

# CAUGHT AT LAST

"Old Bill" Miner Had Been Bandit For Nearly Forty Years.

## RECKLESS DESPERADO

Escapes From a Life Sentence and at Sixty-five Years of Age Holds Up a Railroad Train as Fearlessly as in His Earlier Days He Robbed Stages in the Lonely Mountain.

Old Bill Miner, the notorious train-robber, is again in prison. In all probability he will spend the rest of his life there, but he has shown himself so nimble in escaping that it would be unwise to make any confident predictions. Once before he received a life sentence, but he was soon free. However, he is now sixty-five years old and cannot be so adroit as he was when he began his career of crime forty-two years ago, although what he has lost in agility he has made up in the cunning that comes of experience.

Miner's most recent crime, for which he is now in jail at Gainsville, Ga., was the hold-up of train No. 36 on the Southern Railroad near White Sulphur, Hall County, Ga., early on February 18. It is forty-two years since Miner's first prison experience, which was in the San Quentin Jail in California, and that, like all those that followed, was for the same offense. He began with stage coaches, he ends with railway trains.

Just when "Old Bill" Miner began to break the law no one but he himself knows. Far back in the 60's drivers of stage coaches making trips back and forth across the State of California began to come in from their lonely mountain journeys with cash boxes rifled of their contents, sometimes a horse short, and in every case with the same story.

A lonely spot on the road, sometimes in the day time, sometimes at night, a single highwayman and the magic words, "Hands up!" The tale never varied. For want of a better name the lone highwayman came to be known far and wide as California Billy.

The exploits of "California Billy" continued for several years. All efforts at his capture were in vain. Many posses hunted the lone outlaw, tempted by offers of generous rewards. But he seemed to bear a charmed life.

It was not until 1869 that he was caught. The driver of a stage that ran in from the hills back of Sacramento jumped from his seat in front of the office early one morning in the spring of that year and breathlessly told him he had been held up but a few hours before. The strong box of the stage had been heavy with gold dust sent in by miners. Never before had "California Billy" dared to attack a coach so close to a town. Always before he had chosen a stage further up in the mountains, where many hours must elapse before a posse could even start after him.

In twenty minutes from the time the driver told his story a heavy armed posse was riding hard back over the trail. It was not difficult to pick up traces of the bandit; before nightfall his hunters were close upon him, and as the sun sank behind the hills they surrounded him. The posse expected a fight. To their surprise the outlaw offered no resistance, but surrendered at their command. Miner could fight when a fight would do any good, but like a good poker player who knows when to lay down his cards, he knew when fighting would be folly. The same craft he showed in picking out the time and place to hold up a stage he displayed in picking out the time and place to fight. This was neither.

In triumph the posse took their captive into Sacramento. His trial was speedy and less than a week after his capture he began serving a term in San Quentin prison. While Miner, or "California Billy" as he was still called, was in prison not a single stage coach was held up in that part of California.

When Miner was released he left California as rapidly as possible. He had become too well known in that State. The wider country of Colorado offered greater attractions. In this new field of operations his methods were the same as in the old. Time after time did a lone bandit, masked and heavily armed, stop the stage coaches that ran through the mountains. For more than ten years Miner had been pursuing his profession as highwayman, and only once in all those years had been caught.

In 1878 Miner, single-handed, held up the Del Norte coach and compelled the driver and several passengers to stand to one side while he rifled the money box of \$3,000 in currency. It was such a haul as Miner had been coveting for some time. Although almost a thousand men sought him, he escaped with his booty and got quickly out of the State. He had long cherished a desire to see something of the country, so he went straight to Chicago, where he bought himself several suits of clothes, a handsome gold watch and chain and several other articles of jewelry. The smaller towns of Michigan attracted him and for several months he posed as a wealthy California mining man. He spent money lavishly, and wherever he stayed he made himself one of the best known and most popular men in town. His popularity with women amounted to triumph. But at last his money gave out and Miner was face to face with the choice of working or returning to the West and resuming his life as a bandit. He chose the latter.

The short time he spent in Michigan, however, wrought a great change in Miner's methods. He no longer went about his work single handed and he became more willing

to take a chance. Miner had never organized a band. Now, however, he sought out one or two companions and became the leader of a little band of skillful outlaws.

Of all the men he met in Michigan Miner found only one whose spirit matched his own. This was a farm hand named Staaton T. Jones. When Miner returned to the West Jones went with him.

Early in the spring of 1881 Miner and Jones again stopped the Del Norte stage and cleaned out the money chest and got away to the fastnesses of the mountains. Although he was masked, the driver of the stage was positive in his identification of Miner. Posses immediately started after the two bandits, but Miner's cunning was greater than that of the officers and the chase was fruitless.

Soon after the second Del Norte stage hold-up a third desperado joined Miner and Jones. His name was James East and his career was as short as it was violent.

Having eluded the deputy sheriffs who were seeking them Miner and his two companions started on horseback for California. They had stolen their horses. For their living they depended upon the farmers. Up through Marshall's Pass toward Saguache the three bandits made their way, stealing fresh horses whenever the ones they were riding became worn out and robbing systematically as they rode, and leaving a wake of furious farmers, stockmen and miners.

So bold was their trip and so widespread their depredations that the entire country was aroused. A posse of determined men was organized and in the hills near Villa Grove a pitched battle was fought, which resulted in the capture of all three outlaws.

Life imprisonment stared the captives in the face. Their captors were determined that they should be brought to justice. The nearest prison stout enough to hold them securely was back at Del Norte, and for there they started. To make escape impossible the three men were tied together with balling wire and thrown into a buckboard wagon. All day long the cavalcade marched back through the country over which the outlaws had previously ridden roughshod. The first night's camp was to be at Wagon Wheel Gap.

It was a little after 1 o'clock in the morning. The outlaws, still bound together with the heavy wire, were supposed to be asleep. Their guards, heavily armed, sat surrounding them, rifles within reach. So far as the members of the posse knew the captives had not an opportunity to exchange a single word beyond the hearing of at least one of the guards. Suddenly the quiet of the camp was broken. The three huddled figures of the stage robbers sprang to their feet. Silently and unnoticely they had broken the wire that bound them, secured a single revolver and were prepared to fight for their freedom or die in the attempt.

The fight was sharp and brief. Completely thrown off their guard, the members of the posse were slow to realize what was taking place. Before they quite regained their faculties two of their number lay wounded on the ground and the outlaws were disappearing in the darkness.

Miner and Jones escaped. East was recaptured, taken to Del Norte and sent to jail for a long term.

Having lost one of his gang, Miner added another to his party and on November 7, 1881, reappeared in California after an absence of twelve years, held up the stage that ran from Sonora, Tuolumne County, to Milton, and secured \$32,000 in cash and gold dust.

Two of the gang were quickly caught; Miner managed to elude the officers for several weeks, but was finally run to earth. The trial was brief and justice severe. The three robbers were sent to San Quentin prison for twenty-five years.

Out of jail no more desperate character lived than "Old Bill" Miner. In prison he was a model. It was through no fault of his that he aroused the enmity of another convict, Bill Hicks, who almost killed him.

It was 1901, twenty years later, before "Old Bill" Miner could again breathe the air of a free man. By good behavior he cut his sentence five years, and the authorities believed that when he walked out of San Quentin his days as an outlaw were ended.

It was a different world which Miner found when he left prison. The stage coach had given way to the railroad. Where there had been wilderness in the days when the name "California Billy" brought terror to the hearts of stage drivers and travelers, there was now thickly settled country. The authorities believed that time, if nothing else, had brought to a close the days of the bandit. For a year or two it seemed that such was the case.

But "Old Bill" Miner was merely adopting himself to the new circumstances. There were no more stage coaches to be robbed, it was true, but the same man that had sent cold chills up the back of the stage driver would bring the grip of terror to the heart of the engineer, once he was brought to raze down its threatening barrel. Thus reasoned "Old Bill" Miner, erstwhile stage robber, as he thought out his plans to become a train robber.

Toward the close of 1903 the authorities of Oregon were startled by the hold-up of an express train on the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company's line at Milepost No. 21, near Corbett, Ore. The hold-up was masked, of slight build, gray-haired and evidently old-timer.

Rewards amounting to \$1,300 offered, but the train robber was not captured.

A year later the Canadian Pacific's transcontinental express was stopped at Mission Junction, British Columbia, by a lone bandit, who with cold and deliberate nerve compelled

the express messenger to open the safe, which contained close to \$10,000. This he took and got away quickly.

So daring has been the robbery that the authorities recognized the imperative necessity of capturing its perpetrator. The Dominion Government offered a reward of \$5,000 for him. This was increased to \$12,800 by the railroad and provincial authorities. There was no doubt as to the identity of the masked bandit. His methods and his cool daring identified him as none other than "Old Bill" Miner.

With a small fortune offered as a price on his head, Miner vanished. Plentifully supplied with money as a result of his two train robberies, it was not difficult for him to live.

Less than two years later, on May 10, 1905, at 11 o'clock in the night, as the transcontinental express of the Canadian Pacific Railroad was pulling up the heavy grade just east of Durrer, British Columbia, the engineer was startled by the command "Hands up!" Looking around he saw a small masked man climbing over the tender, keeping him covered in the mean time with a revolver. The engineer did not parley.

Obedient to the command, he uncoupled the express car and took it a mile up the road. The masked robber, who was none other than "Old Bill" Miner, kept him, the fireman and the express messenger covered with two revolvers, while two pals broke open the car and rifled it of its contents.

A posse organized to pursue the bandits soon found Miner's companions near the scene of the robbery. Miner himself escaped to the islands of the coast, but was hunted down. They found him well entrenched. He fought as long as there was a chance for escape, then, finding himself surrounded, he surrendered.

The trial was a memorable one in British Columbia. The evidence was conclusive. Although Miner claimed his name was Edwards, the Pinkertons quickly established his identity, and upon his conviction he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

"Old Bill" Miner was sixty when he became No. 980 and was enrolled as a lifer on the books of the penitentiary at New Westminster. Life apparently held little more in store for him. The authorities believed that at last he had run his race.

Little did they reckon on Miner's astuteness. With two companions who with him were employed in the brickyard of the prison he began to plan for escape almost on the first day of his incarceration. Patiently and persistently the three worked, and on August 8, 1907, the three escaped through a tunnel they had dug beneath the wall surrounding the brickyard.

Rewards were offered for Miner. His photograph was sent broadcast. His photograph adorned the walls of every police station and detective office in the country. Neither pains nor expense were spared in the search for him, but all efforts were unavailing.

"Old Bill" Miner disappeared for more than three years. How he employed these years is not known. He was heard from first last February. It was but a poor description the engineer and conductor of the Southern railroad train that was held up in Georgia could give of the men who had participated in the hold-up. All but one of the men, the train men declared, were obviously young, but this one seemed to be older. He behaved as if he was the head of the gang. He was about 5 feet 8 inches in height, weight about 135 pounds, had gray hair and a perceptible squint.

The warning to look out for such a man went into the police headquarters of many cities. When it reached the offices of the Pinkertons the same words were uttered without a moment's hesitation.

"It's 'Old Bill' Miner."

And it was. Three days after the hold-up a posse of police came upon three of the bandits camped in the woods near Gainesville. The arrival of the police took the outlaws completely by surprise, and before they could offer any resistance they were manacled.

British Columbia has asked Georgia to give up Miner in order that he may be taken back to Canada to serve out his life sentence. Georgia, however, is more likely to hold its prisoner. Justice there will be the same as in British Columbia. "Old Bill" Miner is doomed to be sentenced to spend the rest of his days in jail. To keep him there till the end of his days will be a more difficult matter.

Now that his career is about to close, many stories of the methods Miner employed during all the years he was an outlaw are being told. Daring as he was, utterly devoid of nerves as he seemed to be, desperate in a pinch, ready to fight whenever there was a chance and equally ready to surrender if there seemed no chance, Miner never posed as a "bad man." Much of his success in eluding arrest between hold-ups was due to the quiet way in which he lived.

And though he was quick and unerring with rifle and revolver he never shot to kill. To wound a pursuer was all he ever sought to do. His determination that murder should never be charged to his account was his principal reason when a young man for always working alone.

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