A cowboy who went wrong
THE BLACK JACK STORY

Compiled by Sue Richardson

From the Clayton Enterprise, April 30, 1901:
Swung Into Eternity
Thomas Ketchum, the famous bandit
died game

When a hangman's noose was placed around Thomas E. Ketchum's neck on April 26, 1901, an era came to an end. The outlaw, mistakenly called "Black Jack" by those who did not know him, was one of the last in a line of desperados who thought train robbery was a quick way to riches. Instead, he paid the ultimate price.

Thomas Edward Ketchum was born in San Saba County, Texas, on October 31, 1863, the son of Green Berry Ketchum Sr. and Temperance Katherine Wydick Ketchum. He had two brothers and two sisters. His father died when he was five years old and his mother was blind for several years before her death in 1873.

Tom's oldest brother, Berry Jr., became a wealthy and noted cowman and horse breeder. The other brother, Sam, was a married man with two children, but his wife left him when their son was three years old.

Tom and Sam were both cowboys, working
on ranches in West Texas and Eastern New Mexico. Undoubtedly, they both participated in trail drives through Texas, New Mexico and Colorado, getting to know the country and the ranchers and settlers.

Tom Ketchum's first major crime was the murder of John N. "Jap" Powers, a neighbor in Tom Green County, Texas. Powers was shot down on December 12, 1895, by several men as he left his home. Although Tom later admitted his part in the killing and stated he had been paid to do it, it is doubtful he would have become involved if he had been on good terms with Powers.

When he learned he was under suspicion for the murder, he left the area, heading for the Pecos Valley of New Mexico. His brother Sam, who has not been implicated in the Power's killing, joined him in New Mexico within a short time.

The brothers worked for the Bell Ranch until early June, 1896, when they quit their jobs and stole some supplies. On June 10, they came upon the little settlement of Liberty, north of present-day Tucumcari, where there was a store and post office operated by Levi and Morris Herstein. The Ketchums looted the store during the night and then rode toward the Pecos River. Levi Herstein gathered up a posse of three or four men and went in pursuit, catching up with the Ketchums some 25 miles from Liberty. After a short gun battle, Levi Herstein and Merejildo Gallegos were dead and another posse member escaped death only by playing dead. Tom and Sam escaped without a scratch.

After the killing of Herstein, Tom and Sam joined friends in Arizona. Robberies in Colorado and Utah have been attributed to their gang, but these are doubtful. As far as can be ascertained from official records, their first train robbery was the hold-up of the Southern Pacific train at Lozier, Texas, on May 14, 1897. Other tales of their riding with Butch Cassidy's Hole-In-The-Wall Gang are probably exaggerated.

During the summer and autumn of 1896, everyone in the Southwest heard a great deal about the Black Jack gang. Black Jack was the nick name of Will Christian, an outlaw from Oklahoma and the Indian nations. With his brother and others, he embarked upon a series of robberies in New Mexico and Arizona.

He was killed in Graham County Arizona, in April of 1897, and someone mistakenly identified the dead outlaw as Thomas Ketchum.
It was after Christian's death that folks began calling Tom Ketchum Black Jack. Both men were tall with dark skin and hair, and both rode with their brothers. However, Tom Ketchum was never known as Black Jack among those who rode with him or those who had been acquainted with the real Black Jack.

On September 3, 1897, the Ketchum gang held up the Colorado and Southern Flyer train, just south of the town of Folsom, New Mexico, between Clayton and Raton. A posse of New Mexico and Colorado lawmen was hurriedly formed, but the outlaws escaped and their trail was obliterated by a rainstorm.

Other train robberies included an unsuccessful attempt to hold up a train near Stein's Pass on the Arizona-New Mexico border in December of 1897; the April 28, 1898, hold-up of the Southern Pacific near Comstock, Texas; and the July 1, 1898, hold-up of the Texas and Pacific Railway near Stanton, Texas.

Between robberies the men traveled widely, establishing hide-outs at Texas Canyon, south of Bisbee, Arizona, and in Turkey Creek Canyon, 11 miles northwest of Cimarron, New Mexico. Also, from time to time, they visited friends and relatives in Texas. It is interesting to note that although the proceeds of their train robberies probably were in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, the gang never spent much money, nor was any of their ill-gotten gains ever recovered by the railroads. They spent very little time in towns, preferring the solitude of their hide-outs.

The gang split up some time after the summer of 1898, with Sam riding with Will Carver, Elza Lay and Red Weaver. Although no one ever recorded the reason for the split, it was undoubtedly due to Tom Ketchum's sullen and malevolent disposition. He was cunning and cruel, unlike his brother, Sam, who probably turned outlaw at the age of 41 only because he had nothing to show for a life of hard work.

On July 2, 1899, a lone gunman rode into Camp Verde, Arizona, and gunned down two men. The killer was Tom Ketchum, who never gave any reason for the killings. He once again escaped his pursuers and headed towards northeastern New Mexico.

Meanwhile, unknown to Tom, his brother Sam and several others again held up the Colorado and Southern Flyer on July 11, 1899, south of Folsom, at almost the same place as the September 1897 hold-up.
This time, a posse consisting mostly of Colorado lawmen, financed by the railroad, tracked the outlaws to Turkey Creek Canyon. During the gun battle which followed, Sam Ketchum and Elza Lay were wounded, as were several members of the posse, and Sheriff Farr of Huerfano County, Colorado, was killed.

The outlaws escaped from the canyon, but Sam Ketchum was found a day or two later and was taken to the penitentiary at Santa Fe, where he died of his wounds July 24. He was buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery at Santa Fe, which is now covered by a freeway.

On the night of August 16, 1899, knowing nothing about the July 11 hold-up or his brother's death, Tom Ketchum singlehandedly attempted to hold up the same train at Twin Mountains, southeast of Folsom. He was wounded in the right arm by a blast from Conductor Frank Harrington's shotgun and staggered away into the night.

He was captured without resistance the next morning at a water hole near the railroad tracks by Sheriff Saturnino Pinard of Union County. Ketchum gave his name as George Stevens. Sherriff Pinard had intended to take the prisoner to Clayton, but authorities from Colorado insisted on taking the wounded man to Trinidad for interrogation. Ketchum's shattered arm was bandaged at Folsom and then he was taken to San Rafael Hospital in Trinidad, where he continued to claim he was George Stevens.

It was almost a week before he admitted he was Tom Ketchum, and he steadfastly refused to have his arm amputated, as his doctors advised.

On August 23, 1899, he was transported to the penitentiary at Santa Fe and on September 3 he finally allowed his arm to be amputated.

He was first tried in Las Vegas, New Mexico, November 15, 1899, on a federal charge of delaying the United States mail. He pled guilty and sentence was suspended in order for the Territory of New Mexico to press its charges.

Nearly a year later, on September 6, 1900, his trial began in Clayton on charges of felonious assault upon a railroad train, a charge that carried the death penalty in the Territory. He was found guilty and sentenced to be hung. Judge William J. Mills set the execution date for October 5, 1900, but granted Ketchum the right to appeal, which automatically delayed the execution. Ketchum was
returned to the penitentiary at Santa Fe.

After his appeal was rejected, a date of March 22, 1901, was set, but he was to receive two more postponements.

Finally, on April 24, 1901, he was brought back to Clayton under heavy guard, since there were many rumors that former gang members would attempt to free him. Sheriff Salome Garcia received a telegram supposedly from Governor Otero, ordering a stay of execution, but the sheriff telegraphed to check the authenticity of the wire, and found it to be false.

Sheriff Garcia's son, Fructoso, recalls that the word was out that someone was going to stop Black Jack's hanging, and people were buying a lot of guns and ammunition. He also said that Ketchum told his father, "My name is Tom Ketchum, but I am not the Black Jack you are looking for."

Shortly after 1 p.m. on April 26, 1901, Tom Ketchum climbed to the gallows which had been erected inside a hastily-built stockade next to the Union County jail. Admission to the stockade was by ticket.

A tall, dark stranger was noted in the crowd and he and Ketchum exchanged several glances. Later officials attempted to locate the stranger, but he had vanished. He has been identified as a cowpuncher who had perhaps worked with Ketchum, but according to family accounts, the stranger was "Bige" Duncan, husband of Tom's sister, Nancy.

The noose was pulled down over Tom's neck, a black hood was fitted over his head and then Sheriff Garcia asked the condemned man, "Are you ready?" Ketchum replied, "Ready. Let 'er go."

It took Garcia two blows with a hatchet to sever the control rope. With the second blow, the trap flew back and Ketchum plunged downward, all the way to the ground. Spectators saw blood flowing from under the black hood as the body landed on its feet for an instant before tumbling forward.

Tom Ketchum had been beheaded.

No one in Clayton had ever hung anyone before, so the decapitation was probably caused by several errors, including the length of the drop, misjudgement of Ketchum's weight, and the possibility the rope had been stretched while testing was done.

After the undertaker sewed the head to the torso, Ketchum's body was placed in a simple
pine coffin and buried in Clayton’s Boot Hill on
the open prairie. Before the last clods of dirt
were shoveled on his grave, rumors began to
circulate about his true identity. However, law
enforcement officials were satisfied it was
indeed Thomas “Black Jack” Ketchum laid in
the unmarked grave.

On September 10, 1933, Ketchum’s body was
disinterred and was moved to the new Clayton
cemetery. The coffin was opened and Ket-
chum’s body was found to be well preserved.
Jack Potter, who had known Tom during his
trail drive days, placed flowers in the casket
with a card that read, “To a cowboy who went
wrong.”

(Note: The compiler thanks Berry Spradley,
great grandson of Sam Ketchum, for the family
information he provided and for the suggestion
that the book “Dynamite and Six Shooter” by
Jeff Burton would provide the most accurate
information available on the Ketchum gang.)

(Although Tom Ketchum’s grave has never
been marked, its location has been a poorly
kept secret and flowers appear on the grave
from time to time, placed by unknown persons.
As this booklet is published, some restoration
and erection of a grave marker is underway at
the gravesite. This is being done under the
direction of the Union County Historical
Society at the request of the Ketchum family
descendants.)