

Eugene Blair

Blair was born in 1845, in Augusta, Kennebec County, Maine. He moved to Virginia City, Nevada, at the age of 20 and tried his hand at mining. Not being successful at that he became a jailer and was listed as a policeman in the 1870 census. He moved on to Lincoln County and became a deputy sheriff in the wild town of Pioche, Nevada.

By 1872 he was working for Wells Fargo and moving around the west with the stage coach company. He worked California, Montana, Utah and back to Pioche. He occasionally drove the stage coaches but he gained fame as their most formidable expressman. In February, 1876, he arrested a notorious highwayman by the name of Richard "Idaho Bill" Sloan in Pioche. He then had to guard Sloan as he was delivered to Salt Lake City. Blair told Sloan, "Bill, I heard your friends are going to get you away from me if they can. Likely enough they will, but it is fair enough to tell you that it'll never do you any good, for I shall shoot you dead at the first break they make."

In April 1876, Blair shot and wounded Gentleman Jack when he attempted to rob the stage. In February 1877, he fatally wounded John Carlow when Carlow and a companion attempted a robbery. A few days later he tracked down Jim Crawford, the other highwayman. When Blair was once asked how many men

he had killed, he replied, "Two." One of those was Carlow, but he would make no explanation of the other.

In September 1877, "Big Jack" Davis, a veteran train and stage robber, and three companions planned to rob a stage. The plan was for one of the gang, Thomas Lauria, to watch the stage coach station. If a messenger was aboard the stage it meant there was something of value on the stage. He was then to gallop to a summit and light a fire the other gang members could see. On September 3, 1877, Lauria saw Blair and a second messenger, Jimmy Brown, board the stage. He raced to the summit and lit two fires. They were too close together and appeared as one fire to "Big Jack" and the others who were waiting at the next stage stop. As Blair climbed down from the stage with shotgun in hand, a shotgun blast from one of the gang was so close to Blair's face he was momentarily blinded. Blair hit the ground and fired, but wildly. His partner, Brown, put some buckshot into the bandit and he was seriously wounded. The other two bandits fired four more shots without effect and then disappeared into the night. The wounded bandit was placed into the stage and was headed for town when he admitted that he was "Big Jack" Davis and then he died. Blair and a Wells Fargo agent rounded up the other gang members. Lauria and Bob Hamilton were sentenced to 14-year terms. The other, Hamilton's brother Bill, was released for lack of evidence.

Wells Fargo and Blair decided that his days of riding shotgun should come to an end. Years of riding atop stages in bad weather had taken a toll and his lungs were giving him trouble. He settled in Bristol, Nevada, and worked first as a mine superintendent and, according to the 1880 census, as a butcher. On October 5, 1882, he married 23-year old Nellie Leahigh. On Feb 3, 1883, a wagon accident almost took his life. He recovered and fathered a daughter, Loretta, on February 16, 1884.

He tried to regain his health in the warmer climate of San Diego, but once again was near death. He was taken to Auburn in Placer County, California, where the effects of the accident and worsening consumption became too great and he died on June 27, 1884, at the very young age of 37. The New York Sun observed, "He lived in an atmosphere of danger for years" and "that he was spared to die quietly in bed is the marvel of all who knew him." Wells Fargo paid for his funeral and had a tombstone erected on his grave in the Old Auburn Cemetery.

The tombstone reads: **EUGENE BLAIR, NATIVE OF MAINE, JUNE 27, 1884, AGED 37 YEARS & 8 MOS, AN EMPLOYEE OF WELLS FARGO FOR MANY YEARS. HONEST, FAITHFUL & BRAVE**

Source: Wild West Magazine, January 2009, *Service with a Shotgun*, by William Penn