Surprising Development: The Sundance Kid's

by Daniel Buck

A splash of newspaper articles in early 1992 reported, incorrectly as it turned out, that a scientific expedition led by forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow had disinterred the remains of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in Bolivia. Soon thereafter, members of the expedition began receiving letters and phone calls from individuals wishing to pass along historical tidbits, family stories, or outlaw clues. A few people mailed in copies of old photographs that they hoped would be authenticated as Wild Bunch icons. The fact that the men in these photographs wore derby hats, as did the Wild Bunch quintet in the Fort Worth portrait (and millions of other men of the era, from hod carriers to railroad barons), was proffered as a telling link.

A particularly persistent informant was Gordon Muir, who began telephoning expedition members in late January, 1992 from his home in Hamilton, Canada. Muir said that he had been following the team’s activities in the newspapers and had been “an enthusiast in these areas” since he was a teenager. He explained in his flat but authoritative voice that he was presently tied up in a multitude of projects, including several related to Billy the Kid and Jesse James, but that he had long been interested in Butch and Sundance. In fact, he said he was “frantically looking for Berrillon measurements” for the pair. As for their Bolivian adventures, he said, “I have suspicions that mining officials were in cahoots in the holdups.” During one of his initial phone calls, he tossed out the comment that “the North-West Mounted Police had once arrested the Sundance Kid in Calgary for mistreating a horse.” This was a heretofore unknown story, at least south of the Canadian line.

Muir called again a few days later. He repeated the story about Sundance’s arrest and added that “Sundance owned a saloon in Calgary. The North-West Mounted Police had to put in six substations to keep track of all the outlaws who came into and out of the Alberta badlands.” The story was inflating fast — not only was Sundance a horse-beater, but he was also a bartender. Muir said he was going to put a packet of information in the mail but it would take him a while: “I am intentionally unorganized in case anyone breaks in because I need to protect people who have provided me with information.” One such source, he said, was Clyde Snow, whom Muir described as “a sort of Albert Schweitzer of our time.”

In early February, Muir called to report that he was about “to receive a ton of materials from the prison at Walla Walla” about G.F. Phillips who Muir thought might be William T. Phillips, the Spokane machine-shop owner who had impersonated Butch Cassidy in the 1920s and 1930s. A week later Muir called to say that he had “received all the information and photographs from Walla Walla and will be putting it in the mail soon.” Four days later he called, advising that “I am on the verge of some really major discoveries — I can’t announce them just yet.” He intimated that the press in Canada was anticipating his announcement. After saying that the mule Butch and Sundance stole during their last holdup in Bolivia was “very significant, but more on that later,” Muir asked about the condition of the grave in Bolivia and whether there was anything left to be done down there.

Later that day, he called back to say that he had studied the packet from Walla Walla and determined that G.F. Phillips was “not our man — too short.” But Muir had a new quarry, “Henry Wagner — there’s an interesting case — after leaving jail he drifted up into Canada and was hung for murder in 1913.” Just what Henry Wagner had to do with Butch and Sundance was not clear. Muir said that he was “putting all his papers together, maybe 50 pages or so,” and would “get them off next week or the following.”

Muir’s papers never arrived, but in mid-November 1992, he telephoned with the news that he had found a photograph of a Wild Bunch member who had never been identified and that he was trying to do just that. Muir added that there might be a Wild Bunch photo album out there.

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About the Author:

Daniel Buck, a charter member of WOLA, and his research-writer wife Anne Meadows discovered that the Sundance Kid had been in Canada several years, something that surprised Wild Bunch researchers. He and Anne also made news in 1991-92 with their trips to South America researching the Wild Bunch and helping to exhume a grave in San Vicente, Bolivia, which they believe contain the remains of Sundance and Butch Cassidy. Their work was featured on a recent PBS-TV program and Anne is the author of a soon-to-be-published book by St. Martin’s Press tentatively titled Digging Up Butch and Sundance. Both have written several previous articles for the WOLA Journal.
Unusual -- and Unknown -- Life in Canada

that no one knew about. He then returned to the stories of Sundance in Canada and for the first time mentioned a source for his tales. "The Glenbow Institute published an article or book by Vicky Kelly," he casually mentioned, "who said that Sundance worked in Alberta in the 1880s, came up in 1891, and worked on a ranch for the McHughes." Muir didn't volunteer what or where the Glenbow Institute was.

The Glenbow Institute was located, with the help of a museum directory, in Calgary, Alberta, where the reference librarian provided a copy of Kelly's article, "Butch and the Kid," which had been published in Glenbow, the institute's journal, in November 1970. The article was brief, only two pages, but offered clues to what had been, at least among researchers in the United States, a missing chapter in the Sundance Kid's life. According to Kelly, he worked on the McHugh brothers' ranch in Alberta in 1891, and later broke horses for railroad contractors near High River and for the Bar U ranch, one of the largest cattle operations on the Canadian frontier. North-West Mounted Police records disclosed that that same year he had been arrested for cruelty to animals, but the charge had been dismissed. Finally, Kelly wrote that during the winter of 1892-93, the Sundance Kid was in a partnership with Frank Hamilton running a bar at Calgary's Grand Central Hotel. The partnership ended less than amicably.

With the assistance of the Glenbow librarian, other accounts and documents were collected, which supported the notion that indeed the Sundance Kid had spent the early 1890s living in the Canadian province of Alberta, just over the border from Montana. Coincidentally, this is a period sparsely chronicled by his biographers. In February 1889, Sundance was released from jail in Sundance, Wyoming, after completing an 18-month sentence for horse stealing and by May he was back in trouble for threatening the Sundance deputy sheriff, James Swisher. Not much is known of his activities until three years later, in November 1892, when he is thought to have participated in the holdup of a Great Northern train at Malta, Montana. The Canadian accounts fill in the gaps.

The Sundance Kid was sufficiently well-known in Calgary that when Ben Kilpatrick was arrested in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1901, and initially identified as Harry Longabaugh, the Calgary Herald newspaper took notice. Courtesy Calgary Herald.

For example, Leaves From the Medicine Tree, a regional history published by the High River Pioneers' and Old Timers' Association (1961), is the source for the stories that commencing about 1890 Sundance was a bronco buster on the McHugh brothers' H2 ranch on the Bow River north of Fort Macleod, on the Bar U with ranch foreman Herb Millar, and for various Calgary and Edmonon railroad contractors who were then building a line south from Calgary to Fort Macleod, 40 miles from the U.S. border. The Macleod Gazette reported that, at various times, 700 to 2,000 men and 300 to 600 teams of horses were employed on the project. If Sundance was breaking horses, he had plenty to do.

The year 1891 was eventful in the young Sundance's Canadian sojourn. He was logged in the Canadian census, arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and served as best man at a pal's wedding. On April 6, 1891, an Alberta census taken visited the Bar U ranch near High River, south of Calgary, and enumerated one "Harry Longabaugh," occupation "Horse Breaker," age "25," born "U.S.A."

The best estimate of Sundance's birth date is spring 1867 (Sundance, My Uncle, Donna Ernst, 1992), so the enumerated age might be off by a year or two, perhaps because the information was

Sundance reportedly operated a bar at the Grand Central Hotel in Calgary in the early 1890s. This was taken on November 7, 1886, after a disastrous fire. Courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary.
The name "H. Longabaugh" appears in the August 1891 Calgary court records as having had, on August 7, the offence of "Cruelty to animals" dismissed. No further details about this incident have come to light.

Another regional history, *Big Hill Country*, by the Cochrane and Area Historical Society (1977), disclosed that on November 18, 1891, the Sundance Kid was best man at the marriage of Everett C. Johnson to Mary Eleanor Bigland in High River. According to his daughter Laurie, Johnson was a Virginia native who came west as a boy after the Civil War and knew Sundance from his days in Wyoming. He was a stagecoach driver in the Black Hills, rode with Buffalo Bill, and punched cows for the Powder River Cattle Company, before coming up to Canada, where he was foreman at the Bar U. Apparently Sundance and Johnson worked there together for a time. Sundance was not Johnson's only famous chum. Her father, Laurie wrote, was "a friend and hunting companion of Owen Wister who used [Johnson's] character and some of his adventures in the book *The Virginian.*"

A capsule history of Sundance's life in Canada was provided in *Leaves from the Medicine Tree*:

About 1890, Harry Longbaugh [sic], a quiet boy of medium stature, drifted into the cow country. He was better known in Wyoming as the "Sundance Kid." His first job was with the McHugh's, who had the Blackfeet [Indian] beef contract. Later he was around High River breaking work horses for the railroad contractors when the railroad was being built between Calgary and Macleod.

He had no trouble getting a job at the Bar U as a bronco buster, working with Herb Millar. One day, as he stepped off a bronc and pulled off a saddle, Herb saw something glitter. Layering his saddle down alongside the corral, Longbaugh picked up his rope and went into the corral to catch a horse, which gave Millar a chance to walk by the saddle. The glittering object was a hacksaw blade, peeping out between the skirt and the sheepskin lining. Herb knew what that meant.

Presumably it meant that Sundance had had enough experience with jails to know that a hacksaw blade would come in handy the next time he was on the inside itching to get out, and that Millar had had enough experience with life in the West to know why a cowboy would pack a hacksaw blade.

Another old-timer, Fred Ings, offered a personal recollection of Sundance in his 1936 memoirs, published as *Before the Fences* in 1980:

Sometimes men drifted into Alberta when other places got too hot for them. Here, they found it hard to get away with much; some never tried. I have known and ridden with several chaps who were wanted for depredations across the line, but while here they led decent, law-abiding lives and were fine fellows. Such a one was Harry Longdebough [sic]. While here for a few years, likely evading the U.S. law, no one could have been better behaved or more decent. A thoroughly likeable fellow was Harry, a general favourite with everyone, a splendid rider and a top notch cow hand. He stood about five foot nine in height, and weighed about one hundred and sixty pounds. He had a bright look, and pleasant, nice looking eyes. We all felt sorry when he left and got in bad again across the line.

Sundance's good behavior north of the line might have been enforced by peer pressure. Canadians were markedly more law-abiding than their American cousins. An October 15, 1891, article in the *Macleod Gazette* entitled, "The Mounted Police, A Talk with One of the Lads Who Look After Evildoers in Canada's Northwest," pointed out that Americans are usually surprised to find that smaller Canadian cities keep the peace with so few policemen. Winnipeg, for instance, with a population of about 40,000 people, has only eighteen policemen. ... A different state of affairs is found in the towns of [the U.S.] Pacific coast. In Tacoma, for instance, with a populations of about 40,000, there are ninety police-

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*Continued on page 34*
Kilpatrick was arrested in St. Louis, Missouri, in November 1901 for passing stolen bank notes from the Wagner, Montana, train robbery, he refused to give his name and so the St. Louis newspapers initially identified him as Harry Longabaugh. On November 28, the Calgary Herald picked up a wire story of the arrest and gave it a provincial twist: "Harry Longabaugh, the former Calgarian, who is held at St. Louis for train robbery, is wanted in Texas for murder." Local boys makes bad.

In mid-October 1993, almost two years after Gordon Muir first telephoned Bolivia-expedition members, he called to report that he had seen the Nova program, "Wanted: Butch and Sundance," which aired the previous evening. He promised that "there will be a package going out to you eventually. . . . Anyhow, I'll be following up and I won't talk to you again until I send you a package and when you get the package then maybe you'll be willing to talk to me." Later that same evening, he called again, praising the Nova show and promising that "there'll be a package going off to you in the near future, finally."

Around 8:30 p.m., he called a third time to pose an idea about a fugitive Texan who had been encountered by English explorer Col. Percy H. Fawcett several times between 1907 and 1913 in a Bolivian jungle town. The Texan, named Harvey, is thought by some outlaw writers to have possibly been Harvey Logan. But Muir thinks he might have been Sundance because Col. Fawcett's Harvey had a red beard and according to the Nova show Sundance had a reddish moustache. Objecting to the suggestion that the beard-moustache color connection was far-fetched, Muir said, "Last night they mentioned several times, 'Clyde, keep thinking, you're good at that,' you know, from the movie, Butch and Sundance. Well, that's what I'm good at, too: thinking."

Before signing off, Muir remarked "I know you probably don’t think much of me and I don’t blame you because you still haven't got that damned package, but you'll get it."

Sundance, from page 10

... men, and the citizens seem to think that they need every man of them to keep their . . . town in order.

Precisely one decade after the Johnson wedding, locals received a jarring reminder of Sundance's presence in Alberta. When Wild Bunch member Ben

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Our cover: Nothing has surprised Wild Bunch researchers more in recent years than the discovery that the Sundance Kid had a rather substantial career in Canada before he became a major outlaw in the United States. The cover photo is of the Bar U Ranch, circa 1892, south of Calgary, where Sundance worked as a horsebreaker. Daniel Buck, who with his wife, Anne Meadows, made the major discovery that Sundance had spent several years in Canada, in this issue of The Journal for the first time chronicles that amazing career. Photo of the Bar U Ranch is courtesy of the Glenbow Archives in Calgary. A.J. Ross photographer.