



Were two desperadoes lynched on the American Falls railroad bridge? That is a question that resurfaced when a photo of the trestle appeared on the Facebook group "Idaho History 1800 to Present." I originally said, "Probably not," but as most historians know, sometimes new evidence comes to light and old conclusions must be reconsidered. After doing a lot of digging, it does indeed seem Tex and Johnson were executed by "Judge Lynch" in 1882 and the story is far more interesting than some old tall tale.

In the summer of 1882, the American Falls construction site was about 60 miles past the edge of "civilization" and the Oregon Short Line was in the process of building the railroad trestle. The town of 1882 was not where it is today, nor was it on the east side of the river bottoms prior to its move in 1925. Rather, the original townsite was on the west side of the river, below the falls and on the bluff above where the fish hatchery is today.

While still described as a "tent town," it had a greater sense of permanence than the typical railroad camp. The Oregon Short Line and its parent, Union Pacific, were pouring vast resources into the venture. Over 3,000 men and 2,700 teams of horses and mules were scattered across 60 miles of the Snake

River Plain, laboring in the Idaho summer heat. The bridge at American Falls was a natural locus of the effort.

The railroad project was not done sequentially as might be expected. Work began on the bridge long before the railroad tracks arrived on the east side of the falls. Similarly, grading of the roadbed west of the falls had begun and work crews stretched out into the desert working for many miles. Materials and supplies were brought in by freight wagons from Pocatello and ferried across the river to the work camp.

Large stores of supplies were brought in for the impending race across the desert when the track finally made it to the bridge. The supply point and bridge construction site had hotels, shops, engineers, workmen and saloons. However, with a shortage of buildings, many supplies were placed on racks on the ground until needed.

It was not just the railroad project that brought people to the new town. Bonanza Bar gold mining was in full swing 15 miles downriver and other placer mines opened between there and the falls. Similarly, up on the Wood River, miners and developers anxiously watched for any news on the railroad's progress and the promise of lowered freight costs and more commerce. Ranchers brought beef in and cowboys also hung around for some fun. The ferry ran constantly back and forth across the Snake River as it tried to keep up with all the traffic.

Despite the sudden population boom, the only "law" was a courthouse nearly 60 miles away in Malad, the county sheriff W.H. Homer in Oxford (also 60 miles away and usually focused on apprehending fugitives to take to Malad for trial), the railroad police (who only guarded the company's investment) and a "night watchman" who tried to keep things from being stolen from the commercial shops and storehouses.

U.S. Marshal (later Senator) Fred Dubois was stationed in Blackfoot (40 miles away), but he was more concerned with hunting down polygamous Mormonsthan trying to tame rowdy railroad contractors.

And rowdy they were. On the outskirts of town stood traveling businesses that provided liquor, food, gambling and other well-known methods of separating the laborers from their earnings. At least one gang used the town as a base of operations. Things were so bad that Jesse Pallord, the chief clerk for the

largest contractors, carried a sawed-off shotgun slung from his shoulder when he was on duty. American Falls was the very personification of a wide-open railroad town — a moral vacuum of vagabonds, villainy, vice and violence.

Into this lawless canvas city beside the falls rode two men who called themselves “Tex” and “Johnson.” Some accounts say they were part of Bill Stokes’ gang while others say they ran their own group of outlaws. Most of what we know about Tex and Johnson and their lynching comes from two unrelated eye witnesses — Judge Oliver, a longtime resident of the American Falls area, and W.F. Allen, a laborer who described his experiences to the Ogden paper shortly after the lynching. It is doubtful the two witnesses knew each other.

All sources seem to agree with a later newspaper report that said the two ruffians “were of the brawling type, always went heavily armed and seemed bent upon winning reputations as all-around bad men. One of their favorite diversions was to stroll through the camp (at night) and shoot out such lights as happened to be showing.” The Ogden newspaper put it more succinctly, “Johnson and Tex had been committing depredations of all kinds in that place for some length of time until their drunken acts and damnable tricks became unbearable.”

Indeed, the pot began to boil over on Sunday morning, Oct. 8, 1882. A Chinese man was found stabbed to death in his tent. Local opinion believed he was murdered while being robbed and suspicion quickly fell on Tex and Johnson. Without more evidence, though, nothing could be proven. Still, the townspeople were done with the “drunken acts and damnable tricks” and advised the two thugs to vacate the town presently and permanently.

Tex and Johnson “did not leave, however, but, instead, offered threats, saying there were not citizens enough to make them leave, thereupon firing upon the people who returned the shots and drove the rascals over the river. Johnson and Tex threatened they would ‘clean out the town’ during the night.”

True to their word, while crossing the river in the night, the two were confronted by the night watchman. A fight ensued and Johnson was shot three times — in the body, arm and leg. He fell to the ground as Tex rushed the watchman. The watchman, having emptied his revolver, proceeded to pistol whip Tex into submission.

The commotion was expected. Citizens immediately appeared with ropes and marched the wounded Tex and Johnson to the bridge. Nooses were tied and placed around their necks and they were forced out onto the partially completed trestle. The ropes were fastened to railroad ties and the condemned asked if they had any last words. Both men declined the offer.

They were ordered to jump. Johnson lost his courage and expressed his fervent desire not to hop off the bridge. Tex, unimpressed with Johnson's sudden blubbing, told his partner in crime that he would meet him in hell in 10 minutes. Then Tex jumped.

As Tex's rope snapped tight, the townspeople began to assist Johnson on his own journey to hell. Johnson clung to one of his executioners for a short period, nearly pulling the man off the bridge with him, before finally being separated and Johnson unceremoniously shoved into oblivion. Tex and Johnson dangled by their necks with the heels of their boots wet by the spray of the roaring falls.

The bodies swung for a few hours until morning when they were cut down and buried on the bluff to the west of the falls. Two "bed board" grave markers were placed over them, as much as a warning to others as a remembrance of the executed.

It might be thought that the story ends there, but those boots that dangled over the American Falls continued to play a role in history. Tex and Johnson were dead, but not gone.

As locals know, the construction excitement around the American Falls was not over in the 1880s. The railroad built its depot on the east side of the river and the tent town moved out. Those businesses that decided to stay built more substantial buildings on the east side. The town grew, technology was invented, and in the early 1900s development of a hydroelectric power plant began on the west side of the falls.

The west side power plant was a project designed to solve a bundle of problems at once. It could generate electricity for homes and businesses. It could run pumps that would send water to a placer mine 5 miles away. It could also send water to the Lackawanna Hotel above the canyon (part of a grand plan for a new town that never developed). To do all that, a tunnel needed to be cut through the cliff. After a slight disagreement with the railroad, under

whose bridge the tunnel would run, work progressed in 1903. To get the water pumped to the top of the cliff from inside the tunnel a connecting shaft was sunk through the rock from the top of the bluff. As luck would have it, the shaft was sunk right through the graves of Tex and Johnson. They were back!

The engineer and workmen were perplexed by the appearance of the bones. The wood grave markers were long since lost and so nobody realized the graves were there when they started digging. Other engineering projects in the area often turned up mastodons, but these were human remains and it was clear the bones belonged to a modern man because he died and was buried with his boots on.

It was not long before Judge Oliver spoke up and explained there were only two men buried in that area during his time by the Snake River. Since he was one of the original pioneers, that could only mean that the bones belonged to Tex or Johnson or maybe Tex and Johnson. The decision was made to reinter the remains a short distance away.

The human remains were dropped into the grave, but the noted historian and western artifact collector William E. Hawks Jr. was in town and expressed an interest in the boots for his "Two Bar 70 teepee." Named after the ranch his family owned near American Falls, the teepee was a room in his Vermont home packed with historical objects. Many of those artifacts now reside in museums, including the Smithsonian, but the old thick-leather boots seem to have gone missing.

However, as locals know, the construction excitement at the falls was not yet over. In the 1920s the shaft was becoming a hazard. The mine was long since closed, the hotel failed, and the power plant was no longer running. Some efforts were made to make the site safe, but the wood boards covering the shaft were rotting away and needed to be replaced. The shaft was on bureau of reclamation land so their local man in charge, Dana Templin, was notified and he immediately issued appropriate orders. The work to replace the cover was progressing well when they discovered that one of the upright support posts was rotted and needed to be replaced. As it was removed, low and behold, human remains. They were back!

Once again, there were perplexed workmen on the bluff overlooking the site of Tex and Johnson's demise. Once again Judge Oliver trotted out to tell the story of the two low-lifes from the 1880s and their necktie party.

This time all the workmen found behind the rotted post was a pelvis, a boot, and some leg and foot bones inside of said boot. They decided to let the sleeping scoundrel lie and a new post was installed without bothering to excavate the rest of the skeleton from the shaft wall. This was a government job, after all, and there was no budget for exhumations.

Except, it seems, someone did not really want to rebury the boot. It was part of the city's history and a neat relic. So, legend says, the boot with the foot bones made its way into a saloon and stayed on a shelf behind the bar for locals and visitors alike to ponder as they sipped their beer and whiskey.

However, as locals know... no, I'm not kidding. On April 13 and 14 in 1967, Roth Finley, Alan Templeton and Jerry Fredrickson were on that very same bluff doing more work for the Bureau of Reclamation. Once again, bones were found and once again they found what looked like an old boot.

The place where the bones were found was not marked and there was no indication of what lay beneath the surface. However, as perplexing as they were, undeniably there they were. They also appeared to have been moved because they were not in the usual order. A few frantic calls to the authorities, some discussions with "old timers" and the mystery was solved again. Yep, Tex and Johnson (or Tex, or Johnson) were back! It seems the workmen found the second burial site used to reinter the bones when the shaft was first dug.

The workmen had a job to do and left the bones out over the weekend before reburying them in the same place the next Monday. Well, most of them anyway. Someone came to the site over the weekend, dug around a bit, and a skull was missing on Monday morning.

By the 1980s the old stories had been told and retold so many times that the facts were terribly blurred. About all any of the stories agreed on was that there were two guys named "Tex" and "Johnson" and they were lynched on the railroad bridge. When they were lynched, why they were lynched, who lynched them, and how long they "swung over the falls" were liberally embellished over the century since that fateful night.

Some academic folks decided to see if the whole thing was real or not. If it was then the site should probably be protected. If not, well we could all cross it off our list of tall tales.

If I recall correctly, they used a photo from around 1911 that showed two rough wood boards with the names Tex and Johnson carved into them that were placed over a small rock cairn. Combined with photos from the 1967 discovery and a little detective work they found the location of the photos. They dug for a couple days, but announced that there were no bodies buried in the “graves.”

It made for an interesting “correcting the history” piece in the local papers. Some laughed and shook their heads at the foolishness of those who believed the old legends. Others shook their heads in frustration wondering why the bones their grandparents said were on the bluff were not found. Most people just kept telling the story because it was a good Western yarn.

The problem is, those boards in that photograph looked pretty new in 1911, nearly 30 years after the lynching. It is undoubtedly true that wood can survive a ridiculous length of time in the elements, but no piece of wood looks that good after 30 years of sitting exposed on a bluff in the howling wind, driving rain, freezing snow and scorching sun of Idaho. The archaeologists almost certainly noted that, too, and decided the markers were likely replaced at some time in the past, maybe in the wrong place. There was also the possibility that the bones were stolen after they were reburied in 1967.

There is an old adage in archaeology that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Still, without physical evidence and working off just a couple old newspaper stories it seemed there was very little evidence to support the story of Tex and Johnson’s lynching.

What the archaeologists did not have in the 1980s was a global data network with millions of historical documents available to search. They undoubtedly did the best they could in local libraries and with the aid of historical societies, but the 100-year history of development at the falls, along with multiple disturbances of the graves, was far too complex for them to unravel without extensive time and cost.

Of course, if someone went looking today for the remains of the two desperados it would still be a real problem. One grave is, at least partially, in a place nobody should be going. Another may be somewhere nearby with parts of one or both men, or neither if the grave was robbed in the 1960s or ’70s. Somewhere else there might be a boot with some foot bones in it that smells

like an old bar and is stained with decades of cigarette smoke. Back east there may be a couple boots. Then there is the missing skull that someone thought would be a neat trophy. There is also the perplexing question of just how many boots have been found there!

That is not to say that Tex and Johnson will never make another appearance. After all, they gave their word that "there were not citizens enough to make them leave" and for over a hundred years, despite threats, a lynching and multiple burials, those two outlaws just keep coming back.