

Buck English: The Outlaw Genius

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BUCK ENGLISH - THE OUTLAW GENIUS

A.R. Palmer, the Calistoga stage driver looked down at the two masked men and thought it was all a joke. After all this was the year 1895! "What's up boys," he laughed.

"Shut up or I'll blow you off the box," growled the taller of the bandits, and to prove he meant business he levelled his old style Colt revolver at the driver's head. This immediately took all the humor out of the situation and Mr. Palmer and six other passengers of the stage got down into the dusty road and emptied their pockets to the two bandits. The tall one was particuallarly cool and business like, chalking up just one more exploit in a career of crime that stretched back over two decades. The man was Buck English.

Buck came from a family "that was of the worst in the county," according to the Napa Register. His father was a desperado at times and several of Buck's five brothers met violent deaths. They had drifted down from Canada to Napa county, California, in the early 1860's, and on the night of March 14, 1868, Dan and Charley English saw one John Lonergan flash a roll of bills in Spanishtown. They followed him into the street and demanded his money at gun

point. John was either very brave or very foolish, he began to run and the English boys fired their pistols, but missed in the dim light. Lonergan ran for his life with the robbers in hot pursuit, and when he came to the banks of the Napa River he dove right in without a moments hesitation. Chilled to the bone and nearly drowning in the murky waters, he could hear the English brothers stalking up and down on the bank. Finally with a curse they gave up the search and headed back for the saloons. When they were out of sight Lonergan swam back to the shore, thoroughly soaked, but at least alive.

The English brothers would have done well to call it a night after their run-in with Lonergan, but instead they chose to drink off their frustration. Just what happened next isn't clear, even to the witnesses in the saloon. What is clear is that the English boys got into a heated argument with some Mexicans and pistol shots flashed out in the smoky barroom. A moment later Charley English was badly wounded, and his brother Dan was dead on the floor.

With such brothers as these its not hard to see why Buck English turned out so bad. He was only eighteen and living in Lake County, California, when he decided to try his own hand at crime. The area was rugged and forested, with many prosperous quicksilver mines on the slopes of the Mayacamas Mountains. Quite a few of the Great Western mine employees

were Chinese, and they walked through the foreseted trails to the supply camp of Middletown to spend their money. One day in 1876, Buck and a friend met four of them on the trail and robbed them of their watches and all their money. Buck felt pretty good about the whole business and he remarked to a man in Middletown a couple of weeks later, "Well, it's getting to be about time to meet some more Chinese on the trail." All his life Buck would have a hatred of Orientals, and if he were extreme in his views, it was only a matter of degree, for California would go through the throes of anti-Chinese sentiment for decades.

Buck had made another off-hand remark to the same man, and it would be reprinted in the San Francisco Chronicle years later. He said, "the time will come when I make Wells Fargo weep."

If there was any weeping to be done on his first stage robbery, it was only done by Buck. He met the Lower Lake stage coming up a steep grade and proceeded to hold it up with the aid of his unknown friend. When they got around to opening the Wells Fargo box they found much to their surprise "exactly two brass castings."

Inauspicious starts seemed to be a trade mark of Buck's. His first shooting scrape came at the Middletown skating rink where he knocked a man down in anger and let off two shots at him, neatly hitting the ground. By the time he was

ready to try that again, he must have done a little target practice in between. He encountered a man named Good who had the improbable rank of Captain in the Hawaiian army. In the oldest of Western cliches they met on the main street of Middletown and proceeded to empty their revolvers at each other. Buck was the luckier of the two, he was unscratched, but he gave Captain Good a bad wound in the arm and thigh. Thinking the law wouldn't look to kindly on the incident, Buck skipped out for awhile. When he quietly returned and found that no proceedings were being brought against him, he was emboldened to brasher actions.

It was his next adventure, cattle rustling, that brought him into contact with his life long nemesis -Andrew Rocca. Andrew was superintendant of the Great Western Mine; honest, hard working, and respected by his employees. He was a man apart in that he liked Chinese workers and always dealt fairly with them. He was a handsome man, with dark eyes, friendly smile, and black drooping moustache. In the summer of 1876 he noticed that some of the mine's cattle that were allowed to roam free over the forested hillsides were starting to disappear. He suspected the mine's butcher, an Irishman, father of nine children; and confronted him with some incriminating evidence. According to Helen Rocca, Andrew's daughter, the butcher said, "Why Mr. Rocca, would you really be thinking that a father of nine could be

guilty of stealing the company's cattle, butchering them, and then selling them back to the company?"

Andrew Rocca replied that was exactly what he believed and that it had better stop. "The old man closed his eyes as if in reverential prayer, bowed his head sanctimoniously, and said, 'it will be done.'"

However the cattle stealing did not stop, and Andrew soon suspected that the Irishman was only a tool in the hands of Buck English and the band of rustlers he had formed. Helen Rocca noted, "the first encounter between the two men took place one afternoon when Father heard shots being fired in the neighborhood of the mine store. Hurrying over there he found English and his men engaged in one of their favorite pastimes - frightening whoever happened to be present by their shooting prowess. One of the men would hold out a handkerchief while the swaggering Buck shot it neatly out of his hand. Enraged at the man's audacity, Andrew Rocca gave him a tongue lashing and ordered him and all of the band off the premises. Surprisingly enough, they went fairly meekly, perhaps because it was such a novelty to have someone dare to resist them. But from that time on, Buck English and Andrew Rocca were sworn enemies, English thirsting for revenge, Rocca determined to do what ever he could to see the whole group behind bars."

Buck made his first move against Rocca by telling a mutual acquaintance that he had found a very rich vein of

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cinnabar in the hills between the Great Western and Bradford mines, and he would like to show Andrew Rocca the exact spot. Andrew just laughed that off and said he didn't intend to take a "last trip" with Buck English. He kept on steadily compiling evidence against Buck and waited for the day that justice could be done. The evidence by now included horse stealing, for Buck was so feared by now he could walk up to a man and say, "that's my horse," and the man would meekly give it to him. He also kept on with the cattle rustling, and through a local Mason he sent Rocca the message that if he didn't back off he would, "tan Rocca's hide and make shoe strings out of it."

Rocca replied, "You tell English that I am not a man to be scared out by a threat. Let him come after me if he wants me. I'll be ready for him."

Finally Buck and his gang went a little too far by robbing another stage coach. As the San Francisco Chronicle stated, "English's cattle stealing and shooting exploits had become so legendary that few dared resist him. Had the Middletown posse known that it was Buck English who held up the stage, it is more than probable that they would have stayed at home."

At any rate the posse had their man for the stage robbery and through the tireless work of Andrew Rocca they had a lot of evidence on cattle stealing too. When the investigation of the mine butcher shop came about neighbors and farmers

from miles away came to look for hides of lost cattle. Helen Rocca noted, "one would say, Why that's my cow Nellie, and another would exclaim, "Look at that, will you! There's that Hereford steer of mine that disappeared over a year ago."

Buck English stood trial and was sentenced to San Quentin on October 25, 1876 for two commitments of grand larceny. He was discharged on May 31, 1877 and taken out for a new trial, from which he got a seven year term. He was released on October 29, 1882 for good behaviour.

The Calistogan of September 4, 1878 carried an article on Buck English that sheds some light on his remarkable character. "Buck English the young man now in San Quentin from Lake County, is said to possess the best memory of any man in the state of California."

Helen Rocca added, "though it is rather difficult to think of English in church - and the members of the congregation must have clutched their pocketbooks very tightly when they saw him enter - the article said that he had been known to listen to a sermon lasting three quarters of an hour, walk out of the church and then repeat the sermon almost word for word in its entirety. The man has qualities that with study and attention to business, would place him among the very smartest men of the coast. English, however had no apparent intention of going in for a study and attention to business - unless robbery can be regarded as a business."

Right after his release from San Quentin in 1882 he returned to the Middletown area and the Lobree Store was

mysteriously robbed of watches and jewelry. English then hightailed it for British Columbia and out of the reach of the law. He disappears from recorded accounts until 1890 when he showed up in Astoria, Oregon, and filed for a homestead on some rich timber land. Maybe he truly intended to go straight but the fog shrouded days of endless toil and lonely boredom took their toll. He was soon caught in the act of burglarizing a local gunsmith named Specksarth. He was actually climbing through the window when who should he meet but the gunsmith. The judge who handled that case was so incompetent that all charges were dropped against Buck. The District Attorney Kenagee in a fit of frustration and anger called the judge a "locksmith and saw filer" which must be interpreted as being pretty vile occupations.

Buck drifted around for awhile and like a magnet toward steel was drawn to trouble. He was caught in Baker, Oregon, in 1893 robbing another stage. Buck was sentenced to five years in prison but Governor Pennoyer himself intervened on his behalf and had him set free. One has to wonder if Buck's intelligence was such that men in high places could not quite believe he was guilty of any wrong doing. The local paper however took a different tack and stated, "His people live in Roseburg and are known as a dead game family. His uncle some years ago was lynched by a vigilance committee in eastern Oregon. English is quiet but nervy, and equal to almost any criminal deed."

The year 1895 found Buck in Portland, making plans for what would be his last crime spree. He teamed up with a young tough named Breckenridge who lived in Portland and had been tossed in reform school for breaking into a warehouse. Breckenridge had also joined Coxey's Army, the creation of Jacob S. Coxey, an Ohio businessman who was disturbed by the 1894 depression's effects on out of work men. Coxey recommended a vast public works project to pay workers \$1.50 a day for fixing roads and bridges. To publicize their point, Coxey's rag-tag army, like modern day demonstrators, marched on Washington D.C.

Breckenridge was part of the Western contingent and in Idaho he helped steal a locomotive of the Union Pacific Railroad. Federal troops soon had them rounded up, and Breckenridge with the others spent three months under guard in Corralin, Idaho. When he was released he made his way back to Portland, Oregon, where he met up with Buck English, and together they planned a wave of robberies in Buck's old territory around Middletown.

Ten days before the crime they left by steamer for San Francisco. On May 7, 1895 they were on the Calistoga-Middletown road dressed in long gray dusters and black slouch hats. As the stage pulled in front of Adolph Sutro's summer home, the masked men stepped into the road and yelled at A.R. Palmer the driver to halt. As the San Francisco Examiner detailed the robbery, "He (Palmer) made a jocular reply, but one of the robbers jumped to the horses heads, and both leveled their guns. The weapons and the profanity which accompanied

a threat to blow the driver off the box took all the humor out of the situation and driver and passengers awaited the will of the highwaymen.

The highwaymen went about their work like old hands at the business, one in particular being cool as if he was collecting taxes. The taller man did all the talking as well as searching. They were both armed with old style Colts revolvers, and cursed and swore at everyone, particularly the Chinaman. The Chinaman tried to resist and was knocked down and badly beaten. As the robbers worked they talked incessantly and cracked sarcastic jokes. When one of the men protested their taking his watch, Buck chuckled, "Well, we have our troubles the same as other people, and I think we need the watch, but you can advertise in the Examiner and get it back."

While the robbery was in progress two freight teams from Middletown passed by, one of them driven by Byrd Hunt. "Hello, Byrd, how are you getting along," called English to Hunt, much to his surprise, since he had no idea who the robber was. The two bandits collected about \$1,200 from the passengers, and opened the Wells Fargo box for an undisclosed amount, then disappeared in the direction of the Oat Hill Mine.

Posses were formed in Lake and Napa Counties and the countryside was scoured for the bandits, but for two days the outlaws eluded the lawmen. They were done in by progress- someone recognized them and used the phone to call Under

Sheriff Brownlee in Napa that the robbers were taking the down stage from Monticello to Napa. Brownlee formed a posse of four men, including up and coming young District Attorney of Napa, Theodore A. Bell.

The robbers got aboard Johnny Gardner's stagecoach at Windy Flat and paid the \$1.50 a piece to Napa. Buck climbed up in the box next to Gardner and passed the time of day. Gardner noticed that Buck kept a shotgun always propped across one knee. About eight miles from Pratt's place on top of the grade, the stage was met by four armed men, and Johnny Gardner became confused, thinking that they were about to rob his stage. He remembered, "Buck English and John Williams (one of the posse) fired at the same time, about six or eight feet apart. Then the horses started and I drove past to get ourselves out of range. Soon Bell shot, hitting English in the back of his hip. I was turning partly around, looking backwards and got some of the shot in the thigh. After Bell shot, English drew a revolver and told me to drive faster. I went on and stopped just below the cold spring. The robber said he was dying and fainted."

Three of Buck English's ribs had been fractured. Doctor Springsteen attended to him when he was driven in on the stage, and said later that peritonitis had set in and "the patient will probably die."

But Buck English didn't die - he slowly recovered from his wounds that would have killed a weaker man. Under-Sheriff

Brownlee said, "English is just about the coolest man I've ever met. He displayed great nerve when told to throw up his hands. He is a tough case."

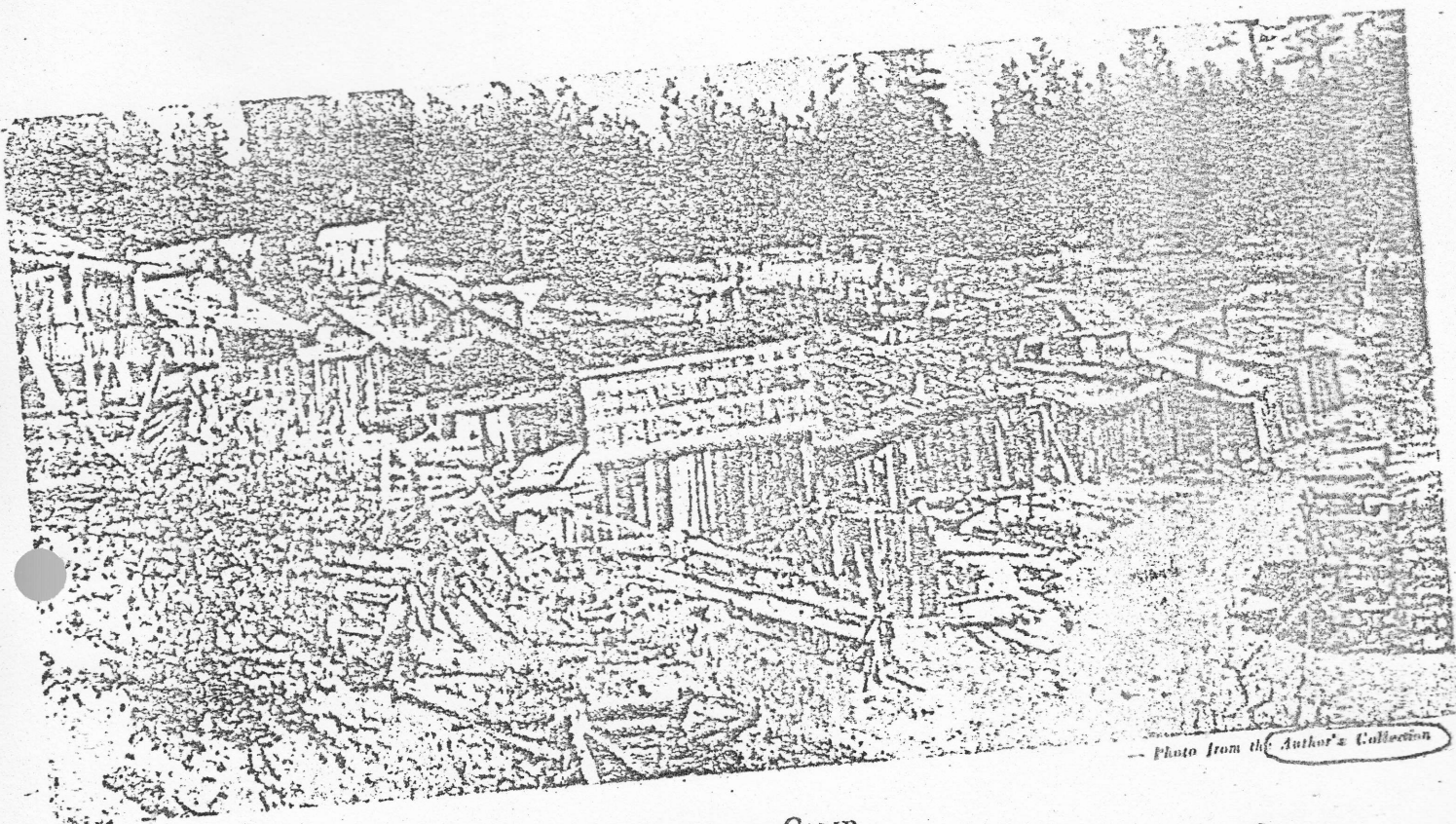
Tough case or not Buck English was sent back to San Quentin for a good long spell. The Napa Register had headlines -The Public Gratified! Andrew Rocca was gratified, he would have no more worries about being tanned for shoe-strings. Under-Sheriff Brownlee was gratified, he had brought Buck English in. And Theodore Bell was particularly gratified. His shot had wounded English so badly that his capture was assured. Bell was the prosecuting attorney and his conviction sent English up for 17 years. On the local fame of the incident he went on to become a member of the 58th Congress (1903-1905) and was nominated for Governor of California in 1906 and 1910.

Buck English much to everyones amazement became a model prisoner at San Quentin and a changed man. He was 62 when he was released in 1912 and Helen Rocca Goss wrote, "he had developed into a sober, rather anxious, even conscientious man whose chief concern was to make sure that his sucessor in his prison job would do the work as well as he had. An article in the Calistogian read, "It has been English's work for years to make the rounds of the prison every night and light the lamps. He instructed his sucessor in the task and as he approached the gate he looked back anxiously at the lamps of the prison yard. "I'm afraid I'll have to come

back and give him another lesson," he said as he bade his friends good-bye."

Buck returned to Canada, out of the region he had kept in such a state of turmoil for so many years, and died a short time later.

Robert Stolz



CHINESE CAMP
Scene in one of the "China Camps" at the Great Western Mine,
sometime in the late 1890's.

Photo from the Author's Collection

Author: Helen Rocca 6

Rustlers and "Road Agents"



— Photo Courtesy Portia Bell Hume

THEODORE ARLINGTON BELL

*This portrait was taken around 1900, about five years
after Bell's capture of Buck English.*



MARY THOMPSON ROCCA
*Shortly after her marriage to
Andrew Rocca
in 1880.*



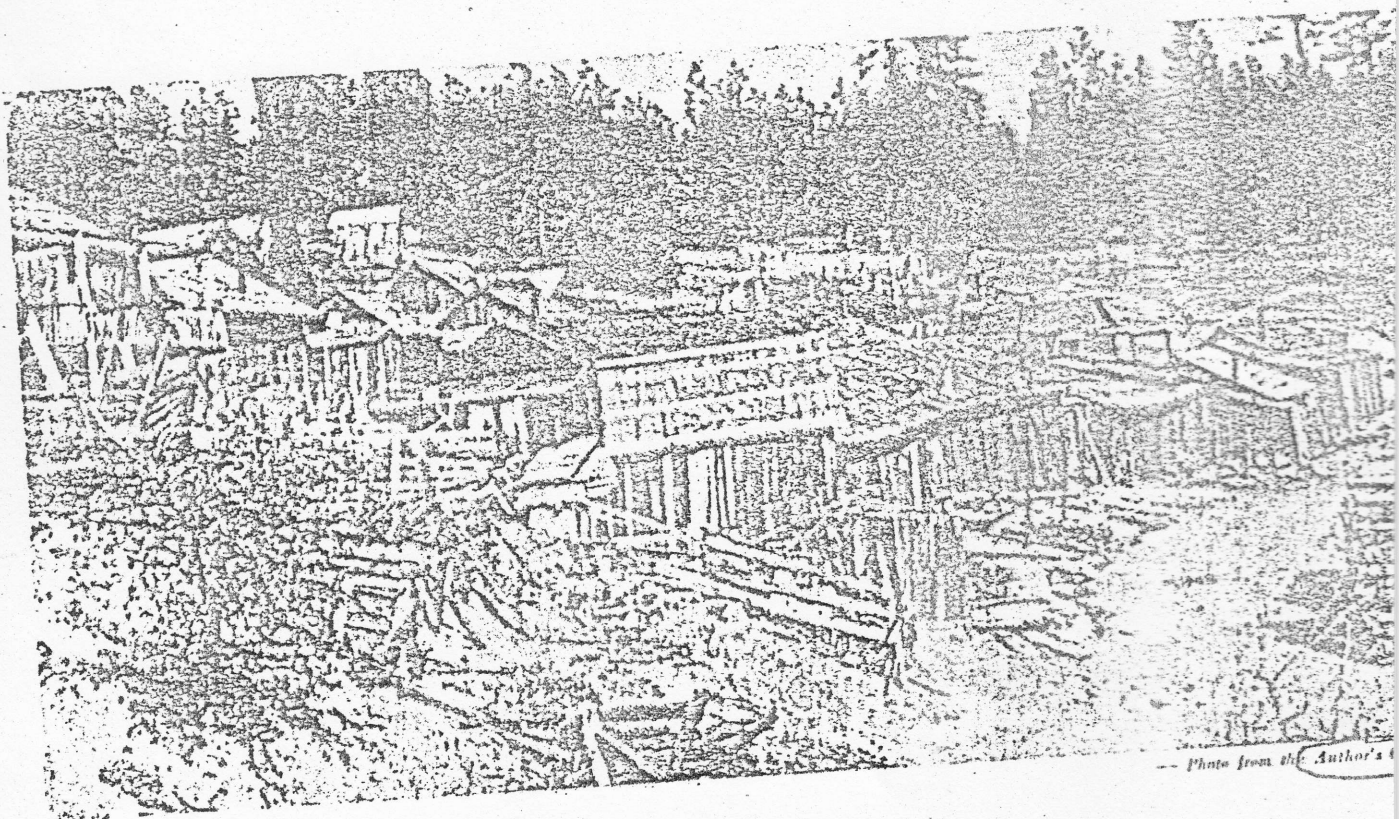
-- Photos from the Author's Collection

ANDREW ROCCA
*About the time he became
Superintendent of the
Great Western Mine*

↑
Author: Helen
Rocca Goss



"The Celestials"



— Photo from the Author's

CHINESE CAMP

Scene in one of the "China Camps" at the Great Western Mine,
sometime in the late 1890's.

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Author: Hel...