

Butch Cassidy and the Castle Gate Robbery • 1897 •

Butch Cassidy hailed from Circleville, Utah, and few there had anything to say against him. Women and children appreciated his polite manner, and his generosity was legendary. The son of a Jack (non-practicing) Mormon, the outlaw seldom drank in excess. He mostly stayed out of folks' way, a trait greatly appreciated in rural Utah.

Butch Cassidy may have started his outlaw career as a cattle rustler, but few took note. Many central Utah ranchers saw little harm in picking up stray, unbranded calves from the unfenced range and taking them home for branding. Things just worked that way in rural Utah in the late 1800s.

True, Butch was a wanted man. His reputation as a bank and train robber in Wyoming followed him everywhere. But other than a bit of cattle rustling, he had always behaved himself in his home state of Utah.

So, few paid any attention when Cassidy rode into the town of Castle Gate on the outskirts of Price, Utah, in April 1897. No one said a thing about him hanging around the saloon for a week, riding his spirited gray horse to the station to meet every train. Why worry about a pleasant stranger when the coal company

made unscheduled payroll deliveries to prevent holdups?

Cassidy was patient and lucky. On one trip to the station, he noticed that certain bags the men heaved from the train were weighing them down quite a bit. Before the men could take the bags up the outside stairs to the Pleasant Valley Coal Company, Butch pulled his gun on them. He told them to put down the sacks and put up their hands. One man resisted and was hit over the head by Butch's sidekick, Elza Lay. Another did as he was told while the third man dropped his bag and dove into a store downstairs.

Butch picked up two sacks and a satchel, tossing some of the loot to Lay. His horse balked at carrying the heavy bags, but Butch spurred him on. Lay and a third robber followed as he rode away. Outside of town, two back-up gang members joined them.

The robbery had been a cinch. The many witnesses included a hundred men who were waiting in town for their paychecks, but efforts to halt the robbery were halfhearted. Someone fired a few ineffectual shots after them, but no one gave chase. Butch had cut the telegraph lines to the town, so word didn't get to the law until the gang had a good head start. Their plan was impeccable, and included a relay point where fresh horses waited to help cover the sixty miles between Price and Robber's Roost, the gang's hideout.

Historians disagree on how the gang actually escaped. Author Charles Kelly believes Butch divided the money among several horsemen going in different directions to confuse pursuers. Historian Pearl Baker claims Butch and his accomplices rode straight south through the canyon country to Robber's Roost.

Robber's Roost was in rugged, remote terrain with box canyons which are still difficult to explore today. Even when a posse came after them, Butch and his gang were relatively safe. The Roost was a perfect place to avoid lawmen such as Joe Meeks (brother of Butch's gang member, Bob Meeks) who led one posse. Anyone who tried to reach the gang from any direction had to cross deserts that had little water, the Dirty Devil River with its

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steep canyon walls, or the Henry Mountains, the last range in the United States to be mapped. Parts of the gang's escape route passed over hard sandstone that held no hoof prints.

Other outlaws used Robber's Roost as a hideout, but when Cassidy returned to Utah from Wyoming, he was the undisputed leader of the Roost. With his generosity and good manners, Butch cultivated friends in the territory around the hideout. Stories say he bought dinner from widows using gold pieces. Cassidy bragged that he never robbed people—only banks and railroads—and that he had never shot anyone.

Butch felt it was his duty to keep his gang safe and provided for them. After the Castle Gate holdup, he sent gang members to Price and Green River to buy food and ammunition. Their main supply point, however, was the tiny, dusty little hamlet of Hanksville, in the middle of nowhere. Charley Gibbons ran a store there where Cassidy liked to shop. When Butch was seventeen years old, he had worked for Charley as a cowhand.

Though Robber's Roost was a perfect place to escape the law, it had a fault. The only nightlife it offered were poker games and coyote serenades. In July, the gang finally decided to spend their money on fun over the border in Baggs, Wyoming. By the time they were through eating, drinking, and shooting up the place, they had become legends. Folks say they paid the saloon owner for his trouble, and he was able to open a fancy place in Rawlins a short time later.

Being on the run all the time was hard on Cassidy. Some said he never meant to become an outlaw; it wasn't in his nature. After Elza Lay was wounded and sentenced to prison and Bob Meeks lost his leg trying to escape from prison, Cassidy made an attempt to go straight. He visited a prominent Salt Lake City attorney and tried to work out a deal with Utah Governor Heber Wells. In exchange for clemency, he wanted a real job protecting railroads from being robbed. The deal fell through, and Butch went back to robbing trains.

Legend has it that Butch lost his life in a shootout in South

America. He went to Bolivia with the Sundance Kid and Etta Pace, first trying to go straight and eventually robbing more trains. The movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, starring Paul Newman as Butch and Robert Redford as the Kid, portrays a version of the famous outlaws' final moments.

But many insist that Butch escaped that jam. His friends and family say he survived and returned to the United States, changed his name to William Phillips, married, and worked as a draftsman. They claim he wrote a book of his life called *The Bandit Invincible* and tried to sell it to publishers and a movie company. Eventually, they say, he died of cancer.

While his time as an outlaw in Utah was brief, Cassidy's legend adds a colorful chapter to the state's history. Many in Utah say they saw and talked to him after 1902, but no one ever turned him in. The friendships he had formed kept him free throughout his life.