

# High Fives were jinxed desperadoes

William T. Christian, alias "Black Jack," and his younger brother Robert seemed born to a life of crime.

After they killed a deputy sheriff in Oklahoma in the mid-1890s, they fled to the lawless New Mexico Territory. There they found three companions of similar ilk and formed an outlaw gang called the High Fives, after a popular card game of the day. One of the band was George Musgrave, a cold-blooded killer.

In the mayhem department, Will Christian, or Black Jack, was a standout. He led his gang in the robbing of trains, stagecoaches, stores and post offices. U.S. Marshal Creighton Foraker of Santa Fe termed him "one of the most murderous desperadoes ever to defy federal authority."

Maybe that was so, but it didn't necessarily mean that the High Fives grew rich from their crimes. The gang in fact seemed jinxed. Time and again they got little or nothing in their hold-ups.

For example, upon robbing the train station at Separ, a whistle stop on the main line between El Paso and Tucson, they came away with exactly \$250. That was scarcely enough to keep a bandit in tobacco and bullets.

Along in 1897, a posse surrounded in High Fivers in the Animas Mountains near the Arizona line and in the ensuing shootout two of the gang fell. But the Christian brothers and Musgrave got away — just barely.

That narrow squeak convinced Black Jack that their days as outlaws were numbered. Therefore, he planned one last try to rob a train, in hopes of getting traveling money that would see them safely to Mexico.

Late on a Saturday evening of Nov. 6, the eastbound Santa Fe train pulled into the Grants station. A couple of passengers got off and one boarded. The engineer went to the loading dock while the fireman, Henry Abel, remained in the cab. Suddenly, he was confronted by two men carrying revolvers and rifles who ordered him to start up the engine.

About a mile out of town, the gunmen ordered Abel to stop while they disconnected the last half of the train. That left them with the engine, express car and passenger car. These they had the fireman move another two miles where they halted.

At gunpoint, the fireman was led back to the locked door of the express car. That was quickly blown open by a charge of black powder. While the acrid smoke still hung thick in the air, the robbers told Henry Abel to go in first.

As he explained it later, the fireman thought his end had come. He was sure the express messenger C.C. Lord was wait-



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ing just inside the door and would cut loose with his shotgun at the first person who entered.

But the fireman found to his surprise that the car was empty. It turned out that the messenger had earlier slipped back to the passenger car and hid out in fear the bandits would force him to open the safe.

They did not need his services, however, being well supplied with powder. Another charge opened a ten-inch hole in the heavy steel Wells Fargo safe. The eager robbers scooped out bundles of currency and handfuls of gold and silver coins, which they deposited in sugar sacks brought for that purpose.

Their work complete, one of the men fished a pint of whiskey from his pocket and took a long swig before handing the bottle to his accomplice. Then he thanked Henry Abel for his help and promised to mail him a thousand dollars. As it happened, he wasn't to get the chance.

When the robbery was complete, the leader remarked to Abel: "If they want to know who did this, tell them it was Black Jack." Then he and his companion dropped off the car and started walking toward the lava beds. In the sacks slung over their shoulders, they carried off \$100,000 in loot.

A short distance from the tracks, the pair met a third man who was waiting with saddle horses and a pack mule loaded with food and whiskey. All three put spurs to their mounts and headed south into the broken wilderness of the Malpais. Down near the far edge of the lava beds, they made camp in a remote hollow and went to drinking and quarreling over their loot.

It was George Musgrave, we believe, who pulled his gun and shot Black Jack Christian in the head. He and Robert Christian then agreed to hide the money deep in a lava crevice with the intention of returning for it when the furor died down.

The two men escaped into Chihuahua, where Robert vanishes from history. Of Musgrave, it is recorded that he fled to South America, dying there in 1947.

And what of the train loot left in the lava beds? Men have searched for it through the years, but to this day no trace of the money has ever come to light.

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