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Major. John B. Jones, Frontier Battalion

## Sam Bass and Round Rock

By Mike Whittington

Sam Bass came from Indiana, but he died in Texas from bullet wounds received while trying to escape from the Texas Rangers, something not unusual in the 1870s. All over Texas, there were similar incidents of bad men being hunted by Rangers. This occurrence, however,

ended a series of train robberies and a trail of crimes that reached from Nebraska to Texas.

Sam Bass was born near Mitchell, Indiana, on July 21, 1851. His parents died while he was young, and he was brought up by an uncle. He left home at the age of eighteen and spent a year in Rosedale, Mississippi, where he became proficient at playing cards and handling guns.

Sam ended up in Denton, Texas, at the end of 1870. There he worked for Sheriff W. F. Eagan as a farmhand and teamster until 1874. He then acquired a little sorrel mare, called the Denton Mare. This was a good racehorse and earned him enough money to stop working for the sheriff in March of the next year.

Sam left Denton in 1875 to go racing against the Indian ponies at Fort Sill, Indian Territory. In December, he went to San Antonio and stayed a few months.

In August 1876, Sam joined up with Joel Collins to drive a herd of cattle to the northern markets. They steered the animals to Kansas, where they then shipped them to Sidney, Nebraska. From there, they drove the cattle into the Black Hills to the gold town of Deadwood. They invested the money they made from the cattle into horses, wagons, and goods freighted between Deadwood and Dodge City.

When the weather made freighting impossible, Sam and Joe invested in a "pleasure resort" offering cards, liquor, and women. While in that business, they also put money into a mine. This made them broke, so in order to recoup their losses, they went into the stagecoach business.

This new stagecoach business consisted of robbing seven of them. Sam and Joe were joined by two more men, Jack Davis and a man called Nixon, believed to be a Canadian. Davis came from California and brought news of gold being shipped over the Union Pacific to the east.

Robbing trains meant that more men were needed, so Bill Heffridge and James Berry were brought into the gang. The group then selected a water station at Big Spring, Nebraska, as their target. On September 19, at 10 o'clock, they robbed the train of 3,000 twenty-dollar gold pieces marked with the date 1877. The sextet split into pairs and scattered to the four winds to make their escape.

On September 26, a Sheriff Bardsley and ten U.S. troops killed Joel Collins and Bill Heffridge and recovered \$25,000. They also shot and captured James Berry close to his home near Mexico, Missouri. Berry had \$2,840 on him. Under questioning, he gave the names of the others involved in the robbery. His partner Nixon went to Chicago, and it was presumed that he continued on to Canada, for he was never found.

Sam Bass and Jack Davis headed south, hiding their identities by travelling in a hack they had purchased. They stashed their gold under their small amount of luggage. They even travelled a part of the route south with some troops out looking for them! Jack Davis separated from Bass and seemingly disappeared. Bass returned to Denton with his share of the money and made out that it was from his mining in the Black Hills.[1]

Bass now returned to robbing trains, starting with the Texas Central on February 22, 1878. He held up another train in March and two in April, all within fifty days and twenty miles of Dallas. According to the *Galveston News* of May 5, 1878, the members of the gang were Sam Bass, Seabourne Barnes, Thomas Spotswood, Arkansas Johnson, Henry Underwood, Sam Pipes, Frank Jackson, and Albert Herndon. Bass and Barnes took part in all the robberies, Jackson in three, Johnson in two, and the others in one.

On April 12, General Steele sent a telegram to Major John B. Jones ordering him to take steps to apprehend the bandits. Jones arrived in Dallas on April 14. Since there were no Rangers in the area, he was ordered to organize a detachment as part of Company B. To head the group, he elected June Peak, a local man who knew the area well and was city marshal and city recorder at the time. Peak was given the rank of lieutenant in the Frontier Battalion, and he was authorized to raise a force of thirty men. [2] On June 1, he was made a captain of Company B and remained in Ranger service for several years. Once the force had been mustered, the unit set about arresting everyone suspected of taking part in the train robberies or harbouring the robbers. Those arrested were sent to Tyler, 100 miles east of Dallas, and were held there with the cooperation of U.S. Marshal Stillwell H. Russell and Judge Duval of Tyler.

In the meantime, Captain Peak and his men had caught up with Sam Bass and his gang at Salt Creek in Wise County. Peak's men, along with a sheriff's posse, killed Arkansas Johnson in the ensuing gunfight. They also captured the horses of the others, forcing them to escape on foot. The leeing robbers stole some more horses, enabling them to ride off back to Denton County. [3]

After this fight, the Rangers returned to Dallas on May 17 and seemed to give up the chase. Their force was reduced to fifteen men, and they were ordered to stay in the Dallas area. Why would this be?

The answer lies in the occurrences at Tyler, where some of the men who had been arrested were to be brought to trial on May 21. One of these was James W. Murphy, who had been arrested for harbouring the robbers. Before he was to come to trial, he asked to meet Major Jones because he had a proposition to make which might interest him. In a sworn statement made after Bass's

death, we get an explanation of what he proposed:

*I hereby certify that on or about the 21st of May 1878, whilst in Tyler . . . for trial as an accomplice of Sam Bass and other train robbers I proposed to Maj. Jno. B. Jones through Walter Johnson and Capt. June Peak that I thought I could assist in the capture of the Bass party by joining them and putting them in a position where they could be captured. The Major then sent for me to come to his room where I had a long talk with him in the presence of Capt. Peak and Walter Johnson Deputy U.S. Marshall, after which he told me to wait there until he could talk with Judge Evans U.S. District Attorney. . . . He returned in half an hour and said he had made an arrangement by which he could have the case against me dismissed. The agreement was that I should go off secretly the next morning before Court met when it would be announced that I had run away, and forfeiture would be taken on my bond, but the District Attorney would protect my bondsmen. [4]*

When Bass and his men returned from the Salt Creek fight, Murphy met up with them. For a while, he had a hard time convincing Bass that he was not a spy, as had been rumoured. It seems that gang member Frank Jackson, Murphy's cousin, interceded for him and prevented him from being shot. Nevertheless, Bass and the gang kept a close eye on Murphy, and he could not get information of their whereabouts to Major Jones from June 11 until July 13. On that date, he managed to get a note to William Everhart, the sheriff of Grayson County, to pass on to the Rangers. He let them know that Sam Bass, Seabourne Barnes, Frank Jackson, and he were heading toward Round Rock either to rob a train or a bank. At Georgetown, Murphy had another chance to write a note, in which he begged the Rangers to get to Round Rock and stop the robbery. [5]

When Major Jones got Murphy's message, he only had a few Rangers in Dallas. The nearest company was that of Lieutenant Reynolds at San Saba. Jones gave orders for Corporal Wilson, one of the Rangers in Dallas, to ride at once to San Saba and instruct Reynolds to make for Round Rock immediately. This meant that Wilson had to ride 65 miles to Lampasas. From there, he had to get a stage to San Saba, a further 50 miles, and then ride to the camp of Lieutenant Reynolds outside the town. Wilson arrived on the evening of July 18 after a journey of 105 miles in just 36 hours.

Meanwhile, Bass and his men had made their way to Old Round Rock and camped in the cemetery. Bass had decided to rob the bank on Saturday.

Lieutenant Reynolds detailed eight men to ride with him on the hunt for Bass and his men: 1st Sergeant C. L. Nevill; 2nd Sergeant Henry McGee; 2nd Corporal J. B. Gillett; Privates Abe Anglin, Dave Ligon, Bill Derrick; and John R. and W. L. Banister. Reynolds was unwell, and he had to ride in a hack pulled by two of the Rangers' pack mules. The men had to ride 110 miles to get to Round Rock, and they arrived on Friday, July 19, between 1:00 and 2:00 in the afternoon. [6]

Major Jones was already in Round Rock, having arrived on July 18 by train. He sent two telegrams from there to railroad agents in Hearne and Austin, warning against possible train robbers. Three of the Dallas Rangers—Dick Ware, Chris Connor, and George Harrell—were also there, along with former Ranger Morris Moore, now a peace officer in Travis County. Deputy Sheriff Grimes of Williamson County and another former Ranger, Albert Highsmith,

were also informed about the planned robbery.

Sam Bass decided to take one more look at the bank in Round Rock on Friday and left Old Round Rock with Seabourne Barnes and Frank Jackson. Murphy stayed behind to get fodder for the horses from the local feed store. When Bass and his two companions arrived in Round Rock, they first went to the Kopperal Store (Gillett spells it "Copperal"), which was next to the bank. They were seen by Deputy Grimes and Morris Moore, who thought one of them was armed and followed them into the store. Grimes asked Barnes if he was carrying a gun. This got Grimes shot dead and Moore shot in the lungs. The only injury to the gang was a gunshot wound in Bass's hand.

Bass, Barnes, and Jackson left the store on the run, with the Rangers coming out from their hiding places. In the ensuing gunfight, Barnes was shot dead with a shot to the head. Bass was shot in the hip, where the bullet split two cartridges on his belt and mushroomed into his kidneys, destroying them.

Weakened and losing blood fast, Bass had trouble mounting his horse. Jackson, under fire, helped Bass onto his horse and held him while they raced out of town. Despite all the gunfire, Jackson escaped without being hit. The two outlaws headed for Old Round Rock, but Bass was too weak to carry on. After convincing Jackson to make good his escape, Bass lay down under a tree to try to recover his strength. Jackson was never seen again.

Minutes after Bass made his escape, Lieutenant Reynolds came into town to report to Major Jones. The Rangers were resting in Old Round Rock, expecting the raid to take place on the following day. Early Saturday morning, the Rangers took up the search for Bass and Jackson. They found Bass where he had stopped the day before, soaked in bloody bandages and lying under a tree. He identified himself to them, saying he was the man they were looking for and asking them not to shoot.

Bass was transported into Round Rock. His right kidney had been shattered by the bullet that had entered his hip, and a Dr. Cochran tended to him in order to make his last hours as comfortable as possible. Despite the questioning of Major Jones, Bass told no details of the other men who took part in his robberies. He said it "was agin his profession" to reveal such things.

Sam Bass died on Sunday, July 21, 1878, on his twenty-seventh birthday. He was buried in the cemetery at Round Rock next to Seabourne Barnes.

The Rangers had prevented another robbery and killed two of the robbers. There are some curious facts that go with this story.

### **Ira Aten**

Fifteen-year-old Ira Aten, along with his brother Frank and his father Austin C. Aten, rode into Round Rock on the Saturday that Bass was caught. They had come to collect post and get provisions. Austin Aten was a preacher, and he was asked to visit Bass in order to see if Bass wanted to "put things right with the Lord" before he died. Aten said he would deny nobody the right to prayer, and he went into the room where Bass lay. Ira, being too young to enter, had to wait outside. He told the Rangers he would become one of them when he was old enough, and sure enough, he did. He joined the Texas Rangers when he was eighteen, and he had a long and successful career with them.



What about some of the other men that took part in that fight?

### Frank Jackson

Gang member Frank Jackson, the only Round Rock survivor from the gang, was one of six children born to Robert and Phoebe Jackson on June 10, 1856. Both his parents died when he was still young. His father Robert, who was a blacksmith, died in 1863, and his mother died a year later. Frank, his three brothers, and his two sisters were brought up by a maternal uncle, Joseph Barker. After living in Arkansas for a time, Jackson arrived in Denton along with his brothers and sisters, and they were taken in by various people. Jackson stayed with Dr. R. S. Ross. He later moved in with Ben F. Key, his brother-in-law, and led a fairly honest life.

Jackson's restlessness got him into trouble, however, in the autumn of 1876. He shot a black man named Henry Goodall, with whom he had a dispute over a horse. Frank was never indicted or prosecuted for this, and the fact that he got away with this crime soon led him to join up with Sam Bass. When his cousin James Murphy betrayed Sam and the gang to the Rangers, it appears that Jackson must have had contact with him after the Round Rock incident. In the archives in Austin, there is a letter from him to Major Jones dated August 27, 1878, in which he says:

*Well, Major Jones, I received a message from Frank Jackson this morning, he wants to no of me if thare is any thing he can do to get his self reprevd he ses that he will lay the plan to catch Underwood and all the rest of the crowd if I will have him turned loose I told hin I would write to you to see what could be done he ses he was persuaded into it and is tired of that kind of life and will do anything in the world to get reprevd and I am sadisfied that him and his brother can work up a job on the hole crowd let me hear from you soon.*

Jackson's grammar was not the best. This letter was written on paper with the letterhead, "T. W. Daugherty, Banker and Exchange Dealer," and we do not know Jones's response. According to the writings of Walter Prescott Webb, it was rumoured that Jackson lived out his natural lifetime on a ranch in New Mexico.

### Dick Ware

The Ranger credited with shooting Seabourne Barnes and mortally wounding Bass was Dick Ware. His full name was Richard Clayton Ware, and he was born in Rome, Georgia, on November 11, 1851. He came to Texas in 1870 and joined the Rangers on April 1, 1876. On that fateful day in Round Rock, he had been in the barbershop when the shooting started. He still had foam on his face when he rushed out and shot Barnes. For a while, there was some question as to who shot Barnes, but Bass is supposed to have verified that it was the man with shaving foam on his face who did it. Some say it was Ranger Connors, but Connors himself gave the credit to Ware. He also said that Ware gave Bass the fatal shot in the kidneys.

Ware took up the post of sheriff in the newly named Mitchell County after leaving the Rangers for this job around 1881. He held this post for eleven years until he was beaten at the polls in 1892. On May 11, 1893, he was appointed a U.S. marshal of the western district of Texas and stayed in that position until January 26, 1898. Ware died in Fort Worth on June 25, 1902.

## Jim Murphy

Jim Murphy lived in constant fear of reprisals after his betrayal of the Bass Gang in Round Rock. He would often ask to sleep in jail in order to have some security. In the end, it was too much for him. He committed suicide on June 9, 1879.

A further mention of the Round Rock incident appears in the March 1924 issue of the *Frontier Times*. There, a Dr. A. B. Reeves claims to be a State Ranger and says he was at Round Rock when Sam Bass came to rob the bank. He declares that he knew Bass personally and was involved in the fight that took place there. I'll let him tell his own story:

*I was detailed to go into the Post office and to signal by firing if the outlaw came into the building. Sure enough, Bass did go in shortly and asked for mail, getting several letters. As he turned to leave I fired into the floor, Bass ran out and the fight began, both side firing rapidly. When I had only one shot left Bass spied me and with an oath turned on me and we fired at the same time, my shot missing, but Bass's shot hit me on the side of the nose, passed through my mouth and downward and came out under my arm knocking me over. Bass then sprang on his horse and was making good his retreat when sergeant Dick Ware, resting his gun on my horse fired at long range and I saw the dust fly up from the back of the coat of the fleeing outlaw, who rode on three more miles further, keeping his seat by holding on with both hands to the horn of the saddle.*

*Finally unable to stay in the saddle, he dismounted and lay under a tree where he was found and taken to a nearby house, where he expired after several hours suffering which he bore with the stoicism of an Indian. Bass was a very brave man and would have made an ideal Ranger and a good citizen if his energies had been properly directed. I knew Bass well having often seen him in Dallas county, where he was employed as a teamster and I had talked with him many times. When Bass saw me fighting his gang at Round Rock he became enraged and said "So you know me do you? Well I'll get you anyway" Badly wounded as I was, and weak from loss of blood, I was detailed to guard Bass in his last hours, a pallet being made for me on the floor in front of the door of the room where the outlaw chief was dying, and where I lay gun by my side watching to see that Bass did not escape even then.*

This report is full of faults, and Reeves must have been a blowhard. He got the date wrong, and he made the mistake of having Bass get his mail at the post office. Bass would not have done that because it was not known that he was in the area until Murphy informed the Rangers. And who would have fired a shot to warn others that a bandit was in the room? How could Reeves have seen the parting shot of Ware if he was as wounded as he says? Also, Ware was not a sergeant until later in his career.

The faults in this report were corrected in the April 1924 *Frontier Times* (vol. 1 no. 7). Sergeant Gillett, who was an honorary captain at the time and took part in the hunt for Sam Bass on the Saturday following the shooting, stated the following:

*We are in receipt of Letter from Captain J. B. Gillett, whose*

*version of the killing of Bass appeared in Frontier Times a short time ago, and inasmuch as it is our desire to "Keep the record straight" we take the liberty of publishing Captain Gillett's letter, the truthfulness of which cannot be questioned, as he was right there and certainly knows what he is talking about. Furthermore, if Dr. Reeves was wounded in this fight, this is the first printed account of it we have ever seen. Captain Gillett's letter follows: "Dear Mr. Hunter: - I notice in Frontier Times of March as article on page 23 copied from the Williamson County Sun, in which is stated that Dr. A. B. Reeves was shot by Sam Bass. There is not one word of truth in that statement. Dr. A.B. Reeves may have been a Ranger at some time, but he was not one of Reynolds Rangers, and they are the only men that participated in the Bass fight at Round Rock in July, 1878, and not in 1879 as Dr. Reeves states. I am the only man now living who was at the capture of Sam Bass the next day after he was shot. Lt. Reynolds has died since my book was published and now I am the only one left of that scout of Rangers that captured Bass.*

There were songs written about Bass, and two books were written about his life. As we see from the story of Dr. Reeves, there were also plenty of people trying to make names for themselves on the strength of Bass's notoriety.

The Rangers were the ones who brought an end to the list of crimes committed by Bass. If we are to believe Ira Aten's autobiography, Bass was even instrumental in inspiring him to join the Rangers. Ira's two brothers Cal and Eddie also joined in later years: Cal in 1888 and Eddie in 1892. Ira urged Eddie to join because his behaviour and his wild ways were causing concern to his brothers.

### Notes

1. These facts are found in two books published about Sam Bass's life after his death. One was published in Dallas and the other in Denton.
2. From a letter from Jones to Peak, held in the archives of the *Texas Adjutant General's Papers*, dated May 29, 1878.
3. This was reported to Major Jones by Captain Peak on May 14, 1878, and the telegram is part of the *Adjutant General's Papers* in the Texas State Archives.
4. This statement was made on July 23 and sworn on July 24. Accompanying it was a memorandum dated May 21, 1878, which was signed by U.S. District Attorney A. J. Evans. In it, Evans agreed to protect Murphy's bondsmen and to dismiss his case if he was instrumental in the arrest of any one of five robbers.
5. This is also part of the statement made in Dallas on July 23.
6. J. B. Gillett names the Rangers in his book, *Six Years with the Texas Rangers*, and notes the time they arrived in Old Round Rock.

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