

FIRST DRAFT

Range war likely provoked Escalante Canyon gunfight

As Cash Sampson and Ben Lowe rode side-by-side through Escalante Canyon on June 9, 1917, they argued vehemently. In a few moments, they drew pistols and blew each other from their saddles. They died within 50 feet of each other.

Sampson and Lowe weren't friends. There was considerable enmity between them. But they each had ranches nearby, and they had eaten lunch at the cabin of fellow rancher J.W. Musser that same day. Musser later said the luncheon was tense, but no harsh words were spoken.

There were no eyewitnesses to the shooting, but there were two people within hearing — Ben Lowe's two young sons who had been riding with their father. The Lowes left the Musser cabin about 15 minutes ahead of Sampson, but he caught up with them. Ben Lowe told his sons to ride ahead, which they did, but galloped back at the sound of gunfire to find their father dying and Sampson already dead.

Did the killings occur because Sampson accused Lowe of cattle rustling, as newspaper accounts of the time suggested? Did it involve horse theft, as one report said? Or, most likely, did it involve Sampson's investigation of a year-old sheep slaughter by area cattlemen, and Lowe's involvement in that slaughter?

Sampson, 46, was a former Delta County Sheriff who had also served as a Colorado brand inspector and a deputy U.S. marshal.

He had resigned his job as sheriff in 1914 to resume his duties as brand inspector. In 1916, not long after the sheep killings, he bought a ranch on Escalante Creek.

Sampson was a bachelor, well liked in Delta County and respected by area cattlemen, according to contemporary reports.

Ben Lowe was nearing his 50th birthday when he died. He was married, with three daughters and his two sons.

Lowe had a reputation as an excellent horseman and cattleman, with a fierce temper but equally fierce loyalty to those he trusted.

At one time, he was known for his heavy drinking and carousing, but that apparently stopped several years earlier, when he moved his family from a ranch west of Delta to one in Escalante Canyon.

The deaths occurred in Mesa County near where Delta, Mesa and Montrose counties meet in Escalante Canyon, about 20 miles south of today's U.S. Highway 50.

Based on gun cartridges found at the scene and the way the two bodies were lying, a coroner's inquest concluded that Lowe had fired three shots from his revolver, while Sampson had shot only once with his pistol.

According to the Montrose Daily Press, the inquest determined "The men rode side by side for a short distance, quarreling. Then Lowe pulled his gun and fired at Sampson, missing him."

Sampson reached for his gun and shot once, striking Lowe in the back as Lowe leaned far over his saddle "to get behind his horse." Sampson's bullet



COURTESY OF DELTA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Ben Lowe and his sons, Robert and William, are shown near their ranch in Escalante Canyon. This photo is believed to have been taken just two days before Ben Lowe died.



BOB SILBERNAGEL



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

Derek Silbernagel, the author's son, walks on the Escalante Canyon road in the general area where the 1917 Sampson-Lowe gunfight is believed to have occurred.



COURTESY OF DELTA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Former Delta County Sheriff Cash Sampson with a pet dog. Date unknown.

pierced Lowe's heart and lungs and knocked him from his horse.

But, as Lowe lay on the ground, he fired twice more. The first of these shots struck Sampson in the head, blew away a large part of his skull and instantly killed him. After Sampson hit the ground, with one foot stuck in his stirrup, Lowe fired his third shot, this time striking Sampson in the thigh.

Lowe's two sons, Robert, 11, and William, 9, returned just in time to hear their father call for them. But he apparently died as they reached his side, without saying anything more.

Then, one or both boys raced back to the Musser ranch for help. Musser and his hired hand rushed to the scene and found the bodies.

Lowe had had run-ins with the law as early as 1904 that didn't involve Sampson. Later, as a brand inspector, Sampson became convinced Lowe was involved in cattle rustling in the area.

A Daily Sentinel article published June 11, 1917, said Sampson had accused Lowe of cattle rustling on multiple occasions, but no convictions were reported.

The Sentinel story mentioned another potential reason for the fight: An Escalante Creek rancher had accused Lowe of stealing a colt just a few days before the shootings, and Sampson confirmed that Lowe had branded over the other man's brand.

Also on June 11, the Montrose Daily Press reported the two deaths adding, "The same two men had a bitter quarrel in the streets of Delta a few years ago."

Nearly 50 years after the killings, in his 1965 book "Uncompahgre Country," author Wilson Rockwell suggested the range war as the reason for the quarrel and killings.

Lowe had been among a group of cattlemen who killed hundreds of sheep near Escalante Canyon in 1916 to discourage sheepmen from moving onto the cattle range. A year later, Sampson was investigating the sheep killings, Rockwell said.

"Within the near future Cash was to testify against Ben at a grand jury investigation concerning a cattle-sheep fight ..." Rockwell wrote. "Consequently, it is quite possible that this pending grand jury investigation was the delicate topic of their heated conversation."

In 1972, Carl M. Gilbert wrote a lengthy article about the Delta County sheep war for the Sentinel's Sunday magazine. Gilbert had been a teenage cowboy on his father's ranch in Escalante Canyon when the cattlemen killed sheep in 1916. He said he participated in the sheep slaughter, as did Ben Lowe and several other ranchers.

By 1917, Gilbert was working on a ranch in Utah. He wasn't around when Sampson and Lowe killed each other. Still, he heard of it from his family and other ranchers.

Gilbert noted that Sampson had moved onto a ranch in Escalante Canyon less than a year before the double killing. He suggested cattlemen, including Lowe, "were suspicious that he had been sent by the sheepmen to spy, to get evidence about the sheep killings."

Another man with ties to

1 dead, 1 hurt in fire and explosion

GRAND LAKE — Colorado authorities said one person died and another was hospitalized after an explosion and house fire in a lakeside community.

Authorities say Susan McLean, 66, died and Mark McLean, 63, was seriously injured in the early morning fire Sunday in Grand Lake. The fire was reported at 12:40 a.m. after a sizable explosion resulting in a blaze that burned until 9:30 a.m. at the home southeast of Denver. A natural gas explosion is suspected.

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According to the Mesa County Sheriff's Office:

- A fraud was reported on Jan. 12 in the 3000 block of Rood Avenue.
- A trespass was reported Wednesday in the 500 block of Beverly Lane.

According to the Grand Junction Police Department:

- Two 16-year-old juveniles were cited on suspicion of minor in possession Thursday in the 1500 block of North Fifth Street.
- Johnnie Federico, 58, was arrested Friday on suspicion of obstructing a police officer.
- Jeremy Lyons, 34, was arrested Wednesday on suspicion of trespassing at the Riverside Parkway and Fifth Street bridge.

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