

Robbery and Murder at the Boulder Creek Train Station

by Sarah Weston

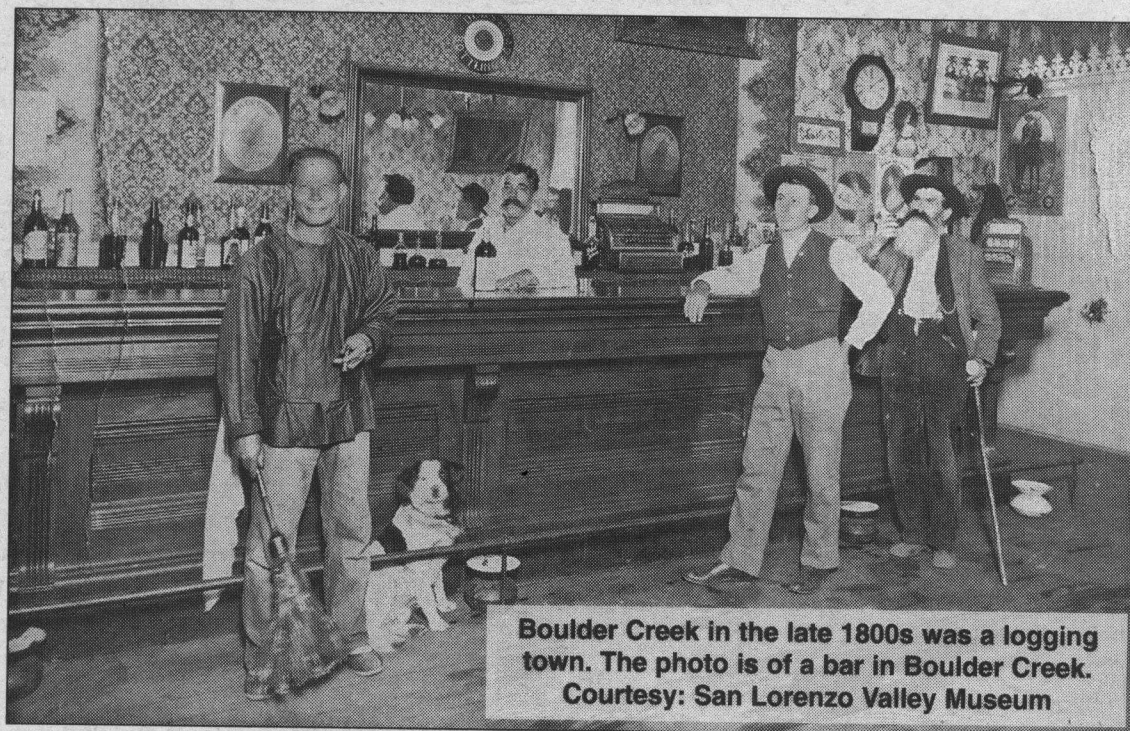
Though his fame never extended to movies or television, one of the Old West's most fearless and respected lawmen was gunned down right here in Boulder Creek in 1894. In an incident surrounded by media hype, tantalizing mystery and even a bit of sex tossed in, the death of Detective Len Harris and the fate of his killer captured public attention for more than a year. And as with so much of the town's history, the story revolves around the very railroad that barely a decade before had brought life's blood to Boulder Creek.

Leonard Harris was one of the top detectives for Southern Pacific Railroad, a steely-nerved lawman of more than 40 years experience. In that era, railroads showed little regard for the landowners they displaced, so misfortune befalling one of their own did not necessarily trigger wails of regret from the citizenry. Harris, however, had shown himself committed to justice his whole career; he had served in public office as well as working for the railroad.

In one famous case in 1876 the Central Pacific had sent Harris to Truckee. There, he aided the local constable's investigation of the "Trout Creek Outrage." Despite the fact that many a town folk in Truckee were opposed to justice for the murdered Chinese worker when it meant charging a white man, Harris and the local police did eventually bring the man to trial.

Don't Mess with the Railroad

Harris had started his career as a deputy sheriff in Sacramento before becoming a guard at San Quentin. But it was in railroad work that he found full use for his talents. He did not hesitate to pursue desperados through a blind-



Boulder Creek in the late 1800s was a logging town. The photo is of a bar in Boulder Creek. Courtesy: San Lorenzo Valley Museum

ing snowstorm, and once famously tracked some train robbers through lava beds in the Arizona Territory, collaring them with only a few charred pieces of an Oregon newspaper he found in their campfire as evidence. Two of the bad guys, a saloon proprietor and a store keeper, were subscribers to the newspaper that provided the key to their demise.

Another time he liberated a trainload of tourists who were cowering under the drunken intimidations of a cowboy brandishing a rifle. Harris simply walked up and snatched the rifle from the would-be killer, meanwhile cursing the high-spirited lad for being a fool.

On May 14, 1894, Harris appeared in the office of Santa Cruz County Sheriff Jesse Cope to inform Cope of a plot to rob the Wells Fargo express agent at the train station in Boulder Creek. Harris was accompanied by William Kelly, another veteran railroad detective. Harris had good reason to believe the plot was credible — one of the men who had participated in planning the robbery was the source of the information.

The Inside Man

George Sprague, the informer,

was a former Southern Pacific employee who lived in Oakland. During his railroading days he had worked in Boulder Creek. There he had met a delivery wagon driver named Anthony Azoff, a sometime sign painter

On May 15, the date of the robbery, everyone was in position. Sheriff Cope, who might be known to Azoff, was detailed to stay out of sight but close to the telegraph in case he was needed. Harris and fellow detective Kelley, along with a local constable, were hidden in a boxcar that was moved into position next to the depot.

who had found work in the logging industry in the area. Azoff was the orphaned son of Russian immigrants, a man with a somewhat unsavory past. He had been imprisoned once in Mexico but

managed to escape. He was also implicated in a train robbery in Arizona, though not convicted. He was married, but was gone from home so frequently that his wife left him, along with his only child.

Azoff showed up on Sprague's door in April 1894 with a plan for the proposed robbery. Sprague, no bandit, went immediately to his former employer. They urged him to play along with the plan and set Harris on the case.

On May 15, the date of the robbery, everyone was in position. Sheriff Cope, who might be known to Azoff, was detailed to stay out of sight but close to the telegraph in case he was needed. Harris and fellow detective Kelley, along with a local constable, were hidden in a boxcar that was moved into position next to the depot.

The Daring Robber and His Colt .44

A bit after 8 p.m., Azoff, Sprague and a third, unidentified man, all wearing masks, approached the station. Azoff went in while the others waited outside. Azoff pulled a massive Colt .44, 14 inches long, and roared "Throw up your hands!" to the agent. As the agent reached to

put money into a bag, all three lawmen jumped from the boxcar. While his companions held the two lookouts at bay, Harris yelled to Azoff (reports vary) "Hold up your hands and surrender, as you are surrounded!"

Instead of complying, Azoff instantly fired several rounds from his Colt, two of which hit Harris in the abdomen and caused him to collapse. Before the other two lawmen could come to his aid, Azoff was out the window and running away down the street. They gave chase, and in the confusion fired not only at Azoff but Sprague as well. Sprague understandably was distressed at this turn of events and threw up his hands, pleading he was on their side and not to shoot. Meanwhile, Azoff and the third man escaped into the night.

News was wired to Southern Pacific's general manager in San Francisco, who sent a special train to collect the mortally wounded Harris. He was taken to a hospital in Oakland, but refused to stay. Instead, he requested to be taken to his daughter's house in that city, where he died the next evening.

How had Azoff managed to get the drop on such a seasoned veteran, especially since Harris had the advantage of surprise? One answer may be that the old lawman was now 66 years old, while Azoff was half his age. Also, Harris had received a bullet wound to the neck three years earlier which had left his right arm partially paralyzed.

But there is another possibility. When Detectives Harris and Kelly checked into their Boulder Creek hotel the previous evening, using false names, someone had scrawled the word "manhunters" next to their signatures while they were out. No employee professed any knowledge. Could it have been Azoff or the third man who had recognized them, and knew they would be waiting?

continued on

HISTORY

continued from page 18

Many Riddles to Solve

There were other riddles. After the failed robbery, Azoff's coat was found in the train yard with a note that said, "Ask and you will receive. Keep my uniform till I return." What could this mean? Also, in the days immediately following, while the search for Azoff was hot, a stranger came into town several times for supplies, including medicine. When he was challenged, he started shooting and disappeared. Was he the mysterious third man, buying food for his sequestered companion?

Citizens as well as lawmen were outraged, and all were on high alert from Santa Cruz to San Francisco to Sacramento. It was feared that Azoff would hide out in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where he would find sympathy of sorts from the many Russian lumberjacks. One rumor circulated that the "Russian robber" had stopped for breakfast in Los Gatos the morning after the incident, while in Redwood City a wheat farmer said a man who answered Azoff's description had asked him for work.

Sheriff McEvoy on the Trail

San Mateo County Sheriff William McEvoy took these alleged sightings seriously. He tried what was then a newfangled crimefighting technique to expand the search for the fugitive — he sent a young boy out to roam the streets looking for him on a bicycle. Sure enough, the boy returned with word that he'd seen a man with Azoff's extravagant mustache walking down the road to San Jose, a man with a heavy, old-fashioned revolver stuck in his belt.

The undersheriff and a deputy were dispatched in a buggy to investigate. After stopping numerous transients for questioning, they spotted Azoff lurking in the shadows. They casually approached him, pretending they were looking for a man on a bicycle. When in, Azoff said he had

seen a cyclist an hour ago, allowing one of the lawmen the chance to raise a lantern to see his face. The undersheriff quietly drew his revolver, shouted "Azoff, I want you!" and the pair grabbed him.

As Azoff was taken to the Santa Cruz Jail, a massive funeral was held for Harris, with a parade made up of hundreds of Odd Fellows, railroaders and firemen. There were countless floral arrangements.

**Azoff Convicted**

With testimony from George Sprague and the station agent, it took a jury just 45 minutes to convict Azoff. Azoff remained carefree, even jaunty throughout, even as he was led off to San Quentin and Death Row. Interviewed by the San Francisco Chronicle, Azoff said "I have a fine room, dry and clean and white as snow. And such beds. It's almost worth hanging to have



a nice, soft place to lie in."

Azoff continued to profess bravado the entire nine months it took for his appeals process to run out. As the date of his execution approached, he became more subdued, listening to the words of a priest and reading passages from the Bible. However, he maintained throughout that he would never swing from the gallows rope. Sure enough, the night before the scheduled hanging a prison shank was found in his

shoe with which he intended to kill himself. Thus foiled, he had no choice but to let justice take its course.

On the morning of June 7, 1895, two other murderers were scheduled to hang along with Azoff. Azoff was second; from his cell he heard the unruly singing of the first condemned man cut short by the twang of the rope. For his part, he went out with characteristic swagger and defiance.

"They worked Garcia off in quick time," he said, "I hope they do well by me. I thought it took longer to hang a man." His last words before the trap was sprung were "Goodbye, boys. Here goes a brave man."

One spectator was especially enraged at Azoff's egotism and lack of contrition. Jack Harris, son of the late detective, remained close by the hanging corpse for many minutes after the event, wondering aloud whether there was any chance he had survived. As the doctor checked Azoff for vital signs, he was assured to the contrary.

Like Father, Like Son

Jack Harris possessed a fatal brashness which may hint in part at the cause of his father's undoing. The younger Harris was to die just a year later in a gun battle with his best friend and business partner. Harris was apparently exceptionally jealous, and finding his wife missing from home, took his pistol and went out looking for her. He found the pair walking together, and commenced shooting.

Anthony Azoff was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in the grounds of San Quentin. He was flanked by his fellow victims of the hangman that day. Len Harris, the former San Quentin guard who trod upon the very ground where they were buried, was himself buried in a cemetery in Oakland, just across the bay from where his murderer lies.

Among Jack Harris' possessions was a souvenir, a piece of the rope cut from Azoff's noose. The mysterious third man was never found. □