

OFFBEAT OREGON

# Manhunt for ‘King of the Western Outlaws’

The “Golden Age of Outlaws” had a good run — almost 40 years. It kicked off just after the Civil War, when thousands of battle-hardened Confederate veterans with nothing to lose spread out across the Western frontier. And it ended in a field in eastern Washington on Aug. 5, 1902.

That was the date when the last Golden Age outlaw, Harry Tracy, went out in a blaze of gunfire following the bloodiest prison break in Oregon history, which was followed by a two-month-long, even bloodier manhunt.

Harry Tracy was the last of the breed of Wild West outlaws like Jesse James, Butch Cassidy, and Billy the Kid. He wasn't technically an Oregonian. His real name was Harry Severns, and he was born in 1875 in Pittsville, Wis., a child of a highly respected and successful family. He was bright, outgoing and likable. He gave no early signs to anyone that he might be headed for a life of crime and murder.

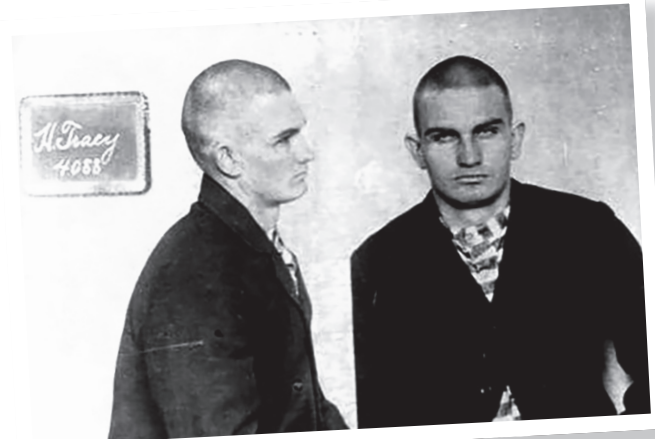
There are some sources that claim otherwise, but they're either spinning stories or quoting sources that are. During the two months when Tracy's name was in the national headlines, the public was hungry for stories about him and many idle rumors got quoted and embellished in newspapers and quoted later in magazine stories. Some of these are still being represented as facts in pulpy retellings today — such as the false claim that a teen-age Tracy raped and murdered his Sunday School teacher.

That changed, though, soon after he left the nest. He changed his name to Tracy and launched a career in robbery and theft that led him to a gunfight with a pursuing posse in Colorado, in which a member of the posse was shot and killed. He was arrested and imprisoned. Within a short time, he escaped, skipped town, and did it again.

By the time Tracy arrived in Portland, he was still only 23 years old. But he'd been in plenty of trouble. By the standards of his peers, he wasn't a particularly successful robber, but he was remarkably good at breaking out of jail. He'd escaped from several jails and prisons in Colorado and Utah and apparently picked Portland as a good place to get a fresh start.

Upon arrival, Tracy met and befriended a local thief named David Merrill. Shortly after that, Tracy actually married Merrill's sister, Rose.

He may have planned on going straight in Portland — settling down, starting a family, thinking about the future. Certainly there was an unusually long period of time between when he arrived in Portland and when he started getting in trouble: three years. Tracy wasn't a very skillful criminal, so it's most likely that he wasn't actually committing crimes during



Harry Tracy as he appeared in his prison booking photo in 1901.

that time.

**LIFE OF CRIME**

Tracy eventually got back into the business, and he and Merrill started pulling stick-up jobs around town. They went about it with a particular style and panache that quickly got them into the headlines as “The Mackintosh Bandits” and “The False Face Bandits.”

Portland police, trying to find the culprits, started “rounding up the usual suspects” by contacting various crooks that they knew to be at large in town. Tracy, a relative newcomer to Portland, was not on that list. But, unfortunately for him, David Merrill was. When a detective dropped by for a surprise visit to check him out, he found clear proof that Merrill was one of the bandits. He found him and arrested him.

Then the cops lurked in the house and waited for Tracy to return.

The sources aren't completely clear on this, but it appears most likely that the reason Tracy wasn't at the house was that he was actually in the act of robbing a nearby butcher shop at the time. Coming home with the loot, Tracy saw a strange, well-dressed man waiting for him, and decided he didn't like the lay. He turned to run, trading pistol shots with the detective as he fled. A streetcar was passing by and he jumped, grabbed onto it, and rode it safely away.

But the streetcar's driver wasn't having any of that. After he realized what was going on, he stopped the streetcar and intentionally disabled it, so that if

Tracy tried to hijack it at gunpoint it wouldn't do him any good.

Tracy jumped off and started to flee again. But by an odd coincidence, the streetcar had stopped right outside the butcher shop that he had just robbed. The butcher's son was ready with a shotgun full of bird shot and Tracy was now at relatively close range.

Wounded, Tracy managed to run a short distance, but was quickly surrounded and arrested.

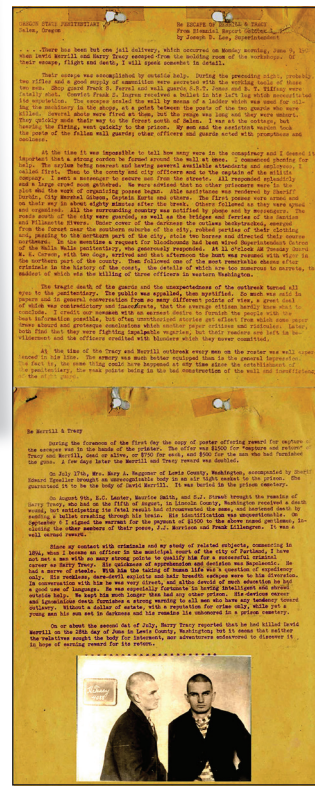
And that is how Harry Tracy came to be a resident in the Oregon State Penitentiary. He and David Merrill both “checked in” in late 1901.

**JAILBREAK**

According to the book by the pseudonymous Prisoner No. 6435, both Tracy and Merrill were a lot of trouble as prison inmates. The glib, friendly Tracy was able to talk his way out of a lot of trouble. But Merrill was always a problem, and the warden took to keeping an “Oregon Boot” shackle on him for extended periods of time. He wore the boot so often in his short time in the pen that it actually disfigured his ankle.

Then came the morning of June 9, 1902. That was the day Tracy planned for their breakout.

He had gotten someone to sneak some money in for him, and he'd used it to bribe someone — nobody knows who — to hide a pair of .30-30 Winchester rifles in a pattern box in the prison foundry. He had also bribed a soon-to-be-released inmate named Harry Wright to, after he



The Oregon State Penitentiary's report on the Tracy-Merrill prison break, with Tracy's mugshot attached.

was out, get a rope ladder and toss it over the prison wall for them. Wright had been released on schedule and had done his bit. They had the ladder.

That morning, Tracy and Merrill reported to work in the prison foundry, went straight to the designated boxes, opened them up, reached inside, and came out shooting.

The two guards in the room were shot dead before they knew what was happening, and the two men ran to the door.

Outside, they shot the guards out of the two watchtowers closest to their ladder, shot a fellow inmate who tried to stop them, and used a fifth guard, whom they had taken at gunpoint, as a human shield while they retreated out of rifle range. Then Tracy coldly murdered the

“shield” and they ran.

What followed was a two-month manhunt covering most of northwest Oregon and much of western Washington, as Tracy and Merrill tried to make it to Hole-in-the-Wall Pass, Wyoming, headquarters of the Wild Bunch gang — not knowing Butch Cassidy & Co. had fled to Argentina the previous year.

Poses were on their track almost immediately. Bloodhounds were brought in from Walla Walla, Wash., but Tracy circled around and mixed his scent with that of the posse, and the dogs lost his trail.

The governor offered a reward, then doubled it. As the weeks went by the reward was raised until it was \$8,000, dead or alive. That's \$280,000 in modern currency — an enormous bounty. This inspired dozens of ad-hoc packs of citizens grab a shotgun and a flask of whiskey, posse up, and join the hunt.

The result was a chaotic landscape of heavily-armed drunks looking hopefully over every backyard fence for signs of Tracy and Merrill.

“The whole damned country was full of militia, and many of the boys were potted,” Detective Joe Day of the Portland Police Department told writer Stewart Holbrook many years later. “They shot at everything, and Clark and Cowlitz counties sounded like the Spanish American War all over again. It was

the most dangerous place I was ever in.”

These boozy posses may have made the countryside dangerous for everyone, but they would have been no match for a professional killer like Tracy. Even stone-sober law enforcement professionals had trouble on the few occasions when they caught up with him that summer.

Tracy wasn't long in Oregon. On June 16 he and Merrill held up three men on the south bank of the Columbia River in Portland and made them row them across to Washington.

Newspaper readers then got to follow their progress by the reports of farmers and homeowners. The outlaws would approach them with guns out, “request” dinner, make some small talk, requisition some supplies, and be on their way.

One such homeowner reported, on July 3, that Tracy had appeared alone. Tracy told him that he had killed David Merrill.

“I was tired of him anyhow,” Tracy said, according to this citizen.

Tracy had said he was headed for Hole-in-the-Wall Pass. For some reason, he didn't seem in too big a hurry to get there. After reaching Washington, his trail really meandered. He spent months lurking around the Seattle area, hijacked another boat to get to Bainbridge Island, came back, forced a farmer to buy him some

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