



Alfred Packer, Colorado's Cannibal

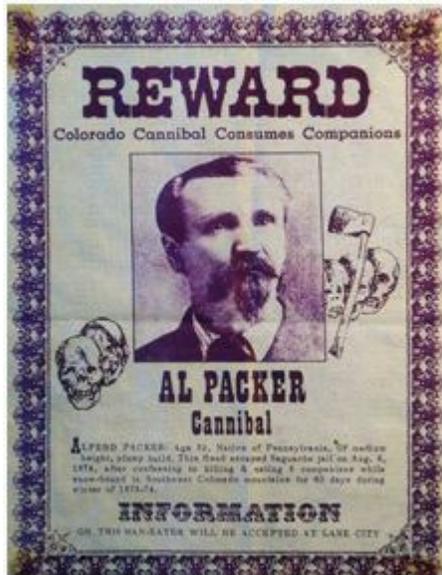
Submitted by Scott D. Myers

Alfred Packer was born in Pennsylvania in 1842 and was by trade a shoemaker. In 1862 at the age of 20, he enlisted in the 16th U.S. Infantry of Minnesota (GAR), but was discharged later in the same year due to epilepsy. Packer headed west to try his hand at prospecting. He enlisted in the Army again, this time in the 8th Iowa Cavalry Regiment (GAR), but was again mustered out of service due to epilepsy. One report says that he served with General Custer, as a scout.

In November 1873, Packer set out from Provo, Utah as a guide with a party of twenty-one men for the goldfields of The Colorado Territory. The severe winter made travel very difficult and the party soon ran out of food. In late January 1874, Ute Chief Ouray provided the party with food and shelter at his camp near Montrose, Colorado. Contrary to Chief Ouray's advice, Packer and five companions soon left the camp to make their way to the gold strike in Breckenridge.

The party became snowbound near Lake City, Colorado. In desperation, they found shelter in a deep ravine protected from the wind by a large stand of pine trees. The six prospectors, lost and starving to death, sent Packer out to find the Los Pinos Indian Agency settlement. Here is where the story gets murky. Packer headed out in the springtime when the sun had created a snow crust capable of supporting a man's weight. He arrived at Los Pinos (near Gunnison) in April but no one could understand how a here-to-fore penniless Packer now sported a fancy knife, a rifle they hadn't seen him with before and, plenty of spending money.

In a strange twist of fate, a vacationing illustrator for Harper's Weekly discovered the bodies of Packer's party. His graphic sketches of the partially eaten corpses were published in Harper's and readers from across the country were both horrified and fascinated by the story. Packer first claimed that he had become separated from his companions in the blinding snow and had survived on rabbits and rose buds. But when confronted with the evidence of having a lot of money and personal possessions of the missing men, he finally admitted to having lived off of the flesh of his companions, but he claimed to have killed only Wilson Bell in self-defense. Packer was arrested and imprisoned in the Saguache jail. Before the trial could start, he mysteriously escaped and managed to stay ahead of the law for nine years.



Packer Wanted Poster

In 1883, Packer, living under the alias of "John Schwartze", was recognized by Frenchy Cabazon in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Cabazon had been one of the original party of twenty-one that set out from Provo in 1873. Packer signed a second confession (admitting again only to surviving on his companion's flesh and killing Bell in self-defense). He was arrested and returned to Colorado where his trial began at Lake City, in Hinsdale County in April 1883.

The trial was presided over by Judge Melville Gerry, and Confederate Veteran who served in the 3rd Florida Infantry Regiment (CSA) during the Civil War. Packer was convicted and sentenced to death.

His case was appealed and his sentence reversed by the Colorado Supreme Court in 1885.

The murder conviction was set aside based on a technical legislative oversight: Packer could not be tried in 1883 for a crime he had committed in 1874, because there had been no state murder statute in 1874 that allowed for it. Luckily for Packer, he had been arrested when Colorado was a territory but tried when Colorado was a state. A second trial was held in Gunnison, Colorado, August 2nd-5th, 1886. He was found guilty of five counts of manslaughter and sentenced to forty years in the State Penitentiary at Canon City.

After serving fifteen years, Packer was paroled in 1901 due to the efforts of Harry Tammen and Frederick Bonfils, co-owners of the Denver Post and owners of one Sells-Floto Circus. The Governor who signed the parole was Charles Spaulding Thomas, a Confederate Veteran who served in the Georgia State Militia (CSA) during the Civil War. Governor Thomas suspected that Tammen and Bonfils really only wanted Packer as a side-show freak for their circus and signed a conditional parole for Packer on his last day of office that required Packer to remain in Colorado and near Denver.

Packer moved to Littleton, Colorado, where by all accounts he became a model citizen, and was well-liked by all of his neighbors.

Packer's Penitentiary Photo

When he died on April 24, 1907, he still maintained his innocence. In fact he wrote a letter to the governor asking for a full pardon that same year but no action was ever taken. According to the Littleton, Colorado newspaper, the Independent, Packer's last words before he died were, "I'm

not guilty of the charge." He was buried in Littleton Cemetery and was given a full military funeral and burial as a soldier and scout for General Custer. Every summer, thousands of tourists visit his grave site. Such a legendary story was Packer's that in 1968, students at the University of Colorado in Boulder christened their new cafeteria The Alferd E. Packer Memorial Grill . In 1982, a statue honoring Packer was commissioned and can be seen on the Boulder campus.



Alfred Packer's Headstone, Littleton Cemetery, Colorado

Controversy over Alfred Packer's innocence or guilt remains to this day. In 1981, retired Colorado judge Evan F. Kushner sought a posthumous pardon for Packer, but the pardon was denied by Governor Richard Lamm. In 1994, the Curator of History at the Museum of Western Colorado, David P. Bailey, conducted his own investigation, starting with the examination of a colt pistol found at the site of the murders. Bailey noted that Packer claimed he shot Shannon Bell in self-defense, and one of the men who visited the scene of the crime reported that Bell had a bullet wound in his pelvis.

In 2001, Dr. Richard Dulay at Mesa State College used an electron microscope to match lead fragments in the soil near Bell's remains to the bullets remaining in the colt pistol examined by Bailey, and the lead fragments matched. However, it was decided that there is not enough evidence to prove self-defense. A monument to Alfred Packer's victims is located at the site where their bodies were discovered in Lake City, Colorado.

Sources:

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