



Jim Clark, Telluride's Outlaw Marshal

Submitted by Scott D. Myers

Jim Clark was born around 1841 in Clay County Missouri. His father's last name was Cummings, but he died when Jim was too young to remember him, so when his mother remarried, they both took his stepfather's name, Clark. When he was a teen, Jim and another local boy stole his stepfather's mule and went to San Antonio, Texas, where they stole fourteen hundred dollars from a rancher. Soon thereafter, he returned home, but was not welcomed by his stepfather. The family moved to Jackson County, Missouri, where they occasionally took in boarders. One of their boarders was William Quantrill, who had come from Ohio to teach school in the area. He became good friends with the Clarks and Jim took a liking to him.

Quantrill eventually became involved in the Border war between Kansas "Jayhawkers" and Missouri "Border Ruffians". He organized a band of guerilla fighters, which soon grew to be about 350 men. They were very successful in harassing Union forces and became quite adept at guerilla warfare. When Jim was about eighteen, he left home and joined up with Quantrill's Raiders. He learned how to handle a gun and soon became a crack shot. Clark was said to be a fearless fighter and soon became one of Quantrill's most reliable officers. In August 1863, Quantrill's Raiders conducted a revenge raid on Lawrence, Kansas, which became known as the Lawrence Massacre. The Confederate leadership was appalled by the raid, and withdrew even tacit support from Quantrill's unit. After the war, Clark joined up with the James and Younger brothers, who had also ridden with Quantrill, and robbed trains, banks and stage coaches.

He eventually drifted away from the gang and headed west to Leadville, Colorado where he worked as a miner. It is suspected that Clark participated in some of the hold ups and other crimes in Leadville during those years. Clark arrived in Telluride in 1887, took a job digging a pipeline and lived in a small cabin. Telluride was a lawless frontier mining town then and the town marshal was afraid to stand up to the drunken ruffians who shot up the town every night.



Telluride in 1887 (Telluride Historical Museum)

Clark approached the mayor and offered to tame the town's lawless elements and he was appointed deputy marshal on the spot. That night he used his physical prowess to overcome rowdy gunmen and Telluride experienced its first peace and quiet in a long time. The next morning, Clark was made marshal and Telluride experienced several years of peace, as he would not tolerate any disorderliness or misconduct in town.

But there were rumors that Clark continued his lawless life outside of town. Some suspected him of dressing in disguise and robbing people on the trails leading into town and others believed he tipped off his outlaw acquaintances about gold and silver shipments and then got a cut of the booty. On June 24, 1889, Butch Cassidy and his gang robbed the San Miguel County Bank in Telluride. Clark later admitted that he had been paid \$2,200 to stay out of town that day.

Despite these nefarious activities, Clark was also enforcing the law in town. He helped capture rustlers in Gunnison and patrolled the Telluride's streets every night. Marshall Clark also took a special interest in helping the needy and elderly of the town. He helped them with chores, made repairs on their shacks and generously lent money to destitute families.



Sketch of Jim Clark that appeared in the Rocky Mountain News, August 8, 1895

Although Telluride owed a lot to Clark for keeping the derelicts under control, the town council had grown tired of all of the rumors about his criminal activities. They knew that many were true and began looking for another marshal. After finding a suitable replacement, the council fired Clark. He was very angry and vengeful; he threatened council members and even assaulted the new night deputy. Town officials wanted him gone, one way or the other. On August 5, 1895, Clark was walking down Main street around midnight when he was shot. He died shortly thereafter. It was believed that the killing was ordered by a member of the town council.

Nearly the whole town attended his funeral . In spite of his contradictory nature, he was remembered for establishing law and order in the rough and tumble town. He is buried in Lone Tree Cemetery in Telluride.



Credits:

Jan Murphy, "Outlaw Tales of Colorado" (2000, The Globe Pequot Press)

Telluride Marshal's Office Colorado (www.odmp.org/officer/3099-marshal-james-clark)

The Spell of the West; The Gunfighters

www.jcs-group.com/oldwest/pistoleer/gunfighter02.html

Telluride Historical Museum

