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Jesse James in Clark County

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Bridges home in Hollywood, where Jesse James is believed to have visited

Jesse James in Clark County

Jesse Woodson James of Missouri is one of our nation's most famous outlaws. He has been characterized as a bandit, gang leader, bank robber, train robber, and even murderer. The most famous member of the James-Younger Gang was a celebrity when he was alive, and became a truly legendary figure after his death. The James –Younger Gang robbed a stage in the Hot Springs area and, according to local legend, made an appearance in Clark County as well.

Jesse and his brother Frank James were Confederate guerrillas during the Civil War. After the war was over, as members of various gangs they robbed banks, stagecoaches, and trains. The James brothers were most active from about 1866 until 1876, when an attempted robbery of a bank in Minnesota resulted in the capture or death of several gang members. The brothers continued in crime for several years, but were under increasing pressure from law enforcement. Then, in 1882, Jesse was killed by a member of his own gang.

In 1874, Jesse and his brother Frank, along with the Younger brothers (Cole and Bob) held up the Malvern-to-Hot Springs stagecoach. It is not clear exactly where the robbery took place, but one report places it on the Malvern Road near Sulphur Creek, about five miles from Hot Springs. Nearby was the road that went to Potash Sulphur Springs, then a popular resort with a hotel as well as “springs.” After the theft, a posse went in pursuit, but never found the culprits.

Perhaps the James-Younger Gang retreated through Clark County with their loot. Local lore has it that Jesse James and his band of marauders once spent a night in the “Rock House,” a natural cave in the bank of the Caddo River, about 200 yards off Military Road.

Also, historian Farrar Newberry related this story as a part of the distinctive heritage of Clark County's Hollywood community: "*A stranger, late of an evening drove up to the home of W.D. Bridges and asked for lodging, offering to pay. As was the custom in that day, he was welcomed and pay declined. During the evening before bedtime, the visitor laid his brace of handsome pistols on the floor beside his chair, but constantly kept his eye on them. He left early the next morning, having expressed his deep appreciation for the hospitality extended to him. That day's newspaper contained a picture of the bandit and a write-up of a robbery at or near Hot Springs. And "Uncle Billy" Bridges realized too late that he had entertained the notorious outlaw, Jesse James!*" The house where James stayed was most recently the home of the late Margie Ballew.