

67

The fall of 1876 and the three years following were noteworthy on account of the wholesale thieving that was going on in the territories. It just seemed as if all the thieves in the universe had been turned loose in Nebraska, Wyoming, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Dakota. They had no regard for property or human life, and were, in my opinion, infinitely worse than the Indians ever were. Among the more notorious characters who infested the great west in the years referred to were the James boys ---Jesse and Frank--- and their gang; Billy the kid, Cully, Bill Zimmerman, Tom Reece, Phoenix, Odell, Jerry Overholt, Madison, Dutch Henry, Black Hank, Persimmon Bill, Jack Campbell, Herman Leslie, Bill Evans, Teton Jackson, McGloskey and Big Nosed George.

353

These men were leaders and had a following that was truly surprising. They stole from the settlers, they robbed the passengers on stages, they rifled the mail bags and money chests on overland routes, held up trains on the Union Pacific, looted stores, run off Indian ponies, and, very often shot or hanged their victims. They kept the entire country in an uproar, and terrorized the settlers to such an extent that one-half the robberies committed by them were never made known. They had their spies and agents at all points, even at the government posts and agencies, and at last the United States authorities were compelled to call into requisition the troops to suppress them.

During the year 1877 my orders kept me swinging like a pendulum between the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail Agencies, and Forts Laramie, Robinson, Fetterman, Reno (McKinney) and Sheridan, now being on the trail of some horse-stealing gang, and then trying to locate a holdup outfit.

On one occasion in 1877 the thieves stole about one hundred ponies from the Indians at Spotted Tail Agency. From the number of horses taken I thought the thieves were in such force that I took a detachment (M troop of the Third Cavalry) from the Spotted Tail Agency and followed them. We struck the tracks of the ponies leading towards the Black Hills. They were very easy to follow, being so many of them. We gained on them very fast, and overtook them the next day on the Cheyenne river, right where Edgemont, S. D., stands at the present time. When I first discovered the thieves they were cooking their dinner. They had turned the ponies out across the creek, with the exception of one or two. These they kept in the vicinity of their fire where they were preparing their meal. Getting as close to them as I could without being seen and riding in between them and the ponies, we captured the herd without any trouble.

364

But while I was looking after the ponies three of my men had ridden up to where the horse thieves were. The first thing I heard were three or four shots fired, and two of the soldiers came riding back to me hallooing that one of my men were shot and killed. There were four of the horse thieves, and before I could reach the place where the shooting occurred, two of them had jumped on their ponies and started toward the Hills. The other two, as soon as they saw me riding toward them, commenced to fire. That made me so hot that I did not want to be bothered with them; so I put the captured thief on his horse, tied one end of a rope to the limb of a tree, the other end around his neck, and drove the horse out from under him. Did not even stop to look back, but gathered up the ponies and started for the agency. I heard four or five days afterward of a man hanging to a tree, and suppose he was the man I swung up; but he gave me good cause to do what I did. If he had not killed one of the men who were with me I should have turned him loose, and his partner would never have been shot if he had not helped to kill one of my men.