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The Ashley Gang and Frontier Justice

The Ashley boys were a notorious gang of desperados that terrorized Florida's southeast coast for more than 15 years. Often violent, their crimes ranged from murder, bank robbery, hijacking, bootlegging and moon shining to piracy on the high seas. One of their specialties, however, was running liquor between West End in the Bahamas into the maze of hideouts south of Stuart.

Florida was a frontier in those days with frontier sheriffs who sometimes solved crimes with frontier justice.

John Ashley first came to the attention of the local sheriff in 1911, when he was accused of killing Desoto Tiger, the son of Tom Tiger, a well-known leader of the Seminole Nation.

The two men had been trapping partners in the Everglades when Ashley came into town alone. A few days later, Desoto Tiger's body was uncovered by a dredge cutting the North new river canal from Fort Lauderdale to Okeechobee.

Ashley sold the ninety otter hides the partners had trapped to a dealer in Miami for \$1,200. Jimmy Gopher, another Seminole, told the sheriff that Ashley was the last man seen with Desoto Tiger.

Palm Beach Sheriff George B. Baker dispatched two deputies to a Gomez neighborhood south of Stuart to arrest Ashley (Martin County was not created until 1925).

John and his brother, Bob Ashley, ambushed the deputies and sent them back with a message to Sheriff Baker, "Tell him not to send any more chicken-hearted men or they might get hurt." This slap at the Sheriff's men made it personal and started a feud that continued for years and finally ended at Sebastian River Bridge. On the run for murder, Ashley went west to Seattle, however, missing the family returned in 1914 and surrendered to authorities.

Ashley's first trial ended in a mistrial. The State Attorney sensing a conviction would be difficult in Palm Beach County with Ashley's large family and friends, argued for a change in venue, requesting that Ashley be taken to Miami for trial.

With no interest in being tried in Miami, Ashley broke away from his jailer, Robert C. Baker (son of the Sheriff) scaling a 10+ foot fence during his jailbreak and returned to the Glades. The feud between the Ashley and the Baker families was now very personal.

John Ashley's criminal career began in earnest on February 23, 1915 when the gang held up a bank in Stuart. This adventure would prove to be very costly to Ashley in the years to come.

Although the gang took \$4,300 in the heist, Kid Lowe, a new member of the gang, shot Ashley accidentally. Shot in the right jaw, the bullet destroyed the sight in his left eye forcing him to wear a black eye patch and later a glass eye from then on. In extreme pain and needing medical treatment, he was soon overtaken by Sheriff G. Baker and his posse.

Once again in custody, Ashley was sent to Miami after the State Attorney succeeded in securing a change of venue. Security at the Dade County jail intensified when rumors circulated that his family vowed to break him out of prison. Known as a close-knit family, they included John Ashley's father Joe, brothers Bill, Ed, Frank, Bob and John's sweetheart, Laura Upthegrove. With a reputation for loyalty, allegiance and duty to each other as their top priority, the authorities took the threat seriously and prepared with extra guards and double locks on the cell.

Planning the prison break, however, went too slowly for Bob Ashley as he set out alone on a suicidal "Kamikaze" mission to free his older brother. He would never know his sacrifice was in vain as the murder charge would be dropped in the months that lay ahead.

On June 2, 1915, Bob Ashley made his move. He stood quietly for a moment in front of the deputy Sheriff's residence, adjoining the Dade County jail, then rapped on the door.

Deputy Wilber Hendrickson stood in front of the opened door and before he could move, Bob Ashley shot him in the chest, a bullet lodged in his heart. As Ashley snatched the deputy's keys the deputy's wife grabbed a rifle and pulled the trigger as Ashley went out the door – the rifle failed to fire.

As the shooting alerted people in downtown Miami, Ashley fled dropping the jailer's keys in the street. He quickly commandeered a passing delivery truck, threatening the driver with a gun to his head. T.H. Duckett the driver deliberately stalled the truck as officer John R. Riblett who also commandeered a vehicle, approached from the rear. As Officer Riblett called out to Ashley to give himself up, Ashley swung around and shot him in the head. Although staggered,

the officer fired twice. In the exchange both men were mortally wounded. The officer was also struck near the heart and Ashley hit twice – once in the body and the second through the head.

The Sheriff arrived on the scene and rushed Officer Riblett and Ashley to the hospital where Riblett died. A mob gathered at the hospital; Miami had lost its first police officer killed in the line of duty. As the mob grew and became more menacing, the Sheriff wisely moved

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Ashley to the County jail for safekeeping.

To be sure the dying man was his younger brother Bob, the Sheriff took John Ashley to the bedside of the dying man. They arrived too late for last words. Bob was D.O.A. (Dead on Arrival)

Ashley won a new trial and the murder charges against him for the killing Desoto Tiger were dropped. He still faced charges for robbing the Stuart bank and after pleading guilty was sentenced to seventeen years at Raiford.

Because of good behavior, he was sent to a road camp, apparently part of his strategy, as he promptly escaped the chain gang in 1918.

With the advent of Prohibition in 1920, Ashley returned to rum-running, bootlegging and operating moonshine stills in the north end of Palm Beach County. Together with his brothers Ed and Frank, he ran liquor from British warehouses in the Bahamas and Bimini to the Jupiter Inlet and Stuart.

In 1921, however, he was arrested again while delivering a large load of liquor near Wauchula. Ashley's incarceration may have been one of the luckiest days of his life. In just a few months after his capture, his brothers Ed and Frank vanished at sea while on one of their trips to the Bimini Islands. They had continued their bootlegging operations without him and on a dark

night in October 1921, made one more trip crossing the Gulf Stream. It would be their last.

Long before Al Capone and his Chicago mob began rum-running from the Bahamas into the Jupiter Inlet, there was the infamous "Ashley Gang" – Florida's answer to the "James Boys". About the time brother John had a very disturbing dream.

The dream, unlike anything he had ever experienced, appeared to him more like a vision in which he seemed to hover or float over the scene of his brother's death. The intensity and clarity of the premonition caused him to toss and turn in his cot as he could see his brothers' skiff as it struggled in the raging sea.

As he watched from above, he saw another boat, much larger, suddenly come out of the darkness and headed directly at the skiff. With a sense of foreboding, he struggled to yell or call out a warning but his brothers could not hear him. Ashley now could recognize the crew of the larger boat as Alton Davis, Bo Stokes and Jim White – rum-runners and pirates at sea. With the sound of gunfire, Ashley woke up soaking wet with perspiration.

Believing that his brothers were in great danger, Ashley wrote to his father to come to Raiford. Joe Ashley usually silent just nodded his head in the affirmative when he heard John's dream. Ashley was so certain his vision was true that he swore to take revenge on the trio when he got out of Raiford.

A few months later, Davis, Stokes and White disappeared at sea. Whether they were dealt with by the Ashley gang is still unknown.

With three of the Ashley Brothers gone and John in prison, the leadership of the gang was often directed by Clarence Middleton, Roy Matthews or Hanford Mobley, son of John Ashley's oldest sister.

In September 1924, the Ashley gang robbed the Stuart bank again. Hanford Mobley disguised in women's clothes approached the teller window while his companions Middleton and Matthews Sheriff Robert C. Baker trailed the trio for 265 miles in a long exhausting manhunt to make his case. He had succeeded his father George B. Baker as Sheriff of Palm Beach County in 1920.

In the meantime, John Ashley escaped from prison for the third time, while Mobley and Matthews soon escaped from the Pam Beach County jail. Not to be left out, Middleton escaped from a road gang with Ray "Shorty" Lynn who became a new gang member.

In was during the last bank robbery in Pompano that Ashley left a rifle bullet with a witness and told him to give it to Sheriff Baker. It wasn't the first time he would leave a bullet at a crime scene for the sheriff, but this would be his last. Sheriff Baker would respond that he would wear John Ashley's glass eye as a watch fob some day.

The feud came to a boiling point with a raid on old Joe Ashley's camp and the resulting gunfire that took the lives of Joe Ashley and sheriff's deputy Fred Baker, cousin to Sheriff Baker. According to Hix C. Stuart who wrote "The Notorious Ashley Gang", John Ashley stated "I grabbed my rifle and got behind a forked tree, and let fly a bullet in short order. A man from behind the palmetto fell prone on his face. I knew I had killed a man" (Fred Baker)

By late October 1924, Sheriff Baker's posses had destroyed all of the gang's hideouts in the Glades and word got to Baker that Ashley would be heading north to hide out with his sister Daisy in Jacksonville. The information also claimed that Ashley planned to come back after the Sheriff's election and kill him and his deputies.

Sheriff Baker contacted Sheriff John R. Merritt in Ft. Pierce and advised him that the Ashley gang would be driving through St. Lucie County on the night of November 1st and that he would send his deputies H. Stubbs, E. Padgett and L. B. Thomas to assist Merritt's men with the arrest. The Sheriff explained that he would not be there because "We were closing our campaign for sheriff that night at Lake Worth."

A plan was devised to set a trap at the Sebastian River Bridge by stretching a heavy chain across the bridge and hang a red lantern in the center.

Sheriff Merritt of St. Lucie County and his deputies along with the deputies from Palm Beach County drove their police vehicles across the Sebastian bridge and hid them in the mangrove trees near the road.

Sheriff Merritt reported that at 10:30 p.m. a car drove

up and stopped when they saw the chain and light. The car was occupied by two Sebastian young men, T.R. Miller and S.O. Davis.

Almost at the same time the Ashley gang drove up and stopped behind the Miller car. Apparently, the gang was so interested in why the car in front had stopped that they were caught unawares when the Sheriff and his men came up from behind and covered them with their guns on all sides.

When the Sheriff came alongside the gang's car, Ashley and Ray "Shorty" Lynn were in the back seat. Mobley, only 19 years old at the time, was driving and Middleton was at his side.

The Sheriff ordered them out of their car and had them walk around the front of the car with their hands up and where the car lights would shine on them.

The story of what happened next is confused and conflicted. The deputies who took part in the ambush told the coroner's jury that the gang had been shot while attempting their escape. But witnesses and the rumors that followed indicate the outlaws were handcuffed and then shot.

Witnesses Miller and Davis, the men in the first car said that when they were asked to move away from the scene they noted the Ashley gang was already in handcuffs. Then there was the question of handcuff marks on the bodies. The deputies claimed the marks were made by the undertaker when he examined the bodies. Later, the coroner's jury accepted this version.

According to the rumor there was a deputy who had been at the scene and took part in the shooting. He told a friend not to repeat his story until his death. He said that Ashley had been separated from the other outlaws who were handcuffed together. Ashley was handcuffed alone and told not to move. Ashley took a step when he was shot; the others tried to make a break for it when they were shot too.

Justifiable homicide was the unanimous verdict of the second corner's jury empanelled to investigate the killing of John Ashley and his three companions by the St. Lucie and Palm Beach County officers at the Sebastian River Bridge on the night of November 1, 1924.

The question is raised by some: Did the 15-year feud between the Bakers and the Ashley's end in "frontier justice"?