

Butch & Sundance - Did They Continue To Outsmart The Law?

Written by Andy Owen



It's one of the most famous endings in film history.

It's 1908 - and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid are both badly wounded and trapped, in a building in San Vicente, Bolivia - surrounded by heavily armed police and soldiers.

They decide, after some jovial banter, to go out in a blaze of glory - and storm through the door, to be met by a hail of bullets.

But, is this what *really* happened?

I don't think so - and a lot of people, including many respected historians, don't think so, either.

"Total horse pucky", Dan Buck, a Cassidy historian, said of the shooting. He told the Associated Press: "It doesn't bear a great deal of relationship to Butch Cassidy's real life, or Butch Cassidy's life as we know it."

Many members of Cassidy's family agreed, as they recalled meeting him in the USA after 1908 - and claim that he lived for decades after the legendary South American shoot-out.

Sundance too, apparently enjoyed reasonable long life - and his wife Etta Place, who travelled extensively with the pair over their more notorious years - survived well, although she is also shrouded in a great of mystery.



Butch Cassidy was born Robert LeRoy Parker on April 13th 1866, in Beaver, Utah Territory.

He was the oldest child of a large family of 13 and enjoyed a safe and loving home environment.

His parents, Ann Gillies and Maximillian Parker met in England - and had converted to the Mormon faith while still living there and in Ireland - before moving to America.

In 1879, the Parker family bought a piece of property near Circleville, Utah, where they farmed and raised cattle.

As a teenager, Robert started working on a nearby cattle ranch and while he was there, he met someone who was to have a major influence on his life.

Mike Cassidy was an outlaw cattle rustler and an extremely colourful character. Robert was very taken with him and he was drawn into his exciting stories of the stealing of livestock and the money that could be earned from it.

At the age of 18, Robert left the family home, telling his mother he needed to seek his future away from Utah.

Clearly influenced by Cassidy, Robert soon entered a life of Wild West crime – cattle rustling and other petty offences.

In 1889, he made the step up into a bigger league, successfully robbing the San Miguel Valley Bank in Telluride, with associates Matt Warner and Tom McCarty.

They got away with \$21,000.

His appetite had been whetted.

He changed his name to protect both himself and his family.

He chose Cassidy to reflect his admiration of Mike Cassidy, but Butch was not his personal choice. *"I took a job in Rock Springs in the butcher's shop when I needed to lay low for a while"*, he told a friend years later.

"Matt Warner nicknamed me Butch, he thought it was a big joke."

In 1894, Cassidy was arrested at Lander, Wyoming, for stealing horses.

He was sentenced to two years in the Wyoming State Prison in Laramie, but was released after 18 months.

Upon his full release in 1896, Cassidy went right back to his old ways and had soon accumulated a posse of outlaws who seemed to look up to him, just as he had to Mike Cassidy, years earlier.



It was around this time that Butch met a handsome and charismatic East Coast-born former cowboy turned outlaw, named Harry Longabaugh.

Longabaugh was born in Mont Clare, Pennsylvania in 1867.

He was the youngest of five children.

When he was only 15 years old, Harry headed west with a cousin.

He was 20 years of age when he stole a gun, a saddle, and a horse from a ranch in Sundance Wyoming, only to be almost immediately captured.

He was convicted and spent 18 months in jail, at which time he took on the nickname of the Sundance Kid. After his release, Sundance joined Butch's gang and soon became quite an influential figure.

The gang started to rob banks and trains. And, because of Butch's attention to detail, they were extremely good at it.

They operated throughout Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. They were soon given the name - The Wild Bunch.

They were mainly based in a wilderness of canyons, hidden valleys and high peaks known as Robber's Roost.



Robbers Roost had become a popular hideout for cattle rustlers and other outlaws and was ideal due to its rough terrain — it was easily defensible, provided hundreds of hiding spots, and was difficult to penetrate.

In 1890, with his share of the loot stolen in Colorado, Cassidy purchased a ranch on the outskirts of Dubois, Wyoming. He used it as a base to rustle cattle and horses.



Many historians believe that the ranch was never economically successful, but was a cover for Butch's clandestine activities.

While rustling in Wyoming, Butch had stayed at the 'Hole In The Wall', which was a remote pass in the Big Horn Mountains of Johnson County.

It was later to become the gang's favourite hiding place.

Geographically, 'The Hole In The Wall' had so many advantages for a gang attempting to evade the authorities.

The area was remote and secluded, easily defended because of its narrow passes - and impossible for lawmen to approach without alerting the outlaws.



Considering the residents, the Hole in the Wall had an impressive infrastructure, with each gang supplying its own food and livestock, as well as its horses.

A corral, livery stable, and numerous cabins were constructed, one or two for each gang.

Anyone operating out of there, adhered to the specific rules of the camp, including a particular way of handling disputes with other gang members and never stealing from another gang's supplies.

There was no leader, with each gang adhering to its own chain of command. The hideout was also used for shelter for the outlaws to lay up during the harsh Wyoming winters.

Many notorious individuals stayed there at some time or another, including Jesse James.

Despite sporadic attempts and many boastful claims, lawmen of the day never discovered the Hole In The Wall, as the outlaws held each other to strict confidentiality regarding its location.

Legend had it that it was defended by a well-armed, 200-man gang with an intricate system of fortifications, tunnels and land mines - plus a vast storehouse of supplies and ammunition.

Few lawmen cared to enter such a dangerous location.

Butch and the Wild Bunch pulled off many successful robberies - and their notoriety grew as they racked up an incredible average of \$35,000 per robbery.



They were, of course, blamed for every robbery in the Northwest, even though they were, in fact, quite selective, due to Butch's careful attention to detail, which, on many occasions, lasted weeks.

Records now show that they probably only robbed four banks, four express trains and a coal company payroll office, in their whole career.

It appears that Cassidy also avoided killing.

Although shots were fired during the robberies, Butch was never known to have shot anyone.

The gang always warned the employees when they were going to use dynamite, so they could protect themselves.

The banks and the railroad companies soon employed the famous Pinkerton agency to track down the Wild Bunch and bring them to justice. Many experienced detectives were put on the case.



One of them - Charlie Siringo - called Cassidy "*the shrewdest and most daring outlaw of the present age*" - and he trailed the gang all over the West, often posing as an outlaw to try and locate them.

With each new robbery, the Bunch became better known and indeed very popular with the American public, who were eager to read about their daring exploits.

In one other story, it was claimed The Union Pacific Railroad proposed to Cassidy that they would arrange a pardon for him, in exchange for the promise of him ending his robberies and coming to work for the company as an express guard.

Cassidy turned the offer down.

In 1900 - and unusual for him - Butch let his guard down and nearly paid a big price for it.

A number of the Wild Bunch were in Texas to visit their favourite brothels and to have some fun. They decided to get a formal portrait taken, as a joke.



This picture of the Sundance Kid, Will Carver, Ben Kilpatrick, Harvey Logan (Kid Curry) and Cassidy, was a mistake. It is said that a Wells Fargo agent recognised the outlaws when the photo was displayed in the photographer's Fort Worth studio window.

It was soon on wanted posters throughout the West.

Butch and Sundance discussed the situation and knew they were living on borrowed time. So, they decided to pull one last robbery to set themselves up - and then they planned to disappear to a new life in South America.

The First National Bank of Winnemucca, Nevada was selected - and after meticulous planning, the gang hit the bank on September 19th, 1900 and it is reported their haul was in excess of \$35,000.

That was the equivalent of \$1.5 million today.

Armed with their cash, Butch and Sundance said goodbye to the other members of the gang and put their plans into action.

What appeared to happen next, is a bit unclear.

It's suggested that Butch went to New York, while Sundance was joined by his mysterious and beautiful girlfriend, Etta Place - and the two of them spent January in Pennsylvania with Sundance's family there.

Some rumours suggested that they got married whilst in Pennsylvania, but this has never been confirmed.



Etta was not her real name.

She was born 'Ethel', but acquired Etta and it stuck. Her surname of 'Place' wasn't her own either and probably came from an alias Sundance used on a hotel register in New York, where he signed in as 'Mr Harry Place' and she signed in as "Mrs Ethel Place".

Place was Sundance's mother's maiden name.

They then went to New York City and met up with Butch.

After a few weeks of living it up in New York, the three of them departed for Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The sailed aboard the British steamer Herminius, on February 20th 1901.



They travelled under the names of Mr Harry A. Place and Mrs H. A. Place, while Cassidy posed as Mr James Ryan, Place's fictitious brother.

When they arrived in Buenos Aires, they stayed in the city for a few weeks enjoying its many delights. Then, they headed for where they felt most comfortable.

Cowboy territory.

The rugged landscapes of Patagonia.

They purchased a four-room ranch house on the Blanco River, along with 15,000 acres around it, to develop. They put 2,500 in Ethel's name.

It was a secluded spot outside the small village of Cholila in the Chubut Province.



At that time, the Argentinean government were still following a friendly immigration policy, as they were seeking rapid modernisation of the country.

Part of this, was that immigrants could qualify for land grants on the frontier, if they showed they had the capital to develop the land.

Clearly, Butch and Sundance had the funds and they took full advantage of the grants available.

Fortunately, the Argentinians didn't investigate how their capital had been acquired, so the trio did the deal and settled down to live an honest life.

Before they set about developing the ranch, they travelled extensively round South America, enjoying the cities and the good life - as their stay in New York had really given them a taste for it.

In a letter to his friend Mathilda Davis back in the U.S., Cassidy explained how much he liked this part of the world, even considering settling down for good:

"Another of my Uncles died and left \$30,000 to our little family of three so I took my \$10,000 and started to see a little more of the world.

I visited the best cities and best parts of the countries of South America.

And this part of the country looked so good, that I located, and I think for good, for I like the place better every day".

He also wrote this to his family in that period:

"I own 300 heads of cattle, 1,500 heads of sheep and 28 riding horses. I have 2 helpers, a nice four-room house, barns, a stable and a henhouse... the only thing I need is a cook, since I am still unpleasantly single and many times feel lonely."

In 1902, Sundance and Etta made a short visit back to New York.

Shortly after this trip, the Pinkertons became aware of her.

How and why it happened is not clear, but they managed to get hold of the wedding photo which they then used for wanted posters of her.

As part of that investigation, they later retraced Sundance and Etta's movements and found that the pair had made a visit to Coney Island while they were in the city.

By now, Sundance's family had moved to Atlantic City - and clearly that was the reason for the visit.

They also visited a clinic in Buffalo and another one in Denver, before they returned to Argentina three months after they'd left.

Exactly why they visited the clinic is unknown, but it might have been related to the fact that, although they had been married for several years, the couple never had any children.



In 1904 they both made another return trip to the USA.

Though they landed in New York again, this time they headed south to visit the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, better known as the St Louis State Fair.

Unknown to them, Sundance and Etta's trips to America had allowed the Pinkertons to draw a real bead on them. Their file was getting significant.

And it was to get worse.

Pinkertons intercepted a letter from Sundance to his family in Pennsylvania - and they now not only knew that they were in Argentina but they also had the location of their ranch.

They planned to arrest them there. But by that time, the South American winter had set in and they couldn't get to the ranch.

So, they issued wanted posters on Butch, Sundance and Ethel with the name of "Etta Place" (the Argentinean pronunciation of Ethel).

Before Frank Dimaio, the Pinkerton agent, could arrest them, they were tipped off by a friend in the Argentinean police force. The local Comisario was Edward Humphreys - and he was a child of Welsh immigrants who had become friendly with the trio.

Humphreys warned them that they were being hunted and this gave them time to make key decisions and leave. On May 1st, they sold the Cholila ranch and travelled north to San Carlos de Bariloche, where they embarked on the steamer Condor, across Nahuel Huapí Lake and into Chile.

While they were hiding out in Chile, Etta fell ill with appendicitis and in June 1906, Sundance took her back up the coast to San Francisco.

Once she'd been treated, she decided to stay in America.

Etta had always been homesick, which was why she had Sundance bring her back on numerous visits, but she consoled herself with making their ranch a home.

Now that the ranch was gone, a life on the run held no attraction for her.

So, in 1906, after five years of marriage, she and Sundance said their goodbyes.

I would have thought she walked away with a healthy bank balance.

But, along with many, I am intrigued as to what happened to her. Where did she go? What did she do?

These are questions that are still being asked to this day, as she completely disappeared.

Researchers continue to try and track her down.



Who was Etta Place?

We really don't know, although she played a pivotal role in one of the Wild West's great legends. That's what makes her fascinating.

It's been speculated that she was born somewhere in New England, some think she might even have been born in England.

She could have been a schoolteacher at some point - she had a notably refined accent, which suggested a good education.

Their wedding photo is one of only two pictures of Etta that survive, and shows her face clearly. She was an extremely attractive woman. In the photo she is also wearing what appears to be an engagement ring, showing this was probably no whirlwind romance.

Several copies were made of the picture, and they were mailed out to friends and relatives.

Sundance sent one to a friend in Wyoming, saying that he had "married a Texas lady he had previously known". From those few words an entire forest of speculation has sprouted.

The most common idea is that Etta was originally a prostitute, and that Sundance had met her in Texas previously, while he was visiting a brothel.

The Wild Bunch were known to have regularly visited Fannie Porter's establishment when they visited San Antonio. Fannie had an extremely good reputation both for discretion when visited by outlaws - and as an employer - ensuring that the girls who worked for her, were not mistreated by clients and received a good cut of the profits.

Actually, it is thought that Etta did briefly resurface again in 1909, when a woman similar in appearance, approached the US Vice-Consul in Chile to try and get his help in obtaining a death certificate for Sundance.

Maybe she wanted to claim she had been his wife - and needed the certificate to collect on insurance, his estate or his bank account - if he had one.

But no certificate was issued by the Bolivian government, so the woman left empty handed. She did not give her name.

If that was her, it was the last time anyone saw Etta Place.

After the break-up with Etta in 1906, Sundance went back to Butch in Chile.

This is where things get very interesting...

There are numerous reports of robberies and hold-ups in Argentina, Chile, Peru and Bolivia, that historians have attributed to Butch and Sundance.

These included the National Bank in Villa Mercedes, Banco de Tarapacá y Argentino in Río Gallegos, a stagecoach carrying wages to a mine in Peru and a train in Bolivia.

It was also suggested that after Sundance returned to South America he and Butch went to work for a Bolivian mining company.

Cassidy, under the alias James "Santiago" Maxwell, obtained work at the Concordia Tin Mine in the Santa Vera Cruz range of the central Bolivian Andes.



Their main duties included guarding the company payroll.

They were also responsible for transporting the company's payroll and taking cash into town to make purchases, both of which they carried out without any issues.

Rumour has it that they left when the company found out who they were.

On November 3rd, 1908, near San Vicente in southern Bolivia, a courier for the Aramayo Franke and Cia Silver Mine was conveying his company's payroll, worth about 15,000 Bolivian pesos, by mule, when he was attacked and robbed by two masked American bandits believed to be Butch and Sundance.

I have to say, all of this makes no sense to me.

Let's look at the facts as we know them.

Butch and Sundance must have both been very wealthy when they arrived in South America. (Remember, they cleared the equivalent of \$1 million in their last job alone).

No matter how much they enjoyed the good life (and they did), there is no way it would have made that big a dent in all that wealth.

Butch was a very smart man. And so was Sundance. They had to be, to have stayed ahead of the law for all those years.

But, they both knew that Pinkertons were getting closer to them by the day. Their luck had held, up to now, but the odds were shortening - and they were aware that their luck couldn't hold for much longer.

With respect to the many historians that have worked on this - I simply can't believe they would have taken the chances they did, by continuing to carry out more robberies.

They didn't need the money.

And to sign on as payroll guards - why on earth would two very smart and wealthy men want to do something as stupid as that? It makes no sense.

Obviously, they were serial outlaws and robbers. They clearly got a kick out of it and earned very well. And old habits die hard.

I get all of that. But I simply refuse to believe they did some of the crazy things in South America that some historians believe.

I think they hightailed it out of South America and went back to the USA - with their money - leaving Pinkertons chasing ghosts.

In my humble opinion, those two outlaws shot dead in San Vicente, were not Butch and Sundance.



There have been many, many claims that support this.

One story told by Josie Bassett claimed that Cassidy had come to visit her in the 1920s, *"after returning from South America"* and that he didn't die until about 1940.

Locals of Cassidy's hometown of Circleville, Utah, claimed that he had worked in Nevada until his death.

Cassidy's sister, Lula Parker Betenson, wrote in her 1975 book *'Butch Cassidy, My Brother'* that the outlaw had returned to the family ranch in Circleville, Utah, in 1925, to visit his ailing father and attend a family wedding

A number of people in Baggs, Wyoming, a popular destination of the Wild Bunch during their raiding years, claimed that Cassidy had visited the town in the 1920's.

In Cassidy's nephew - Bill Betenson's book - *'Butch Cassidy, My Uncle'*, the author points to around 20 well-documented sightings of Cassidy after 1908.

In 1925, Cassidy, driving a shiny new Ford and sporting the *"characteristic Parker grin,"* was said to have visited his family in Utah.

His sister Lula Parker Betenson claimed he told the family of his exploits and kept in touch with them until he died in 1937.

Bill Betenson states in his book, his family knew exactly where Cassidy was buried after his death in 1937:

"My great-grandmother, Butch's little sister Lula, was very clear. She said that where he was buried - and under what name - was a family secret; that he was chased all his life and now he had a chance to finally rest in peace - and that's the way it must be."

But, the strongest clue of them all to the truth of that final shootout in Bolivia, comes from husband-and-wife researchers, Daniel Buck and Anne Meadows.

They spent years mining South American archives and police reports trying to track down the true story of what really happened to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

Meadows wrote a book about it, called *'Digging up Butch and Sundance.'*

While the paper trail pointed to their demise in Bolivia, conclusive evidence as to the identities of the bandits killed in San Vicente in November 1908, rested under the ground of the village's cemetery.

The researchers enlisted the help of Clyde Snow, the renowned forensic anthropologist who had conclusively identified the remains of Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele.

They obtained permission from the Bolivian authorities to exhume the graves of the two bandits.



Guided to their grave by an elderly villager whose father had reportedly witnessed the shootout, diggers in 1991 unearthed a skeleton of one man along with a piece of a skull from another.

After a detailed forensic analysis - and a comparison of DNA to the relatives of Cassidy and Longabaugh - Snow found there was no match.

The conclusion was clear. The two gunmen shot at San Vicente, were not Butch and Sundance.

I think they enjoyed their money and lived their lives to the full, back in the USA.

Whether they stayed apart from each other, we will never know.

But I doubt it. They were joined at the hip.

Etta probably enjoyed her money too and lived a quiet life. Maybe she got married again.

It wouldn't surprise me if her and Sundance got together now and again.

Maybe Butch got invited too.

I hope so.

Seems right, somehow.



Butch, Etta and Sundance (right to left) in front of their ranch cabin in Cholila, Argentina, sometime between 1901 -1905