“We Parkers Always Enjoyed A Good Story.”
Butch And Sundance’s Unlikely Reunion In Mexico City

By Daniel Buck & Anne Meadows

Almost ten years ago, we gathered together on these pages a variety of stories of Butch Cassidy’s fate, many from the Parker family.1 Our attempt was to figure out if the family knew what became of him.

More recently, we collected from all quarters tales of Butch and the Sundance Kid’s deaths, which number more than 60 and stretch over eight decades.2

Here is the break down for distinct death stories, by place. Butch Cassidy: Arizona, 1; California, 3; Colorado, 2; Georgia, 1; Nevada 7; New Mexico, 1; Oregon 1; Utah, 7; Washington, 6; and Wyoming, 5. Outside the United States: Argentina &/or Chile, 6; Bolivia, 3; Brazil, 1; Ecuador, 1; Honduras, 2; France, 1; Ireland, 1, Mexico, 1; Uruguay, 1; and Venezuela, 1. The Sundance Kid: Idaho, 1; Montana, 1; New York City, 1; Oregon, 1; Utah, 1; and Wyoming, 1. Outside the United States: Argentina &/or Chile, 6; Bolivia, 3; Brazil, 1; and Uruguay, 1. The Argentine and Chilean accounts are lumped together because some are vague as to which side of the border was where the fatal event occurred.3

“Normally,” we wrote in our 1998 article, “the first source to consult about a man’s fate would be his immediate family. But in the case of Butch Cassidy, born Robert LeRoy Parker, the family is of little help: Its members hold maddeningly divergent opinions on the subject. Only one relative who lived during Butch’s day, Lula Parker Betenson, went on record to state unequivocally that her brother had returned, and her story is subject to many a question.”4 As it turns out, most Parker family members on record have expressed opinion at odds with Lula’s account that Butch had returned home in 1925 and had died in the upper northwest in 1937.5

For example, Butch’s father, Maximilian Parker, reportedly said that he never came home.6 Butch’s brother Dan Parker said that he died in South America – because he’d read it in a magazine!7 Dan’s widow Ellnor said that Butch visited her family in 1930 as “Bill Phillips,” the name of the Butch Cassidy imposter active in the 1930s.8 Lula, on the other hand, said Ellnor’s story was “absolutely untrue.”9

Lula’s son Mark Betenson reportedly told a Wild Bunch researcher that the 1925 visit never happened10 but told Lula’s great-grandson Bill Betenson that it did.11 A brother-in-law of Lula’s, Glen Betenson, wrote to a friend – after Lula had gone public with her claim that Butch had returned – saying he believed that Butch had died in South America.12 Butch’s niece, Nina W. Taylor, said that the family had looked for him for years but that she didn’t believe he was ever seen again after he went to South America. She also said that two of Butch’s sisters didn’t think much of Lula’s book and that one of them had dismissed it as “a pack of lies.”13

Furthermore, questions about the reliability of Lula’s stories have been raised by researchers who had known or interviewed her. They suggested that she didn’t know much about her brother, that she was just having fun telling stories about him, or that, in any event, she changed her stories from one rendering to the next.14

A previously unnoted – and in retrospect telling – example of her inventiveness recently came to our attention. In her 1975 book Butch Cassidy, My Brother, she relates anecdotes that Butch supposedly told the family during what she claims was his visit to Circleville in 1925.15 In one, Butch describes in some detail his chance encounter with the Sundance Kid and Etta Place in a bar in Mexico City after his escape from Bolivia:

“Well, one day I was sitting in a bar in Mexico City, minding my own business, like any law-abiding citizen. I didn’t think a soul was looking for me. I was studying the counter absently, with my head down.
The bartender put my drink down in front of me. Suddenly I felt a hand grip my shoulder. I didn't dare look up. The hair on the back on my neck stood on end, and that creepy feeling traveled up my scalp. I thought — here it is, after all this time! I realized I had long since ceased to keep up my guard. I gulped real hard and glanced up to see who had apprehended me after all those years. Had the Pinkertons finally trapped me? Who should it be but Etta Place standing there! I was so relieved I almost collapsed on the bar stool. She was the same old Etta — a beautiful woman, and she was a helluva good cook. She said she and Sundance had a place in the city, and I went with her. We had a great time visiting for several days. Then one afternoon we went to a bullfight. I always hated bullfights — couldn't stomach them. After a little while of watching, I picked up my bag and told them three's a crowd. I gave 'em the high sign and left. Our paths have gone in separate directions ever since.⁴⁶

That Lula could remember word-for-word Butch's account of that chance meeting in Mexico City when she wrote her book fifty years later is astounding. Even more so is that in an interview she gave in New York in 1969 while attending the premiere of the movie Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, some six years before her book was published, she said that during Butch's visit he had told her that Sundance had died in Bolivia:

"Butch didn't die in Bolivia," [Lula Parker Betenson] said. "He came home to Utah — I saw him after he got back. The Sundance Kid was killed in Bolivia and it grieved Butch to leave him there."⁴⁷

But there's more. In April 1970, Lula was interviewed in Circleville by a Los Angeles Times reporter. She said that the fate of Sundance (whose real name was Harry Longabaugh) was unknown: "Mrs. Betenson says she's not sure what happened to Longabaugh, but does know that Etta Place later returned to Denver."⁴⁸

In a Salt Lake Tribune interview that October, Lula seems to have first indicated the idea that Butch had "rendezvoused in Mexico" with Sundance and Etta.⁴⁹ And in a November interview with a Wyoming
newspaper, she said that Butch had told her during his 1925 visit that “Sundance and Etta were also back in the United States.” She added that in the spring of 1937 – a few months before Butch died – Butch “had spent three days with the Sundance Kid . . . . Then they separated forever. Sundance died in 1957 and is buried in Casper, under the name Henry Long.”

It turns out that she got the last mentioned tale from a fantasist who traveled the Rockies in the 1970s under several aliases “claiming to be the son of the Sundance Kid and Etta Place (or her half-sister – he had as much trouble remembering who his mother was as he did recalling his own name).”

In Lula’s narrative of Butch’s supposed visit to Circleville in 1925, she quotes Butch as joking that he would tell apocryphal stories to people who “get too inquisitive and ask too many questions, or I feel especially devilish.” With a palpable wink to the reader, Lula adds, “We Parkers always enjoyed a good story.”

Endnotes:
3. Numbers based on Buck and Meadows, “Butch & Sundance: Still Dead?” as well as accounts that came to our attention after its publication. For example, Kirk Fullmer, a Circleville storekeeper, said that he had spoken with Lula Parker Betenson when he was a boy: “Lula said she could walk from here and put her hand on his grave – but she wouldn’t tell anyone where that was, not even her own children.” Lee Benson, “Little Left of Butch’s Life in Circleville,” Deseret Morning News, July 24, 2006. Fullmer’s anecdote parallels what Mrs. Mark Betenson, Lula’s daughter-in-law, told another Deseret News reporter who visited Circleville three decades earlier: “Mother, now in her 80s, says she can walk to Butch’s grave . . . . If mother can walk to that grave it can’t be very far away!” Hack Miller, Deseret News, August 10, 1973.
5. Ibid, p. 28.
7. Max Parker (Dan’s son), interview with Larry Pointer, January 2, 1975; and Max Parker, interview with Jim Dullenty, January 3, 1975. Thirty years later, however, two of Max and Ellnor Parker’s grandchildren have differing memories. Susan Parker says that her father and her grandfather (Max Parker) “both believed that Butch died in South America.” Susan Parker, email to Daniel Buck and Anne Meadows, November 24, 2005. On the other hand, Laura Parker, who also says she is a grandchild of Max and Ellnor Parker, sides with her grandmother’s version. Laura Parker, message posted on “Inland Northwest History” blog, November 11, 2006. In November 2005, Jim Kershner, editor of the “Inland Northwest History” blog, which is hosted by the Spokesman-Review (Spokane, WA), asked the question “Was William T. Phillips actually Butch Cassidy?” Over the ensuing year, 282 messages – messages at times informative, contentious, or digressive – were posted. See http://www.spokesmanreview.com/blogs/history/archive.asp?postID=921.
8. Ellnor Parker, interview with Jim Dullenty, June 30, 1975. For information on questions raised about Phillips’s claim that he was Butch Cassidy, see endnote 64, Buck and Meadows, “Did Butch Cassidy Return?”
14. Buck and Meadows, “Did Butch Cassidy Return?” p. 25. Harry Murdock, the grandson of Butch’s outlaw colleague Elza Lay, said that Lula didn’t know much about her brother because she had been only a baby when he left home. “Lula was like Queen Ann [Bassett] . . . she’d tell you what you wanted to hear. She capitalized, she definitely did, she capitalized on her
relationship with Butch. She embellished. I knew several Parkers, and they told me, very kindly, that Lula had a ‘vivid imagination.’ That’s how they put it.” Although Murdock didn’t give Lula much credibility, he did believe that Butch returned because Josie Bassett, Ann’s sister, told him he had visited her. Harry Murdock, conversation with Daniel Buck, August 19, 2001. Hanksville, UT, historian Barbara Ekker told Cassidy researcher Jim Dullentay: “Lula has given out quite a number of contradictory statements on Butch’s life and death[,] it makes me wonder. I relayed the information she gave a fellow about Butch being buried near Circleville. Said it was an ‘easy walk’ for an 88 year old woman to his unmarked grave.” Barbara Ekker, letter to Jim Dullentay, ca. November 11, 1973. Jim Dullentay, “Papers, 1973-1981,” American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY.
16. Ibid., pp. 186-87.
22. Betenson, Butch Cassidy, pp. 185-86. Lula’s great-grandson Bill Betenson offers another example of the family’s affection for tall tales: Butch’s brother “Dan, like others in his family, enjoyed a good practical joke.” Among his pranks was the string of aliases he used, including Billy the Kid. See Bill Betenson, "Alias ‘Tom Ricketts’: The True Story of Butch Cassidy’s Brother, Dan Parker," True West, August 1997.