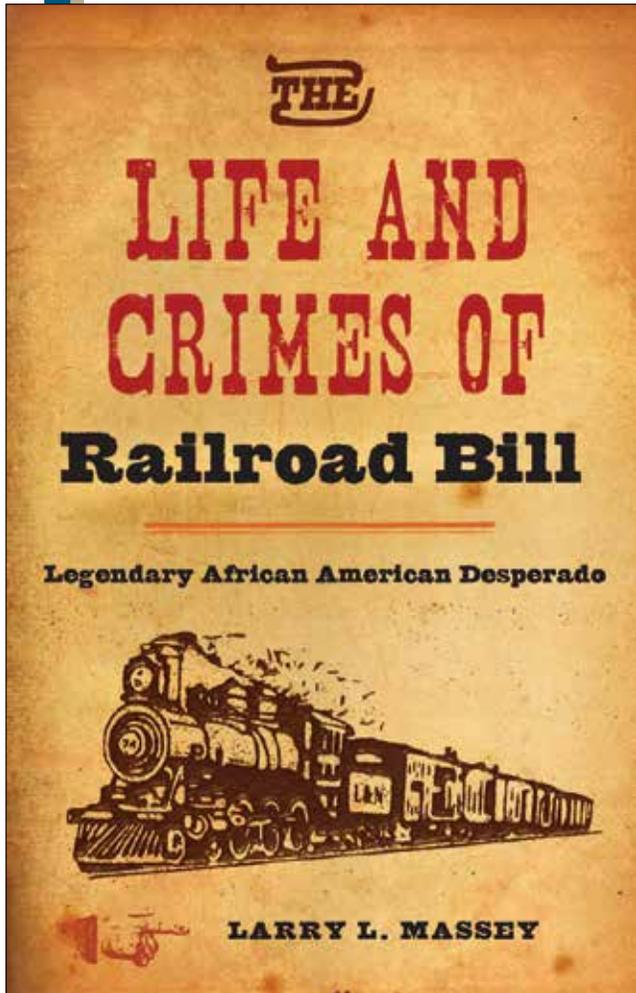


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THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF RAILROAD BILL
Legendary African American Desperado
LARRY L. MASSEY

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LARRY L. MASSEY is an independent writer and researcher living in Mobile, Alabama, and DeLand, Florida. His interest in family and regional history led to a six-year study of Railroad Bill. The outlaw and former turpentine worker once worked with Massey's great-great-grandfather at Bluff Springs, Florida.

LARRY L. MASSEY
is available for interviews and appearances.



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Q & A with

LARRY L. MASSEY

author of

The Life and Crimes of Railroad Bill

*Legendary African American
Desperado*

How did you first become interested in Railroad Bill?

I began researching my great, great grandfather, whose history is intertwined with that of Railroad Bill, and the more I unraveled the stories of the two men, the more interested I became in the history of the outlaw.

What makes Railroad Bill such a unique outlaw?

Unique should have been Railroad Bill's nickname. Nearly every incident in his criminal career was unique—each was as profound to law enforcement and the public in the 1890s as they should be to readers today. Moreover, he was initially a hardworking turpentine worker who was inoffensive and well liked until a failed attempt to arrest him for carrying a repeating rifle that resulted in a gunfight. He then turned into an outlaw as bold and cunning as one could imagine. He repeatedly demonstrated skill in outmaneuvering the best efforts of railroad detectives, Pinkerton detectives, sheriffs' posses, and private bounty hunters.

What are some of the more common misperceptions about Railroad Bill?

I believe many performers and admirers of the popular folk song “Railroad Bill” probably believe it is based on a mythical person. But Railroad Bill was real, and he demonstrated a criminal persona equal with stories told of popular western outlaws of the nineteenth century.

There must be so many rumors and stories to choose from. How did you decide which to include in the book?

I sought actual facts for the book, taken from newspaper articles from the 1890s and reports by individuals involved in Railroad Bill’s story. My objective was to tell the entire story as revealed in those sources. The original materials, however, varied considerably. Thus, I addressed that by collecting everything available for a particular event and arranging the information as a mosaic with overlapping pieces of information. With that in view, I was able to see each event more clearly and select the apparent facts that I used to write the book.

What is your favorite tale about Railroad Bill?

My favorite story about Railroad Bill is true. It is his gunfight with trainmen at Hurricane Bayou in which he singlehandedly fought nearly a dozen armed men. Alternatively, the inability of authorities to capture the outlaw produced a wave of tongue-in-cheek stories in Escambia County, Alabama, in the 1890s. Those had a single theme: the outlaw could purportedly conjure into an animal or inanimate object to confound his pursuers. I like those stories equally well.

Was there a specific story about Railroad Bill that sparked your interest but that wasn’t included in the book?

Yes. After the book was proof set, I found an 1895 newspaper article with valuable information. The article states that my great-great-grandfather brought Railroad Bill to Alabama from North Carolina. From family tradition, I suspected that to be the case, but I did not have direct evidence. It was too late to integrate into the book text, but I added a paragraph in the preface that reveals some of the information.

Why do you think the folk song “Railroad Bill” has been so popular throughout the years? Which is your favorite version?

I am no musician, but I would say that the rhythm of the song, the simplistic theme relating to a bad man, and the fact that the song from its beginning was part of the folklore have contributed to its success. Also, numerous versions have been performed successfully by commercial artists since the 1920s, thus helping to keep the song popular for more than a century. My favorite version is the one sung by Frank Hutchison in 1929. It is similar to the version my mother sang to me when I was young.

How does the story of Railroad Bill compare with stories of more well-known outlaws of the nineteenth century?

The story of Railroad Bill is as intriguing and dramatic as the great American stories of Jesse James, John Wesley Harden, Billy the Kid, Rube Burrow, etc. It should stand the test of time in the annals of American history.

8



The Death of Mark Stinson

The L&N hired informants to provide information on the whereabouts and plans of Railroad Bill. Detective John Harlan discussed their strategy when writing about the desperado in an article in the *L&N Employes' Magazine*:

Several negro detectives were employed to “get in” or to associate with him, but they were never able to gain “Railroad Bill’s” confidence. While he would treat them kindly, he always acted in a way that would satisfy them that he was more or less suspicious and they were never able to accomplish the ends for which they had been employed.¹

Mark M. Stinson would become the exception. After Stinson was observed with the outlaw on several occasions, railroad detectives attempted to recruit him as an informant. But according to the Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, “it was an impossibility to catch him,” since he was as wary as Railroad Bill. A woman named Susan Austin would recruit Stinson. She lived

near Pollard, Alabama, and sometimes she cooked for the James McMillan family. James was Sheriff Edward McMillan's older brother and had served as sheriff before Edward. Austin told him she wanted to help in capturing Railroad Bill, and James arranged for her to meet with railroad officials. They assigned her the task of recruiting Stinson. It took her about a month (apparently late September 1894), then she sent a telegram to L&N officials stating that she and Stinson would endeavor to capture the outlaw. The station agent at Bay Minette, J. F. Cooper, became Stinson's contact within the company. Stinson, however, distrusted L&N officials and only sent letters to Cooper. In one he stated that he was attempting to persuade Railroad Bill to surrender. In another he asked Cooper to send a letter to Perdido that he could collect the next day. It probably contained his pay.²

The L&N had not been taking threats from Railroad Bill lightly:

“This man Salters [Railroad Bill] is really a dangerous character as you will readily believe,” said a railroad official. “The operations of his gang of freight car robbers have extended over a period of a year or more, and they have stolen lots of goods. The leader is absolutely fearless and desperately bold, and now that he has it in for the trainmen for having wounded him, killed one of his partners [Andrew Jackson] and jailed another [Louis Ferguson], he is intent upon evening up scores.”

Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, March 12, 1895

Not only had Railroad Bill threatened the crewmen he fought at Hurricane Bayou, but he had threatened to kill Superintendent McKinney. That threat apparently encouraged McKinney

to negotiate a deal with Stinson to betray and capture the outlaw. McKinney traveled 142 miles from his office in Montgomery to intercept Stinson when he appeared for his letter in Perdido. Stinson, however, did not call for the letter, so McKinney traveled to Mobile to spend the night. The next morning he returned on a fast freight train but arrived too late. Stinson had retrieved the letter and disappeared about half an hour earlier.³

McKinney boarded a slow freight train back to Montgomery. But when he was about two miles northeast of Perdido, near Sullivan's Switch and Wilson Station, he saw Stinson standing in the doorway of a cabin. It was the residence of Henry and Mary Caldwell. Detective Harlan described Henry as "a partner who traveled with [Railroad Bill] as a kind of assistant." McKinney jumped off the train, returned through the woods to Perdido, and directed station agent R. L. Stewart—who had probably given Stinson the letter—to go to the cabin and ask the undercover informant for a meeting. Stewart did as directed, but Mary said Stinson had left.⁴

McKinney did not believe Mary and sent Stewart back to the cabin to watch for Stinson. Eventually he appeared, and Stewart approached him with McKinney's request. Stinson "seemed afraid" when Stewart stated that McKinney wanted to talk with him. But when Stewart assured him that the superintendent did not wish to arrest him, Stinson agreed to meet McKinney the next morning.⁵ The conference took place in a swamp near Wilson Station:

[Stinson] was standing with his hand on a murderous looking knife sticking in unpleasant suggestiveness in his belt, while his other hand was back on his hip pocket. The

Superintendent walked up to him as unconcernedly as possible under the circumstances, and assured him that he had no idea of trying to arrest him—that as Railroad had spread it broadcast that he intended to kill him on sight, he thought it his duty to get him if possible.

Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, March 8, 1896

A few nights later, Stinson met with Cooper at the Bay Minette Station and agreed to meet with McKinney the next night. The superintendent traveled to Bay Minette but was delayed and arrived too late. Stinson, nevertheless, had promised to return a few nights later. For that meeting McKinney went to the dispatcher's office in Montgomery so that he could communicate by telegraph with Stinson and Cooper at Bay Minette. In that conference, Stinson and McKinney agreed to meet again face-to-face a few nights later. But as Cooper watched Stinson leave the station after the telegraphic conference, he observed that Stinson gave "a low whistle and was joined by another negro who was waiting behind a pile of cross ties about 100 yards down the track."

McKinney interpreted that as "foul play" and arranged for security before the next meeting. He stationed Detective Watts, Robert Wilkins, and J. F. Goodson around the meeting site to make sure Stinson came by himself. Indeed, Stinson arrived alone and assured McKinney that he "would do what he had promised."⁶

What could Stinson have promised that was important enough for McKinney, a railroad executive, to travel from Montgomery on multiple occasions to negotiate? The *Montgomery Daily Advertiser* stated that McKinney offered the undercover agent all the reward money if he would capture

Railroad Bill. But that was not a novel offer. It already existed for anyone willing to bring Railroad Bill to justice or to the undertaker's office. Based on events that would transpire at Mount Vernon in April 1895, a village twenty-nine miles north of Mobile, it would seem that McKinney offered Stinson a negotiated amount for setting up Railroad Bill so that L&N detectives could capture the notorious outlaw. Understandably, Stinson may not have wanted to personally apprehend the man who had befriended him. But such an offer by McKinney would allow the undercover agent to receive a handsome sum without having to make the capture.

Stinson's opportunity apparently did not mature until early April 1895, when Henry Caldwell was arrested and sentenced to hard labor in Escambia County, Alabama, for robbing the contents of freight cars. Stinson then replaced Caldwell as Railroad Bill's lieutenant, and Stinson seems to have lost little time in attempting to fulfill his promise to McKinney. Evidently, that promise was to lure Railroad Bill to a predetermined destination so that railroad detectives could make their capture. The scheme, however, would cost Stinson his life.⁷

Stinson would mysteriously disappear in mid-April 1895, and his fate was unknown until 1898 when fishermen accidentally raised his remains in their net from a lagoon. His body had been weighted and dumped into a waterway. It is unclear which lagoon held Stinson's remains, but it was probably near the outskirts of Mount Vernon, the last known location of the informant. "The general supposition," according to Detective Harlan, "is that 'Railroad Bill' killed him and did away with the body." But why would the outlaw, who was already wanted for murder, take the time and effort to transport, weight, and sink the body of an informant so that it could not be found?