

## Modern Day Shootout:

Less than two years ago, I spoke at an event hosted by the James-Younger Gang in San Angelo, Texas. The following article is about that meeting and was published a few days later in the San Angelo Standard-Times newspaper.

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By Ross McSwain,  
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If there is ever a real shootout staged during a gathering of the James-Younger Gang, the bullets will be flying between the descendants and wantabe relations of Jesse Woodson James. The Younger Clan seems to have all of its family tree in order.

In recent years I have taken much pleasure in working with West Texans who strive to learn about their ancestry. Never – I repeat, never – have I experienced such combative demeanor among folks claiming the same ancestor. It seems that several different men claimed to be Jesse Woodson James and who occupy graves from Texas to Missouri.

The James-Younger Gang, a loosely organized group of several hundred persons living nationwide, swooped into San Angelo last week for their annual meeting (or showdown) to swap family information, folklore or other tidbits of knowledge about the infamous outlaw gang that terrorized the mid-west in years following the Civil War.

"Jesse James has become an icon in American history," said writer-historian Phillip W. Steele of Springdale, Arkansas. Steele served as co-chairman of the "family claimants" gathering on Friday morning with Eric James, a distant relation to the bandit. The San Angelo gathering was the first that Eric James had ever attended, he said.

Steele said his interest in Jesse James and the James-Younger outlaw band developed when he listened to stories being told at night while staying on his grandfather's farm. He admits having no kinship to the outlaw, but says the story has intrigued him for a quarter-century. When the courts allowed Jesse's grave to be opened in 1995, Steele was one of 15 people selected as official witnesses.

"There was 10,000 people and five television film crews at the graveyard when we arrived at 5:30 a.m.," he said. Among items found in the grave was a .38 caliber bullet, some tufts of human hair, some teeth and a tie tack, the same shown in a photo of Jesse taken at the funeral parlor before burial.

Steele said the purpose of the James-Younger Gang organization is to bring people together who are interested in learning about that period of history and to separate fact from fiction. It appears that there is perhaps more fiction surrounding Jesse James and his exploits than there is fact.

Several people stepped up to the microphone to tell about their relationships to either the James or Younger families. A member of the Mims family briefly told about that group coming to America from Wales, and that the name at one time was spelled "Mimms."

Frank Younger and his wife, Sharon, of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, told of their relationship to the bank robbing Youngers. Despite one of her relatives serving as a bank teller in the bloody Northfield, Minn. Raid, and later as a bank official who captures another bank robber years later, she and her husband had a good time telling their story.

The fun ended when Texas author Betty Duke of Liberty Hill, between Burnet and Austin, started talking about her great-grandfather, J. L. Courtney, whom she believes to be Jesse Woodson James. Mrs. Duke wrote a book about her beliefs, including that Courtney is buried in Falls County, Texas, a place where he came to retire to a peaceful life in old age.

Retired California Superior Court Judge James Ross was not amused or happy with Mrs. Duke's presentation. He has challenged her claims for years, saying that DNA tests of exhumed remains taken from Jesse James' grave in Kearney, Missouri in 1995 prove the old bandit died there and didn't wander away. There have been many imposters over the years, including the late J. Frank Dalton who claimed to be Jesse. He is buried in Granbury. Another imposter, John James, died in a mental hospital after traveling around the country with a tent preacher. The preacher's daughter was in attendance Friday, but did not make any comment.

However, Mrs. Duke came prepared. She challenged each person claiming direct kin to Jesse James to provide blood for DNA testing. In fact, she had blood sampling kits with her. Matters got even more out of hand when a video she planned to show gave problems, using up some of her allotted 30 minutes. When she was nearly finished, the judge demanded a minute of time and took several to read about DNA testing from a lawbook. There was grumbling, and another speaker offered his 30 minutes to allow the woman to show the video, which featured a Missouri official saying the exhumation in 1995 did not prove conclusively that the remains were that of Jesse's corpse.

Perhaps next year's meeting will reveal some new facts about the James bunch. However, I doubt it. Facts are hard to come by when there is little or no cooperation among groups.

Thanks for coming to San Angelo. I hope your journey to the James boys "Peace Ranch" in Sterling County was informative, entertaining and peaceful. I'll be seeing you Out Yonder.