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By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

THE MASON-HENRY GANG IN SAN BERNARDINO

By Richard D. Thompson

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, or rather after the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, it was rumored that a band of secessionists had left Visalia and was on its way to plunder San Bernardino. The townspeople were rightly concerned, as there had been reports of attacks by gangs of marauding secessionists throughout the country.

Some of the secessionists were die-hards for the Southern cause and hoped for adverse news to help spur renewed efforts to continue the fight, or to switch to a guerrilla war if necessary.¹ When they heard that President Lincoln had been assassinated on April 14th, five days after Lee's surrender, they felt this was the event that might provide the impetus needed to rally the Southern cause.

In the eastern United States, the South still had several armies in the field, and these did not all immediately join in Lee's surrender. The last land battle of the war, the Battle of Palmito Ranch in Texas, was on May 12-13, 1865. Elements of the Confederate Navy held out for several more months, but their efforts came to naught, and President Andrew Johnson issued a formal declaration of the war's end on August 6, 1866.

Not much was written about the band of secessionists that was rumored to be heading toward San Bernardino Valley back in the spring of 1865. Mrs. Helen Beattie, who wrote the Civil War chapters in San Bernardino's premier history, *Heritage of the Valley*, devoted just a few lines to the supposed Confederate raiders coming to ransack the area. Her sources were dispatches sent by Union officers at the time, and a book by Mrs. Eliza Crafts in which a description is given of defensive measures taken in San Bernardino by nervous citizens.²

About the same time that the townsfolk were gearing up against the possible threat of marauding secessionists, a band of thieves and murderers known as the Mason-Henry Gang committed some depredations in the vicinity of Tehachapi. They appropriated a herd of horses and other stock from two area ranchers and escaped with the stolen animals along the trail through the desert, clinging to the north

¹ San Francisco *Daily Alta*, April 24, 1865. "It was feared some time since, by those who are familiar with the conditions of affairs in the lower country, that trouble would occur in that section should anything of an apparently unfavorable character occur to the Union cause."

² Beattie, George and Helen, *Heritage of the Valley*, San Pascual Press: Pasadena, CA 1939, p 417. Crafts, Mrs. E. P. R., *Pioneer Days in the San Bernardino Valley*, Redlands, CA pp 112-13.

side of the San Gabriel Mountains. After they arrived at the Mojave River, they became active in the San Bernardino area.

Not much was known about this gang in the 1930s when Mrs. Beattie was writing her Civil War chapters; there were just a few scattered references in old 19th Century history books, so it is no surprise that she did not connect the two bands of marauders. However, with the publication of Frank Latta's *Tailholtz Tales* in 1976, and more recently William B. Secrest's books, *Lawmen and Desperadoes* (1994) and *California Badmen* (2007), much more is known of the gang's activities. When contemporary newspaper accounts and other historical data are added in, it appears that the would-be Confederate raiders and the Mason-Henry Gang were one and the same.³



San Bernardino in the 1860s

The gang was formed under the sponsorship of rebel sympathizer George G. Belt. Judge Belt was a large, portly Marylander, “always known as an over-bearing, bullying fighter,” who had come to Stockton in 1848. Later he moved to a ranch on the Merced River, and this place became the base for his attempt, in early 1864, to recruit and equip Confederate guerrillas who would pillage the countryside. He was not very successful, attracting only a half-dozen or so men, but these included Joe Mason and James Henry. These two went on to commit several heinous acts in 1864-65, including murder, rustling and robbery, while maintaining they were a military force fighting for the Confederacy. They ranged from the northerly end of the central California valley down to Fort Tejon. They did not stay in one spot very

³ Latta, Frank, *Tailholtz Tales*, Bear State Books: Santa Cruz, CA 1976. Secrest, William B., *Lawmen & Desperadoes: A Compendium of Noted Early California Peace Officers and Outlaws*, Arthur H. Clark: Spokane, WA 1994. Secrest, William B., *California Badmen: Mean Men with Guns*, Quill Driver Books/Word Dancer Press, Inc.: Sanger, CA 2007.

long in their year-and-a-half reign of terror, but numerous articles on their activities appeared in the Visalia newspaper and they may have been associated with that place as a result.⁴

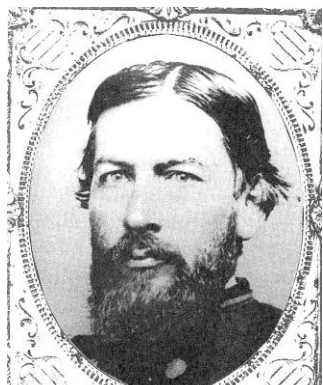
State Senator Thomas Flint was from Hollister, one of the regions where Mason and Henry were active, and he is quoted as saying that “their very names was enough to strike terror to the hearts of brave men.” He further stated that “they posed as sympathizers to the cause of the Confederacy and enlisted the aid of many well-meaning people.”⁵

In April of 1865 the gang moved into the lower Kern River area. They robbed a store, and then hid out in a sheep camp, where they murdered a herder. Soldiers were sent to capture them and they almost succeeded. This report of the encounter is from the April 18, 1865, edition of the Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News*:⁶

A dispatch says that a detachment of soldiers surprised the murderer Mason, at the head of the Great Panoche Valley, and wounded him badly in the hips, but he escaped. Another detachment was to be sent out to hunt him up.

It was at this time that the rumors had begun circulating about Secessionists planning to raid San Bernardino. Colonel James F. Curtis, commander at Drum Barracks in Wilmington, wrote the following to his superior in a letter dated April 16, 1865:⁷

...it is probable that the death of the President will hasten the preparations of secessionists within these lower counties, who have been organized for months to oppose the government of the United States by force. The Union people of San Bernardino are satisfied that an organization of secessionists is preparing for action of some kind, and they demand protection; consequently I today dispatched a force of 120 men...to silence opposition and to protect Unionists.



Col. James F. Curtis

The San Francisco *Daily Alta* reported that in late April a party of eleven “armed rebels” appeared in the Tehachapi Valley—part of a larger group it was thought—and stole a considerable number of horses.⁸ On April 23rd they escaped out into the desert and made their way to the Mojave River. Colonel Curtis was requested to send a contingent of cavalry after them, and though he was anxious to do it, he had only one cavalry company and it was on its way to Arizona. However, help would eventually come, as General Drum announced in an early May communiqué that Company E, First Cavalry California Volunteers, had just been mustered into service and would be on the first steamer from San Francisco to report for duty at Drum Barracks.⁹ Nevertheless, for the time being, the Army was unable to pursue the gang.

⁴ *History of San Joaquin County, California, Historic Record Company*, Los Angeles, CA 1923. In a June 9, 2009, e-mail to the author, Deputy Coroner David Van Norman quotes from the James Henry Coroner’s Inquest, stating that “These two [Mason and Henry] were wanted for several robberies and killings that had occurred 14 months prior in the mountains between San Juan and San Gabriel.” Secrest found that the gang was quite active in the San Joaquin Valley for the same time period, so it would seem they had a wide range of movement.

⁵ Latta, *op cit*, p 196.

⁶ Secrest, *Lawmen & Desperadoes*, *op cit*, p 217.

⁷ *O. R., I, L, p 1197. War of the Rebellion...Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols., Washington, D. C., 1880-1901. The official records pertaining to California and other western locales appear in Series I (one), and were gathered in two volumes, numbered Volume L (50), Parts One and Two, which will hereafter be abbreviated *War of the Rebellion*.

⁸ San Francisco *Daily Alta*, May 4, 1865.

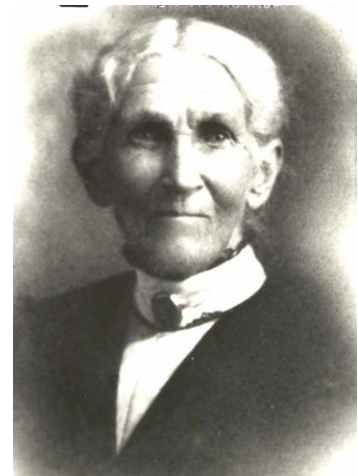
⁹ *War of the Rebellion*, *op cit*, p 1219. There had previously been a Company E, First Cavalry C. V., but it had been decommissioned in 1864.

The number of horses stolen from Tehachapi is estimated by various sources as being from 60 to about 200 head. A number of saddles were also taken from the settlement of Tehachapi. According to the *Daily Alta*, soldiers were put on their trail, but “nothing could be found of the robbers except their camp-fires.”¹⁰ It seems that a herd of at least 60 head of horses would be pretty easy to follow, but apparently not. The gang then moved on to San Bernardino, stole some stock, and “after giving the citizens of that place a fright, they left for parts unexplained.” The newspaper story concludes with the statement that “there were various reports as to the number of the band, but they were probably exaggerated, perhaps it was not composed of more than one hundred.” Author Secret’s studies indicate the gang did not travel in large numbers, and it would not surprise this writer if the actual number was the eleven referred to as having committed the Tehachapi depredations. Perhaps a few more

Whatever the number of men in the gang, the citizens were definitely on edge. Mrs. E. P. R. Crafts tells of the defensive measures taken in San Bernardino:¹¹

As the county seat was our nearest postoffice and market, Mr. Crafts went there once or twice every week, leaving home early in the morning and returning by sunset. One Wednesday in May he left home as usual, but did not return. I waited and watched for him until a late hour, thinking he might have been detained on important business. The next morning I sent the hired man to San Bernardino on horseback, telling him I would follow to ascertain the trouble. At the river I met the man returning with the team and wagon. It was considered unsafe for Mr. Crafts to return home alone, unarmed, he having been with the other Federals in San Bernardino on picket guard all night, in the unfinished Catholic church, which was used as a fort.

A company of Confederates had been organized in Visalia to go to Texas by way of San Bernardino, intending to make a raid on the Union men in the latter place to obtain their outfit. Dr. Benjamin Barton, a southern gentleman, being informed of the plot, advised the citizens to defend themselves. Accordingly every man was at his post, on picket duty all over the city, all night, at the time set for the depredations. It was afterwards learned that the scheme failed because of the unwillingness of the captain to carry out the designs of the party.



Mrs. E. P. R. Crafts

Someone very familiar with the events surrounding the difficulties in the Southland sailed from Los Angeles to San Francisco aboard the steamer *Pacific*. He, or she, gave an excellent account to the editor of the San Francisco *Daily Alta*, and claimed that upon leaving the area, the gang had a rendezvous in Yucaipa Valley:¹²

Passengers by the *Pacific* give a gloomy account of the condition of affairs in the counties of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and San Diego. Parties of horse thieves who degrade themselves by pretending to be Confederate guerillas, are roaming at large around the interior, stealing all the stock they can lay their hands on and putting the people in terror for their lives. Many families have abandoned their homes and gone to the town of San Bernardino for safety, and some have left the latter place and gone to Los Angeles. The band, having its rendezvous in the Jucaypa

¹⁰ San Francisco *Daily Alta*, May 17, 1865.

¹¹ Crafts, *op cit*, pp 112-113. Mrs. Crafts writes that it was in May that the events took place, but she also writes that it was right after word came regarding the President’s death. The assassination information came to Los Angeles on April 15, 1865, so there is a bit of a discrepancy, although “right after” could be three or four weeks. Actually there is a problem with many of the sources regarding the exact dates of the gang’s doings; the military dispatches, newspaper articles, subsequent testimony, etc., should be considered as approximate.

¹² San Francisco *Daily Alta*, May 16, 1865.

[Yucaipa] Valley, near the entrance to San Gorgonio Pass, above San Bernardino, are variously estimated at from 25 to 250 in number: our correspondent thinks they do not exceed 50. They have stolen a large lot of stock, and even became so bold as to enter San Bernardino and bully the inhabitants. In one instance they levied a forced loan of \$100 on a merchant and got the money. At one time four hundred men were under arms at San Bernardino, expecting an attack, but the excitement has somewhat subsided. Two companies of infantry have been stationed there for protection of the inhabitants, and Company E, Second Cavalry, C. V., Capt. McElroy [McIlroy], is being mounted for service at Drum Barracks as fast as possible, the contract for well-broken horses having been made at \$68 each. A company of Native California Cavalry are also at Drum Barracks, but being, as yet, unmounted, they are of no use at present. A party of thieves, numbering one hundred to three hundred are reported by the Indians to be herding some six hundred animals in the mountains back of Warner's Ranch, on the old Overland Mail route, beyond Temecula, and another party of fifty are said to have passed down through San Diego county in the direction of Lower California. The mail routes to La Paz, Olive City and Prescott, Arizona, are still open and the stage is running regularly.

With every man on picket duty and two companies of soldiers in town, all hunting the guerrillas/gang members, the ability for the marauders to move would seem to be very limited. How could they get from the Mojave River, north of town, to Yucaipa, south and east of town? A May 12th letter from Colonel Curtis provides an answer.¹³

I have the honor to report that the band of secessionists which appeared in Tehachepay Valley, and stole horses there, made its way east of the mountain range to the San Bernardino Mountains, and in the vicinity of Bear Valley divided, a portion passing into Lower California through San Diego County, others toward the Colorado River, and others are believed to be secreting in the neighboring valleys. It was their intention to raid upon the town of San Bernardino. The appearance of Captain Atchison's command, Fourth California Infantry, there prevented.

From the Mojave River it would have been simple to go up the Van Dusen Road, or, if stealth were necessary, and it probably was, they would have gone up the Cushenbury route to Bear Valley. From there they would have descended on the old pack trail used in the early days to bring in supplies to Belleville and other Holcomb Valley locales. That trail would take them down the south face of the San Bernardino Mountains and into Santa Ana Canyon. From there it would be easy to get to the Yucaipa Valley and thence through San Gorgonio Pass to the Colorado River or south through the Badlands to the present day Hemet/San Jacinto area.

One reason the gang was able to maneuver is disclosed in an interview Frank Latta had in the 1920s with Robert Glenn, who was an eyewitness to the events. Glenn was a Southerner, born in Texas in 1848, and had memories of the Mason-Henry Gang; in fact, he knew them very well. His father Silas Glenn would accommodate the gang at his place in El Monte, California, feeding them and even sharing beds with them when they came to his house seeking asylum, no doubt to keep secret their location:¹⁴

It was in 1864 that I first met Ben Mayfield [the man who later killed Joe Mason in 1866], when he was mining at Lytle Creek in San Bernardino County. At this time both Mason and Henry were busy with their depredations in San Bernardino and Los Angeles Counties, and I knew both of them quite well. We lived in a small house at El Monte, and Mason and Henry used to come and ask my father to put them up.

...I remember several instances concerning the activities of Mason and Henry near where we lived. One morning a neighbor by the name of Roobottom [William Rubottom] was milking his cows, and the soldiers rode up to him and asked him if he had seen Mason.

¹³ *War of the Rebellion, op cit*, p 1228.

¹⁴ Latta, *op cit*, p197.

It happened that at this very time Mason walked into view just a few yards away. Roobottom knew Mason and felt sure that there would be a battle immediately, but the soldiers did not know Mason. Mason asked Roobottom if he had seen any stray cattle that morning. Roobottom said that he had not; so Mason turned and left them.

Nothing more was heard of Mason and Henry until September of 1865, when San Bernardino County Sheriff Benjamin Mathews learned that James Henry was in the area. As the story goes, Henry and another member of the gang, John Rogers (or “Rodgers”), were in a camp in San Gorgonio Pass. Henry sent Rogers to San Bernardino for supplies, and while in town, Rogers stopped at a saloon, became intoxicated, and bragged about being a member of the notorious Mason-Henry Gang. Someone notified the Sheriff’s Office, and he was arrested before he could leave.



The Old Corner Saloon (right) was a popular watering hole at Third and D Streets in San Bernardino. This was one of four taverns in town, and possibly where John Rogers got drunk and revealed his gang affiliation.

There are several versions of what happened next, mostly all in agreement except for minor details. The following account by Horace C. Rolfe, San Bernardino District Attorney, appeared in the *Los Angeles Tri-Weekly News*:¹⁵

Killing of a Supposed Notorious Desperado
San Bernardino, September 16th, 1865, Eds. News

Day before yesterday morning, about daylight, our Sheriff, with a posse of three soldiers and two or three citizens, ran across the notorious Henry, of Mason and Henry notoriety, and after making some resistance he was killed by them. They found him about twenty-five miles from this place, near Santa Jacinto Canyon, and when discovered was sound asleep.

¹⁵ Latta, *op cit*, 238-39.



Horace C. Rolfe

The posse kept as still as possible, but their noise awoke him, when he jumped up, drew a revolver, and resisted to the last, firing three times and wounding one man in the foot. But the shot and balls soon brought him down, covered with wounds, and he died immediately without saying a word. He had with him two horses, a carbine, two revolvers, and a bowie knife; the carbine not loaded, besides several other implements and things. He was brought to San Bernardino, and a photograph taken of him so that he can be identified by those who knew him. The world is rid of a desperate villain, who has murdered several good citizens, and by his death the lives of many more good people are no doubt saved.

He is a small man, but quite muscular from the appearance of the corpse.

Yours,
H. C. Rolfe

A more lively account of the incident is this one appearing in the September 17, 1865, San Francisco *Daily Alta*:

Killing of Henry, the murderer. Los Angeles, Sept. 16th.

The notorious murderer, Henry, was killed last night before light, about twenty miles from San Bernardino. Henry, and a confederate named Rogers, had left Mason with the other portion of the gang in the mountains, and came down toward San Bernardino. Henry stopped at a house twenty miles from town, while Rogers went in to purchase provisions and ammunition, got drunk, and bragged of being a member of the Mason and Henry gang, when he was arrested, he told where Henry was concealed, and that Henry was armed with two six-shooters and a rifle, but had no ammunition for his rifle.

A party took Rogers and started for the place, and when approaching it one of the party stepped on a branch, which broke and alarmed Henry, who jumped up with a six-shooter in each hand and commenced firing, but was immediately shot down, said to be completely riddled with balls, fifty-seven balls taking effect, after shooting Mathews, the Sheriff, one of the pursuing party, in the foot.

Interestingly, San Bernardino County had their biannual election of local officers on September 14th, the very day of the shootout, and County Sheriff was one of the offices on the ticket. Ben Mathews lost on the very day of his biggest triumph, and perhaps one of the biggest achievements in the history of the department. How much the voters knew of the feat on election day is unknown, but it might not have made a difference. Mathews subsequently ran for sheriff, not once but twice, and was defeated both times, so evidently there was some issue that prevented the voters from again electing Mathews to the office.

When the body of James Henry was brought to the courthouse, Justice of the Peace A. Parks called for an inquest. He wrote to the sheriff, stating that there was no qualified coroner and that he, Parks, would therefore conduct the proceedings.¹⁶ A jury of twelve was quickly assembled and testimony taken. Good for a laugh is John Rogers' version of events. Reading his testimony, absent any other information, one would think that he was the hero of the day. He phrased his statement in such a way as to make it appear

¹⁶ As previously stated in Footnote No. 4, a Coroner's Inquest was held. It is not dated, but presumably is subsequent to that of Judge Parks. There has been some confusion over the fact that there are two inquests, but in comparing the twelve members of each jury, it can be seen that they are not the same.

that after seeing Henry at his camp near San Jacinto Canyon, he went and told the sheriff the next day, and then offered to lead the authorities to Henry's camp. He mentions the reward enough times that it seems like he is hinting it should be given, perhaps, to him:

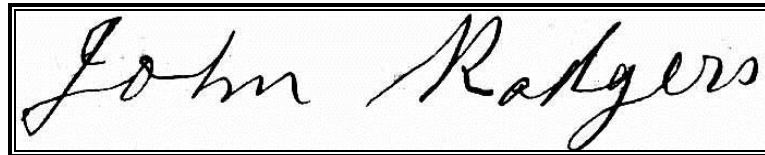
Justice of the Peace Inquest:

[Testimony of] John Rogers

I told the Sheriff that if he would go with me I would show him the man named Henry. We went together to Hicks Ranch — got there about daylight on the 14th Sept 65, found Mr. Henry laying [in]bed camped out asleep. He was ordered to surrender & he should not be hurt. He gathered up part of his arms & ran. The posse that were with me then commenced firing. He got into a bunch of brush & fired three loads out of his pistol. When I got to him he was dead. I know him to be James Henry. He has told me so himself. It is near four months since I saw him first. I saw him near Clear Creek. He has been travelling around from one place to another during that time. I have seen him several times during that time. I saw him last Wednesday morning yesterday week, saw him at Smith's ranch at San Gorgonio. He was doing nothing, he told me where he was camped. I knew at the time that he was the man for whom a reward was offered. He told me so himself. I don't think he told me at that time why the reward was offered. He told me at other times that he had helped to kill several men up the country and that was the reason the reward was offered.

The next day after I saw him at Smith ranch I told Benj. Mathews, the Sheriff.

[signed] John Rodgers

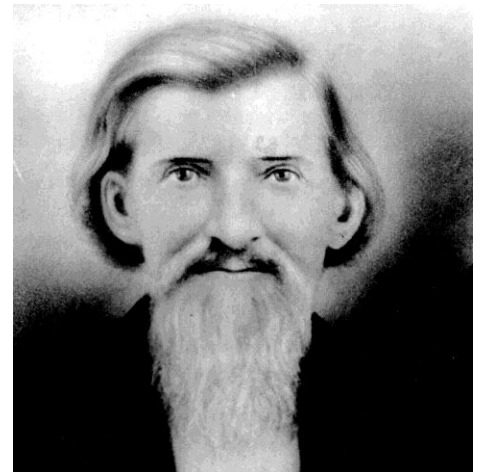


The signature of John "Rodgers" as it appears on Judge Parks' inquest transcript. All other references spell his name "Rogers."

Rogers' obfuscations at the inquest did him little good. He was taken to Los Angeles for trial and found guilty of grand larceny.¹⁷ And justice was swift; within a month after the inquest, he was sentenced to five years in San Quentin. The October 10, 1866, Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News* carried the story of Undersheriff A. J. King taking Rogers by steamer to San Francisco, and named Rogers as a member of the Mason-Henry Gang.

Most of the posse was identified in the Coroner's Inquest. One of the soldiers was Captain Robert H. McIlroy, the commander of Company E, 1st Cavalry, California Volunteers. Another was Corporal Wiles. The wounded posse member was not the sheriff, but rather Richard Mathews, the undersheriff. Richard had served previously as undersheriff in San Bernardino and does not appear to have been related to Sheriff Benjamin Mathews.

Two men were called before Judge Parks to give testimony that they knew James Henry and that the dead man before the court was indeed him. George Woodward stated that he was personally



Sheriff Benjamin F. Mathews

¹⁷ Latta, *op cit*, p 200.

acquainted with Henry for about six months in the years 1861-62, in the counties of San Diego, Los Angeles and San Bernardino. John McGirr testified he also knew Henry in 1861-62, in those three counties. These facts would seem to indicate that these two men rode with Henry for six months, although there may be an innocent explanation.

According to Robert Glenn, when Henry's cohort Joe Mason heard the news of the killing, he rode into San Bernardino dressed as a woman to find out for himself if it was true. After seeing the remains, Mason rode to the Glenn farm, and told Robert's father Silas that when he stood beside Henry's body, he made the statement that a good man had been shot in the back.¹⁸

Mason was killed seven months later, in April of 1866, by Ben Mayfield, an acquaintance of Robert Glenn. Mayfield was charged with murder, and during the trial Glenn gave the following testimony on behalf of Mayfield, but it was not enough, as Mayfield was found guilty (although later exonerated):¹⁹

Ben Mayfield was a fine man. He was not a desperado at all. I do not want to hear anyone say that he belonged to Mason-Henry Gang. I Knew him before the killing, when he was working like a mule in the Lytle Creek mines near our camp. At that time Mason and Henry were marauding about the country, murdering and robbing people.

Thus ended the criminal activities of one of California's most notorious gangs.

Saving the past for the future since 1888

¹⁸ Latta, *op cit*, p 199.

¹⁹ Latta, *ibid*, p 244.