



Jesse James, the famous outlaw, made a mistake on the 3rd of April, 1882. It was a mistake which cost him his life.

Unknown to James, a plot was in the works to capture (or kill) him. People involved in that plot were people close to Jesse, including his friend Charlie Ford.

For years, the governors of Missouri had unsuccessfully tried to capture the James Brothers. Even a squad of secret police, funded by the state government, could not capture Jesse.

Thomas Crittenden, governor of Missouri in 1882, realized that in order to catch a thief he needed a thief. In his 1881 inaugural speech, he declared that he would find a way to end the escapades of outlaws like Frank and Jesse James:

Missouri cannot be the home and abiding place of lawlessness of any character...

Then he sought the help of railroad executives who agreed to fund a \$10,000 reward for the capture of Frank and Jesse James. (To put the size of that reward in perspective, \$10,000 in 1882 would be worth around \$234,327 in 2012.) Perhaps such an amount would attract the attention of a thief who was close to the famous outlaws?

The governor made sure news of the reward received wide attention. When he learned about it, 21-year-old Robert ("Bob") Ford developed a plan.

His brother, Charlie, was a member of Jesse James' current gang. Bob convinced Charlie that he had a good plan, and that it would be worth double-crossing his friend, Jesse.

Bob Ford met with Governor Crittenden on the 13th of January, 1882. The Governor agreed that if the Fords killed Jesse, they would get the reward money and a pardon for their crimes.

By March of 1882, Jesse believed that he could trust Charlie Ford, although he was less-sure about Bob. He invited the brothers to live with him and his family (Zee, his wife, and their two children) at their St. Joseph, Missouri home.

The brothers realized they could never do anything to harm Jesse while he was wearing his gun. They bided their time until Jesse might make a mistake.

On the 3rd of April, 1882, Jesse made a mistake. On a very hot day, he removed his gun belt while he was inside his home. The Ford brothers saw their chance to collect the \$10,000 reward.

Bob Ford fired a single shot at Jesse which disintegrated the famous outlaw's brain. Jesse dropped dead.

With a pardon and money in hand, the Ford brothers created a show about the infamous shooting event. Warned that the show would likely have a short life span, the brothers had a different view. They thought their performances would be a source of income for many years.

Spending money as though it would last forever, the Ford brothers eventually learned they should have heeded the warnings. We learn more about what happened after the shooting from a May 7, 1884 article published by *The New York Times*. The story announces the suicide of Charlie Ford:

Suicide of Charles Ford

The Death of the Brother of the Man Who Killed Jesse James.

St. Louis, May 6. Charlie Ford, who committed suicide this morning at Richmond, Mo., was suffering from consumption and had been taking morphine for a long time to allay the pain of another disease.

News of his death was received with joy in St. Joseph, Mo., many of whose people sympathize with the James family and cannot be brought to excuse Jesse's assassination. The house in which this occurred is now occupied by its owner, Mrs. Altzman, who was forced to take up her residence there to protect it from relic hunters.

...The lack of money increased the weight of Charlie Ford's despondency. When he and his brother first started out with their dramatic rehearsal of the James assassination, they drew splendidly and made lots of money, which they spent freely. They were advised by theatrical people to be careful of their money, as their show could not hope to retain its popularity; by they insisted that their play, "The Brother's Vow; or, the Bandit's Revenge," was food for a 50 years' run.

Last January their dramatic career came to an end in this city, and since then they have been financially broken. They have been trying hard of late to secure engagements, but no one would have anything to do with them, and it was in despair that Charlie ended his days.

Their 50-year show had lasted about 2 years.

After the death of his brother, Robert Ford (who murdered Jesse James) when to Colorado to make a new life for himself.

The public tends to have long memories about bad deeds, however, and Bob Ford was no exception. In the end, he was also killed by an assassin.

Credits:

Image of Charlie Ford, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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