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THE TROWBRIDGE GANG

1842

PRESENTED TO

Dr. Ray Granade

History Research Seminar

MARTY SARTIN

DECEMBER 2, 1980

The Trowbridge Gang

Counterfeiting is the unlawful production of any article in imitation of another, especially the imitation of money. Many states encountered problems with counterfeiters during the 1830s and 1840s. Arkansas was not without her gangs of counterfeiters who worked in the cities of Little Rock, Van Buren and Lewisburg. These gangs copied not only paper money but coins, corporation notes and bank notes.

One of the more notorious gangs in Arkansas was the Trowbridge Gang led by Samuel G. Trowbridge. Not much is known about Trowbridge except that he came to Arkansas from Chicago, Illinois. He leased the American Hotel, later to become the Anthony House, and all its furniture in April, 1840. Trowbridge also managed to make friends with many newcomers from abroad whose favorite pastimes seemed to be frequenting hotels and barrooms.¹

The State Legislature met in 1838 and amended the city charter. This act allowed Little Rock to issue corporation notes of small denominations. Samuel Trowbridge and his gang began producing copies of these notes in 1841.

¹William F. Pope, Early Days in Arkansas (Little Rock: Gazette Publishing Company) p. 255.

By 1842 Arkansas, especially Little Rock and Van Buren, witnessed a sharp increase in bogus money. On June 1, 1842, the Arkansas Gazette published an article warning citizens of the possible circulation of spurious three dollar Little Rock Corporation Notes issued in 1841. A young man from Lewisburg named Hamilton tried to pass some of these notes at a store where he was trading. Hamilton claimed he received the money from a Conway citizen in payment for a keelboat.²

The notes were so well reproduced that it was difficult to distinguish between the genuine and the spurious notes. The only way to tell the difference was,

...by comparing the length-- the former being nearly one-fourth of an inch longer than the latter. The ink used in filling up the spurious is considerably lighter than that in the genuine note. The three signatures are so well imitated, that it is difficult to detect them, except on the closest scrutiny. Those we have seen are dated '6 April 1841.³

Two weeks later, on June 15, the Gazette carried a letter to the editor written by Earl Buxton, who had purchased the keelboat from Hamilton. Buxton denied any allegation of possessing a large roll of the bills. Buxton further claimed the young man had told a "bare,

²Arkansas Gazette, June 1, 1842, p. 2:3.

³Ibid.

infamous, and willful lie."⁴ Buxton had exchanged the fifty dollars in Arkansas bank notes for the three dollar shimplasters.⁵ He received the counterfeit notes from a man who had passed through Lewisburg a few days earlier. Buxton was not sure but thought he had seen the man at one time or another in Little Rock.⁶

The editor of the Times and Advocate, Colby, did not question whether or not the notes were counterfeit or genuine. He denied any charges that the notes were not genuine and added that if Buxton could not pass any of the notes he possessed he (Colby) insured the redemption of the money.⁷

J.H. Crease, the Comptroller, was shocked by Colby's statement that the corporation notes were genuine. In response to Colby's statement Crease remarked,

... after the information given by myself and others to Mr. Colby, and is so well calculated to mislead the public, I am constrained, by a sense of duty, to assert, that there is doubtless a very considerable amount of spurious bills in circulation, as there have been actually presented and rejected, at this office, ... which are base base counterfeits, at least so far as it regards their having been signed or issued by the Comptroller,....⁸

⁴Arkansas Gazette, June 15, 1842. p. 2:3.

⁵Shimplasters were usually smaller than five dollars and had little value.

⁶Arkansas Gazette. June 15, 1842. p. 2:3.

⁷Arkansas Gazette. June 22, 1842. p. 2:3.

⁸ Ibid.

There were allegations about the Comptroller possibly authorizing other persons to sign his name to the notes, Crease denied all such allegations and plainly stated the notes were counterfeit.

Talk about the counterfeit notes died out somewhat the rest of the summer. The big news the rest of the summer was the election of a new mayor. Little Rock's mayor at this time was John Widgery, Widgery, for uncertain reasons, resigned from office. A special election held on April 2, 1842 found Samuel G. Trowbridge running for the vacancy. Trowbridge was elected mayor but his term in office was short.

On the night of August 25 a person or persons unknown broke into James D. Fitzgerald's office. Fitzgerald was an auctioneer and justice of the peace in Little Rock. The perpetrators removed somewhere between 13,000 and 14,000 dollars of Real Estate Bank money and the justice's trial docket from the iron safe in Mr. Fitzgerald's office. The bills were of denominations from five dollars to one hundred dollars. Fredrick W. Trapnell had brought suit upon these notes. Trapnell deposited the notes with Fitzgerald for safekeeping. The justice put the money in one-hundred-dollar parcels and docketed a suit against each hundred dollars. He also inscribed on the back of each bill, in red ink, "Filed and writ issued." He gave the date of each filing and signed them as justice of the

peace. All this was done for the purpose of rendering his judgment on the validity of the bills.⁹

The news of the robbery was kept very quiet for some time. Fitzgerald confided in only two people, Fredrick Trappell and Samuel Trowbridge, whom he suspected all along. Trowbridge, surprised upon hearing the news of the robbery, offered any assistance he could in apprehending the culprits.

A short time after the robbery, the wives of Samuel Trowbridge; William Caldwell, a carpenter, and Amour Hunt, a tailor entered Adamson & Prather's dry goods store. Adamson & Prather had advertised to sell everything at cost and they accepted Real Estate Bank money at fifty cents on the dollar. The three ladies purchased several thousand dollars worth of dry goods, millinery and other notions. They paid for all this in Real Estate Bank notes. Trowbridge evidently was not aware of the inscription Fitzgerald put on the back of the bills.

When the business closed that night one of the members of the firm who was counting the money held up to the light one of the notes he received from the three women. Much to his surprise he read the words "Filed and writ^e issued (date), J.D. Fitzgerald, J.P." ¹⁰ He then examined more of the notes, all with the same surprising results.

⁹Pope, p. 256.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 257.

Prather informed Fitzgerald of his findings and Fitzgerald promptly issued warrants for the arrest of the guilty parties. The men and the woman implicated in the robbery were Samuel G. Trowbridge, mayor; William M. Wilson, a gambler; Robert Caldwell and his wife; Ina Q. Whitmore, a blacksmith; Tapley H. Stewart, a brother of the noted Virgil A. Stewart, the hero of the Murrel disclosures; John H. Walker, a carpenter; Nelson Keys, a clerk in a store and Van Horne, a printer.¹¹

Trowbridge, Wilson, Hunt, William Caldwell and his wife and Robert Caldwell were arrested on Sunday, October 2 and committed to jail. Mrs. Caldwell was put under protective custody. These suspects were charged with either being principals or accessories in the robbery of Fitzgerald's office and charged with counterfeiting.

That same day an officer with his "posse committatus"¹² entered the Caldwell home and found Caldwell sitting by the stove. The sheriff found fresh ashes and paper at the stove. These he thought to be the remains of some of the bank notes which Caldwell tried to destroy. The officer also searched Mrs. Caldwell, and found a vial in her bosom

¹¹ Arkansas Gazette. Selected issues 1842, October 5, 12, 19, and November 2.

¹² A posse committatus is where a sheriff can summon any male in a county above the age of fifteen and not weak, frail, or physically unsound, in order to preserve public peace or to execute any legal precept that is forceably opposed.

containing around fourteen thousand dollars, also believed to have been taken in the robbery,¹³ According to the Gazette, William Caldwell escaped from custody on Sunday night and remained at large almost a week.

During his absence three guards were placed on the premises to await his return. Two of the guards, N.B. Thomasson and Edwin J. Baker, were totally unaware of each other's presence at the house. That Friday night was cloudy and it was raining. About one o'clock Thomasson heard a noise at the Caldwell house. He then conferred with his partner Reynolds and proceeded to the front of the house where he thought he would be the safest. Upon arriving at the front of the house a voice shouted to him. In a letter to his brother, Thomasson described the rest of the story --- "... who comes there! I instantly replied; 'One of the guards.' 'Move and I'll shoot you.' He instantly replied; Laurie, (Dr. Laurie, a particular friend). I then called him to me."¹⁴ Thomasson was careful for he knew Caldwell was a desperate man and feared Caldwell might be armed. He returned to Reynolds and cried out, "Do your do; a noise has been made."¹⁵ With

¹³Arkansas Gazette. October 5, 1842. p. 215.

¹⁴Arkansas Gazette. October 12, 1842. p. 215.

¹⁵Ibid.

this a man ran from the Caldwell house. Thomasson cried out, "stop or I will kill him!"¹⁶ The tragic event that followed is best described in Thomasson's own words:

He heeded it not, but burst through the gate. I, by this time, had retreated some four feet from the gate, in front of the house. He rushed from the gate, ran rather around me, and was entirely past me, when he stopped, wheeled, and his pistol cap exploded. I pulled the trigger with deadly intent, and shot him with (unfortunately) a too deadly aim. He proved to be one of my best friends, E.Y. Baker. . . . He no doubt attempted to fire at me, believing I was Caldwell, and died under the belief that Caldwell had shot him.¹⁷

On Saturday, October 8, Caldwell returned to custody. As the Gazette dramatized the scene,

'He was afterwards pursued so closely, that he could get nothing to eat. Hunger, guilt, destitution, and hot pursuit, all operating on his mind, in conjunction with the reflection that he would be hunted down, as a felon and outlaw, brought him to the conclusion to surrender himself to the administrators of the law; and accordingly, at an early hour, on Saturday morning last, he left his secret haunts, and surrendered himself to Mr. Blackburn, who handed him over to the proper officer.'¹⁸

Caldwell did not go through the formality of a legal

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2:4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2:5.

investigation but pleaded guilty as charged. ¹⁹

Ira O. Whitmore, the blacksmith, was gone to Hot Springs county when the gang was arrested. He returned to Little Rock Monday the 17th which was a special election day. Samuel Thowbridge resigned from office after his arrest and a new mayor had to be chosen. The sheriff expected Whitmore's return and promptly placed a man near the edge of town to persuade Whitmore to vote before going home. Whitmore was not aware of the arrests of his partners or what was in store for himself. Whitmore voted and then was arrested. His saddle bags were filled with ore resembling gold, silver and some of baser sort. ²⁰

There is little known about the trials of the counterfeiters and robbers. The papers didn't carry much news of the trials. Thowbridge, Wilson, and Hunt were examined by Justices Fletcher, Shaw and King. Through the testimony the judges found that there was a counterfeiting gang extending from Illinois to Texas. The justices also discovered that a wagon belonging to Wilson was hidden a short distance from town. It was loaded with every variety of implement necessary for counterfeiting "hard money, together with a large quantity of copper, quicksilver, acid, etc." ²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Oppe, p. 259.

²¹ Arkansas Times and Advocate. October 10, 1842. 2:1.

After their trials, Trowbridge and Wilson received fifteen years in the state penitentiary. Because Trowbridge was the organizer and controlling body of the gang and Wilson passed many of the spurious notes around the state they received the heavier sentences. Governor Thomas S. Drew pardoned Trowbridge in 1846 for his conduct when the prison burned. Nelson Keys received six years in the penitentiary but Governor Drew pardoned him for his conduct during the fire. Wilson had to serve out his sentence because he was one of the ringleaders of the men who burned the State Prison. Tapley Stewart refused to confess to charges of counterfeiting, robbery and passing counterfeit money. He was tried and convicted on counts of robbery and passing counterfeit notes. He received only one year in the penitentiary and died a few years after his release.²²

John H. Walker, who had been indicted for counterfeiting, escaped from jail in December. He was sick and the guards admitted him into the debtor's room from whence he made his escape. The guards recaptured Walker a few days later in Jefferson County. When he was arrested,

...he had a gun in his possession, which was doubtless furnished by some 'uncaged bird' in this place (prison). He stated, that if he had been awake, he would not have suffered himself to be arrested alive. His health is quite feeble, owing to a long-contracted affection in the breast, and is quite probable that he cannot survive the winter.²³

²²Pope, p. 260.

²³Arkansas Gazette. December 23, 1842. p. 2:1.

Van Horne's trial attracted more attention and publicity than any of the others. The case came up for closing arguments on Saturday, June 10, 1843. The closing arguments by the council lasted nearly eight hours. The indictment charged Van Horne with having, "on the 18th day of June, in 1841, forged certain counterfeit resemblances of the corporation tickets of Little Rock,"²⁴

The principal witnesses against Van Horne were William Caldwell and his wife. Mrs. Caldwell testified that she saw Van Horne, Whitmore, Trowbridge and Caldwell printing the money in the Jeff Smith house. Van Horne was the printer and Whitmore made the press.

Mrs. Caldwell went even further to state Caldwell had been charged with counterfeiting in Illinois and fled the state. He then met up with Trowbridge in Arkansas and they began printing bogus tickets at the Peay Tavern. Mayor Nicholas Peay owned the tavern and was part owner in the Anthony House. She also implicated Trowbridge, Whitmore, Caldwell, Walker and Ledbetter in two other operations, one at the Fulton House and the other at a place called Pandleton's. Van Horne stole the type from the Times and Advocate office where he was once employed.²⁵

²⁴Arkansas Gazette, June 21, 1843, p. 111.

²⁵Ibid., p. 211.

The Attorney General, Robert W. Johnson, tried to show the jury Mrs. Caldwell was a creditable witness. Mrs. Caldwell had already stated she helped color some of the bills and was present at many of the printing sessions. To many, her statements might appear false. Robert Johnson said of Mrs. Caldwell,

When the first three or four criminals were arrested, the State was in possession of but little evidence, and had Mrs. C. refused to tell what she knew, the discoveries would soon have ceased. Had she concealed what she knew, she could have lived independently upon the spoils and unlawful accumulations of the gang, her name would not have been brought before the community, three-fourths of the crimes now punished and to be punished, had escaped detection. ²⁶

Johnson went on to point out how she had endangered her life by bringing out all these facts.

When Johnson finished Ebenezer Cummins, defense attorney, got his chance to argue. Cummins said the Caldwells were not be telling the truth. He proceeded to show that Van Horne could not possibly have been a part in this act. Van Horne was employed by Colby at the time and there was no evidence to convict him of the offense.

The final statement made by the prosecution may have had an impact on the jury. "Let this sin, I beg of you, be no longer upon us--make this verdict of such a character that it shall be a formal notice to rogues throughout the world, never to trust themselves in Arkansas."²⁷

²⁶ Ibid. p. 2:2.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 2:3.

The jury deliberated for two hours then returned a guilty verdict. Van Horns was sentenced to the State Penitentiary for six and one-half years.²⁸

The Trowbridge Gang was completely dissolved by 1843. They were implicated in forging notes from Illinois, New Orleans and Delaware. They were also connected with the robbery of James B. Keatts' store in Little Rock, October 8, 1841. The gang supposedly took over five thousand dollars worth of watches and jewelry. Keatts offered a five hundred dollar reward for the return of the jewelry or information about the thief.²⁹ Trowbridge nor any of his men were ever convicted of the robbery.

The citizens of Little Rock and the entire state were not only appalled by happenings of the past few months, they were frightened. They seemed to be afraid that there were more of these types of gangs in neighboring counties and states with the intent of carrying on more underhanded doings. The people issued warnings to further wrongdoers; "Cutthroats, robbers, black-legs, loafers, counterfeiters and thieves, the farther you keep yourselves away from Little Rock, the safer you will be."³⁰

²⁸Ibid. p. 2:5.

²⁹Arkansas Gazette. December 13, 1842. p. 2:3.

³⁰Arkansas Gazette. June 15, 1842. p. 2:3.

Samuel Trowbridge and his gang set out to make money by counterfeiting corporation notes. The plan might have worked if three of the men's wives would have stayed away from Adamson & Prather's dry goods store. The tragic part of the whole Trowbridge Gang story was the death of an innocent merchant trying to catch one of the escaped counterfeiters. But like many lawbreakers the Trowbridge Gang got their just reward. Some members served many years in the State Penitentiary and some served only year for their crime. The best part is that the will of the people finally seems to have worked. With tougher laws prohibiting counterfeiting the crime has slowed down since the 1840s.

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