by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist and Dennis Myers, Journalist

This has become the best known instance of fantasy overtaking reality in Nevada. The story goes that Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, and several companions robbed the First National Bank in Winnemucca on September 19, 1900. The story became so popular after the movie *But ch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*
(1969) made the obscure outlaws both heroes that the town began holding an annual Butch Cassidy Days celebration.

Then in the fall of 1982 the myth was challenged by the *Humboldt Historian*, which published a carefully researched article by Lee Berk. Berk, who had unearthed papers of banker George Nixon that contained new evidence, had replowed all the old ground--bank records, investigative files, newspaper accounts--and discovered that although Wild Bunch members pulled the heist (including the Sundance Kid), Butch was not among them.

For instance, Nixon had negatively identified Cassidy. That is, after viewing photographs of the Wild Bunch outlaws, Nixon had said positively that Cassidy was not among the robbers. A web of additional evidence also supported the Berk thesis, such as placing Cassidy six hundred miles from Winnemucca robbing a passenger train in Tipton, Wyoming on August 29, 1900, twenty-one days before the Winnemuca holdup. The bank robbers were known to have camped

in a field north of Winnemucca ten days before the holdup. If Cassidy had committed both crimes, it would have entailed making the six hundred mile ride from Tipton to Winnemucca in eleven days. "I figured that Cassidy couldn't have gotten there," according to Berk. "He had to go on horseback."

Where the story originated, no one knows for sure, but it may have been the work of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, which, after the robbery, issued two wanted cards listing the robbery among Butch's and Sundance's credits. According to an entry for Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in *The Mythical West: An Encyclopedia of Legend, Lore, and Popular Culture* (2001), "the majority of the gang's crimes... took place between 1896 and 1901. During that period, those in which both Butch and Sundance actively participated included no more than two train robberies and one bank job." The Winnemucca bank robbery is not listed as the one bank job.

The myth includes a photograph of Wild Bunch members sent from Fort Worth, Texas, to the First National Bank a few months after the robbery. An unsigned note thanked the bank for the cash. The photo of five men included Harry Longabaugh (the Sundance Kid) and Robert Leroy Parker (Butch Cassidy). The presumption was that everyone in the photo was associated with the Winnemucca robbery. Yet, only three of the gang entered the bank and robbed it of $32,640, giving birth to a legend.

In fact it was the Pinkertons who sent George Nixon (later a U.S. Senator from Nevada) the photograph more than five months after the robbery. A Wells Fargo detective in Fort Worth found the photo at the Swartz photography studio and recognized the Wild Bunch gang. Wells Fargo sent a copy of the photo to the Pinkertons, who were investigating the robbery on behalf of the American Bankers Association.

Note: For further reading on this subject, a well written synopsis of the "Great Winnemucca Bank Robbery" by David Toll can be found in the May/June 1983 issue of Nevada Magazine.

Photo courtesy of the Denver Public Library Western History Collection.

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