

# The Saga of Sheriff Jesse James Bailey

**Sheriff of two counties and special police officer, he lived to see himself become a legend.**

Jess Bailey's scrapbook is a massive volume. Heavy wooden covers bound with rawhide and hinged with wrought iron hold page after page of photographs, letters and newspaper clippings detailing a career with more than its share of violence.

Into the varnished cover of the book is burned his name, the date of his birth, his flowing signature, a youthful silhouette of the sheriff and the outline drawing of a six-shooter. Even unopened on the desk top the book reflects something of the pride and style so much a part of the man who fashioned the book and filled it to bulging.

More than his big-shouldered frame and the face weathered by sun and wind mark the sheriff as a mountain man. He has the independence of the mountain people, the self-reliance backed by the skill of hands to do whatever comes their turn.

A railroader since he was eighteen (he's crowding seventy), Jesse James Bailey has twice left the Southern Railway for two-year leaves of absence. Both times he put on the badge, gun and responsibilities of a North Carolina county sheriff. Both times he wore them with style.

In 1920, at the age of 32, he received a mandate from the voters to clean up Madison County. "Bloody Madison" they called it then. In some parts of the county, a still lurked in every backwoods hollow; in others the



Sheriff Bailey, his three badges, his scrapbook.

prohibition sentiment was running strong. Though the aspiring sheriff didn't intend to make that the burning issue in his campaign, his personal reputation as a teetotaler and his chief opponent's alliance with the "wet" faction conspired to put him in the prohibition camp.

Young Jess swamped his three opponents in the election, went on to make life miserable for an assortment of lawbreakers in the county. The next two years contained nothing but dark days for "moonshiners" in Madison.

Born near Bailey's Bend on the French Broad River, Jess himself was a Madison County boy who grew up on a back country farm until he came to take a telegrapher's job at Bailey, a station on the Knoxville division named after his family.

The station was not much more than a windowed shed with a chimney,

located where the tracks curved around a bend in the French Broad.

Product of a lonely mountain land that made every man his own minstrel, Jess Bailey loves people and he loves to talk. A yarn-spinner with few equals, he acknowledges quite cheerfully that he never was one to let the truth get in the way of a good story. When Jess carefully smooths a fingernail end with the blade of his penknife and says, "Now, I tell a story about . . ." it is high time for the listener to hang onto his hat.

One story he tells with relish concerns how he happened to be named Jesse James Bailey. It seems a traveling preacher selling Bibles called at their backwoods farm about a week after Jess was born. He rode up to where Jess's father was working in the field and after a bit of talk asked if he's like to have a new Bible.

"What's that?" the elder Bailey teased.

"Friend, you don't mean to say you've never heard of the Bible?"

*Condensed from "Ties," Magazine of the Southern Railway.*



Special Railway Officer Bailey meets with some of his crew at Asheville and below, an old picture shows Bailey and a friend at the tiny station on the French Broad where he started his railroading career.

Bailey senior allowed that he did have one book but that wasn't it.

"Well, what book is it you have if it's not the Bible?"

"It's a life of the James boys."

Somewhat shaken, the preacher made him a proposition: read his sample Bible for a spell and if he didn't like it better than the James boys, back it came. If he did like it he could buy it. That sounded fair enough, so Erasmus Bailey took him up on it. A month later the preacher rode by again.

"Well, how'd you like the Bible, Mr. Bailey? Get a chance to read any?"

"Yes. Yes, I read a good bit."

"Like it as well as your James boys?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I used to think the James boys were some fighters, about the best anywhere. But after reading that Bible I seen they couldn't hold a candle to Samson and those Phillips boys!"

"So I reckon if I had been born the week after, instead of the week before that preacher came," says the sheriff, "I'd-a-been called Samson Phillips Bailey."

(Sheriff Bailey's eyes brighten. His cheeks wrinkle with laughter and his chuckle is pure mischief. "I mostly made that up. You know how I happened to be named Jesse James? Had one grandfather named Jesse and another named James. But that's no story.")

The story of Samson and the Phillips boys and dozens of reminiscences of the sheriff's years on the trail of elusive moonshiners in Madison and Buncombe counties are delightfully told by North Carolina author Wilma Dykeman in her book *The French Broad*. One entire chapter, entitled "The High Sheriff," recounts the exploits of the only man ever to be elected sheriff of two different North Carolina counties.

"He pushes the big-brimmed hat on the back of his head," says this perceptive author in describing the sheriff, "and it gives him a jaunty, careless look. You know he isn't a careless man, however, or he wouldn't be here now — he'd be dead from one of the dozens of bullets that missed by a hairbreadth during one of those hundreds of raids on hidden distilleries.

"Or from the crash of his car as it hurtled off the road more times than once giving chase to a blockade-runner or transporting prisoners down to the North Carolina state penitentiary at Raleigh and facing emergencies of slipped handcuffs, mutiny and violence. Or the times he confronted knives and the quick, well-honed razors.

"It took courage and caution in equal parts to be a successful sheriff in Madison County at the beginning of prohibition: courage to face ambush, courage to do the work for less pay than the moonshiners would give you for not doing it, and caution to read the trails with care, know your opponent's methods, go in after him and come back alive. Dead law was no law.

"Sheriff Bailey captured stills up and down the hills and hollows; from Paint Rock where the French Broad River crosses the North Carolina line into Tennessee to Paint Fork; at the remote head of one of the tributaries, his men cut down barrels and furnaces, brought in boilers and jugs as evidence of their success."

When Jess Bailey left the Madison County courthouse in 1922 to go back to railroading, he didn't return to brass pounding. Instead he entered the Southern's special service department (then called the police department). In two years he moved to Richmond as a lieutenant of police and served the railway in the same rank at Greensboro for a year before he came back to Asheville as a captain in 1927.

His second leave of absence from railroading came in 1928 when he made a successful race for sheriff of Buncombe County and moved into offices in Asheville's new skyscraper courthouse. For the next two years lawbreakers lived as hard in Buncombe County as they had in Madison a few years earlier.

Jess Bailey's first four weeks in office put the handwriting on the wall in case any moonshiner cared to read it. From December 3 to December 31, 1928, his officers seized twelve stills and confiscated 137 gallons of whiskey and 800 gallons of beer, and captured three automobiles (any car used to transport moonshine was forfeit to the law if taken).

Lawbreakers in Buncombe County were up against a man who had learned the ropes in the backwoods of "Bloody Madison" — a sheriff who could outfigure just about any ruse of concealment a clever moonshiner could devise. "Some of them," recalls the sheriff, "were mighty cute."

When his term ended, Sheriff Bailey hurried back to railroading. After five more years in Asheville, he went to Greensboro in 1935 as division special agent. In 1940, he came back to Asheville to stay.

Life flows more quietly now for the sheriff than it did in the days of dawn forays into the brush, but it doesn't lack excitement. Railroading has always been an absorbing job for him. Besides, he has to see to the name and fame of his beloved North Carolina mountains.

He has never lost touch with the rocky peaks, the cool forest shadows and the mountain streams of his boyhood. He regards them with much the same warmth and shares them with the same pride a man might feel in showing a fine horse or a great hunting dog. You won't spend many hours with Sheriff Bailey without being spirited away in his station wagon along some mountain road to enjoy some of the beauty nature lavished on the Land of the Sky.

Young Sheriff Bailey poses with a stack of stills brought in from raids while he was officer in Madison County.



Looking over some of the results of a raid. The bandaged hand is from a bullet wound — the only one he ever suffered.