

FIRST DRAFT

No ordinary thief

Castle Gate payroll robbery put brash Butch Cassidy among the outlaw elite

When the Pleasant Valley Coal Mine in Castle Gate, Utah, was robbed of more than \$7,000 on April 21, 1897, it was labeled the boldest theft in Utah history. With good reason.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

1889, when he joined Matt Warner and Tom McCarty to rob the San Miguel Valley Bank in Telluride. McCarty planned the successful holdup and taught Cassidy the importance of having multiple escape routes and confederates with relays of fresh horses.

However, it was the alleged theft of horses, which Cassidy claimed he had purchased legally, that landed him in the Wyoming State Prison in 1894. He was pardoned in January 1896 after promising to commit no more crimes in Wyoming.

Soon afterward, Cassidy learned that Matt Warner was facing trial on murder charges. Warner was then married and trying to go straight. He'd been hired to protect mining claims near Vernal, Utah. But when he and another man confronted would-be claim jumpers, a gun battle ensued. Two of the claim jumpers were killed and the third injured.

Cassidy decided to raise money for Warner's defense — by robbing a bank. On Aug. 13, 1896, Butch, Elzy and a third man named Bob Meeks robbed the bank at Montpelier, Idaho. They made off with more than \$7,165.

The Montpelier robbery was big news in the West, but it didn't garner the same notoriety for Butch Cassidy that the Castle Gate robbery did eight months later.

It was one month before a Salt Lake City newspaper identified Cassidy and Lay as participants in the heist. They weren't captured.

So, Butch and Elzy spent much of the winter of 1896-1897 in Robbers Roost, with Elzy's wife Maude and a second unidentified woman. There, they planned the Castle Gate job.

They "knew it would require careful planning down to the smallest detail," wrote Butch's great-great nephew, Bill Betensen. "They trained horses for their escape during their stay at Robbers Roost."

In March, Butch got ranch work south of Price. Butch, Elzy and others began visiting Price, Helper and Castle Gate, running their horses up and down the canyon, telling people they were training them for upcoming horse races. So, no one was surprised to see them the day of the robbery.

Immediately after the heist, Carpenter commandeered a locomotive at Castle Gate, and with a few well-armed men, steamed down the tracks in pursuit of the outlaws. But Butch and Elzy hid behind a section house as the train passed.

Cassidy's reputation grew, while authorities grew frustrated. One year after the Castle Gate robbery, newspapers around the country described Cassidy as the leader of a gang of 500 "bloodthirsty" outlaws, while governors of Western states conferred on capturing him.

The first claim was a wild exaggeration. The Wild Bunch, led by Cassidy, never had more than two dozen loosely affiliated members.

But the second claim was accurate. In 1898, the governors of Utah, Wyoming and Colorado agreed on a plan to eliminate outlaws who hid out in Robbers Roost, the Hole in the Wall in Wyoming and Brown's Park in Colorado.

But that news was overshadowed in May of 1898 with startling reports that Cassidy had been killed by lawmen near Thompson Springs, Utah, along with an outlaw named Joe Walker.

The reports were wrong. When a Wyoming sheriff who knew Butch examined the body, he declared it wasn't Cassidy.

Butch took the news with good humor. Through an acquaintance he complimented Utah Gov. Heber M. Wells "for his good judgment in refusing



Photograph taken at the Wyoming State Penitentiary about 1895 and mounted on a card from Pinkerton's National Detective Agency with information about Robert LeRoy Parker, giving his aliases as George Cassady and "Butch" Cassady.

to pay the state reward for his (Butch's) apprehension," the Salt Lake Tribune reported in August.

Although some accounts claim Cassidy was involved in numerous crimes across the West, he probably participated in no more than a half-dozen major thefts. He may have helped plan others.

By early 1901, he and Harry Longabaugh, aka the Sundance Kid, were on their way to South America.

By then, Elzy Lay was in prison in New Mexico, after participating in a train robbery and shootout in which a sheriff was killed. He was released from prison in 1905 and went straight. He died in California in 1934.

Matt Warner also spent time in prison for the shootings near Vernal. Like Lay, he went straight after his release, and even became town marshal in Price, where he died in 1938.

Butch and Sundance were either killed during a shootout with Bolivian authorities in 1908, or they miraculously escaped death. Either way, the Cassidy mystique continued to grow.

Sources: "Butch Cassidy, My Uncle," by Bill Betenson; "The Outlaw Trail: The Story of Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch," by Charles Kelly; "The Castle Gate Payroll Robbery," by Joel Frandsen, WOLA Journal, Winter, 2007; "The Wild Bunch: Wild, but not much of a bunch," by Daniel Buck and Anne Meadows, True West Magazine, November-December, 2002; Historic newspapers at www.newspapers.com and https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu.

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Two men stole the mine payroll at midday, while more than 100 people stood nearby. The two bandits raced down the canyon toward Price, Utah, and galloped into infamy.

The next day, Butch Cassidy was named as one of the robbers by mine paymaster E. L. Carpenter, who had looked directly at the outlaw over the barrel of Cassidy's gun.

The audacity of the payroll theft cemented Cassidy's notoriety.

"This one event elevated Butch to national prominence and eventually to folk hero's status," wrote author Joel Frandsen.

With gun drawn, Cassidy confronted Carpenter and his employee at the base of the stairway to their second-floor office as they arrived with bags of silver and gold. He snatched a bag of gold from Carpenter, and picked up a bag of silver that the other man dropped when Cassidy hit him with his pistol.

Cassidy initially had trouble mounting his skittish mare, but with the aid of his companion, Elzy Lay, he was quickly on her back. The pair then galloped down the canyon, and were out of range before the shocked bystanders grabbed guns to shoot.

They made it safely to the outlaw stronghold known as Robbers Roost, east of Hanksville, Utah.

The Ogden Daily Standard, on April 22, 1897, called it, "One of the most daring robberies that ever took place in the West."

Daring it was, but it was also meticulously planned. Swift horses were obtained, then trained to handle the expected commotion. Relays of fresh horses were provided at key locations along the escape route. There was even a northern escape plan, in case the southern route was blocked.

When members of the two posse chasing the outlaws ended up shooting at each other before they figured out they were on the same side, it added to the perception the outlaws had outwitted authorities.

Cassidy was born Robert LeRoy Parker in Beaver, Utah, in 1866. He spent his youth around Circleville, Utah, where he became a top hand at breaking horses and wrangling cattle.

William Ellsworth "Elzy" (sometimes spelled "Elza") Lay was born in Ohio in 1869, but raised in north-eastern Colorado. He met Cassidy in the late 1880s around Brown's Park in northwestern Colorado.

Cassidy had rustled horses and cattle, but he graduated to major crime in August



The headline and first few paragraphs of a story that appeared in the Washington, D.C. Bee newspaper depicting Butch Cassidy as the leader of a massive gang of criminals.



This article from newspapers.com from the Salt Lake Herald on May 29, 1900, shows that Butch Cassidy's criminal reputation was alive and well at the turn of the century. It was later believed that Harvey Logan, aka Kid Curry, led the outlaws who did the shooting, and not Cassidy.

Small towns reclaim abandoned ski areas as nonprofits

By BRITTANY PETERSON The Associated Press

CUCCHARA — It's been the longest wait, their whole lives, in fact. But Race Lessar and Landen Ozzello are finally right where they want to be, on a snowy slope close to home, molding snow into a ski jump.

Their local ski mountain just reopened.

"I'm happy that it's open for at least one year," Lessar said. It opened as a nonprofit, and that may be the key. "I didn't know that there was a hope," he said.

His ties to the mountain are so close, he's practically named after it. His dad used to race here and named his son for what brought him joy. Chad Lessar first skied on hand-me-down gear and later worked summers at a nearby ranch to earn money for more nimble racing equipment.

"We've never been very rich," Chad said of Huerfano, one of the poorest counties in the state. "It's nice to see a little area

open up on the cheap," he said. The ski runs here are short, but the fact it's affordable just might be enough to keep it up and running.

Under the gaze of the imposing Spanish Peaks in southern Colorado, the 50-acre Parker-Fitzgerald Cuchara Mountain Park is the story of so many American ski areas, only the community was determined to change the script.

Ski resorts boomed in the 70s and 80s, emerging even in areas that didn't have the climate or workers to sustain them long-term. First-time ski resort owners took on debt and quickly filed for bankruptcy after a bad snow season. Ownerships transferred numerous times before resorts calcified into ghost towns.

But some communities are now finding a niche, offering an alternative to endless lift lines and soaring ticket prices. They're reopening, several as nonprofits, offering a mom-and-pop experience at a far lower cost than corpo-

rate-owned resorts.

"It's not necessarily about drawing overnight or out-of-town guests, but about bringing positive economic impact and a source of physical and mental wellness for the community," said Adrienne Isaac, marketing director for the National Ski Areas Association.

A DELAYED REOPENING

Cuchara shuttered in 2000 after years of mismanagement, unpredictable snow and bankruptcies. It was dead for 16 years, when a group of stubborn locals with fond memories of the mountain came together. When the last owner put it up for sale, the Cuchara Foundation gave the county a down payment and helped raise the remaining funds.

Going into this season, the work of readying was in full swing. Volunteers kept holding fundraisers. There were donation jars. Inheriting snowmaking equipment and lifts may sound good, said Ken Clayton, a board member at Panadero Ski Corporation, a sister nonprofit

that runs operations. But both required expensive repairs, and then the refurbished chairlift didn't even pass inspection. On top of that, it was a warm, dry winter. As the season wore on, the volunteers began to lose hope of reopening. "It just wasn't going to happen because we didn't have the snow," Clayton said.

Finally, when cold air and snowstorms arrived in late winter, Cuchara's maintenance director had an idea. They welded old school bus seats to a car-hauling trailer and hitched it to a snowcat, a tractor with snow treads, then put out the word they would be towing people up the mountain.

And the community showed up.

GROWING ACCESS

There's no guidebook for how to reopen an abandoned ski area, especially as a nonprofit, so some community groups are making common cause, and learning from each other.

Will Pirkey had heard of a nonprofit ski area

six hundred miles north in Wyoming, and sought them out as soon as he joined the volunteer board. The Antelope Butte Foundation had been running a nonprofit ski area in northern Wyoming since 2018 after a closure that lasted 15 years.

For \$320, a child can receive a season pass to the Wyoming mountain, rentals, and four lessons. The foundation covers families who can't afford the cost. They also host classes for area schools that introduce kids to cross country and downhill skiing.

Greybull Middle School Principal Cadance Wipplinger used to chaperone students to ski areas when she taught in a Montana town with a robust outdoor industry. But her students now mainly come from mining, railroad, and farming families with fewer resources.

"A high percentage of our kids would not be getting the opportunity if we weren't taking them," Wipplinger said. "It opens up their world a little bit."

A FUTURE WITH SHORTER, WEIRDER WINTERS

In southeast Vermont, irregular snow has long plagued stand-alone Mount Ascutney. A local nonprofit reopened Ascutney after five years of closure. A few seasons ago, a storm dumped several feet of snow on the slopes, but a week later, rain washed it away.

So ski areas are dealing with climate risk by offering year-round activities from archery to concerts and weddings. But in a quiet Colorado town like La Veta, with limited outdoor winter activities and a population of fewer than 1,000, there is just no substitute yet for snow sports.

On a late Sunday afternoon in March, energy pulses at the Mountain Mermaid Brewing Co. Pints sling across the counter to construction workers wearing ski pants, while teenagers — Lessar and his pals — nosh chicken barbecue pizza and play Battleship.