DNA kills a legend

Smithsonian Expert Says Outlaw Never Did Escape Hangman

By PATTY REINERT

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- On the day they were going to kill him, Texas outlaw Wild Bill Longley, said to have murdered 32 people in his 27 years, dressed in his best black suit, pulled on his cowboy boots and pinned a flower to his lapel. He joked with the hangman even as he was being strung up.

Four thousand people supposedly witnessed Longley's execution on Oct. 11, 1878, out by the railroad tracks in Giddings, Texas. Three doctors pronounced him dead. The sheriff nailed the gunslinger's coffin shut and planted him in the ground.

Still, for 123 years an alternate legend has persisted, claiming the hanging was a hoax. Longley -- who, after all, had survived a previous hanging -- had somehow escaped to Louisiana, the story goes, where he changed his name and his lawless ways, married, reared a family and lived another 43 years.

On Wednesday, however, scientists at the Smithsonian Institution said they now have proof that badman William Preston "Wild Bill" Longley, who bragged of killing more men than Jesse James, Billy the Kid or Wild Bill Hickok, met his maker on the gallows in 1878. His corpse, they confirmed, has been in a Texas cemetery ever since.

"These legends die hard," said Douglas Owsley, a forensic anthropologist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History who has spent the past 15 years investigating the matter. "But now we have evidence that finally brings closure to a long-standing mystery."

In a quiet anthropology lab in the bowels of the museum, removed from the tourists who flock here to see the dinosaurs and the world-famous Hope Diamond, Owsley and his colleagues unveiled Longley's skeletal remains. On a table with the dead man's skull, teeth and bones, Owsley had placed other evidence from his excavations in Giddings -- a religious medal, given to Longley during his jailhouse conversion to Catholicism, and a yellow celluloid leaf, believed to be part of a flower pin the condemned man's 10-year-old niece brought him a few hours before his hanging.

But the definitive evidence came from a DNA test comparing the outlaw's tooth to blood and saliva samples from his great-great niece, Helen Chapman.

"I'm just thrilled," said Chapman, a 76-year-old homemaker from Mesa, Ariz. "I've heard the stories all my life. He was a conversation piece, you might say.

"Of course, we knew he was an outlaw," she added quickly, saying her religious relatives had never condoned their ancestor's deadly deeds, which inspired the 1960s television series *The Texan.*

Longley, born in Austin County and reared in Evergreen, was an expert marksman by the time he killed his first victim at age 17. Legend has it that he enlisted in the Army, deserted twice and then roamed the West, living among the Ute Indians, working as a cowboy in Kansas and Texas, murdering as he went.

After the Civil War, the desperado terrorized freed slaves, shot a preacher while the man was milking his cow, and -- almost unheard of in those days -- killed a woman. Lawmen placed a $1,000 bounty on his head.

On the scaffold in Giddings, the man who once boasted of 32 murders recanted most of them and repented, blaming his wickedness on disobedience to his parents, whiskey and gambling.

In a letter written just before his execution, Longley declared hanging his favorite way to die, after natural causes. But his hanging was far from flawless. First try, the rope slipped, dropping Longley to his knees. The sheriff helped him up; the executioner retied the rope.

The rumors began flying almost immediately: Longley had cut a deal with the sheriff, bribing him to outfit him with a special harness under his suit that prevented the rope from snapping his neck and suffocating him. The coffin lid had been left ajar so Longley could breathe en route to the cemetery, where he simply hopped out and went on his way.

The story seemed plausible to some, especially given the fact that Longley had been hanged once before, by Arkansas vigilantes who had mistakenly accused him of being a horse thief. Some said a bullet had cut the rope; others said a boy cut him down before he strangled.

The legend grew and became part of another family's folklore years later when a mystery man some believed to be Longley surfaced in Louisiana. The man, John Calhoun Brown, married, sired a large family and died a well-respected member of the Iberville Parish community in 1923.

In 1986, Ted Wax, one of Brown's younger grandsons, asked Owsley to help him verify whether Brown was really Longley. Owsley accepted, thinking he would dig up the Giddings grave to see if it was filled with bones or stones.

But finding the grave, which had long lost its wooden marker, was not so easy. Owsley and his team, guided only by a 1920s-era photograph of the gravesite, which they matched up with surviving trees and tombstones, eventually discovered more than 20 unmarked graves.

Meanwhile, Michael Reese, a high school math teacher from Houston and a Longley descendant, offered Owsley his genealogical research, talked to his kin and searched for a suitable DNA donor.

"I never really doubted he was there," Reese said. "I had heard the stories from my granddaddy since I was a boy. To me, Wild Bill was a hero in a Wild West sort of way. They said he was a man who stood up for his honor, shooting people who had insulted the virtue of Texas women. It was a different time."

When Owsley finally found a grave containing a young white male, more than 6 feet tall, Reese called Chapman, a distant cousin, who provided a blood sample.

"This is proof enough for me," Chapman said as she touched her notorious relative's bones and inspected plastic bags filled with cotton swabs soaked in her own blood. "He was related to us and he was buried right there where they said he was."

Later this summer, Reese plans to gather his relatives in Giddings, where Longley's remains will be reinterred.

"We're going to put him right back where he was," he said.

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