

Some Good Old Stories

This story, like so many others in our history, have many versions that include some facts, some speculation and some outright sensationalism.

Tom Bell and Jack Philips

What we know for sure is that Tom Bell was an outlaw and was hung and Jack Philips, ran the stage house, the Mountaineer House on the Auburn-Folsom Road and was arrested for his connection with the gang. From there, however, the story gets murky. Much has been written about the Tom Bell Gang but the details vary wildly from one account to the next. So here is the story, the best it can be made out.

Tom Bell was born in Rome, Tennessee with the name Thomas J. Hodges. He came from a good family and had a college education and went to medical school. He joined the army and participated in the Mexican-American War. (Some accounts say this is where he picked up his medical knowledge and he never attended medical school.) After the war, he came west for the Gold Rush. One version is that he mined near Rough and Ready in Placer County, another account says he had a rich mine in Mariposa. Nonetheless, he was soon out of luck (some accounts says he gambled away a fortune) and began to steal horses and cattle. According to the many sources, Bell had a gang of either 7 or 30 men. One author speculates that he was the mastermind behind many robberies and sent out small groups of men to carry out the deeds. Thus the Tom Bell gang seemed to range across several counties at one time terrorizing the population. Eventually he was caught and sent to, some say San Quentin, others say Angel Island prison, while others say it was a prison boat anchored near Angel Island. He did escape and that story is also wildly different in accounts.

Meanwhile, back in Placer County, Jack Philips and his wife Kate were running the Mountaineer House, a popular inn and stage stop. Jack was said to have been a “Sydney Duck,” coming from a penal colony in Australia others say he was from London. He was known to harbor criminals in a ravine behind his Inn. Rattlesnake Dick is said to have sought shelter there as did the Bell Gang. Philips was said to “spot” potential targets for Bell to rob. In order to avoid any connection to the gang, the members used a signal; a bullet or pistol ball hanging from a string to identify themselves to Philips when Tom was not with them.

We do know that on August 12, 1856 Bell and his gang attempted to rob the Camptonville to Marysville stage. The stage was carrying over \$100,000 in gold bullion. (Some accounts say this is the first stage coach robbery in California, while others think it was not the very first) but the robbery went bad and the outlaws did not get the strong box and engaged in a fire fight that resulted in a woman passenger being shot through the head and two others wounded.

Several posses were formed and set out to capture the gang. According to some sources several members were caught and informed on Tom’s whereabouts. Some say it was near his ranch on the Stanislaus River, some say the San Joaquin, and another speculates that it was the South Yuba River. In any case he was eventually found by a posse of vigilantes on October 4, 1856 and hung from a tree near Firebaugh’s Ferry on the San Joaquin River. It is reported that he was given time to drink some liquor and write two letters, one to his mother and the other to Mrs. Hood. Mrs. Hood was either his love interest or an accomplice..

After Bell was hung, the law turned its attention to Jack Philips and arrested him. The remnant of the Placer County Court of Sessions file says he was arrested for robbery, other accounts say is was for harboring fugitives and receiving stolen property. He was sentenced to two years in San Quentin. What became of him or of Kate Philips is unknown.

Author’s note – I used a multitude of sources to try to put together this story. Our own file on the Jack Philips trial at the Placer County Court of Sessions is unfortunately missing! The most dependable account is probably William B. Seacrest’s California Desperadoes: Stories of Early California Outlaws in their Own Words. He uses the most primary sources. Also consulted: Joseph Jackson – Bad Company; Historical Atlas of the Outlaw West; Cheryl Stapp’s The Stagecoach Inn; The Outlaw Doc at ecvus41.com; Tahoe Weekly Oct. 16, 2016; Thompson & West pg. 150; McGuiresplace.net/Rice’s Crossing; Bill Wilson’s Gold and Schemes.

April McDonald-Loomis - 2016