

Jesse James in Iowa

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JESSE JAMES IN IOWA

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Having inherited an interest in Jesse James from his father, Mr. Smith has studied the West and its "legendary heroes" extensively. He has consulted Mr. Carl Breihan, a well-known authority on Jesse James, in the preparation of this article.

Jesse James and his band of outlaws, probably the most legendary in western Americana, raided Iowa twice within a three year period. Prior to their first ride into Iowa, the James gang had attempted a bank robbery in Gallatin, Missouri. They received nothing for their efforts and left a cashier lying dead on the floor of the bank.

Eighteen months later, on June 3, 1871, the 24 year old bank robber and his band rode into Corydon, Iowa. It is believed that the reason they picked Corydon was that they knew about a political meeting being held in the courthouse square there. This would allow them to ride into town without being noticed, as people came from miles around for a political meeting.

Seven men rode into Corydon that day. They are believed to have been Jesse James, Frank James, Cole Younger, James Younger, Clell Miller, James White and James Koughman. Stopping in front of the Ocobock Bros. Bank, three of the seven entered the bank finding the cashier all alone. Each man aimed his pistol at the bank officer. He gave up the keys to the safe without a second thought. The money, disputed between \$10,000 and \$40,000, was scooped into a wheat sack. Before leaving the bank, the bandits tied up and gagged the cashier. This was something which the James gang never performed before or afterwards.

As they were riding out of town, it is said they stopped at the political meeting. The speaker addressing the assembly was the Hon. H. Clay Dean, a lawyer from northern Missouri.

Jesse, not wanting to pass up an opportunity for a joke, said to the speaker, "Mr. Dean, I rise to a point of order, sir."

"What is it, friend and fellow citizen?" inquired the speaker. "If anything of paramount importance, I yield to the gentleman on horseback."

Everyone turned toward the mounted man, whose companions sat on their horses close by.

"Well, sir," said Jesse, "I reckon its important enough. The fact is, Mr. Dean, some fellows have been over to the bank and tied up the cashier, and if you all ain't too busy you might ride over and untie him. I've got to be going."

Dean thought this intruder was merely trying to annoy him. He continued with his speech. It was not long, though, before the outlaw's hint was acted upon. However, by that time the men were well out of town. A posse followed, half an hour later, but it returned with nothing.

Before entering Iowa for the second time, the James gang held up the St. Geneieve Savings Association in St. Geneieve, Missouri. The robbers had hoped for \$100,000, but had to settle for \$4,000 since most of the cash had been sent to the Merchant's Bank in St. Louis. After this robbery, Frank James and James Younger, who had been traveling west, returned to Jackson County, Missouri to meet with the other members of the gang. They informed Jesse of a big gold shipment that would be going from west to east by way of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railway in the third week of July. It is believed on July 12, 1873, the seven started from Jackson County enroute to Iowa.

Frank James and Cole Younger went to Omaha, Nebraska, to make inquiries as to the exact date that the gold shipment would be coming eastward. Somehow they found out that the gold shipment would be rolling through Adair, Iowa, on the evening of July 21. Council Bluffs, Iowa, became headquarters for the expedition.

The seven riders rode to a point a few miles west of Adair. Here was a sharp curve that presented an excellent opportunity for wrecking a train. A rail from the track was unspiked and left loose with a long rope tied to it. The end of the rope was held by a couple of the bandits some yards from the track.

At 8:30 p.m. on July 21, 1873, Engineer John Rafferty drove his train around that curve, unsuspecting of what lay ahead. Suddenly, Rafferty saw a rail move without reason.

The engineer quickly reversed the engine, but it was too late. The huge locomotive plunged off the track and turned on its side, crushing Mr. Rafferty to death. The fireman was scalded and bruised. Only the engine and tender were thrown from the track while the rest of the train, made up of two Pullman sleepers and five day coaches, stayed upright. Several passengers were bumped and bruised too, but fortunately not any of them seriously.

The train conductor did not understand what was going on. He thought that the train had derailed by some ordinary reason. Then the raiders came running at the train from both sides, pistols blazing.

Two outlaws boarded the express car and forced the messenger to open up the safe. They took all the money it contained, hardly more than \$3,000. This was quite a letdown since the robbers were expecting in the neighborhood of \$75,000 in gold. (Although it is disputed, it is believed that between 12 and 24 hours *later*, the train carrying the \$75,000 in gold went whizzing down the same rails. The James gang had robbed the wrong train.)

Because of the disappointment, the men then went to the passengers for their fair share. After picking up several hundred dollars in cash and a quantity in jewelry from them, the gang headed for Missouri.

News of the robbery was sent all over the United States and it even reached Europe. The people of the Midwest region of the United States were at such a high that it was sometime later before the James gang could come out of hiding. This event, not the first train robbery in the United States, was the first one west of the Mississippi River. The fame of Jesse James was at a new beginning, although his activities in Iowa were at an end. He and his gang carried on their escapades for nine more years without being touched by the law.

On April 3, 1882, Jesse James was killed in St. Joseph, Missouri, under the name of Thomas Howard. The deed was accomplished by a 21 year old youngster, Bob Ford. This murder for money ended a 15 year reign of outlawry unsurpassed by any other bandit.

Sources

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courtesy of Carl Breihan

Jesse James in 1871

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