

Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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September 2019

It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Murrieta Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.

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The Capture of the Harrell Brothers

By Jeffery Harmon

On July 19, 1932, Claude Harrell, 20, and his sister-in-law, Freda Harrell, 22, placed their monthly supplies on the store counter. Claude pulled out a wad of dollar bills and paid the clerk. When they exited the front door of the Murrieta General Store, they found themselves staring at the gun barrel of Constable Melville Thompson along with multiple guns drawn by San Diego lawmen. Dejected, Claude and Freda slowly raised their arms. Claude's time on the run was over.

Brothers Claude and Carl Harrell were the sons of Silas Street Harrell. They were raised in Indianola, Oklahoma. Carl mar-

ried Freda Bell, and they had a daughter. When his father died in 1928, Carl struggled to find work as the family fell on hard times. He left Oklahoma, and his younger brother, Claude, followed in tow. They found work as ranch hands in western Montana. The pay was meager, but they had a roof over their heads and food on the table.

In 1931, they formed a gang composed of drifters, and ranch hands. They began an eight week bank robbing spree. At one bank robbery, things went awry, guns were discharged, and four bank customers were shot dead. Afterwards, the gang scattered in hopes of avoiding capture. The Montana

pose chased each gang member until three were captured and three were killed. Claude and Carl Harrell escaped to a cabin in the woods, but Carl knew if they stayed in Montana, they were going to get caught.

Several months after leaving Montana, the brothers were arrested in Pineville, Missouri. They spent seventy days awaiting their court trial, but they escaped custody and fled Missouri. The brothers then headed west to California.

Laura Harrell, their sister, had married Paul Doville in 1927 and they had moved to Southern California. They purchased some land in the Deluz area and planned to develop a homestead. Claude and Carl Harrell fled to California and found refuge on their sister's property. With the money that they had stolen, they planned to start a new life as honest farmers.

They began purchasing large pieces of farm equipment for the ranch. The brothers began rousing suspicions with the Murrieta farmers because they made large purchases using large amounts of \$5, \$10 and \$20 bills. Murrieta and Fallbrook businesses notified the authorities, who had been searching for the bank bandits for six months.

Lawmen began watching the local Murrieta general store for the fugitives. Soon a purchasing pattern began to emerge, and the officers planned their next move. When Claude and Freda had entered the store, the

officers surrounded the general store and waited for their suspect.

After Claude was arrested, the officers questioned him to learn the whereabouts of his brother, Carl. While in the San Diego County jail, Claude confessed that he and his brother Carl had taken part in the robbery of the state bank at Edgar, Montana and gotten away with \$2,700 in cash. He then told the authorities where his brother was hiding in the Deluz area.

Constable Thompson joined the San Diego posse, who were armed with high powered rifles, as they descended up the mountain and located the criminals' hideout. When the officers searched the home they found \$2,000 in cash, three high-powered guns, and a lookout station.

Carl was no where to be found. He had been out clearing brush, and had come back to find officers searching the house. He stayed hidden hoping they would leave. Instead, sentries were left behind, waiting for his return.

Desperate, Carl went off into the woods and came out near the road leading to Fallbrook. He flagged down a 17-year old boy and offered to pay the boy to go into Fallbrook and purchase him a change of clothes and some food. The boy took the money and drove off down the dirt road. Carl waited at the rendezvous point, plotting his next move.

A little while later, Carl

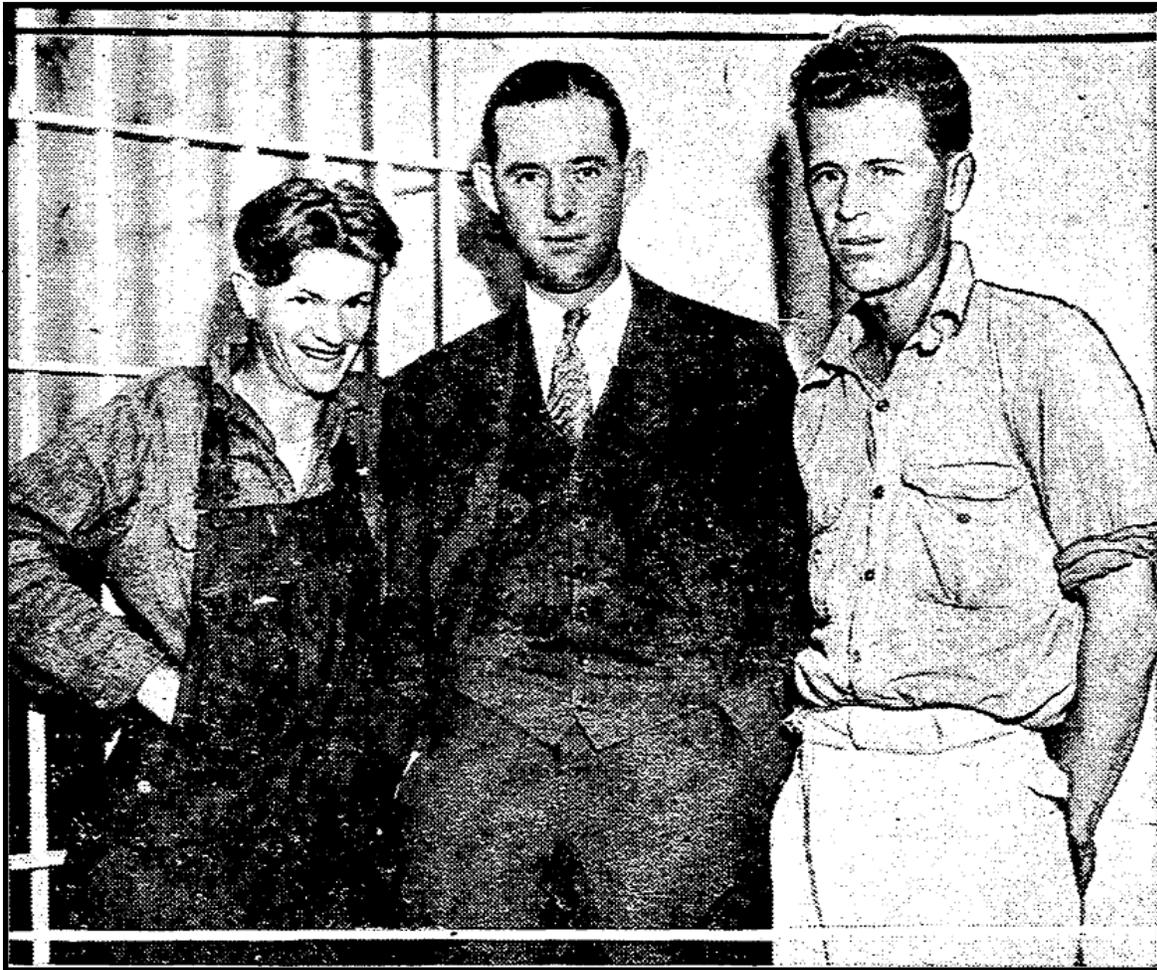
saw the boy's car coming back to meet him. When the car came to a stop, Carl paid the boy. The boy told him the supplies were in the trunk. Carl went around and popped open the trunk. His eyes went wide as he stared down the barrel of Deputy Sheriff Fred Buck's gun. There was no where to run, so Carl threw up his arms and surrendered.

Earlier when the boy left Carl, he drove straight to the town constable and reported what had happened. The San Diego lawmen were then notified. Deputy Buck crawled into the trunk of the car, and the boy was given instructions. With the trap set, time had run out for the fugitive bank robber.

Claude and Carl were locked up in the San Diego County jail while they awaited extradition to Montana. A week after their capture, the brothers were transported back to Montana where they stood trial for bank robbery. Carl had confessed to three bank robberies in Yellowstone County, Montana.

After the investigation, Carl's wife, Freda, was released from the county jail because she was not connected with the bank robberies. Freda Harrell and her daughter, along with her parents traveled to Montana to attend the brothers' court hearings. There was no jury trial because both men pleaded guilty to the charges.

Claude was charged with stealing \$2,800 from the Edgar State Bank in Edgar, Carbon



From left to right: Claude Harrell, Deputy Sheriff Jack Tillery, and Carl Harrell at the San Diego County Jail waiting to be transferred to Montana. (Source: July 23, 1932, San Diego Evening Tribune)

County, Montana on July 21, 1931. He served ten years in the Montana State Penitentiary and then was released. He returned to his hometown in Oklahoma, got married, and farmed the rest of his life.

Carl Harrell was sentenced to 20 years in the state penitentiary for robbing the bank at Warden, Yellowstone County, Montana on September 28, 1931. In 1938, a petition was given to the state parole board requesting a pardon or parole for Carl Harrell. Representatives of the Montana Bankers Associa-

tion appeared at the parole hearing and protested Carl's release.

They stated, "The federal bureau of investigation records showed Harrell had been charged with robbing banks at Pineville, Missouri, Stinnett, Texas, Pittsburg, Kansas, Paintsville, Kentucky and Los Angeles, California . . . The FBI records also showed he had escaped jail at Pineville and Stinnett while awaiting trial." (Big Timber Pioneer, February 17, 1938)

After serving ten years in a Montana prison, Carl was

transferred to Missouri to stand trial for another bank robbery. Carl died on July 5, 1961, and was laid to rest in his hometown in Oklahoma.

The capture of the Harrell brothers in Murrieta was a great achievement for Constable Thompson and the San Diego lawmen. With the Harrell brothers behind bars, the bank robbing gang was no more. Justice had been served because of the vigilant Murrieta residents who had notified the authorities of the brothers' suspicious activities.



Members of the *Library for All* taking a tour of the Murrieta Museum. (Photos by Annette Jennings)

MUSEUM *Hours*

THURSDAYS
1 - 4 PM

For groups and tours call (951) 387-4862



Museum Update

The Museum has been busy with visitors and group tours. One of the groups, *Library for All*, really enjoyed the Museum's hands on displays, and looking around while learning about Murrieta's history. (See photos)

The House family donated a few artifacts from their parents, Virginia and Gordon House. The items are now on display at the Museum. Also the staff is working on new family storyboards that will be on display soon.

Special thanks to President Jeffery Harmon for coordinating the historic

walking tours these past months. He will be offering future tours. Please mark your calendars for upcoming displays or events.

In October, the Museum will have a Highway 395 display. In November, MVHS will be displaying photos and memorabilia about local veterans, past and present. The display will be located at the Murrieta Public Library's Heritage Room. *Christmas in the Museum*, will be held on Saturday December 14th from 4-7 PM. Refreshments will be served. Come and meet the Murrieta Valley Historical Society's Board

Members and enjoy an evening with us.

If your organization would like to make an appointment for a future walking tour or a museum tour please email us, info@murrietahistoricalociety.org

As always, MVHS cannot have the Museum open without the wonderful volunteers and the support from our community.

Thank you,

Annette Jennings,

Murrieta Museum Director

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<https://www.gofundme.com/murrietamuseum>



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Monthly Board Meetings

Held on the first Monday at 5:30 p.m.

At the Murrieta Museum

41810 Juniper Street

(At Hunt Memorial Park)

All members welcome to attend



JUAN MURRIETA HIS LIFE AND LEGACY

Monday, September 9, 6 PM
Murrieta Public Library, 8 Town Square

A Spaniard, a shepherd, a landowner, a family man, a botanist, and a lawman. Come learn about the fascinating life of the City's namesake, Juan Murrieta. Presented by Jeffery Harmon and in partnership with the Murrieta Public Library.



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