By 19 December 1917, when the San Antonio (Texas) Light reported rumors of Etta Place’s death “in the vicinity of Cape Horn,” she had been back in the United States for more than a decade, and her erstwhile companions, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, had been dead for nine years. The fact that very few people knew what had become of the trio had not stopped newspapers from publishing speculative stories. Indeed, the Light article, “Police Doubt Girl Bandit Dead,” was hardly the first. It was a reprint of “The Girl Terror of the West is Mystery Still,” which appeared in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer on 11 November 1917, and which was itself a thinly veiled rewrite of “The Stick-Up Girl: A True Tale of an Uncatched Outlaw,” published in the New York Morning Telegraph on 16 March 1913.

The source for “The Stick-Up Girl” was a deputy New York police commissioner, George Dougherty (1865-1931), who had joined the force in 1911 after a quarter-century with the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. The Pinkertons had pursued the Wild Bunch with more fervor than any other police organization, public or private, so it is likely that Dougherty’s service there had familiarized him with the gang, although his own assignments appear to have been largely confined to New York.

In 1885, as a young man of 20, he left a small-town-newspaper job in Pennsylvania and, as he described it, “boldly went to New York, walked into the Pinkerton office and asked for a job.” Dougherty became a man-about-town, a friend of Broadway star George M. Cohan, and a member of the Friar’s Club. A Who’s Who entry, which he most likely penned himself, said: “Known for successful detective exploits. Introduced fingerprint system of identification in U.S.” He quickly made a name for himself in an era when the city was riven by gang wars and the police department by corruption. Dougherty led raids on gambling houses and waged a vigorous campaign against crooks in uniform. In perhaps his most famous case, he helped secure the electric chair for senior police lieutenant Charles Becker and four others, who had murdered gambling boss Herman “Beanie” Rosenthal because he had informed on the lieutenant’s protection racket.

Detective Dougherty

After leaving the New York police department in 1914, Dougherty joined his brother’s firm, Dougherty’s Detective Bureau and Mercantile Police, and starred (playing himself) in a silent film called The Line-Up at Police Headquarters. (A print of the six-reeler is held by the UCLA Film and Television Archive.) During the filming, he did a stunt fall after a fake bomb explosion and tumbled with such enthusiasm that he knocked himself out. He landed on his feet the next morning in the New...
York Times, where he was dubbed an “unconscious hero.”

Dougherty wrote two books, In Europe (1922) and The Criminal as a Human Being (1924), and articles for the Saturday Evening Post and other magazines. The Wild Bunch must not have been uppermost in his mind, as neither of his books mentions them, although The Criminal makes passing references to Jesse James, the Daltons, and Black Bart.

On the subject of crime in America, Dougherty was a man of strong opinions. He wrote a letter to the New York Times in 1925 suggesting the payment of bounties to policemen for killing robbers—$1,000 for the first dead robber, $2,500 for two, and $5,000 for three or more. His former colleagues at the police department took a dim view of this plan, saying they feared it “might incite the police to indiscriminate shooting.” While on a visit to England in 1926, Dougherty urged the “crossroads hanging” of any bandit who committed a murder in the course of a crime. Once the culprit was caught, he said, “he should be at once strung up by the friends of the people who [had] been killed.”

In The Criminal as a Human Being, Dougherty conjectured a cause-and-effect relationship between World War I and the criminals of the late 1910s and early 1920s. Measured against the bandits of “the olden days,” he found contemporary criminals lacking: “The present-day stick-up and all-round-crook is the dapper fox trotter with the brilliantined, sometimes marcelled locks. He is a cross between mama’s boy and a mail order tailor’s model.” But responsibility for America’s crime wave wasn’t entirely the fault of the Great War and brilliantine. “It is this hero worship,” he continued, “in the motion pictures, on the stage, and so on, that inspires so many young men to deeds of violence and crime.” And where there were young men, there were young women. “Some of the flappers are as criminal as their heroes, though they more often evade arrest. There is a woman in nearly every case of suspected criminal intent.”

The war-sparked, movie-influenced, effete-styled, flapper-encouraged criminal element could be brought to heel, Dougherty averred, by “prohibiting the manufacture and sale of revolvers and pistols,” an action that he predicted would diminish crime 70 percent. He saw such legislation as a sure thing: “Who can object to this federal law?”

**Dougherty and Etta**

His egalitarian view about the woman behind every crime might well have been on his mind that morning in 1913 when the Morning Telegraph reporter, identified only as “T.B.,” came calling and asked, “Who is the most picturesque woman criminal in the present generation?”

“Etta Longabaugh would be good reading,” Dougherty responded.

Mixing a few facts with a healthy dose of “good reading,” he proceeded to tell Etta’s story. He had her participating in the Wild Bunch’s 1900 holdup of the bank in Winnemucca, Nevada, which not a single eye-witness has ever substantiated. He conflated the Fort Worth photograph of five of the gang’s members with Sundance and Etta’s New York portrait, enlarging the latter to include “eight or ten” members. He said that in Argentina, Butch, Sundance, and Etta had settled “in a town called Sixteenth of October, in the province of Shibaut,” where “they were the first white people.” Actually, they homesteaded a ranch in the Cholila Valley, near a colony called 16 de Octubre in the western part of the territory of Chubut, and could accurately be called pioneers, but they were hardly the first whites. According to the 1895 Chubut census, the population of the territory was 3,748, of whom 40 percent were foreign-born, chiefly Welsh, with a smattering of English, Scots, Italians, and Americans. In fact, a dozen immigrants from the United States were counted in western Chubut. Among the outlaws’ Cholila neighbors were immigrants from Wales, England, and the United States.

Dougherty surmised that Etta had been unhappy in Cholila—”Life was stupid for her, and she didn’t try to overcome the depression”—and that as a result, she had “fired [Butch and Sundance] with the idea” of robbing a bank in “Riogelleges,” after which they fled to Chile and, eventually, to Europe. She bought clothing and jewels in Paris and “took a cure at the gaming tables in Monte Carlo.”

“Where is she now?” T.B. wondered.

“Working with the band around Cape Horn,” Dougherty confided. The New York policeman had an almost unblemished record for getting his geography wrong. Cape Horn is an uninhabited rock pile buffeted by freezing winds in the Tierra del Fuego archipelago off the southern coast of Chile.

**Río Gallegos Bandits**

There was a bank robbery in early 1905 in Río Gallegos, a town in the Santa Cruz territory of far southern Argentina, but historians today believe that the Wild Bunch trio wasn’t involved. Nonetheless, they were the prime suspects, which caused them to flee Argentina. By 1906, Etta was living in San Francisco, while Butch and Sundance had moved on to Bolivia. Meanwhile, there were rumors that
the unidentified Rio Gallegos bandits had come from or escaped to Punta Arenas, Chile, on the Strait of Magellan. These stories, or bits and pieces thereof, wafted into Dougherty’s narrative. How Paris and Monte Carlo entered the picture is anyone’s guess.

The Wild Bunch trio’s movements after 1905 weren’t generally known in 1913, so Dougherty can be forgiven his factual lapses, if not his exaggerations. After all, he was spinning a yarn for a reporter.

By the time the 1913 “Stick-Up Girl” had been recycled in 1917 as the “Girl Terror” and the “Girl Bandit,” Dougherty had vanished from the narrative and been replaced by the anonymous “New York police department,” but his (or T.B.’s) misspellings and errors lived on, sometimes with new twists. Chubut was still rendered “Shibaut,” but 16 de Octubre was now a hotel rather than a town.

The biggest difference in the accounts was that Etta had blossomed into a Wild Bunch dominatrix. She didn’t simply join the gang: “She became its leader.” Amazon-like, she “bore the brunt of attacks by aroused citizens and always was the last in the getaway.” She wasn’t just the first white woman in the Cholilí valley: She “became its virtual ruler.” And not any old ruler. “She lorded it over the simple natives and they voluntarily became her abject slaves.” One can envision Etta in stiletto-heeled black boots, with a cheroot hanging from her lurid red lips and a whip in each hand, barking orders at the heathen rabble.

The Light story moved the bandits to Europe and thence to Cape Horn, roughly as Dougherty had first recounted it, but the article introduced a new rumor: “Now comes word that Etta Longbaugh [sic] is dead and her band is broken up.” This was not to be believed, however: “Old police officials are skeptical.” Perhaps she had spread this story so as to get the police bloodhounds called off so she could return quietly to her homeland. “Who can tell?” asked the Light. Who indeed? If one were going to plant a story of one’s death, an uninhabited island off the southern tip of Chile would hardly be the place to do it.

Charles Bell’s concept of Etta Longabaugh, from the Post-Intelligencer, 11 November 1917. Courtesy the authors.