

## **John Theodore Pope**

John Theodore Pope was born at Farmington, Utah, on March 2, 1860, one of eleven children born to Robert and Sarah Pope. John witnessed such extreme violence in his formative years that it prepared him for later life when he often stood alone against desperate and lawless men.

AS an adult, John settled in Vernal, Utah, in Uintah County which is in the heart of what was, in the 1800s, one of the nation's most notorious hideouts for outlaws and rustlers. Among the most infamous to make this area their headquarters for illegal activities were Butch Cassidy, "Dutch John" Honselana, Matt Warner, Cherokee Bill Pigeon; Ann Bassett, known as "Queen of the Rustlers"; Elzy Lay; Isom Dart, and many others. John T. Pope had no designs on being the County Sheriff. He just happened to be standing on the street one day as one of the local merchants was shot and killed during a robbery. A posse took off after the killer. Pope also gave chase, but in a direction that he figured to be faster than the path chosen by the posse. He caught up to the killer in a canyon and held him until the posse arrived. In the fall of 1890, his name was placed on the ballot for County Sheriff, without his permission, and he was elected.

Shortly after his election he became the first sheriff ever brave, or dumb, enough to venture into the badlands of Brown's Park to make an arrest. His first effort in the area was to arrest a notoriously bad guy by the name of Buckskin Ed Carouthers. After the arrest he and his prisoner had to cross the Green River by row boat. About halfway across Carouthers managed to free himself, pulled a knife from his pocket and stabbed Pope in the throat from behind. Pope was able to draw his revolver and fire over his shoulder, striking his attacker in the face and knocking him overboard. Pope wrapped his neckerchief around his wound and continued on to Vernal. Sometime later Speck Williams, a local character who was a former slave, found Carouthers' body in a pile of driftwood.

Some of the local outlaws were really upset that Pope not only came into their hideout to make arrests, he also had the nerve to start a ranch in the area. Cassidy and Lay often visited

with Pope and they developed a mutual respect and friendship. Other outlaws offered rewards up to several thousand dollars for the murder of the sheriff. One bushwhacker shot Pope's horse in the head, but as he fell from the horse he was able to pull his rifle and play dead. The attacker continued to fire at Pope until he stuck his head up to see the damage. Pope killed him. There were other attempts to collect the reward and the results to the outlaws were usually the same.

One incident put an end to the friendship between Pope and Cassidy. A close friend of Cassidy's, Matt Warner and his friend, Bill Wall, were attacked by three bushwhackers. Matt and Bill were able to kill all three of the attackers. A warrant was issued for the pair and Pope had no choice but to arrest them. While he had the pair in jail, Cassidy and Lay came to talk to him about the situation. They agreed that as long as the pair got fair treatment they would take no action. Trouble occurred when Pope had to leave town for a while. That night a lynch mob attempted to take the law into their own hands. Quick thinking Warner popped a paper bag making the mob think he was armed and they lost their courage. After that, Cassidy and some of his gang stood guard until the sheriff returned later that evening. Cassidy told Pope that if the two prisoners were not taken to a safer place he would take the prisoner even if it meant going through Pope to do it. Early the next morning they were transferred under heavy guard to Ogden, Utah. Needing some money for the prisoners' defense fund, Cassidy and Lay robbed a bank in Idaho. Pope mounted a posse and came very close to catching them twice. The second time came as the sheriff went in the front door of the Antler Saloon, Cassidy and Lay ducked out the back door. According to Kerry Ross Boren in the document entitled: Sheriff John T. Pope - Early Utah Peace Officer, "Three weeks later Sheriff Pope received a postcard mailed from St. John's, Arizona, which read, 'Pope, gawd damn you, lay off me. I don't want to kill you!' It was signed, "Butch". Friends had helped Cassidy and Lay to escape on both occasions, but Ann Bassett, the "Queen of Rustlers" who had a great dislike for Pope tried to spread the rumor that he 'let them go'. Pope served a total of five years as sheriff and got his gold badge from the governor. But, he didn't

really retire. He continued as town marshal for a number of years. In 1904 he was elected County Attorney. He had no formal schooling, and didn't pass the bar until 1906. I was told at the Uintah County Western Heritage Museum that Pope also dug the first oil well in Utah.

Pope died in Vernal, Utah, on January 1, 1943, just two months shy of his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Old age did what the outlaws couldn't do and the west was not to see the likes of him again.



**Pope is buried in Vernal Memorial Park, Vernal, Utah**

**Sources: Kerry Ross Boren's story *Sheriff John T. Pope — Early Utah Peace Officer* at <http://www.prospector-utah.com/pope.htm> and for fascinating stories on the Brown's Park area of Colorado and Utah read her, *A Guide to Historic Sites in Brown's Park* at <http://www.prospector-utah.com/brown.htm>**