

WANTED

DEAD OR ALIVE

There isn't much to tell about Jesse Waters and his early years. His pa was a wheelwright, and he evidently worked at that trade himself for a while. The schoolmarm in the village said that Jesse seemed to have a keener understanding of life than many of her other students. She also said he had an unusual mastery of words for someone of the common folk. His ma was well-respected in the village, as much as could be given to women at the time. Some scandalous rumors about her floated around the area about the time of Jesse's coming into the world, but his pa put an end to it rather quickly.

At some point in time, Jesse left the wheelwright business to put some of his other skills to work. It's not known if his pa remained in the trade at that point or not. His other ventures did not appear to be financially lucrative, but somehow, he managed to get by. Apparently, folks just kind of ponied up when they could. He began hanging around with a group of hard-working cowboys and, oddly, one guy that worked for the government.

All in all, Jesse was always well-received wherever he went. Somewhere along the line, though, he must have crossed somebody who had some influence—the wrong kind. There arose some animosity among a group that didn't appreciate Jesse cutting into their territory. They apparently felt threatened enough to get a bounty put on Jesse's head. The law in the area didn't seem to have any interest in pursuing any criminal charges against Jesse, but they didn't inhibit the issuance of the bounty either. The corruption of the law had many facets in those days.

Jesse was smart, though, and he always managed to elude the traps set for him by the group. One day, one of the guys Jesse had been hanging out with decided to line his pockets with some of the bounty's silver. He told the group who offered the bounty exactly where they could find Jesse. One of Jesse's good friends put up a little bit of a fight when they came to apprehend his friend, but Jesse ended it pretty quickly, though, by not resisting. The rest of his friends figured Jesse knew the odds weren't in their favor.

Some figure that Jesse came out pretty lucky, though, considering the bounty was for dead or alive. In the vast majority of such cases, the wanted

man came in dead. While Jesse sat in a jail cell waiting for the regional judge to get to town, his friends just kind of disappeared. Somebody claimed they saw one of his friends hanging around outside the jailhouse, but he apparently took off when confronted. People wondered if they might attempt some kind of jailbreak.

The next morning, an explosion ripped through the jailhouse. The Calhoun gang planted enough dynamite to blow out the complete front of the sheriff's office. The Calhoun's got the keys and unlocked the cell next to Jesse's that held Brett Calhoun. As a matter of professional courtesy, they also unlocked Jesse's cell so he could escape, too. When some of the townsfolk ran over to the sheriff's office, they found the cells empty. But instead of running away, Jesse tended to the wounds of the deputy who was on guard.

The judge finally arrived in town, and they had a trial for Jesse, if you could call it that. Jesse didn't say a whole lot in his defense, and so the trial ended badly for him. The law took him away, along with two other prisoners the marshals brought over from another town. They strung the three men up across the stout branch of a big oak tree on the hill outside town.

The group that Jesse had crossed remained worried about his influence in the area, so they convinced the sheriff to post two deputies at the entrance to the tomb where they laid Jesse. They feared Jesse's friends might try to take the body and somehow, create more trouble. Their fear of Jesse's friends was unfounded, though. They were all holed up away from the area. The group should have feared what might occur from inside the tomb. When the tomb was found empty, the deputies on guard offered no good answer as to what happened.

Jesse's friends later claimed that they had seen Jesse walking around after his hanging. They said he had, in fact, come to see them where they were holed up. Witnesses to Jesse's hanging abounded. Only a few witnessed him walking around after he was supposedly dead, but they swore it was Jesse. So sure that it was him, they eventually gave their lives defending the memory of their friend and everything he had tried to teach them and inspire them to do.

This account of Jesse Waters was given to me by Matthew McGuire, an intrepid reporter for the Village Gazette. His father had given it to him before he passed away. Intrigued by the story,

Matthew questioned his father as to why there was so little actually written down or recorded at the time. His father told him that he had met one of Jesse's friends in a hotel in Laramie, who told him everything he remembered. Matthew's father made copious notes, but never actually composed an account. When he knew his time was near, he said that perhaps someone should write it all down so the story of Jesse wouldn't be forgotten.

As Matthew prepared to leave my office, he reached into his briefcase and carefully pulled out a yellowing, fragile paper. That paper was an original wanted poster for Jesse Waters. The odd thing about the poster was that where it said 'Wanted: Dead or Alive' someone had crossed out the 'or' and written 'and' above it, so it actually read 'Wanted: Dead and Alive'.