

Etta Place: A Most Wanted Woman

By Daniel Buck & Anne Meadows

In 1901, Harry Alonzo Longabaugh, alias the Sundance Kid, sailed off to Argentina arm-in-arm with a winsome lass. Five or six years later, Etta Place -- as she came to be known -- sailed out of Sundance's life and into the mists of outlaw history. To this day, she remains the most perplexing member of the Wild Bunch. Her real name, her origin, and her fate are unknown.

Etta Place entered the saga standing by the Sundance Kid in a photograph taken in DeYoung's Studio on lower Broadway in New York City, prior to the couple's February 20, 1901, departure on *S.S. Herminus*. In her portrait, her long brown hair is pulled back from her well-scrubbed face and piled on her head in a roll. Pinned to her left lapel is a watch -- a gift from Robert LeRoy Parker, alias Butch Cassidy, according to Wild Bunch lore. (Tiffany & Co. records show that on February 4, 1901, James Ryan, another Parker alias, purchased a watch for \$40.10. Whether this was indeed the watch in the photograph has never been established.)¹

How she came to be at Sundance's side is the first of the three Etta Place riddles. According to Marvel Lay Murdock, the daughter of Wild Bunch member William Ellsworth "Elzy" Lay, Etta had originally been Cassidy's girl friend in Utah's Robbers Roost during the winter of 1896-1897. Murdock, who had not been born at the time, did not tell her story until decades later.² Lula Parker Betenson disputed the account, saying that Murdock's mother, Maude Davis, wasn't sure the woman at Robber's Roost was Etta Place and that, regardless, she was with Sundance, not Cassidy.³

Researcher Doris Karren Burton recently published a booklet, *Queen Ann Bassett Alias Etta Place*, arguing that Ann Bassett, the famous Brown's Park pioneer and small-time rustler, slipped off to South America with the Sundance Kid in 1901 and returned alone in January 1903. Burton, secretary of the Outlaw Trail History Center in Vernal, Utah, based her case on certain physical resemblances between Bassett and Place and on Bassett's absences from the Brown's Park area in the early 1900s. But the resemblances are hardly striking, and although she was absent from Brown's Park



Etta Place

from January 1901 to January 1903, she appears to have gone to Texas. There is no evidence she ever left the United States.⁴ In any event, Bassett, who died in 1956, never claimed to be Etta Place, not even in her *Colorado Magazine* memoir, "Queen Anne of Brown's Park."

According to writer Carl W. Breihan, Bassett claimed that Etta Place had visited her in Leeds, Utah, in the 1950s.⁶ Imagine their mutual shock upon meeting: "And you are?" Burton surmises that there may have been more than one Etta Place, but that Bassett is the one in the 1901 New York City photograph.

Ostensible clues to Etta Place's origin also occasionally tumble out of letters-to-the-editor and query columns in Western-history magazines. In the July 1990 issue of *True West*, for example, Mrs. Jane Fish passed along the startling news that Place "was a gal from Door County, Wisconsin. My dad used to speak of her since he grew up in Door County."⁷ Mrs. Fish later said that her father -- a Mr. Mowry, who was born in 1877 -- was Etta Place's cousin. He "used to talk about [her] all the time" and once said that "she got mixed up in a bad crowd." Mrs. Fish also mentioned in 1894 her uncle had been found murdered, possibly at the hand of the Sundance Kid, on a farm in Winnetka, Illinois.⁸

Mrs. Fish put us in touch with her cousin, Chan Harris, the retired editor of the *Door County Advocate*. Harris, however, rejected her story. "The Etta Place rumor is a false one, as far as Door County is concerned," he said, although he agreed to publish our query. "Maybe your letter will get a response from local history buffs," he said, "but I think you will draw a blank." He was right except for a note from a local Wild Bunch enthusiast who was also looking into "a lead that would indicate that Baby Face Nelson came from this area."⁹

If Mrs. Fish is correct, and nothing suggests that she is, Etta was using the Place name long before she teamed up with the Sundance Kid and they began travelling as Mr. and Mrs. Harry A. Place. When last we corresponded, Mrs. Fish -- somewhat perturbed that she had opened a "kettle of fish" -- was searching Mowry family genealogical records for women named Etta.

Wisconsin is only one of Etta Place's alleged home states. Sooner or later, every researcher trolling for Etta Place will reel in a letter from Florence Lind, a resident of Seattle. Mrs. Lind wrote last year as follows: "I... went to Tacoma when very young 4 or 5 and grandma went to a home and met with this very refined quite beautiful woman. Grandma gave her some money and said 'That's all, there won't be any more.' My grandparents were very frugal and never had much so it must have been very difficult. The woman I'm sure was Etta. Grandma asked where some guy was and Etta said 'He's gone to Portland.' Grandma said, 'This (money) is for you, and I don't want you to give him any of it.' So she evidently didn't like the man which I'm sure was Sundance."¹⁰

Yet another Etta Place confector was Robert H. Longabaugh who claimed to be the Sundance Kid's son. Before wandering into the Rocky Mountain states and volunteering colorful lectures at county libraries, he had apparently lived on and off in a detox cell in the Fresno County, California, jail. He died in 1972 in a hotel fire in Missoula, Montana, and all his papers perished with him. Among the limbs on Longabaugh's family tree -- which he apparently planted himself -- was Etta Place, who he claimed was actually Hazel Thyne, half-sister to his mother, Anna Marie Thyne. He said that

Etta ultimately drifted to Marion, Oregon, where she died in 1935. Except for his death certificate, which was based on his own statements, no documents or other genealogical paraphernalia have been found to support Longabaugh's yarns.¹¹

A new clue about Etta's origin surfaced in a recently translated article from the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Prensa*. In the aftermath of the December 19, 1905, holdup of the Banco de la Nacion in Villa Mercedes, Argentina, by four Yankee bandits, three of whom were identified from newspaper photographs as Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid and Etta Place, *La Prensa* sent a correspondent to the Cholila Valley in Chubut Territory, where the outlaws had previously been ranching. After interviewing their former neighbors, he wrote that Etta Place "spoke a little Spanish and said that she had lived in Mexico before emigrating" to Argentina.¹² (It is conceivable that she said New Mexico, and the New got lost in translation.)

The first contemporaneous documentation of Etta Place's existence was a July 29, 1902 Pinkerton Detective Agency memorandum describing visits to New York City by Mr. and Mrs. Harry A. Place in February 1901 and April 1902. After noting that Mrs. Place "is said to be [Sundance's] wife and to be from Texas," the memo states that the agency was reproducing the 1901 DeYoung portrait (which apparently had only recently been obtained) for use by its regional offices. Upon receiving the memorandum at

the agency's Chicago office, William A. Pinkerton lamented in a letter to his brother Robert, "What a great pity we did not get the information regarding the photograph while this party [Sundance] was in New York. It shows how daring these men are, and while you are looking for them in the wilderness and mountains they are in the midst of society."¹³

Indeed, following the September 19, 1900, holdup of the First National Bank in Winnemucca, Nevada, Wild Bunch members Ben Kilpatrick, Will Carver, Harvey Logan, Cassidy and Sundance had celebrated in Hell's Half Acre red-light district, and posed in John Swartz's studio for the now-ubiquitous Ft. Worth Five Portrait.¹⁴ If a single mistake proved to be their undoing, this was it. The photograph found its way into the hands of the law and onto thousands of Pinkerton posters, which sailed as far from the Rocky Mountains as Tahiti, where they went unnoticed, and Argentina, where they did not.

Etta Place's real name is as unknown as her origin. She most likely acquired the name *Place* when she began travelling as the wife of the Sundance Kid, whose mother's maiden name was Annie Place. For several years, the Pinkertons assumed that the pair were married and referred to her either as Mrs. Harry Longabaugh (often dropping the first "a" in Longabaugh) or Mrs. Harry A. Place. She herself used the latter name. In an undated (c. 1903) memorandum, the agency noted that she and Sundance had visited the United States in 1902 and returned to Argentina on a British freighter, the *Honorius*, registering on the crew's list as "Harry A. Place, purser, and Mrs. Harry A. Place, stewardess." Robert A. Pinkerton wrote to Buenos Aires police chief Francisco J. Beazley on July 1, 1903, enclosing "four photographs and descriptions of Mrs. Harry Longabaugh, known in South America as Mrs. Harry A. Place."

Earlier that year, Pinkerton detective Frank Dimaio had visited Argentina and traced the outlaws to their Cholila ranch, but he did not turn up any new information about Etta Place. In a memorandum written nearly fifty years later to Wild Bunch historian James D. Horan, Dimaio said "I know nothing of Etta Place's background, but have the impression that he [the Sundance Kid] may have met her in a house of ill-fame, and that she afterwards became his common-law wife. . . I do not know whether she is a mystery woman or not, but she evidently has parents in Texas."¹⁵

Ignoring the obvious, some outlaw researchers have spun outlandish theories to explain the Place name. One such theory -- a mulligan stew of tidbits from the pantries of several outlaw historians, among them Kerry Ross Boren, Ed Kirby and Carl Breihan -- is that Place was her real name and that she was the illegitimate daughter of Emily Jane Place, a relative of Sundance's mother, and George Capel, alias George Ingerfield, the son of the Sixth Earl of Sussex. (Apparently, the fact that Capel is an anagram of Place is one basis for this theory.) No documentation has ever surfaced. Another version of this story was spun by Frank O'Grady, a garrulous Irishman who befriended one of the Wild Bunch outlaws' former neighbors, a Scotsman named John Gardiner, who had returned from Cholila to Ireland. According to O'Grady, a Scotch-Irishman named George Capel had emigrated from Northern Ireland to Arizona and fathered Etta with his Mexican mistress. Nothing has ever been found to document this story, either.¹⁶

Even Place's first name is uncertain. In an October 24, 1904, memorandum containing the earliest reference to her first name, the Pinkertons called her Ethel. Relying on post office informants, who might have misread the letters they surreptitiously opened and scanned the delivery, the Pinkertons later called her Eva and Etta. Until recently, outlaw-history sleuths could not be sure which of the three she actually used or whether it was her real name. Donna Ernst's biography of the Sundance Kid may have the answer, at least to the question of which first name Etta Place actually used. Ernst found in the Pinkerton files a heretofore unnoticed clue: a copy of a hotel register signed by "Ethel Place."¹⁷

Before Ernst's discovery, Etta Place researchers had to sort out several conflicting clues. On a draft of a 1906 Pinkerton filing card, for example, Etta Place is called "Mrs. Harry Longabaugh, Alias Mrs. Harry A. Place, alias Mrs. Ethel Place," and described as 27 to 28 years old, 5'4" to 5'5", 110 to 115 pounds, medium build, and medium dark hair, which she wears "high on top of head in a roll from forehead," and "medium dark complexion." The filing card is probably a rewrite of a description the Pinkertons obtained in an interview with "hospital officials who treated" the Sundance Kid and Etta Place "in May 1902." The officials recalled that Etta Place was "age 23 or 24, 5 ft. 5, 110 [pounds], medium comp., medium dark hair, blue or grey eyes, regular features. No marks or blemishes."¹⁸

About the Authors:

Daniel Buck and Anne Meadows are the only currently producing Wild Bunch researchers who have actually been to South America to visit the scenes of Wild Bunch activity. Their research has produced a number of articles for such magazines as True West and South American Explorer, and Anne Meadows is currently at work on a book on their South American research. In 1992, they helped exhume a grave in San Vincente, Bolivia, and returned the bones to the United States for forensic testing. They believe the bones may be those of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Both are WOLA members and reside in Washington DC. This article was previously published in the Spring 1993 edition (Volume 39, Number 2), of the English Westerners' Society Tally Sheet, and is used by permission.

In a confidential January 15, 1907, draft of a police memorandum, which was ultimately translated into Spanish and circulated in Argentina, Robert A. Pinkerton stated that "Harry Longbaugh, using the name of Harry A. Place" and wife, "using the name Ethel Place," were in Chubut "engaged in cattle raising." Later that same year, William A. Pinkerton inexplicably referred to her as "Etta Place, the alleged wife of Harry Longbaugh," in an address to the International Association of Chiefs of Police convention in Jamestown, Virginia. For whatever reason, perhaps a mere typographical error, the Pinkertons settled on Etta for their press statements and wanted circulars, so Etta she became.¹⁹

Not knowing Etta Place's real name has hampered many a Wild Bunch researcher. Cassidy biographer Larry Pointer, for example, spent years tracking one Etta Place clue after another through government records, newspaper morgues and city directories. "A detailed search," he wrote "of United States census records, state by state has yet to produce any solid leads."²⁰

The final Etta Place mystery is her fate: What happened to her?

James D. Horan wrote that Butch Cassidy had told American mine superintendent Percy Seibert that Etta had come down with acute appendicitis and "begged the Kid to take her back to the States . . . [They] went back to Denver, where Etta entered the hospital." When Seibert asked Cassidy if "they had ever heard of Etta again, he just shook his head." Notwithstanding Seibert's hazy recollection of dates and his penchant for passing on second-hand stories, he was in Bolivia during Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's sojourn there, and he apparently hired them at the Concordia Tin Mine. His story should be given some credence, at least as one of the earliest accounts of Etta's return.²¹

Leonard Sanders, author of the historical novel, *Fort Worth* (1984), wrote that Etta landed in the eponymous city and, calling herself Eunice Gray, operated a bordello for some years, then ran the West Hotel until her death in a fire there in 1962. Sanders borrowed the story from *Fort Worth Press* columnist Delbert Willis, who surmised that Gray might have been Etta Place, because of certain coincidences in their lives. In an October 25, 1970, column, Willis recalled a conversation in which Gray told him, "I've lived in Fort Worth since 1901. That is except for the time I had to high-tail it out of town. Went to South America for a few

years . . . until things settled down." Willis conceded, however, that Gray never claimed to be Etta Place. If she did high-tail it out of town, the reason probably had something to do with anti-vice crusader Rev. J. Frank Norris, but he didn't arrive in Fort Worth until 1909 and didn't lay siege to Hell's Half Acre until 1912. If that was the year of Eunice Gray's exile, she wouldn't have been on the *S.S. Herminus* with Harry Longbaugh.²²

Texas historian Richard F. Selcer spent ten years researching his book *Hell's Half Acre* (1991) but he was unable to establish that Etta Place was ever in Fort Worth or that Eunice Gray was Etta Place.²³

Welsh author Richard Llewellyn, who wrote the best-selling novel *How Green Was My Valley* (1939) and lived in Argentina in the late 1940s, passed along the story that Etta Place had left there for Paraguay, where she married a government official and raised a family. (Correspondence with Paraguayan historians, as well as an American family with roots in Paraguay dating back to the early 1900s, has turned up no Etta Place sightings.)²⁴

Another version of this tale is that she married an American boxing-promoter in

Paraguay. There is a kernel of truth here, but it doesn't sprout in Etta Place's front yard. Millionaire boxing-impresario Tex Rickard retired to a cattle ranch in Paraguay's Chaco region, shortly after promoting world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson's successful July 4, 1910 title defense -- dubbed "The Fight of the Century" -- against Jim Jeffries in Reno, Nevada. If Tex married Etta Place, it was news to his wife Edith Mae, who accompanied him to Paraguay and returned to the United States with him in 1915, when he resumed his fight-promotion career. Rickard's Paraguayan interlude did have one outlaw twist. Among the cowboys he recruited for his ranch was George Musgrave, reputedly a former member of Black Jack Christian's gang. Musgrave, who also used the name Bob Stewart or Stewart, settled permanently in Paraguay and became something of a fixture on the Chaco ranch scene until his death in Asuncion in 1947. He was married for a time to Janette Magor, but she returned to the United States and divorced him. Although she herself once drew a researcher's attention as a possible Etta Place, Magor demurred.²⁵

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Carl W. Breihan and Kerry Ross Boren, who have probably spun more Etta Place stories than any other writers, drafted her and the Sundance Kid into Pancho Villa's forces during the Mexican Revolution. Breihan, who used Boren's research in writing *Lawmen and Robbers*, signed the Wild Bunch pair up with Emilio Zapata for good measure and also suggested that Etta Place had several children, including Betty Weaver, the leader of a minor gang of bank robbers active in the Midwest in the 1920s and early 1930s. Nothing has ever come to light to back up these stories.²⁶

Larry Pointer eventually gave up on chasing Etta Place. "The identity of Harry Longabaugh's mysterious lover," Pointer wrote in 1977, "is one of the most intriguing riddles in western history. Leads develop only to dissolve into ambiguity."²⁷

But the hunt for this mystery lady continues. The burst of newspaper stories about the December 1991 exhumation of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's alleged grave in San Vincente, Bolivia, has renewed popular interest in the history of the Wild Bunch. Somewhere in America, North or South, is someone who can tell the real story of Etta Place.

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