

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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The first train robbery on the Pacific Slope took place just west of Reno near what is today the River Inn," wrote Nevada Historian Phil Earl in his "This Was Nevada" series. Earlier the general area had been known as Hunter's Crossing, a Truckee River crossing on the emigrant trail, a post office from 1867 to 1870, and a connecting point to and from Virginia City and the Comstock mines. Samuel Clemens (AKA "Mark Twain"), in traveling from San Francisco to Virginia City during his second and last Nevada lecture tour, switched from a Central Pacific train to a stagecoach at Hunter's Crossing early on April 24, 1868.

Later names included Mayberry's Crossing; nearby was Granite (Lawton's) Hot Springs. Today greater Reno encompasses this area. However when the train robbery was pulled off in the wee hours of November 5, 1870, the fledgling town of Reno was some six miles to the east. Contemporary newspaper accounts did not call the heist the Verdi train robbery, rather it was noted that the holdup was "between Reno and Verdi," or "near Verdi." So why has the train robbery been called the Verdi train robbery when Verdi is some four miles west of the actual robbery site?

Maybe the earliest reference to the "Verdi train robbery" in a secondary source is found in editor Myron Angel's History of Nevada, published in 1881. The probable reason for the convenient naming is that the bandits boarded Central Pacific No. 1 when the Ogden, Utah, bound train slowed down to pass through the small lumber town of Verdi.

According to Earl, the train had left Oakland carrying \$41,800 in \$20 gold pieces and \$8,800 in silver bars. One of the five robbers, A. J. "Jack" Davis, earlier in the day had received a telegram from an accomplice in San Francisco informing him of the valuable cargo, the payroll for Gold Hill's richest property the Yellow Jacket Mine. Following receipt of the message, the gang rode out to a site about a mile northwest of Hunter's Crossing after sunset and built a rock and tie barrier across the railroad tracks.

Quietly boarding the train around midnight in Verdi, the robbers hijacked the engine and express car just east of town, setting the rest of the train adrift. The engineer was ordered to proceed to the barricade further down the line toward Hunter's Station. There the gang looted the express car, stuffed the money and bullion into their saddlebags, and rode off into the darkness. Before going their separate ways, Jack Davis and his fellow gang members split the booty at a quarry near Granite Hot Springs.

Wells Fargo, the Central Pacific Railroad, and the State of Nevada, Earl tells us, posted a combined reward of \$40,000. The five robbers and three accomplices were quickly captured. Six of the men were convicted of the train robbery and served time in the State Prison. Less than a year later, four of the men, minus ringleader Jack Davis, joined in a bloody prison break. Three of them were soon apprehended, however one remained at-large for five years. While most of the loot was recovered, people still hunt in the vicinity of the robbery for the 150 missing gold coins now estimated to be worth over \$500,000.

Logic seemingly dictates that later stories referred to the heist as the Verdi train robbery because Verdi was the closest town to where the holdup occurred, and probably because the gang initiated the robbery while the train was passing through the community. Despite the fact that the settlement of Hunter's Crossing has long ago disappeared into obscurity, we know the first train robbery on the Pacific Slope--some even claim "the West's first train robbery"-- could have just as easily, and maybe more accurately, been called, the "Hunter's Crossing train robbery."

For a more detailed account of "The Verdi Train Robbery," including illustrations, see Phil Earl's

article in *This Was Nevada* (Reno: Nevada Historical Society, 1986), pp. 149-53; and Terri Springer-Farley, "The Great Train Robbery," *The Historical Nevada Magazine* (Carson City: Nevada Magazine, 1998), pp. 54-61).

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

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