

2ND EDITION

# OUTLAW TALES OF CALIFORNIA

TRUE STORIES OF THE GOLDEN STATE'S MOST INFAMOUS  
CROOKS, CULPRITS, AND CUTTHROATS



CHRIS ENSS

**OUTLAW TALES**  
**of California**

## Other Books by Chris Enss

*Pistol Packin' Madams: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West*

*Buffalo Gals: Women of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*

*The Doctor Wore Petticoats: Women Physicians of the Old West*

*How the West Was Worn: Bustles and Buckskins on the Wild Frontier*

*Hearts West: True Stories of Mail-Order Brides on the Frontier*

*Tales Behind the Tombstones: The Deaths and Burials of the Old West's Most Nefarious Outlaws, Notorious Women, and Celebrated Lawmen*

*The Lady Was a Gambler: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West*

*Frontier Teachers: Stories of Heroic Women of the Old West*

*A Beautiful Mine: Women Prospectors of the Old West*

### With Howard Kazanjian

*The Young Duke: The Early Life of John Wayne*

*Happy Trails: A Pictorial Celebration of the Life and Times of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans*

*The Cowboy and the Señorita: A Biography of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans*

*None Wounded, None Missing, All Dead: The Story of Elizabeth Bacon Custer*

*Thunder Over the Prairie: The True Story of a Murder and a Manhunt by the Greatest Posse of All Time*

### With Joann Chartier

*With Great Hope: Women of the California Gold Rush*

*Love Untamed: Romances of the Old West*

*Gilded Girls: Women Entertainers of the Old West*

*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon: Women Soldiers and Patriots of the Western Frontier*

# **OUTLAW TALES**

## **of California**

**True Stories of the Golden State's Most Infamous  
Crooks, Culprits, and Cutthroats**

**Second Edition**

**Chris Enss**



**TWODOT®**

GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT  
HELENA, MONTANA

AN IMPRINT OF GLOBE PEQUOT PRESS

To buy books in quantity for corporate use  
or incentives, call **(800) 962-0973**  
or e-mail **premiums@GlobePequot.com**.

**A • T W O D O T<sup>®</sup> • B O O K**

Copyright © 2013 by Morris Book Publishing, LLC

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed to Globe Pequot Press, Attn: Rights and Permissions Department, PO Box 480, Guilford, CT 06437.

TwoDot is an imprint of Globe Pequot Press and a registered trademark of Morris Book Publishing, LLC.

Map by M. A. Dubé © 2013 Morris Book Publishing, LLC.

Project editors: Julie Marsh and Lauren Brancato

Layout: Justin Marciano

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Enss, Chris, 1961-

Outlaw tales of California : true stories of the Golden State's most infamous crooks, culprits, and cutthroats / Chris Enss. — Second edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7627-7234-6

1. Outlaws—California—Biography—Anecdotes. 2. Criminals—California—Biography—Anecdotes. 3. Brigands and robbers—California—Biography—Anecdotes. 4. Frontier and pioneer life—California—Anecdotes. 5.

California—History—1846-1850—Anecdotes. 6.

California—History—1850-1950—Anecdotes. I. Title.

F865.E58 2013

979.4'04—dc23

2012050285

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my brother-in-law, Peter Parry,  
an attorney at the Cook County Public Defender's Office,  
who faithfully fights for justice*



# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	x
Tom Bell	1
Tiburcio Vasquez	12
John Allen	22
Juan Soto	32
Henry Plummer	40
Charles Earl “Black Bart” Boles	50
Jesús Tejada	61
Juan Flores	68
“Rattlesnake Dick” Barter	76
John and George Sontag and Chris Evans	85
Dick Fellows	93
Joaquin Murieta	101
Jack Powers	113
James Gilbert Jenkins	123
Bibliography	135
Index	139
About the Author	146



# Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the following people and organizations for their help in writing this book: Kathy Correia at the California State Library in Sacramento, the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society, the Wells Fargo History Museum, the Santa Cruz Museum and History Library, the San Diego Historical Society, the staff at the Doris Foley Library, and Ed Tyson and the volunteers at Searls Library in Nevada City, California. To all I humbly offer my thanks and appreciation.

# Introduction

Stories of the bandits, cattle rustlers, horse thieves, and highwaymen of the Old West have intrigued readers since the first pioneers ventured across the plains. More than 125 years after outlaw Jesse James made a famously candid statement about the public's continuing interest in criminals, people continue to be drawn to the tales of the desperadoes who roamed the wild frontier. As Jesse aptly commented in 1879, "All the world likes an outlaw. For some damn reason they remember them."

A lawless element followed the daring collection of prospectors, hard-working emigrant men and women, and enterprising farmers to the gold fields of California. While civilized pioneers were building churches, schools, theaters, and hotels, thieves and outlaws were terrorizing camp followers, looting mining claims, and robbing Wells Fargo stagecoaches.

Where liquor ran freely, it seemed so did crime. Alcohol often eroded away any effort ambitious sojourners painstakingly made to tame the rowdy territory. Drunkenness, banditry, and violence plagued the California boomtowns, provoking frightened citizens to take the law into their own hands, or appoint willing, but unqualified, peace officers to act on their behalf.

Many of the outlaws who dominated sections of the rugged territory were desperate men who were once honest members of the community, but who felt forced by circumstances into a life of evil. In the later part of the 1860s, a majority of the offenders were veterans of the Civil War, ex-Confederate soldiers like Cole Younger, Frank Dalton, and Ben Thompson, who were convinced they no longer had a country of their own, or a choice but to become a criminal.

*Outlaw Tales of California* contains the tales and adventures of the most famous rebels and brigands in California's history. Listed among the wanted men of long ago are Black Bart, the notorious highwayman who rarely left the scene of a crime without leaving a poem behind; John Allen, the barber turned horse thief also known as Sheet-Iron Jack; and the most feared bandit of all, "Bloody" Joaquin Murietta.

Although gold initially attracted unscrupulous characters to the northern section of the state, the crimes committed by outlaws chronicled in this book were not limited to that area. Hardened wrongdoers like Jesús Tejada and Juan Flores performed their nefarious activities primarily in Southern California.

By 1850 much of the state, and San Francisco specifically, was so overrun by murderers, horse thieves, and highwaymen that hundreds of law-abiding citizens banded together to enact swift justice against all desperadoes. There were no jails as of yet, and no official court system had been established. Impromptu hearings to try offenders were held and they were either driven out of the city or hanged if they were found guilty of a crime that merited—or even suggested—it.

The February 18, 1858, edition of the *San Francisco Morning Call* gave an example of the quick action law breakers could expect at the hand of determined vigilante committees.

"A man named Aaron Bracey," the article read, "who owned a little place in the northern part of Auburn, sold to his neighbor, James Murphy, a piece of his land. They met near their boundary line, and in an altercation Bracey struck Murphy on the head with a pick-axe, opening his head and exposing the brain. Bracey gave himself up to the officers, and citizens cared for Murphy, who, before he died, explained how he received

his wound. Bracey was lodged in jail; but in the evening it was rumored that he would be liberated and lynched.

“About 2:30 o’clock next morning, some sixty-five men overpowered the Sheriff and deputies and took the jail keys, though in their impatient haste, the mob burst in the doors with a sledge-hammer, and Bracey was taken to the edge of town and hanged. Father Quinn, of Sacramento, who had come up to see Murphy, interceded for the prisoner and tried to quiet the mob, but without avail.”

The serious, no-nonsense reputation of numerous vigilante committees spread quickly throughout the outlaw community. The fear of retribution at the hands of these committees caused some desperadoes to abandon their illegal ways, but others fiercely defied the unofficial constabularies. Juan Soto, John Sontag, and Chris Evans taunted vigilante teams by perpetrating even more crimes in broad daylight. They also openly threatened the lives of anyone who tried to “bring them to heel.”

When insolent criminals like Tiburcio Vasquez were eventually apprehended, their executions were public events. Anxious spectators jockeyed for the best position from which to watch the outlaws hang. More than 2,500 people attended Vasquez’s hanging in March 1875.

Faced with an abrupt and furious end to their lives, renegades were often granted the opportunity to write letters to their loved ones. Vasquez wrote to his mother, trying to shed light on the reason for his tragic demise.

“Beloved Mother,” he wrote. “Perhaps you are not aware of the difficulties that I have to surmount and overcome every time I feel inclined to open my heart to you by way of a few

## *Introduction*

badly written lines, but I hope you will overlook the little faults and mistakes of your unfortunate son.”

Only a few of the most noted criminals, their crimes against California residents, and the punishment they received, have been included in *Outlaw Tales of California*. Their tales serve as a reminder that the Old West was a violent place, and that although the savage misdeeds of some legendary bandits were romanticized, in the end these perpetrators were regarded as nothing more than troubled outlaws.



# **Tom Bell**

## **Outlaw Doctor**

A pair of tired, dust-covered deputies escorted outlaw Tom Bell to a noose dangling off a limb of a sycamore tree. No one spoke a word as the rope was slipped around his thick neck. More than fifty lawmen from Sacramento, Marysville, and Nevada City, California, made up the posse that apprehended Bell at his hideout at Firebaugh's Ferry near the San Joaquin River. The ruthless highwayman and his gang had eluded the law for more than a year. Bell's reign of terror would end here—a mere four hours after he was captured on Monday, October 6, 1856.

Bell held in his hand a pair of letters his executioners allowed him to write before they administered justice. Outside of the firm grip he had on his correspondence, he didn't show the least bit of fear. Judge Joseph Belt, the self-appointed hangman and head of the posse, sauntered over to Bell and looked him in the eye.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” he asked. “I have no revelations to make,” Bell replied. “I would be grateful, however,” he added, “to drink to the health of this party present and hope that no personal prejudice has induced them to execute me.” Judge Belt nodded to one of his men, who stepped forward with a bottle of whiskey and offered it to Bell.

Bell lifted the bottle to the men and thanked them for their thoughtfulness. “I have no bitterness toward anyone of you,”

## Outlaw Tales of California

he said. He took a drink and handed the bottle back to the lawman. "If you let me now . . . before I go. I'd like to read aloud the letter I wrote to my mother." Judge Belt scanned the faces of his men; no one seemed to have any objections. "Go on," Belt told the bandit. Tom unfolded one of the letters in his hand and began reading.

"Dear Mother, I am about to make my exit to another country. I take this opportunity to write you a few lines. Probably you may never hear from me again. If not, I hope we may meet where parting is no prodigal career in this country. I have always recollected your fond admonitions, and if I had lived up to them I would not have been in my present position; but, dear mother, though my fate has been a cruel one, yet I have no one to blame but myself.

"Give my respects to all my old and youthful friends. Tell them to beware of bad associations, and never to enter into any gambling saloons, for that has been my ruin. If my old grandmother is living, remember me to her. With these remarks, I bid you farewell forever. Your only boy, Tom."

Bell refolded his letter and bowed his head in prayer. Two lawmen stepped forward, took the letters from him, and tied his hands behind his back. Tom lifted his head and nodded to Judge Belt. His horse was whipped out from under him and he swung into space.

Tom Bell's real name was Thomas J. Hodges. He was born in Alabama in 1826 and raised in Rome, Tennessee. His parents were upstanding citizens in the community and made sure their son received the finest education. The early talent he had for healing prompted him to become a doctor. Not long after graduating from medical school, he joined the US Army and fought in