

# The Outlaw Jesse James in Clark County

Jesse Woodson James of Missouri is one of our nation's most famous outlaws. He has been characterized as a bandit, gang leader, bank robber, train robber, and even murderer. The most famous member of the James-Younger Gang was a celebrity when he was alive, and became a truly legendary figure after his death. The James-Younger Gang allegedly robbed a stage between Malvern and Hot Springs and, according to local legend, made their getaway to the south and southwest, passing through Hot Spring and Clark counties.

Jesse and his brother Frank James were Confederate guerrillas during the Civil War. After the war was over, as members of various gangs they robbed banks, stagecoaches, and trains. The James brothers were most active from about 1866 until 1876, when an attempted robbery of a bank in Minnesota resulted in the capture or death of several gang members. The brothers continued in crime for several years but came under increasing pressure from law enforcement. Then, in 1882, Jesse was killed by a member of his own gang.

In 1874, Jesse and his brother Frank, along with the Younger brothers (Cole and Bob) held up the Malvern-to-Hot Springs stagecoach. It is not clear precisely where the robbery took place, but one report places it on the Malvern Road near Sulphur Creek, about five miles from Hot Springs. Nearby was the road that went to Potash Sulphur Springs, then a popular resort with a hotel as well as "springs." After the theft, a posse went in pursuit, but never found the culprits.

But, one man claimed that the gang robbed the wrong stage—they were a day too late to seize the large sum of money they hoped to take. In 1912, Henry Tidd of Cleveland, Ohio, an insurance agent with Aetna Fire Insurance Company, recalled what happened for the Hot Springs *New Era* newspaper. At that time, he was the company's oldest employee at age 73. He stated he had traveled to Hot Springs in 1874 to settle a claim, carrying with him \$15,000. Fortunately, Tidd made it to the spa city the day before the James Gang confronted the stage between Malvern and Hot Springs. He believed the large amount of cash was the thieves' actual target.

After the robbery, perhaps the James-Younger Gang retreated through Hot Spring and Clark counties with the smaller total of loot they did seize. Local lore has it that Jesse James and his band of marauders once spent a night in the "Rock House," a natural cave in the bank of the Caddo River, about 200 yards off Military Road.

Also, one local historian related this story as a part of the Jesse James lore: "*A stranger, late of an evening drove up to the home of W.D. Bridges and asked for lodging, offering to pay. As was the custom in that day, he was welcomed and pay declined. During the evening before bedtime, the visitor laid his brace of handsome pistols on the floor beside his chair, but constantly kept his eye on them. He left early the next morning, having expressed his deep appreciation for the hospitality extended to him. That day's newspaper contained a picture of the bandit and a write-up of a robbery at or near Hot Springs. And "Uncle Billy" Bridges realized too late that he had entertained the notorious outlaw, Jesse James!*" Bridges' house, where James allegedly stayed, once stood in the Hollywood community of Clark County.



*The stagecoach robbery occurred between Malvern and Hot Springs, not far from the Potash Sulphur Springs resort, shown here.*