

BOB ROGERS HAS GONE TO HELL

If there ever was a candidate for the nether regions among the rough and tumble outlaws that inhabited Indian Territory it was Bob Rogers. During his abbreviated twenty two years, Rogers, a murderer, horse thief, and bank or train robber, even managed to double cross an associate when it fit his purpose. With a rag tag gang he assembled about a year after the Dalton's Coffeyville escapade, Rogers terrorized citizens of Craig County as well as those just to the west. Fittingly he died violently, just like he lived.

Little is known about his early life, but it is assumed he grew up at the family home near Horseshoe Mound, about twenty miles south of Coffeyville, Kansas, because, as this story concludes, that's where he died. His first brush with the law was during the spring of 1892 when he was convicted by Judge Isaac Parker of stealing a dozen horses in Indian Territory then selling them in Arkansas. Parker sentenced Rogers to the federal reformatory, but pardoned him because he was only nineteen. But shortly thereafter, on November 3, 1892, Bob Rogers committed such a vicious murder, followed by a desecration of the corpse that was so repulsive his youth was no longer a factor as far as law abiding society was concerned.

Jess Elliot, a Vinita lawyer and sometimes Deputy Constable for the Cherokee Indian Police had ridden the thirty five miles from Vinita to Claremore to serve some legal papers. Upon arrival, he stopped at one of the local saloons and, for reasons only known to him, stayed too long and became seriously drunk. During his drinking bout Elliot, and Rogers, who was also drinking in the saloon, began arguing and shortly after, a fight broke out. The much stronger Rogers was beating Elliot severely until other customers separated them, got Elliot outside, put him on his horse and headed him back to Vinita. Unfortunately for Jess Elliot, Rogers was not finished. As the drunken Elliot rode along on the trail, somewhere around Chelsea, Rogers jumped him, slit his throat in three places and left him beside the road. Shortly thereafter near dusk, Elliot's body was discovered by several people and, while one went to summon authorities, the rest waited with the body. Soon after starting a fire to keep warm, Elliot's guardians heard a horse galloping toward them. Rogers had returned and as the men scattered they looked back, horrified to see Rogers dismount and stomp Elliot's lifeless body. Placing Elliot's hat on his head and rummaging through his clothes, Rogers then mounted his horse and left. The next day, lawmen tracked Rogers to Sapulpa where they found he had his horse shod and, according to the available information, had gone on west.

Bob Rogers surfaced the following summer when he was identified as the apparent leader of a gang that included his two brothers, Sam and Jim, Bob Stitleler, Ralph Halleck, Willis Brown and the Turner brothers, Dynamite Jack and Kiowa. After committing a series of minor depot and train robberies in the area, the gang became more aggressive, robbing train depots at Blue Jacket and Chelsea as well as the Mound Valley Bank at Labette, Kansas. These escalating activities drew the attention of Judge Isaac Parker and he assigned the case to U.S. Deputy Marshal Heck Bruner. On July 29, 1893, Bruner set up surveillance of a farm a few miles west of Vinita that was reputed to be a hangout for the gang. His hunch proved to be correct and during a shoot out Ralph Halleck was killed.

The Rogers gang struck next on December 22, 1893 when they attempted to rob a MK &T train by diverting it to a siding at Kelso Switch, five miles north of Vinita. As the train approached, the engineer saw the problem and “highballed” the train through the siding switch foiling the attempt. However, the gang was successful a couple of days later when they used the same tactic on an Arkansas Valley train at Seminole Switch near Lenapah, obtaining money and mail from the express car and relieving passengers of their money and jewelry.

An unusual situation occurred the following January 8. U. S. Deputy Marshal W. C. Smith surprised Rogers and gang member Bob Stiteler at his father’s home. Stiteler was captured and returned to Fort Smith for trial. Later it was revealed that Rogers had turned him in for the reward money. January of 1894 turned out to be a bad month for the gang. On January 24, Marshal Bruner and a posse surprised them at their hideout on Big Creek a few miles west of Centralia. The posse killed Kiowa Turner, capturing his brother Dynamite Jack and wounded Willis Brown so seriously that he died at Vinita as the captives were being transported to Fort Smith.

With his gang decimated, it seemed only a matter of time until Bob Rogers would be next in line and the clock wound down on Friday, March 17, 1894. U.S. Deputy Marshal Jim Mays and a large posse surrounded his father’s house near Horseshoe Mound early in the morning while he was asleep upstairs. A fierce gunfight ensued during which several hundred rounds were fired. Miraculously, Rogers wasn’t killed and volunteered to surrender if he could bring his rifle with him. Incredibly, Mays agreed, if he would keep the weapon pointed to the ground. But stepping onto the porch, Rogers raised the rifle and the posse responded with a volley that killed him instantly.

During his brief tenure here Rogers had achieved the distinction among outlaws and lawmen alike as being the scum of the earth. Most agreed that, if hell is a destination, Bob Rogers will be there to greet whoever else qualifies.

