlaw clan.
(*From Kansas to Illinois!*)
He twirled an old Colt forty-five;
(*Roll on, Missouri!*)
They never took Jesse James alive.
(*Roll, Missouri, roll!*)

For weeks the outlaws had planned this holdup. Already the James gang was notorious for its bold bank crackings, its stagecoach stick-ups, and its train robberies. Led by Jesse and Frank James, both crack shots, these highwaymen were criminal adventurers who soon were to sweep into prominence as America's most famous bandits. But in 1873 Jesse, then only a common robber, had not

assumed his place among the nation's strenuous men. Yet even then he was taking on those legendary characteristics which a democratic people ascribed to their heroes — Daniel Boone, Mike Fink, and Paul Bunyan. Jesse, crowned by "Manifest Destiny", was soon to be described as a "hawse an' a man together" who lived in a mountain cave with "a rattlesnake, a wolf, an' a bear."

His fame, preserved for young America in hundreds of dime novels, those yellow-backed tales of excitement published by Beadle and others, equaled that of any contemporary hero. Small boys of the decades of the eighties and nineties smuggled the gory adventures of Jesse James behind the wide leaves of prosaic geographies. Even adults were not immune. Many a sedate American found thrills when he stepped to the counter for a "Jesse James Five Cent Cigar — Sold over the Entire United States — Unsurpassed in Quality".

And Jesse E. James, the not-too-brilliant son of the bandit, secured fame by writing, *Jesse James, My Father . . . The First and Only True Story of His Adventures Ever Written*. As a matter of fact, neither the account written by the phlegmatic son nor the scores of other romances of terror tell the true life of the criminal whom poets now immortalize. For the biography of Jesse

James stands not clear-etched for all the world to read, but lies devious and hidden behind the powder smoke of rumor and romanticism. The facts are few; the rumors, many.

His father was the Reverend Robert James, a Baptist preacher abundant in piety, but short of cash. He died in the California gold fields where he had gone to seek his fortune. It is recorded that he was buried "in a soil unhallowed by the dust of kinsmen, in a grave unbedecked by the tears of the loved ones left behind." But the wife and two small sons were not long without protectors, for Mrs. James remarried twice, the second time to a physician.

Jesse, born on September 5, 1847, apparently liked his stepfather, frequently speaking of him with warmth and cordiality. The two lads, Jesse and Frank, enjoyed a normal boyhood in Clay County, Missouri. There is nothing to indicate, as one lurid biographer writes, that the "jocund laughter of innocent youth seldom broke from their lips, but, instead, oaths and curses, and bitter threatens, mingled with gross profanity" or that "Cutting off the ears and tails of dogs and cats, and the wings of birds, was a cherished practice, and the pitiful cries of the dumb suffering things was a sort of music they delighted in."

One thing seems certain, however. Both

brothers early learned the use of firearms, and Jesse became remarkably proficient with the pistol. When he heard a little noise in the house, said his brother, Jesse would "whip out his pistol so quick you couldn't see the motion of his hand." It was said that he could kill a red-headed woodpecker at fifty yards. He was always armed, declares one biographer, "with two 45-calibre Colt's revolvers and three cartridge belts, together with plenty of spare shells in his pockets to be used in case of emergencies; and when he went 'on a trip' he carried a valise full of cartridges and a Winchester rifle concealed within a large umbrella."

Jesse's first taste of violence seems to have occurred about 1863 when a troop of Union soldiers invaded his home in search of the famous Missouri bushwhacker and guerrilla, Quantrill. Neither Jesse nor his stepfather, Dr. Reuben Samuels, both Southern sympathizers, gave the blue-coated cavalry assistance. The enraged soldiers, thereupon, hung Dr. Samuels to a tree until he was nearly dead, and slashed Jesse's back with a knotted rope. The lad's action was immediate. "Ma," he cried, "I'll join Quantrill!" And he did.

For the next two or three years Jesse James, in Quantrill's service, preyed upon Union soldiers. Wounded twice through the right lung and finally captured, he managed to escape to return to his

home county, there to wed his nurse and to join the Baptist Church. His conversion, avers one commentator, was complete, for from this time on Jesse never "slew a human being except in the protection of his own life".

The light of history shines dimly upon Jesse's activities for the next few months. Then, in the floodlight of notoriety, stands a two-gun bandit leader. Jesse James, America's "Impossibly Bad Man", was the cynosure of the nation's eyes. "He committed hundreds of murders and robberies, and acted the part of the Red Cross Knight toward fair ladies in distress", wrote an over-enthusiastic author; "he cleaned out a bank in Texas, and held up a train in Missouri on the same day; he despoiled capitalists of all their wealth, and then gave it to poor widows and bereaved orphans. He shot his enemies from ambush, kissed his mother when they met and parted, betrayed his friends, and crammed his children's stockings with bulging presents at Christmas."

Such was the man who, with a heavily-armed gang, lay in wait for John Rafferty on that fateful July night. Jesse, in 1873, was only twenty-six years old, a man about five feet, seven inches tall, with "light hair, blue eyes, heavy sandy whiskers, broad-shouldered, short nose, a little turned up," and a high, broad forehead.

His companions were all young men like their leader. Among these were Cole and Jim Younger, tight-lipped brothers, familiar with crime since childhood. Thomas Younger, another brother, probably was present. Clell Miller, an unsavory character without the ability of either the James boys or the Younger brothers, and Bill Chadwell, completed the party.

Early in July the gang had learned, in that devious and cunning fashion so common to Jesse James, that \$75,000 in gold from the Cheyenne region was coming through on the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad. About July 12th, the group, mounted upon excellent horses, rode quietly into Council Bluffs where they rested and awaited further reports from their Cheyenne spies. When the news came, Jesse James was ready. He sent Frank James and Cole Younger to Omaha to learn when the treasure shipment would start for Council Bluffs. Finally the two robbers reported the gold shipment was on its way, and the gang rode away to the fateful curve just west of Adair.

The outlaws hitched their mounts some distance from the track and then began to execute their carefully made plans to wreck the train supposed to be carrying the treasure. Breaking into a hand-car house, they stole a spike-bar and hammer.

Then they pried off a fish-plate connecting two rails and pulled out the spikes. A rope and strap, explained an eye-witness, was tied in the bolt hole at the west end of the disconnected rail. The rope, about the size of a common bed-cord, was passed under the south rail, across a little ditch, and up a bank behind which the robbers were hidden. Who held the rope, ready to jerk the rail from beneath the wheels of the approaching train, has never been determined.

But Engineer Rafferty, reducing his speed for the blind curve, saw the rail yanked out of place. He reversed his lever, but the distance was so short and the momentum of the train so great that he failed to stop. His engine plunged through the break, balanced an agonizing instant, plowed into the ditch, and then slowly toppled over on its side. The coaches piled on top of one another. Rafferty was killed instantly. Several passengers were seriously injured, and scores of others, said newspaper accounts, were thrown from their seats and bruised.

Jesse James all alone in the rain
Stopped an' stuck up the Eas'-boun' train;
Swayed through the coaches with horns an' a tail,
Lit out with the bullion an' the registered mail.

"The passengers on the train", said the *Keokuk Weekly Gate City*, "report that the scene was

terrible and baffles description. When the crash came, all were thrown forward — some entirely out of their seats. Then came the recoil, and immediately they heard firing, but supposed that it came from the wreck. Many of the men jumped from the cars and started to go forward, but were ordered back by the robbers, who continued firing, and enforced their demands by terrible oaths and threats. Back they went with a rush, and in the cars found women and children half-crazed with fright — shrieking, crying, and fainting, imploring the men to protect them, and exclaiming, 'My God! we shall be killed! We shall be killed!'

Jess made 'em all turn green with fright
Quakin' in the aisles in the pitch-black night;
An' he give all the bullion to a pore ole tramp
Campin' nigh the cuttin' in the dirt an' damp.

No sooner had the engine turned over than the gang, with whoops and yells, was at the train. Their objective was the express car where they expected to find the \$75,000 which they were confident was in the safe. When two of the troop — perhaps Jesse James and his brother — forced John Burgess, the guard, to open the safe, they found only two thousand dollars in currency. The silver bullion was too heavy for them to carry. Furious that their plans had miscarried and their information was false, the gang entered the

coaches to collect passengers' money and valuables. This loot, together with the stolen currency, they packed in a small valise. They then "waved their hats and shouted farewell to their victims, and gaining their horses, they rode away."

Conductor Smith, formerly an employee of the Western Stage Company in Iowa City, left one of the most descriptive accounts of the wreck and robbery. "I was in the smoking car near the front end; from the noise I thought the engine was in the ditch when one or two cars piled on it. I was thrown under the seat in front of me; don't remember which side of the car I got out on, but know that I reached the engine on the north side. I went forward to see who was hurt. The first person I met was one of the masked men, near the baggage car door, who pointed a revolver towards me and told me to get back, firing at me at the same time. I backed down as far as the sleeping coach before I felt I was out of his way.

"There I met Dennis Foley, the fireman. He said, 'Billy, Jack is dead!' The passengers were in a hubbub, and women and children crying. I told the passengers I thought the masked men were trying to rob the baggage car, and tried to borrow a revolver, but failed. I could still see a man from where I was; saw another passing up and down on the opposite side of the train; think

he was firing at me; also some of the passengers asked me to get into the train as these men were firing at me and I would be the cause of some of them getting killed. I then went into the sleeping car at the rear, still trying to get a revolver, and urging the passengers to keep quiet, as these men were robbing the baggage car.

"After the passengers had got quiet, I went forward to investigate the wreck. The west end of the rail when I saw it was only a few inches from the south rail. The hind trucks of the smoking-car were still on the tracks."

No sooner had the robbers left, than an emergency telegraph set was rigged to the nearest pole and soon the news of the first American train robbery accomplished by means of wrecking the train went flashing over the nation. Had Jesse James not neglected to cut the wires, the news would have been delayed several hours.

Pursuit was almost immediate. All railroad agents west of Des Moines were instructed to organize posses and to patrol the country. Special trains, filled with armed men, left Council Bluffs on both the North Western and the Rock Island railroads. These trains left small detachments of men along the route where saddled horses awaited them. Hundreds of vigilantes volunteered their services. Men stood guard at farm-

house doors, and children were forbidden to play out of sight of the house. Search for the bandits was further increased when the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad offered a reward of \$5000. The State of Iowa offered \$600 for the arrest of each person engaged in the robbery.

The whole U. S. is after Jess;

(Roll on, Missouri!)

The son-of-a-gun, if he ain't gone Wes';

(Missouri to the sea!)

He could chew cold iron an' spit blue flame;

(Cataracks down the Missouri!)

He rode on a catamount he'd larned to tame.

(Hear that Missouri roll!)

The trail left by the moon riders was not difficult to find. Railroad detectives, deputy sheriffs, posses, and vigilantes — all of these followed it straight to Missouri. On July 26th the bandits, riding easily, crossed the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad. Expert trailers, some of whom had followed Indian signs in western territories, showed where the outlaws had entered Jackson and Clay counties, Missouri. There, however, the gang split, and no trace was found of a single member. Missouri friends and neighbors sheltered the men quietly and efficiently.

Sometime later private detectives, heavily armed, moved into Monegaw Springs where they

found Jesse James and two of the Younger boys living with no attempt at concealment. When questioned by the officers, they denied any part in the robbery and brazenly defied the detectives to arrest them. The police, candidly confesses one commentator, "made no effort to bring them away and were glad to escape themselves alive!"

They're creepin', they're crawlin', they're stalkin' Jess;
(*Roll on, Missouri!*)

They's a rumor he's gone much further Wes';
(*Roll, Missouri, roll!*)

They's word of a cayuse hitched to the bars
(*Ruddy clouds on Missouri!*)

Of a golden sunset that busts into stars.
(*Missouri, roll down!*)

Although Jesse James, as might be expected, denied participation in the Adair robbery, there never was any doubt on the part of peace officers and railroad officials that his gang was responsible. The Iowa City *Daily Press* openly said that the Adair robbery was the work of the same men who robbed the bank at Saint Genevieve, Missouri, and the Russellville vaults in Iowa. And eastern newspapers, thoroughly excited by this new type of western terrorism, also gave the James outfit credit for the deed.

Meanwhile, in Des Moines, a coroner's jury, composed of J. G. Morgan, F. W. Burtch, and

Jos. Garretty, found that "the said John Rafferty refused to abandon his train when appraised of the danger and died manfully at his post." From coast to coast, newspapers made the engineer a hero. "There is not in the history of railroads", editorially commented the Saint Louis *Democrat*, "a more heroic deed than his. He belonged to a class to whose faithfulness and courage the public are greatly debtors." The New York *Daily Graphic*, not to be outdone, said, "Wife and little one, as well as personal safety, he laid on the altar of duty and died a hero."

To the editor of the *Avoca Delta*, the robbers represented everything that was vile, while Rafferty symbolized all nobility. "As it was no one but the engineer, John Rafferty, was killed; and he, like many a noble-hearted, unselfish hero before him, died at his post, regardless of self in the vain effort to save the precious freight of human lives committed to his charge. Let it be written upon the hero's monument:

Whether on the gallows high,
Or in the battle's van;
The fittest place for a man to die,
Is where he dies for man.

God help the fatherless children and widow. She, who roused from her slumbers at midnight's quiet hour, to have her heart grieved with anguish at

the intelligence that its best stay and comfort was gone. — 'Died at his post!' and the angels stoop low to greet the soul that faithfully performed its duty to the last."

The Ottumwa *Democrat*, while sharing the sympathy for the engineer, did not forget to mention the Chinese aboard the train. "All the Chinese," reported the *Democrat* with what was perhaps poetic license, "went back to Anita at one o'clock, saying this was 'hellee country'."

Despite the activities of officers, the coast to coast publicity, and the substantial rewards offered, not a single arrest was made in connection with the wreck and robbery. Gradually the affair faded from the public mind, and Adair returned to its sleepy existence. Yet the deed was not insignificant.

Jesse James, when he staged the killing of Rafferty and the robbery of the express safe, inaugurated a new chapter in the history of American crime. Never before had bandits wrecked a train in order to rob it. This was Jesse James's unique contribution to lawlessness. Robertus Love, in *The Rise and Fall of Jesse James*, one of the more creditable accounts, merely says that the James gang "invented train robbery" on July 21, 1873. Even Buel's readable book, *The Border Outlaws*, barely pays attention to the novelty of the crime.

The James gang itself probably understood the significance of their work, for they led peaceful lives for about six months after the robbery. Then, on January 15, 1874, a group of masked riders surrounded and stopped the Hot Springs stage-coach. A year or so later, Jesse James led the attack upon the bank at Northfield, Minnesota, one of the most spectacular incidents in his biography of violence. In January, 1875, the law took vengeance upon the James family while Jesse was away from home. A party of detectives, at midnight, tossed a bomb into the family home. Exploding, the bomb killed Jesse's half-brother and tore off his mother's right arm between the wrist and elbow. From that time on, Jesse James no longer talked of surrender to the law. It was either kill or be killed with him.

Governor Crittenden of Missouri offered a reward of ten thousand dollars for the arrest or killing of the James brothers. That sum was too great a temptation for Bob Ford who made plans to kill the outlaw. After months of effort he succeeded in having Jesse accept him as a friend. On April 3, 1882, an unusually warm day, Jesse "took off his coat and vest, unbuckled the belt which held his two pistols, mounted a chair, and began to dust a picture which, together with the ubiquitous mural decoration, 'God Bless Our

Home,' constituted the sole ornaments in the room." That was Bob Ford's long-awaited opportunity. His heavy revolver sent a bullet through the outlaw's brain. Thus was the Adair train wreck and robbery avenged.

Perhaps this was a fitting end for America's romantic terrorist. He was not shot down by a party of hunters as was John Sontag, the renowned bandit of the Southern Pacific Railroad; nor was he hanged by a group of vigilantes as was Henry Plummer, famous thief and robber of Montana and Idaho. James's slayer did not long enjoy the reward which he sought so long to collect. He was presently killed in a drunken quarrel—a brawl which some say was not as accidental as circumstances indicated.

Jesse James's death provided front page news for the newspapers of the country who glorified him as a desperado of a rapidly disappearing type. He was less dangerous, said one country weekly, than the "city slicker". The bandit's body, encased in a metallic coffin, was taken to Kearney, Missouri, where it was buried under a large coffee-bean tree not far from the house where Jesse had been born. Relatives, fearful that the corpse might be stolen by showmen for public exhibition, ordered the grave to be filled with heavy stones and placed an armed guard over it.

Tributes, in prose and poetry, increased. Roared one Southern attorney, "Farewell, Jesse James, prince of robbers! Missouri cries a long, a glad farewell! Cruellest horseman that ever wore a spur or held a rein, seeming oftener than Death himself on his pale horse charging through the land, than feeling man, farewell! farewell! Foulest blot that ever marred the bright escutcheon of a glorious state, farewell! farewell! Yes, thou bloody star of murder, hanging for years like a thing of horror in our very zenith, frightening science and civilization from our borders — I condemned the manner of thy taking off, yet I could but join the general acclaim, when, seized with the shock of death, we saw thee reel in thy orbit, and then plunge forever into old chaos and eternal night."

And those survivors of the wreck at death's curve, just outside of Adair nine years earlier, doubtless echoed this flamboyant farewell.

PHILIP D. JORDAN