

The Man Behind the Ballad

By Steve Hathcock

Sam was born in Mitchell County, Ind. on July 21, 1851. Orphaned shortly after birth, Sam and his brother and sister were raised by an uncle who had nine children of his own. That's a lot of mouths to feed and as was the custom at the time, Sam was expected to pull his weight in the fields and barns of his uncle's farm.

There was no time for schooling so Sam never received a formal education. Farm life did not sit well with him though, and on his 18th birthday he struck out on his own. Working his way down the Mississippi River, Sam settled in Rosedale, Miss. where he found a job in a saw mill.

For the next year, the young man worked long, hard, mind numbing hours, loading and unloading lumber to and from wagons or boxcars. But Sam was used to hard labor so he thrived. During this time he developed other skills, too, skills of a shadier nature. He became an expert card player, winning more often than not. He also learned to handle a pistol, a skill that would prove very useful in his later years.

In the late summer of 1870, Scott Mayes, a teamster, asked Sam to join him on a trip to Denton, Texas. The two left Rosedale on horseback for the cattle country and arrived in Denton in early fall.

For the winter, Sam worked on Bob Carruth's ranch southwest of town. But, finding cowboy life not up to his boyhood dreams, he went back to Denton and handled horses in the stables of the Lacy House Hotel. Later he worked for Sheriff William F. Egan, caring for livestock, cutting firewood and building fences. He also spent much of his time as a freighter, hauling dry goods between Denton and the railroad towns of Dallas and Sherman. Anyone knowing Sam at the time would

never suspect the black stain that would soon be attached to his name.

Sam's downfall actually started the day he bought a racing horse known as the Denton Mare. The horse was fast, winning race after race. Before long Sam quit his job with the Sheriff to race full time. He won most of his races in North Texas and later took his mare to the San Antonio area.

When his racing played out in 1876, he and a friend, Joel Collins, put together a small herd of longhorn cattle to take up the trail for several owners. When the drovers reached Dodge City they decided to trail the cattle farther north, where prices were higher.

After selling the herd and paying the hands, they had \$8,000 in their pockets. But instead of returning to Texas, where they owed for the cattle, they lost the money gambling in Ogallala, Neb. and in the Black Hills town of Deadwood, S.D., which was then enjoying a boom in gold mining.

Hard luck seemed to dog Sam. In 1877 he and Collins tried freighting, without success, so they decided to rob stagecoaches. On stolen horses they held up seven stages but gained little as the pickings were slim.

Next, the two decided to try their hand at train robbery. With four other men, they traveled to Big Springs, Neb., where, on the evening of Sept. 18, they held up an eastbound Union Pacific passenger train. Enraged at finding a measly \$450 in the "way safe," which contained only petty cash used in the day to day operations, the bandits pistol whipped the Express messenger in an effort to get him to open a second larger safe known as the "through safe."

This safe contained mail and several large payrolls. It had a time lock though, and could not be opened. Finally, the men broke into some wooden crates and discovered more than \$60,000 in freshly minted \$20 gold pieces being sent from the mint in San Francisco to an eastern bank. (In today's market, an 1877 double eagle minted in San Francisco can be worth from \$1,600 to \$3,500.)

The bandits divided the gold before going their separate ways. Two of the gang were shot and killed a week later. Within another week Collins was shot and killed.

Meanwhile, a fourth escaped to Canada. Sam and Jack Davis, disguised as farmers, made it back to Texas, where they formed a new outlaw band.

The gang held up two stagecoaches and, in the spring of 1878, robbed four trains within 25 miles of Dallas. They did not get much money, but the robberies aroused the citizenry and the bandits became the object of a spirited chase across North Texas by sheriff's posses and a special company of Texas Rangers headed by Junius Peak.

Sam eluded his pursuers until one of his gang, Jim Murphy, turned informer. As the band rode south, (their intentions were to rob a small bank in Round Rock, Texas) Murphy sent a message containing details of the plan to Maj. John B. Jones, commander of the Frontier Battalion of Texas Rangers. On July 19, Sam and his men became engaged in a gun battle in Round Rock, in which he was wounded. The next morning he was found lying helpless in a pasture north of town and was brought back to Round Rock. He died there on July 21, 1878, his 27th birthday. He was buried in a plain pine coffin in the cemetery at Round Rock. After his death, Sam's life was immortalized in song written by John Denton of Gainesville Texas; perhaps you have heard it sung around a campfire. It's called, "The Ballad of Sam Bass."