

## Did They Die With Their Boots On?

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One of the more popular movies of the 1960s was the flick *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which featured Paul Newman and Robert Redford as the two titled Western outlaws. The film portrays the careers of Butch and Sundance, and how they were forced by the law to leave the Wild West for South America. In the last scene of the movie, the two bandits are shown surrounded by a bunch of South American soldiers after a robbery-gone-bad. Facing capture and extradition to the United States, the two badmen charge out of their hiding place, guns firing away. The film stops there, giving the impression that the two outlaws died in a blaze of glory with their boots on. However, did the real Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid meet their end in some one-sided shootout in South America? Members of both men's families, as well as some historians, believe that the two men survived the shootout and later returned to the United States. A number of men have claimed to be the notorious outlaws, the most credible being a machine-shop owner by the name of William Phillips who said he was really Butch Cassidy. Based on the available information, the debate could go either way.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid both came from respectable families that were trying to make a living on the wild American frontier of the nineteenth century. Butch, born Robert LeRoy Parker, was actually the grandson of one of the original bishops of the Mormon Church (Editors 91). However, early on in his life, Robert turned to crime. He started out small, rustling cattle and stealing horses (Meadows and Buck 22). Robert Parker picked up his alias from his short career as a butcher. The name Cassidy came from Mike Cassidy, the con who taught Parker how to rustle cattle (Editors 91). Caught trying to steal a horse in Cheyenne,

Wyoming in 1893, Butch was arrested and served time in the State Penitentiary. When he got out, Butch teamed up with several other outlaws and formed the Wild Bunch (Editors 90). One of the members was Harry A. Longabaugh, also known as the Sundance Kid. At first, the gang concentrated on cattle rustling and robbing an occasional bank. Eventually, the Wild Bunch moved on to bigger things, mostly train robberies because there was more money involved (Editors 21). When planning and carrying out robberies, Butch always tried to avoid hurting anybody. When being chased by posses, the gang would shoot at the other men's horses. When asked by a reporter how many men he had killed, Butch honestly replied, "none" (Editors 90). Despite their careful concern for others, the gang stole so much money from the railroads that the iron horse called in the Pinkerton Detective Agency to stop the robberies. Pinkerton agents, armed to the teeth, rode the trains and sent out posses looking for the Wild Bunch. Sensing that their time was almost up, Butch and the rest of the gang decided to seek greener pastures in South America (Johnston 162).

In March 1901, a Mr. and Mrs. Harry A. Place took the steamer S.S. Herminius from New York to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Pinkerton agents later determined that Mr. and Mrs. Long were really the Sundance Kid and a female companion, Miss Etta Place (Meadows and Buck 22). Butch joined the two in South America in 1902. The three settled down and bought a ranch in Argentina's Cholila Valley. Many of their neighbors were fellow American expatriates. During their time in Cholila, Butch, Sundance, and Etta became good friends with Percy Seibert, an American who owned a ranch and mine complex (Horan 273). Seibert often let the two outlaws work for him when they were down on their luck. Another close neighbor was George Newbery, who was the United States' vice consul in Argentina (Meadows and Buck 23). Recognizing the outlaws from wanted posters, Newbery contacted Pinkerton agent Frank Dimaio

who had come to Argentina looking for Kid Curry, another member of the Wild Bunch. Dimaiou rounded up a posse and headed out for two fugitives' ranch (Horan 263). However, Butch and Sundance slipped out of town before the posse arrived. Etta Place, Sundance's friend, seemed to simply disappear (Meadows and Buck 23). After the failed attempt to capture the two bandits in Argentina in 1903, the trail went cold. Suddenly in November 1908, newspapers across South America began to run the story of the deaths of two gringos in a robbery of a mine payroll in Bolivia. Based on the one line description of the robbers, the Pinkerton Detective Agency identified the two dead men as Butch and Sundance, and notified law enforcement agencies in the U.S (Meadows and Buck 24). The federal authorities pulled their offer of 15,000 dollars for information leading to the arrest and capture of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (Horan 269). Case closed. Or was it?

Almost as soon as the outlaws were declared dead, rumors started circulating that they were still alive. Reports started appearing claiming that the two men were doing everything from robbing banks in Russia to running a dry-cleaning business in Omaha (Editors 92). Since so little was reported about the gunfight in Bolivia, many people believed that the Pinkerton Agency made up the whole thing. Even the agency itself found it hard to believe the tale; for years Butch and Sundance were listed by the agency as "dead, but unaccounted for" (Stewart 6). Relatives of the two bandits added fuel to the flame by making claims that the men were alive and living in the United States. Lula Parker Betenson, Butch's sister, even went so far as to write a book entitled *Butch Cassidy, My Brother*: the book asserted that Cassidy returned to America, lived with Lula, died, and was cremated (Stewart 9). The old woman might have been talking about William Phillips. During the 1920s, Phillips, a machine-shop owner from Spokane, Washington, began to visit many of the old haunts and friends of the two outlaws in

Wyoming, telling them he was really Butch Cassidy (Meadows and Buck 25). Some of the old acquaintances of Butch believed that Phillips was the old bandit; he bore a striking resemblance to Cassidy and knew many of the outlaw's aliases (Stewart 9). Phillips said that after the shootout he fled to Europe, where he had plastic surgery before returning to United States and marrying his wife in 1908. However, some were suspicious. Jan Regan, an old rancher who rode with the Wild Bunch on occasion, said he knew William Phillips and Butch Cassidy, but as two separate people (Meadows and Buck 25). In 1938, Gertrude Phillips, wife of William Phillips, wrote to a Wild West historian and said that although Phillips might have ridden with Butch and the Wild Bunch at some point, her husband was not the famous robber and bandit (Stewart 35).

Legends about the two outlaws' survival persisted for so long because for a real long time little was known about the gunfight in Bolivia. The only real information came from the newspaper articles that the Pinkerton Agency used to declare the men dead. As a result of renewed interest in the subject following the premiere of the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, several Wild West experts and historians took trips down to Bolivia to try and find more information about the shoot out (Meadows and Buck 25). Finally, in the late 1980s Western historians Anne Meadows and Daniel Buck found a letter written by the chief of the American embassy in Chile that gave the following account of the outlaws' final years:

“Following their close call in Argentina, Butch, Sundance and Etta Place headed for Chile. Most of the money that the three had had gone into the ranch in Cholila. Needing money to start over in Chile, the two American outlaws went back to their old ways. The first victims were two Argentinean banks that were robbed in 1905 of a combined total of 400,000 dollars. After the two robberies, Butch and Sundance lay low for a while. During the interim, the two

banditos worked at the Concordia tin mine run by their old Cholila neighbor, Percy Seibert. On Tuesday, November 3, 1908, the paymaster for the Aramayo, Franke & Company silver mine left the mine's office in Tupiza, Bolivia for the corporate headquarters in Quechisla. The next day, the payroll caravan ran into two white-masked men armed with rifles and pistols. The two robbers demanded that the paymaster hand over the two mules carrying the payroll. After the bandits had left, the paymaster hurried off and warned police and the Bolivian army of the robbery. A posse composed of soldiers, police and armed citizens were organized to track the fugitives. On November 7, three days after the robbery of the payroll, a three-man Bolivian army patrol ran into the pistolaires in the village of San Vicente. The bandits opened fire, killing one of the Bolivians. A standoff ensued, followed by a long period of silence. Suddenly, two gunshots broke the quiet. The two remaining soldiers rushed the outlaws' hideout, only to find the two men dead from self-inflicted gunshot wounds. The soldiers recovered the 90,000-dollar payroll only to have it seized by a Bolivian judge investigating the incident. The money was never returned to the Aramayo, Franke, & Company silver mine. The bodies of the two men were buried in the cemetery in San Vicente side by side" (Meadows and Buck 25-27).

While the account answers several questions (before the Bolivian documents were discovered, people had claimed that over 100 Bolivians were killed by the outlaws in the final shootout), many questions were raised (Johnston 162). The number one question: were the two bandits killed in San Vicente really Butch and Sundance? The two descriptions that were given by witnesses of the two Argentinean bank robberies match descriptions of the two western icons (Patterson 210). However, when the paymaster of Aramayo's payroll first went to the police, he said the two robbers were a gringo and a fat Chilean fugitive by the name of Madariaga (Meadows and Buck 25). Later on, the paymaster said the two men were Yankees. Why did the

man change his story? The American government was putting pressure on South American governments to find American outlaws like Butch and Sundance (Patterson 223). Did the Bolivians force the paymaster to change his story so that the Bolivian government could claim it had killed some important American bandits? If the Bolivians did kill Butch and Sundance, why did they not try and collect the 15,000 dollars offered by the federal government and railroads for the capture of the two fast guns? And why did the two men, who supposedly were Butch and Sundance, shoot themselves? Both men had been in tighter situations than just being surrounded by a three-man Bolivian posse. Why kill themselves now?

In an attempt to solve the lingering doubts about the shootout, in 1990 the public television program NOVA sent a group of forensic scientists to Bolivia to find out who was buried in San Vicente (Patterson 224). After interviewing some villagers, the team determined that the two graves were located next to a concrete pillar in the back part of the cemetery. Almost as soon as the first shovel hit the ground, problems started to occur. The soil around San Vicente is so rocky that the small cemetery contains the only ground soft enough for men to easily dig a proper grave ( Wanted ). As the village grew, people had been forced to bury their dead ones on top of each other in the cemetery (Patterson 224). The researchers found at least ten different bodies in the graves identified as belonging to Butch and Sundance. The scientists also discovered that, in Bolivia, custom dictates that once a man is buried, he could not be exhumed from the ground (Patterson 224). This custom did not apply to the supposed remains of the two robbers because they had taken a man's life, but the tradition did apply to the caskets that were above their remains. The Americans got around the rule by erecting a scaffold to hold the caskets of the deceased in place ( Wanted ).

Finally, the researchers got down to the level where it was thought that Butch and Sundance were buried. Two bodies were recovered. The remains were those of two white males. One man seemed to have been tall and lanky, similar to Sundance. The other remains seemed to be of a male of average build, like Butch (Patterson 224). Unable to achieve good results in Bolivia, the two remains were sent to New York City to be tested. The tests were inconclusive, the remains could have been those of Butch and Sundance and they might not. As a final note to the story, when NOVA aired a segment on the expedition, a man came forward who had traveled to the supposed gravesite of Butch and Sundance in the 1970s ( Wanted ). In fact, the man had taken a picture of the concrete grave marker when it still had a metal plaque on it that identified who was in the grave; this plaque was gone by the time NOVA's team arrived in Bolivia. The traveler had not been able to read the marker because it was written in German. However, he turned the picture over to NOVA's experts who determined that the plaque said the grave belonged to some German mining engineers killed in 1911 (Patterson 224).

Since people are willing to even dig up the dead in search of Butch and Sundance, then one single explanation of the deaths of the two men is not going to work. However, the research that the author has done has led him to believe that the two men died in Bolivia. Well, what about William Phillips and the families' stories of the two men's return to America? Phillips did know many of Butch Cassidy's aliases and he did visit many of the bandit's old friends. The problem with the theory that Phillips was Cassidy is the fact that most of the details and information that Phillips used to identify himself as Cassidy were widely available in books published in Phillip's lifetime (Stewart 9). Also, Phillips' account of the shootout does not match the real story. Phillip's wrote in his autobiography that he survived the shootout, returned to the United States and married his wife in May 1908. However, the shootout did not happen

until November of 1908 (Meadows and Buck 23). Many parallels exist between the Parker's family's accounts of Butch's return and the visits of William Phillips. For example, Lula Betenson says that her brother died in the United States and was cremated. William Phillips was cremated when he died in 1938. Therefore, Butch's family may have seen Phillips on one of his trips to the old outlaws' stomping grounds and thought that he was Butch (Meadows and Buck 25). The family accounts may also be exaggerated or made up. As an example, one cousin of the Sundance Kid said he returned and fought Jack Dempsey for the world heavyweight championship under an assumed name (Patterson 331).

Just as many of the stories of Butch and Sundance supposedly returning to the United States can be explained using deductive reasoning, many of the questions surrounding the shootout in South America can be explained in the same way. During most of their stay in South America, Butch and Sundance lived in either Argentina or Chile (Meadows and Buck 24). So, when the two men robbed the payroll in Bolivia, the Bolivian police were caught off guard. The policia were supposed to be. Butch and Sundance most likely chose to rob the payroll because it was not well guarded, and it was located far from where American law enforcement thought the two men were hiding. The Bolivians had been told by the American government to look out for American bandits on the loose, but not for Butch and Sundance because the American government, according to the letter from the Chilean embassy, thought that the two men were still in Argentina (Meadows and Buck 27). The Bolivian government probably never knew how important the deaths of Butch and Sundance were to the Americans. That is why the Bolivians never asked for the reward money; they did not know any existed. The payroll guard did give two different versions of what the two suspects looked like. However, one of the Argentinean tellers at a bank robbed by the Americanos said that one of the robbers referred to himself by the



common Chilean name Madariaga, the same name used in the payroll guard's account (Meadows and Buck 27). Most likely, then, one of the American bandits was simply using an alias to hide his real identity. Instead of changing his account of the robbery, the paymaster was simply clarifying the matter. The fact that the two men killed themselves should not surprise anyone. The two American outlaws did not know Bolivia as they had known the Wild West: the terrain, hideouts, and the like. The two men were also out of ammunition. Faced with the threat of languishing in a harsh Bolivian prison for a long time, the two probably thought death would be an easier way out (Meadows and Buck 25). Many outlaws have committed suicide when they had no way out. In fact, one of Butch and Sundance's old compatriots from the Wild Bunch, Kid Curry, killed himself after being surrounded by local law enforcement after a robbery-gone-bad in Utah in 1906 (Patterson 248).

A hundred years have passed since the disappearance and supposed deaths of Butch and Sundance, and no one is any closer to solving the mystery. One explanation is not going to solve the problem, but the research uncovered so far has led the author to believe that the two men died in Bolivia. Most people agree that the two men fled to South America and did engage in criminal activities there, such as the bank robberies in Argentina. The descriptions given by the paymaster in Bolivia match known descriptions of the real Butch and Sundance. In all likelihood, though, no smoking gun will ever be found that says that the two men did indeed die in Bolivia. Butch and Sundance probably would have liked it that way.

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