Butch Cassidy was born Robert LaRoy Parker, the eldest of 13 children in a Mormon family, on 13 April 1866 in Beaver, Utah. As a teenager, he fell under the influence of a young rustler named Mike Cassidy and later borrowed his surname for an alias. He acquired the nickname “Butch” working at a butcher shop in the early 1890s, and it was as George “Butch” Cassidy that he served time in a Wyoming prison for stealing a horse.

Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

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BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID

inasmuch as famous outlaws are often blamed for others’ deeds. The gang’s first verifiable heist was the 1889 robbery of a bank in Telluride, Colorado, by Butch Cassidy, Matt Warner, and Tom McCarty; the last was Ben Kilpatrick’s ill-fated assault on a train in Texas in 1912. The majority of the gang’s crimes, however, took place between 1896 and 1901. During that period, those in which both Butch and Sundance actively participated included no more than two train robberies and one bank job.

By the time the Pinkertons began calling the gang the Wild Bunch, many of its core members had been arrested or killed. Matt Warner had gone straight in 1900, after several years in prison. Ben Kilpatrick, William Ellsworth “Elzy” Lay, and Harvey Logan were still in jail (although Logan would escape and then commit suicide after a botched train robbery in 1904). Will Carver, George Currie, Sam Ketchum, Lonnie Logan, Bill and Fred McCarty, and Joe Walker were already dead and buried.

Meanwhile, Butch and Sundance had fled to South America, accompanied by the mystery woman known as Etta Place. The Pinkertons called her Etta on their wanted posters, but she signed hotel registers as Ethel. She acquired the surname “Place” by traveling as the wife of Sundance, who was now using the alias Harry A. Place (Place being his mother’s maiden name). Although no record of the marriage has been found, Sundance introduced her to family and friends as his wife. In a letter to a Wyoming pal, he said they had met in Texas. She has been described as a prostitute, a teacher, or both, but no one knows her true origin or fate.

In any case, the couple met up with Butch—who now called himself James Ryan—in New York City early in 1901 and they all steamed south to Argentina. (Why they picked Argentina is unknown, but the newspapers of the day touted homesteading opportunities there.) After arriving in Buenos Aires, they sought the advice of the U.S. vice-consul, George Newbury, who suggested they head for Patagonia, as southern Argentina is known. He owned an estancia (ranch) there and wanted to recruit other North Americans to colonize a large tract of government land just north of the Choilila Valley in the Chubut Territory.

The trio took his advice and journeyed to Choilila, where they settled on 625 hectares of government land in June 1901 and began raising cattle, sheep, and horses. They registered their brands with territorial authorities and joined neighbors in petitioning the government for more land. By all accounts, the bandits stayed out of trouble in Choilila, except for one instance in which Butch was questioned about having facilitated the escape of his friend Robert Evans, who had been arrested on suspicion of having stolen money from an estancia manager. Evans, who may have been from Montana, made himself scarce, and Butch was never charged in the case. (Evans and a Texan named William Wilson later committed several crimes that were mistakenly blamed on Butch and Sundance, who had long since left Argentina. Evans and Wilson died in a shoot-out with police in 1911.)

While Butch and Sundance ranched, the Pinkertons sleuthed. Through postal informants (who opened mail addressed to the outlaws’ families), they learned that the fugitives were in Argentina. After veteran operative Frank Dimaio finished a case in Brazil, he went to Buenos
Aires to see what he could learn. Dimaio located their banker and visited Vice-Consul Newbery, who told him the trio was living in Cholila.

The Pinkertons sought funds from clients to send a posse after Butch and Sundance, but the banks and railroads declined to chip in. The agency had to be satisfied with arranging for wanted posters in Spanish and warning the Buenos Aires police chief, in characteristically ominous rhetoric, that “it is our firm belief that it is only a question of time until these men commit some desperate robbery in the Argentine Republic. They are all thorough plainsmen and horsemen, riding from 600 to 1,000 miles after committing a robbery. If there are reported to you any bank or train held up robbers or any other similar crimes, you will find that they were undoubtedly committed by these men” (Meadows 1996).

Sure enough, in February 1905 two “Yankees” held up a bank in Río Gallegos, 700 miles south of Cholila. Although the descriptions of the robbers didn’t fit Butch and Sundance very well, and although evidence indicated that they had been in Cholila at the time of the robbery, the police jumped to the obvious conclusion. Tipped off by a friend about orders to detain them for questioning, the bandits sold most of their holdings and fled to Chile in May 1905.

Later that year, all three briefly returned to Argentina, and with an unidentified accomplice, they robbed a bank in Villa Mercedes de San Luis. The robbers galloped west, pursued by several armed posses, and escaped over the Chilean border. Very little is known about Butch and Sundance’s activities in Chile, but they spent some time in the northern port of Antofagasta in 1905 and 1906. From another postal informant, the Pinkertons learned that Sundance—using the alias Frank Boyd—had run into an unnamed difficulty with Chilean authorities but that he had settled the matter with the help of Frank Aller, the U.S. vice-consul in Antofagasta.

Shortly after the Villa Mercedes holdup, Ethel sailed back to the United States for good. The last known report of her whereabouts put her in San Francisco in March 1906, perhaps using the name Ethel Matthews. Later that year, Butch (under the alias Santiago Maxwell) and Sundance (under the alias H. A. Brown) made their way up into Bolivia and found work at the Concordia Tin Mine as muleteers and payroll guards. Mine manager Percy Seibert knew they had been outlaws, but he “never had the slightest trouble getting along with” either of them, and they often dined at his home (Meadows 1996).

In late 1907 the bandits made an excursion to Santa Cruz, a frontier town in Bolivia’s eastern savanna. In a letter to friends at Concordia, Butch said he had found just the place he had been looking for and predicted, “If I don’t fall down I will be living here before long.” Sometime in 1908 he and Sundance quit their jobs at Concordia. In August they turned up in Tupiza, a town in southern Bolivia. Butch was now calling himself James “Santiago” Lowe (an alias from his New Mexico days), and Sundance was using the name Frank Smith or H. A. Brown (accounts vary). Lying low while planning the holdup apparently intended to finance their Santa Cruz venture, they camped intermittently with English engineer A. G. Francis, who was running a gold dredge on the nearby Río San Juan del Oro.

The bandits initially intended to rob a bank in Tupiza, but the arrival of a contingent of cavalry soldiers led them to shift their focus to the Arajay, Francke mining company, which sent unguarded payrolls overland from Tupiza to its headquarters in Quechila. When Arajay manager Carlos Peró picked up the weekly payroll on the morning of 3 November 1908 and headed north, Butch and Sundance were not far behind. Peró stayed overnight in Salo and set off again shortly after dawn. The bandits, now ahead of him on Huaca Huanchaca (Dead Cow Hill), relieved him of the payroll and a company mule at about 9:30 in the morning.

Released unharmed, Peró sent word to Arajay officials, and posses were soon looking for two armed gringos with a dark-brown mule bearing the company’s distinctive Q brand. Meanwhile, Butch and Sundance had made their way south to Francis’s camp. In the morning, they conscripted him to guide them on a looping escape route that put a mountain range between them and most of the posses. The next day, the bandits let Francis go and rode on alone. They were heading north, probably toward Oruro, site of Sundance’s last known address.

At sundown on 6 November, they rode into the mining town of San Vicente and sought lodging for themselves and forage for their mules. The corregidor (local justice) arranged for them to stay in a spare room off the walled patio of a village’s adobe house. The corregidor then alerted a four-man posse (an army captain, two soldiers, and a policeman) that had arrived that afternoon in search of the Arajay bandits. The captain was sleeping or otherwise indisposed, but the two soldiers and the policeman went to investigate at once. As they entered the patio and approached the bandits’ room, Butch appeared in the doorway and shot the leading soldier. The Bolivian responded with a rifle shot before retreating to a nearby house, where he died within minutes. The other soldier and the policeman also fired and retreated, then stationed themselves outside the patio door and began firing into the bandits’ room. The captain appeared and asked the corregidor to gather villagers to surround the house and prevent the bandits from escaping. As the corregidor hastened to comply, he heard three desperate screams from within the room. By this time the house was surrounded, the firing had ceased.

The next morning, Butch’s body was found stretched out on the floor, with one bullet wound in the temple and another in the arm. Sundance’s corpse was on an adobe bench behind the door. He had been shot once in the forehead and several times in the arm. The witnesses concluded that Butch had put Sundance out of his misery and then turned the gun on himself. Later reports claimed they had left their rifles outside and were down to their last bullets when they committed suicide. In reality, Sundance’s rifle lay beside his body, and both men had plenty of ammunition. Also among the bandits’ effects were the Arajay payroll and a map of Bolivia with penciled annotations coinciding with their known movements in Bolivia. Peró later identified the corpses as those of the men who had robbed him. An inquest was held, but the officials never identified the bandits by name.

Word soon spread among Butch and
Sundance’s friends in Bolivia that they had died in San Vicente. The last report of their whereabouts in that country was an item in a Tupiza biweekly, El Choroque, which listed Santiago Lowe as a guest at the Hotel Términus at the beginning of November. This lends credence to a report by writer James D. Horan that a Reverend Wenberg had run into Butch in a Tupiza hotel and greeted him as Mr. Maxwell—the name Butch had been using when Wenberg met him during his Concordia days. “I’m fine,” Butch coldly replied, “but my name is Lowe” (Meadows 1996).

In 1909 mail sent to Sundance went unanswered, and rumors of his death reached Chile. His erstwhile benefactor Frank Aller wrote the American legation in La Paz for confirmation and a certificate of death (Meadows 1996) for two Americans—one known as Frank Boyd or H. A. Brown and the other as Maxwell—who reportedly had been “killed at San Vicente near Tupiza by natives and police and buried as desconocidos [unknowns]” (Meadows 1996). Aller said he needed proof of Boyd/Brown’s death to settle his estate in Chile. The legation forwarded the request to the Bolivian foreign ministry, which eventually sent a summary of the inquest report and “death certificates for the two men, whose names are unknown” (Meadows 1996).

The bandits’ South American friends may have learned of their fate early on, but their North American friends had to wait. Although the Bolivian newspapers carried several articles on the Aramayo holdup and its aftermath, they never identified the slain bandits. A wire-service story in a Buenos Aires daily was the first to link the crime with Butch and Sundance: “There are opinions that these are the ones who held up the Banco de la Nación in Villa Mercedes” (Meadows 1996). Within a few years, varying accounts of the shoot-out began appearing in English. The first came from Hiram Bingham, who had traveled through Tupiza two weeks after the event and mentioned it in his travelogue Across South America (1911).

In 1913 Wide World Magazine published “The End of an Outlaw,” in which A. G. Francis related his encounters with the two bandits, whom he identified as Kid Curry and Butch Cassidy. (He knew the pair only by their Tupiza aliases and apparently mixed up the Sundance Kid with Kid Curry when he wrote his article.) Although much of Francis’s account was accurate, the Pinkertons dismissed it as a fake, written to make a buck.

In his 1922 book Six Years in Bolivia, English miner A. V. L. Guise reported the death of two gringo bandits in a shoot-out with Bolivian soldiers in Cochabamba, a city in central Bolivia, far from San Vicente. In Tales of the Old-Timer (1924), Western writer Frederick R. Bechdolt had Butch and Sundance dying at their Argentine ranch in a 1906 shoot-out “with more than 100 soldiers.” Because Bechdolt interviewed people who had known the bandits in the West, it seems clear that the fact of their death in a South American shoot-out was known in the United States by then, even if the details were murky.

Arthur Chapman (best known for his treacly poem “Out Where the West Begins”) interviewed the bandits’ friend Percy Seibert for the article “Butch Cassidy,” which appeared in The Elks Magazine in April 1930 and has been quoted by historians ever since. Chapman described Butch as the “coolest, cleverest, and most dangerous outlaw of his age,” while Seibert jumbled places and dates and credited Butch and Sundance with crimes they couldn’t possibly have committed. As for the shoot-out, which he correctly placed in San Vicente, Seibert inflated the story patrol to a “company of Bolivian cavalry” who charged the outlaws’ house: “Rifles blazed from door and window, and men began to stagger and fall in the courtyard.” Seibert also introduced the anecdote of Sundance’s desperate run across the courtyard to fetch the rifles and ammunition.

Charles Kelly incorporated the Seibert-Chapman version of the San Vicente shoot-out into Outlaw Trail (1938), the first book-length history of the Wild Bunch. James D. Horan, who wrote several books about the bandits, also depended heavily on Seibert. When William Goldman wrote the screenplay for the 1969 hit movie Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, he relied on Kelly’s and Horan’s work.

By the time the film appeared, Butch and Sundance’s adventures had long since been hopelessly exaggerated and romanticized. A 1930 Denver Post article, for example, blamed them for “raids on banks, mining offices, and trains in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia,” and the New York Mirror in 1937 lionized them for “a series of daring holdups” in Argentina, adding that the “gauchos loved being robbed by the dashing gringos—because they stole in the grand manner.” In reality, they apparently committed only two holdups during their eight years in South America.

Inspired by the popularity of the movie, writers took up the story again in the 1970s, this time with a dramatically revisionist view: The outlaws had not died in Bolivia but had returned to the United States and lived out their remaining years in relative obscurity. Many reports fueled this new view, including testimony from old-timers, apparently reliable sources, and friends of friends. A plethora of reports had one or both of the men living or dying in Europe (in France or Ireland), Latin America (in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, or Venezuela), or the United States (in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, or Wyoming). Butch dominated the sightings and death legends, perhaps because at least one impostor was making the rounds in the West claiming to be him.

The return theories gained credence because of the lack of hard evidence about the shoot-out; historians had never documented the fact that such a shoot-out had taken place, let alone who had died in it. No one had done any research in Bolivia or even looked at the available collections of early-1900s South American newspapers in the States. Indeed, the Southern Hemisphere continues to be terra incognita to Western historians. Howard Lamar’s much-acclaimed New Encyclopedia of the American West (1998), for example, has Butch and Sundance roosting “quietly in the backcountry of Brazil near the Chilen border” (Lamar 1988), though they never lived in Brazil—which, in any event, has no border with Chile.

Another factor that may have contributed to the revisionist view is the ro-
romantic notion of “the return of the bandit,” who cannot die because he represents hope. “Men can live without justice, and generally must,” according to historian and bandit expert Eric Hobbsbawm, “but they cannot live without hope” (1981). There was also the conceit that intelligent outlaws like Butch and Sundance could not have been outwitted by a posse in a Third World country like Bolivia. In fact, however, the Bolivians captured most payroll bandits—invariably foreigners—who operated during the early 1900s.

The first and most significant revisionist was Lula Parker Betenson, Butch’s youngest sister, who was a baby when he left home. In Butch Cassidy, My Brother (1975), a memoir of the Parker clan’s life in frontier Utah and her sibling’s career, Betenson wrote that he had visited the family in 1925. She said he had died in Spokane in 1937 but was not the Cassidy impostor who had died near Spokane that same year. She refused to say what name her brother was using when he died, and she never provided any proof of his return. Researchers who met Betenson surmised that she didn’t know much about her brother’s life. She implied to a couple of them that she was just having fun with her stories, and one of her sons said point-blank that Butch’s alleged 1925 visit had never happened. Moreover, Butch’s father said he had never seen his son again after he went to South America, and a niece said Butch’s brothers had looked for him for years without learning what had become of him.

Butch as the “good bandit” was another of Betenson’s themes. “He was known as Robin Hood in North and South America,” she wrote, “robbing the rich and often giving to the poor.” His friend Josie Bassett agreed: “Butch took care of more people than FDR, and with no red tape.” It is true that Butch and Sundance were well liked and respected, but they were hardly philanthropists. The best that can be said of them is that they stole company money rather than personal belongings and that they usually shot only at people who were shooting at them.

Western writer Larry Pointer’s 1977 book *In Search of Butch Cassidy* combined a history of the Wild Bunch with an attempt to prove that William T. Phillips, a Michigan native who owned a machine shop in Spokane, Washington, was the returned Butch Cassidy. Pointer based much of his case on Phillips’s unpublished manuscript, “The Bandit Invincible,” an account of his supposed life as Cassidy. Some of the manuscript’s details conform with what is known of the outlaw’s life in Wyoming, where Phillips had worked as a young man, but aspects of Butch’s life elsewhere in the United States were wrong, and the South American portion of the manuscript was lacunose. Phillips located the bandits’ ranch in the wrong part of Argentina and had them holding up railroads not yet built when they were in the area. He proffered an extensive (and improbable, considering the era) round of plastic surgery in Paris as the deus ex machina to account for the differences in his and Butch’s appearances.

In 1983 outlaw buff Ed Kirby published *The Rise and Fall of the Sundance Kid*, another book at war with itself. The first half is a straightforward narrative of Sundance’s life until his apparent death in Bolivia. The second half is an incon-gruous effort to prove that the handsome, nearly six-foot-tall Sundance Kid had returned to the United States as the five-foot-three Hiram BeBeé, a homely drunk who died in the Utah State Penitentiary in 1955 while serving a life sentence for murdering a sheriff. Kirby suggested that osteoporosis might explain how the 30-something Sundance could have shrunk into the elderly BeBeé. A 1919 mug shot of a much younger BeBeé, however, showed him to have always been gnomish in height and appearance.

In the 1980s and 1990s Butch and Sundance went under the loupe all over again. The tales of their return got a skeptical reevaluation, and researchers finally combed judicial, police, and newspaper archives in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia. The resulting research produced a slew of articles in outlaw and Western history journals and several new books. Two key judicial reports were found. One contained some 1,000 pages addressing outlawry in Patagonia during and after Butch and Sundance’s residency there. The other was the long-lost file from the Bolivian judicial inquest into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the two gringo bandits in San Vicente. Much of this material can be found in Anne Meadows’s *Digging Up Butch and Sundance* (1996).

In *Sundance, My Uncle* (1992), Donna Ernst provided a wealth of new information about her outlaw in-law’s childhood and experiences as a young cowboy. With *Butch Cassidy: A Biography* (1998), Richard Patterson contributed the first thoroughly documented look at the icon’s career. Butch and Sundance have also begun to intrigue historians in Argentina, including Marcelo Gavirati, Osvaldo Topcic, and Ricardo Vallmitjana. Gavirati’s *Buscados en la Patagonia: Butch, Sundance, Ethel, Evans y Wilson* (1999), for example, surveys their stay in Patagonia and their connection to other outlaws there.

The legend of Butch and Sundance is certain to live on. “Some folks say [Butch] never died in South America,” Paul Turner told a Salt Lake City *Deseret News* columnist in 1999. “Myself, I like to think the old boy’s still alive out there, whoopin’ it up.” Turner, who operates the Butch Cassidy Museum in Richfield, Utah, added that “anybody who’d like to hear a Butch Cassidy legend or two, give me a call… What I don’t know I’ll make up.”

—Anne Meadows and Daniel Buck

References


