ROBBING THE STEAM CARS

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

FOLKLORE being what it is, it is only natural that most Americans believe that Jesse James and his goons invented train robbery, for Jesse, like Casey Jones and Buffalo Bill Cody, attracted a large number of biographers and balladists who have constantly added to his reputation these many years past.

Nothing could be further from the truth than the allegation that Jesse invented train robbery; and while only a man of great rashness would hazard to name America's first train robber, the first formal holdup of a string of steam cars was accomplished on October 6, 1866 by a crew of Hoosiers. The incident occurred on the Ohio & Mississippi Valley Railroad near Seymour, Jackson County, Indiana.

This first stickup was a simple job. In early evening, as the passenger train pulled out of Seymour, heading east, two masked men came into the express car from the coach just behind. They secured the messenger's keys, opened his safe, took out some $13,000, then pulled the bell cord to stop the train. They dumped another unopened safe out the door, leaped after it, and disappeared. It was a clean and successful operation. Somewhat later, and for sufficient reasons, two brothers named John and Simeon Reno were arrested for the crime. Still later they were hanged by vigilantes, and thus died the founding fathers of a typically American institution that was to flourish for the next half century and more.

With the death of the Reno boys there came a hiatus in train robbery; then, in 1870, it broke out like a rash, in Kentucky, in Tennessee, in Nevada. Pinkertons promptly began specializing in the new profession, and worked most ably, breaking up half a dozen gangs who had been operating on the railroads. They were even called to the effete East, for a thug held up and robbed an express car on the staid Boston & Albany, electrifying all New England, which had theretofore encountered its bandits vicariously in the pages of Mr. Beadle's Dime Library.

THE James and Younger gang did not enter the field of the steam cars until 1873, when the technique had been all but perfected. On July 21 they stopped a Rock Island train near Adair, Iowa. Folklore has it that the great Jesse was "kind to his mother and to little children." So, no doubt, he was; that is, except to little chil-

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dren who happened to be on the trains he and his thugs wrecked in order to rob. That was the way they stopped the Rock Island cars at Adair. As this particular train sped across the hot summer prairie that sultry evening, Engineer Rafferty, an excellent man, was at the throttle, his eye on the track, his heart glad that the grain harvest was to be good for the struggling farmers. The tall wheat and the towering corn fled by in the falling twilight, waving in the soft Iowa breeze. All seemed well ahead. The shining rails stretched out, true and level, beyond the beam of the great headlight. Then came a curve, and as they rounded it Rafferty's fireman saw a rope tauten, then a rail slide out of place. He shouted warning. Rafferty threw his engine into reverse, but there wasn't time. Over keeled the locomotive on its side, crushing poor Rafferty to death — leaving four orphans of Jesse James' making. Several cars also left the rails.

The Rock Island holdup was small, around $4000. Off and on the James and Younger gorillas continued to wreck and rob trains, sometimes shooting the cars full of holes just for the hell of it, and always displaying a complete and hideous disregard for human life. They did not meet their match until they tried to rob a bank in Northfield, Minnesota, a place not to be trifled with. The rustics of Northfield shot three of the yahoos dead in the street and wounded and captured three more. This affair really wrecked the gang. They were never the same after, even though they stuck up another Rock Island train in 1881, and brutally and needlessly shot and killed two members of the train crew. Less than a year later Bob Ford fired the shot that put Jesse and himself into folklore and made a nice customer for the morticians of St. Joseph, Missouri.

Several decades of journalists magnified Jesse James and, to a lesser extent, Cole Younger to such heroic size that even the professors came to hear of them. So Frank and Cole went into the *Dictionary of American Biography.* So, too, did Sam Bass, another robber of the steam cars, who, unlike Jesse, never tried to rationalize his thuggery but admitted he wanted money to spend on race horses, faro banks, painted whores and other necessities. Bass was never much of a train robber, but he died in Texas, his boots on, and some lad down there put him into what is unquestionably the most dreadful ballad ever written, all sixty verses of it. The sentimental and gun-loving Texans erected a neat gravestone to Sam with a characteristic epitaph: "A Brave Man Reposes Here: Why Was He Not True?" In the Lone Star State today, if one is not careful, one is likely to be shown as many as 146 different revolvers, each and all certified as being the gun last carried by the illiterate thug.

II

I REGRET exceedingly that neither Christopher Evans nor John Sontag rate a sketch in the classic *D.A.B.*

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above-mentioned. They belong there more than does Sam Bass and are as fitted for its chaste pages as James and Younger. Evans and Sontag had a deep and, to them and to many another, a very proper motivation for the robberies which they executed on the Southern Pacific Railroad and nowhere else. That is, if they ever committed any robberies at all. Theirs is indeed a curious case. Neither was ever convicted of robbery, and although I happen to believe they staged five bold and quite efficient stickups of S.P. trains, there is many a Californian today who will swear that the two men were hounded to prison or death merely because they opposed and agitated against a powerful railroad corporation. Whatever Evans and Sontag were or weren't, they were assuredly the most indestructible human beings I can think of — offhand or after long deliberation.

To COMPREHEND the cold, undying hate that appears to have powered Chris Evans, it is necessary to know a little something about the Southern Pacific Railroad of the last quarter of last century. The Road's policy was to create and maintain a monopoly in California and more, to exact from that monopoly "the utmost possible profit," as even a friendly historian put it.

In building or acquiring its lines southward from San Francisco through the San Joaquin Valley in the 1870s, the S.P. was subsidized by Federal land grants. The S.P. land office put on a campaign to get settlers on these lands, even before they had been surveyed and the titles validated. It announced to these settlers that as soon as the grant was legally clear, the settlers could buy their acres at from $2.50 to $10 an acre. The settlers swarmed in. They found a country more desert than anything else, but they did not give up; they went to work digging their own irrigation canals and building dams. Their labors changed the forlorn sterility into a kind of lush paradise.

When the S.P. at last received its titles to the grant, however, it offered the lands for sale, not at the agreed price but at twenty-five to forty dollars per acre. The long-suffering settlers were naturally alarmed and angry. They appealed to the Company. No answer. They formed a Settlers' Rights League and engaged lawyers to attack the Railroad's right to the titles. Their case was defeated in the local Federal courts, and the League appealed direct to the Interior Department. Interior favored the Railroad, which thereupon ordered off its lands all settlers who had not paid cash at S.P. prices.

The settlers refused to move. The Railroad sent a United States marshal and deputies into the Mussel Slough region to start dispossessing the farmers. Shooting began, and when the smoke cleared two officers and five farmers lay dead. But the evictions were carried out. Five farmers were sent to jail for the riot. The Settlers' Rights League, of which

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Chris Evans was a member, gave up the battle.

The fine acres Evans had brought to bloom, his house and barn and other improvements, all went to the Railroad. Impoverished as he was, with a sizable family to support, the poison of bitterness crept into the introspective soul of this ex-Vermonter. Nevertheless, he went to work with a will, grading grain, then becoming superintendent of grain warehouses in Goshen and Pixley. (Mark those names; they were soon to be in the news.) The record of his subsequent movements reads like this: After he left his warehouse job he went to Modesto where he opened a livery stable. (Mark the name of Modesto.) The stable soon burned down, with most of the animals in it. Evans gave up trying to be a businessman. Taking his family, he finally moved to Tulare County, on a small tract of rented land near Visalia.

Now as for John Sontag: where he and Evans met isn't known. Sontag was a tall, rugged man from Mankato, Minnesota, a sort of boomer railroadman, who had been badly injured while working for the Southern Pacific. He claimed that neglect of his injury, in the Railroad's hospital, had left him maimed for life. He walked with a limp. He was as bitter for this reason as Evans was for his lost acres.

Things began happening to Southern Pacific trains on the cloudy evening of February 22, 1889. As Number Seventeen pulled out of Pixley, two masked men climbed over the coal and into the cab. At point of gun the engineer stopped the train. The two robbers now shouted to the man in the express car to throw out the safe. Messenger Kelly refused. "Very well," said the shorter of the two robbers, a man about as tall as grain inspector Evans. He placed a charge of dynamite under the car. It lifted the car off the rails. But Kelly still refused to deliver the safe. Whereupon the robbers announced they would kill both engineer and fireman unless the safe came out. Out it came. Meanwhile the rest of the train crew had been milling around. One of the bandits shot and killed a trainman named Gabert. Then they ordered the train to move on. Taking the safe, which contained around $5000, the masked men disappeared in the brush.

Eyewitnesses agreed there were but two men, one short, one tall. No identification was made. No one in particular was suspected. Chris Evans, warehouse foreman, continued to grade the wheat and barley at Pixley. Almost a year later, this time near Goshen, where Evans inspected grain, another holdup of an S.P. train was accomplished by two men using virtually the same technique as at Pixley, except that this time no shooting occurred and the haul was a thumping $20,000. The Railroad's detectives converged on the scene, but found never a clue, nor any sympathy from citizens who jeered at them as hirelings of what was soon to be known in California as The Octopus.

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Early in February of 1891, old Number Seventeen was held up a second time, again near Pixley, but there was no profit, for Messenger C. C. Haswell defied the robbers and started shooting at them through the grating of his side door. The police had no clues, but somebody simply had to be arrested. Two goats were handy. They were Bill and Gratton Dalton, already notorious in the Midwest, who were apparently hiding out in the San Joaquin Valley for some Kansas crime.

Convicted on general principles, rather than on evidence, Grat Dalton was sent to jail for train robbery. While he was still in jail, the two S.P. robbers struck again, this time near Modesto — a town, perhaps not incidentally, to which Chris Evans had recently moved to open a livery stable. (To finish the story of the Daltons: Grat quietly walked out of his cell in one of the easiest jail deliveries of record, then went back to Kansas to die in the raid on Coffeyville little more than a year later.) The Modesto attack was much like the others. The bandits got away clean, though without any cash.

At about this time Evans' stable in Modesto burned, and he moved to Visalia. A year passed, then good old Number Seventeen was held up again, this time just out of Fresno. The routine was much the same, and the robbers went away with 125 pounds of silver coin.

By now detectives for Wells-Fargo, the express people, and for the Southern Pacific were desperate. They joined forces and in two days arrested more than fifty "suspects," among whom was a mouthy dude named George Sontag, who hung around Visalia poolhalls and saloons and liked to talk loudly about what a cruel monster the Southern Pacific was. Detective Will Smith of the S.P. questioned Sontag, who became confused and made contradictory statements about his brother, John. Learning that John was staying at the Chris Evans ranch near town, Detective Smith and Deputy Witty drove out there. They found both Evans and John Sontag, all right. When the smoke blew away Witty, badly hit, was down in the road in front of the house; Smith, mildly wounded, was running fast for town and more help; and Evans and John Sontag were getting into the officers' buggy and driving off.

III

California's biggest manhunt began right after Detective Smith, bleeding like a stuck hog, got back to Visalia. It was to last a year and a half. Some 3000 men were to engage in it, and it was to end only with the death of John Sontag, by then virtually weighted with lead, and the capture of Evans minus an eye, an arm, and scarred and pitted beyond recognition.

From the Evans home the two men drove toward the Sierras, hid, and permitted a large posse of mounted men to gallop by. Then the outlaws re-

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turned to the Evans ranch, enjoyed a substantial supper, and proceeded to load up the buggy with provisions for a long stay in the mountains. Just as they were about to leave, deputies came up. It was too dark to see much, but both sides started shooting and Deputy Beaver was killed. Evans and Sontag drove away into the hills.

MEANWHILE the mouthy George Sontag had been convicted, on almost no evidence whatever, of having had a part in the last train robbery. He was sent to Folsom Prison. At the instigation of her father, who was never long out of touch with his family, Eva Evans, oldest daughter, with some help from sympathizers, planned a prison delivery for George Sontag. Just how it was arranged isn't clear, but on June 27, 1893, Sontag and three other convicts who were working in the rock quarry of the prison, suddenly picked guns out of thin air and opened fire on their guards. The attempt looked good only for a moment. Guards shot them all down, killing all but Sontag who was crippled for life.

Meanwhile, too, Evans and John Sontag were holding out in fine shape. Once, maybe twice, they drove to the Evans home near Visalia, and once were put to the trouble of shooting their way through a cordon of officers who had surrounded the place. Mostly, though, they stayed in the hills, and there they lived very well, eating at logging camps, where no questions were asked, and with miners. The United States government and the Southern Pacific put a small army of marshals and deputies into the region. Two Indian trackers were engaged. So was a pack of bloodhounds. The woods were filled with armed men, at best a dangerous condition; and when the vigilantes used whiskey to spur their courage and their efforts, they took to shooting at each other. At least eleven deputies were wounded by other deputies. The S.P. and Wells, Fargo & Company combined to offer $10,000 reward for capture of the two men, and indicated they did not care if the men were alive at the time of capture.

At a place called Young's Cabin, Evans and Sontag were almost taken by a posse. They shot their way out of it. A bit later came a terrific battle at Stone Corral, where United States Marshal George Gard and a posse lay in ambush. The officers were well hidden in a cabin. As soon as Evans and Sontag came into range, one of the more nervous deputies opened fire. The two outlaws dropped down behind a pile of straw and manure and there for the next several hours put up a battle that was likened by excitable newspapermen to that of the Alamo.

First, Sontag got a bullet through his right arm. Then Evans' left arm was practically shot off, and hung uselessly. Two more big slugs got Sontag in his side. Another bullet went through his body, chest high. Now a charge of buckshot caught Evans fair in the head, tearing out his right eye.

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The two men continued to shoot whenever any officer showed any part of his body; bullets continued to thud into the ground around the besieged bandits.

Evans attempted to patch up his partner, now bleeding pretty much all over. Both men had to load and fire with one arm. Evans got another bullet, this time in his right shoulder. The outlaws' fire had not been very effective, only one of the officers being hit.

DARK came on. Gard and his men, knowing the outlaws to be wounded, prepared to wait out the night. Sontag got so weak he could not lift a hand; and as dusk deepened, Evans started to creep away into the nearby woods. The officers detected the move and all hands opened fire. Evans somehow managed to shoot back once, then disappeared. As for Sontag, he died slowly, painfully, on the straw, and at dawn, when the posse cautiously approached, they found him breathing his last, heaving blood at every breath. His body was taken to Visalia where a doctor said he had never seen a human being so riddled with lead.

Up in the hills, as soon as he had reached the cover of night and the woods, Evans plodded on. His clothing soaked with blood, both arms hanging at his sides, one of them mere strips of flesh and bone, and with three buckshot embedded in his head, he started a journey that Carl B. Glasscock, historian of outlaws, termed an "amazing instance of human endurance and will power." Stumbling through the dark of a mountain night, Evans traveled six miles through deep and rough woods to reach a cabin occupied by a Perkins family. From here, where he lay in bed, white from loss of blood, he sent a Perkins boy to Sheriff Kay in Visalia with word that he, Evans, was prepared to give himself up without more ado, on condition that the reward for his capture should go to Mrs. Evans. Officers came to carry him out. In jail his left arm was amputated. He was tried and found guilty, not of train robbery, but of the murder of one of the posse in a battle near Evans' home.

THE trial was held in Fresno, and right after its end came the big sensation that brought extras tumbling out of the presses all along the West Coast. EVANS FLEES JAIL, said the headlines. It was true, too. Before he could be moved to prison a gun was smuggled to him in the Fresno jail. With it he forced the jailer to let him out; then, with an accomplice named Ed Morrell, he took to the hills.

It was an amazing escape of California's favorite criminal-hero. The newspapers went into ecstasies. Farmers of the Mussell Slough region and, yes, the farmers everywhere along the S.P. lines let go whoops of joy. The chase began all over again. Again the hills crawled with deputies. Again the hounds bayed. Handicapped with an artificial arm, blind in one eye, the outlaw seemingly had no difficulty keeping out of the hands of the posses.

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The officers apparently gave up the idea of ever taking Evans by force. So they sent a faked message through an intermediary to the effect that one of Evans' daughters was seriously ill and was pleading to see her father.

It worked. Evans came home at once and there was captured by a posse large enough to have stormed a fort.

Chris Evans went to Folsom Prison in 1894 to serve a life sentence. In 1911 he was paroled by Governor Hiram Johnson, a man who had no great love for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Evans and family moved to Portland, Oregon, where he lived quietly and spent much time on a bench in the Park Blocks, often in company with an old acquaintance, Frank Coulter, whom Evans had known in the Modesto days many years before. "Evans," the late Mr. Coulter told me, "was a soft-spoken and genial sort of man. He had plenty of intelligence. It was hard for me to look at him, to hear him talk, and to think that this was the man who had successfully defied the Southern Pacific and the state of California — at that time almost the same thing — for so many years, and took on the United States government to boot. No other man than Evans required such an army to take him, and Evans, remember, was taken only by fakery of the worst sort — playing on his love for his family. I came to know the man well and to like and respect him. He never so much as intimated he had ever robbed a train."

Evans died in 1917, in Portland, the last of the old school of great train robbers. (Cole Younger had died two years before.) He remains pretty much unknown to this day, except on the Pacific Coast and to experts in the history of robbers and robbery. I could wish that the editors of the *Dictionary of American Biography* would hear of him.

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Can You Answer These Questions About

CANCER?

Q. Are we winning or losing the war on cancer?

A. The news is good! The death rate from cancer of the stomach, skin, and mouth is going down. Among women the rate is being reduced for *all* forms of cancer.

Q. How is medical science attacking cancer?

A. Doctors are treating more patients in the early stages of cancer when the chances of cure are greatest. Intensive studies are now being carried on to determine the causes of cancer and to develop new methods of diagnosis and treatment. These include research with hormones and experiments with radio-active substances and certain chemical compounds.

Q. Is there any new "sure cure" for cancer?

A. No! Medical scientists say that there are still only two ways of curing cancer: complete *removal* by surgery or complete *destruction* by X-rays or radium rays. There is *no other way* known at present.

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Q. What should *everyone* do about cancer?

A. First, learn the *danger signals*. Second, when such warnings appear, *get medical advice immediately*. It is estimated that 30 to 50 percent of the deaths from cancer today might have been prevented by earlier recognition and prompt treatment.

Q. What are cancer's "danger signals"

1. Any unusual lump or thickening, especially in the breast. 2. Any irregular or unexplained bleeding. 3. A sore that does not heal, particularly about the mouth, tongue, or lips. 4. Noticeable changes in a mole or wart. 5. Loss of appetite or continued unexplained indigestion. 6. Any persistent changes in normal habits of elimination.

Important note: These signals do *not necessarily* mean cancer. In fact, 88 out of 100 women who came to one cancer clinic proved *not* to have the disease. However, the signals do indicate that something is wrong which you should have checked by your physician. His examination will reassure you if cancer is not present, or, if it is, will permit prompt treatment.

To learn more about cancer, send for Metropolitan's free booklet, 106-L, "There Is Something YOU Can Do About Cancer."

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A LAUREL WREATH FOR SIMEON FORD

By Stanley Walker

In the old days in New York, before the time of paid public speakers, before the coming of the cheap wise-crackers and professional gag men, before ghost writers, before the invention of the ubiquitous microphone, and before rubberized, broiled chicken became popular, the art of after-dinner speaking was justly esteemed as a high and gentlemanly art. One of the ablest practitioners thereof was Simeon Ford, a hotelkeeper of funereal countenance, who was one of the sliest and wisest and wittiest of men.

He said so many good things that it is difficult to select the best of them. But there was one remark which I always cherished, the one in which he deprecated his ability as a forensic artist. He said: "I never was any good as an after-dinner speaker. It was just that everybody was so astounded that a hotelkeeper could get up and say a few sentences in English that could be understood. And I suppose it was pretty marvelous, at that. I mean a hotelkeeper being able to talk anything but gibberish."

And then there was another line which he pulled in a speech at a farewell dinner given in his honor at the old Waldorf-Astoria in 1914. Mr. Ford had just sold his Grand Union Hotel on Forty-second Street for $3,000,000; this hotel, he said, "had been the haven for so many hayseeds who came across the street from the Grand Central Terminal because they were terrified of hack drivers." The fine old hotel was to be torn down to make way for a new subway station. Mr. Ford, perceiving that evil days were on their way, and remembering something of the past glories of his hotel, said: "Simeon Ford may have sinned, but he never charged the public for bread and butter."

Simeon Ford retired from hotelkeeping and public speaking at the same time, and went to live in Rye, up on Long Island Sound. Though he kept in touch with a few old friends, the world of oratory and wit saw him no more, and a new generation quickly

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