

Old West Stories

Laura Bullion

About the only fact that historical writers seem to come close to agreeing about on the birth of Laura Bullion is that she was born in 1876. One even goes so far as to state, "Most sources, as well as Bullion's grave marker, provide December 2, 1876, as the date of her birth." As can be plainly seen, her grave marker provides no date at all, only the year of 1876 and that is probably correct as most do agree on the year and most folks seem to think October is the month. Her place of birth is almost as varied, with all but one insisting that it was either Texas or Arkansas. The writer that I would tend to believe is a relative and she says that Laura's mother moved her from Arkansas to Texas when she was three years-old. One author is so far off that he has her born in Wyoming and her mother dropping her off in the backroom of a saloon where she was raised by dance hall girls. Her mother did abandon her and her brother and sister but they were to be raised by their elderly grandparents in Texas.



Laura

Other than Etta Place, girlfriend of the Sundance Kid, Laura was the most well-known of the Wild Bunch girlfriends. And like Etta and almost all other ladies of the Wild Bunch, she was an alumna of Fannie Porter's San Antonio brothel. But unlike the others, that was not her route into the outlaw gang.

Laura had an aunt, Viana Byler, who was only two years older. At the age of 17, Viana met a dashing cowboy about ten years her senior and his name was Will Carver. Carver was a highly respected, hardworking man with no history of being in trouble with the law. Unfortunately Viana died two days before she turned eighteen and Carver was totally devastated. In addition, Laura's life would be greatly impacted. For three or four years Carver worked as a cowhand on various ranches in the area of San Angelo and Sonora, Texas. It was while cow punching that he became friends with such future notable outlaws as Tom and Sam Ketchum, Ben and George Kilpatrick and a fellow named Bullion who some claim was actually her brother Dan. It was also during this time that the loss of his love, and per-



Will Carver

haps the resemblance to Viana, that Carver began an attraction to Laura. Laura, in an interview with the *San Angelo Standard Times* described how she and Carver started their relationship. "Part of the time I lived out and part of the time I helped at home, but you all know how it is in a small country place—they ain't much there for a girl to do and when a girl ain't got no parents to look after her and tell her how to do right, she just naturally begins to running wild. I got brushed up a heap agin Bill Carver and he sort o'took a shine to me, an me and him went to Fort Worth. I expect Bill was fixing to marry me, but nothing ever come of it."

Carver took Laura to San Antonio where she entered into the oldest profession. She was now mixed in with the outlaw society and she went under such aliases as Laura Casey, Clara Hays and Della Rose. The choice of Della Rose probably came from the fact that the infamous bordello of Madam Fannie Porter was located on the corner of Delarosa Street and Military Avenue in San Antonio. Carver was spending most of his time pulling robberies all over Texas with the Tom "Blackjack" Ketchum gang and never able to pull off a big score.

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On the night of April 2, 1901, Will was in Sonora, Texas, with George Kilpatrick when Sheriff E. S. Briant and three of his deputies got the drop on the two outlaws inside of Jack Owens Bakery. They wanted to arrest Carver for the murder of Oliver Thornton. Carver took an exit from the outlaw life when he foolishly went for his gun and took seven bullets from the lawmen. Kilpatrick was just as foolish, but the five bullets that he took did not take his life and later he would clear Carver of Thornton's murder.

The Wild Bunch would then take their last ride out of Fort Worth and Ben Kilpatrick, known as the "Tall Texan," and Harvey Logan, aka "Kid Curry," rode down to San Antonio and picked up Laura. Kilpatrick who was known to be the *real* ladies' man in the Wild Bunch promised her a better life than being a soiled dove in Fannie Porter's brothel.



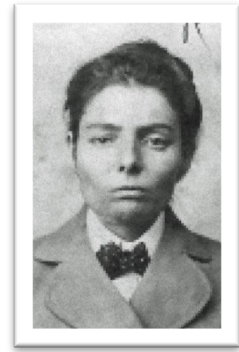
**The famous photo of the Wild Bunch taken while in Fort Worth
Seated L to R: Sundance Kid, Tall Texan, Butch Cassidy
Standing L to R: Will Carver and Kid Curry**

Laura had spent most of her young life on her grandfather's ranch and she was quite well equipped to be on the outlaw trail. She was an expert horsewoman and could handle a pistol or rifle as well as some of the men she rode with. While she was probably not a real active participant in the actual holdups, it is known that she went along on some of their escapades and was used as a horse holder at times.

After the robbery of the Great Northern Railroad near Wagner, Montana, on July 3, 1901, which netted the Wild Bunch \$40-\$60,000 in unsigned bank notes, Kilpatrick and Laura headed for St. Louis to lead the high life with their portion of the ill-gotten gains. But it just wasn't to be. They registered in the Laclede hotel as Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Rose. I suppose the Tall Texan was trying to be a good guy when he went into a pawn shop and bought Laura some jewelry with some of the forged bank notes from the Wagner robbery. It would be hard to call him a good guy when the subsequent arrest by the chief of police took place in one of the local brothels, and Laura was not a working girl at the time. The chief upon learning that they were registered at the hotel also arrested Laura and confiscated \$7,000 in bank notes from her valise. She received a term of five years in the Missouri State Prison at Jefferson City and he was sent to a federal pen in Ohio and then transferred to a new fa-

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cility in Atlanta, Georgia. The two wrote letters often as allowed from their prisons. Laura was released after serving three years of her five year sentence and immediately moved to Atlanta to be near him. She managed to buy half-interest in a rooming house with money that may have been made from prostitution. The warden would not allow her to visit the Tall Texan for several reasons, but mainly he knew who she was despite the fact that she was still using an alias and because Kilpatrick was a continual violator of prison regulations. So they continued to correspond by letter whenever Kilpatrick was not under punishment for continually violating prison regulations. Constant harassment from reporters, lawmen and curious civilians caused Laura to relocate to Birmingham, not too far from Atlanta and Kilpatrick.



Laura's Mug shot



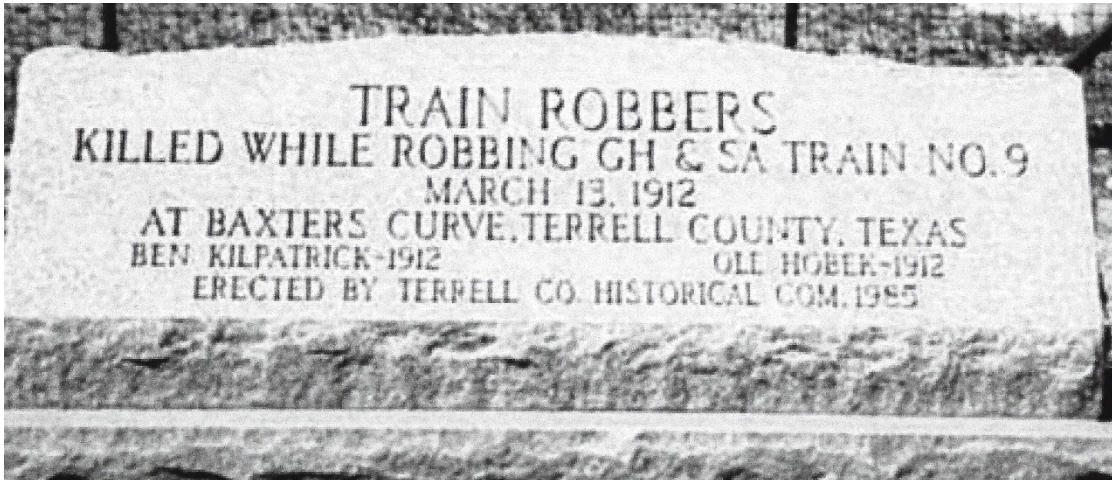
In Birmingham she made a living as a seamstress and while she was there Kilpatrick was released on good behavior (hard to believe) on June 11, 1911, after serving 10 of his 15 year sentence. But once again Laura would not be allowed to see him. Upon his release he was immediately arrested for an alleged role in the same Oliver Thornton murder that cost Will Carver his life. He was taken back to Concho County where a Point Rock, Texas jury acquitted him. There is no record to indicate that Laura and Ben ever saw each other from the time they went to prison until his acquittal. But she was there with him when he was released and they moved onto his brother's ranch near Sheffield, Texas.

They entered what was probably the happiest times of their lives together. But once again it was to be short lived. Ben Kilpatrick and Frank "Ole" Hobeck had met in prison. On March 12, 1912, the two decided to rob a Southern Pacific train near Dryden, Texas. Did Laura know of these plans and sanction them? It is hard to believe that she would go along with a scheme that would so soon send her husband back to prison or death after she had waited that long for them to be together. When the two thieves stopped the train they had no idea that David Andres Trousdale was in the baggage car. When Ole entered the car Trousdale crushed his skull with an ice mallet and then shot the Tall Texan. The old saying that people who are buried together stay together is true. The two share a grave in the Cedar Grove Cemetery in Sanderson, Texas.



Ben on the left and Ole on the right being held up by citizens after their bodies were brought to Sanderson following the attempted robbery.

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Ben and Ole's Tombstone in the Cedar Grove Cemetery in Sanderson, Texas

Laura was totally alone once again and she felt she had only one family member she could turn to. She asked Uncle Jake Byler for enough money to get her out of the state of Texas. He granted her the request and she returned to the south, spending the last 49 years of her life in Memphis, Tennessee. There she was known as Freda Lincoln which along with Freda Arnold was another alias she had used frequently in her past. She made a living as a seamstress for department stores and drapery shops. In her last days she was so sick and so afraid someone would discover her past that she would not leave her room or permit visitors. She would only open the door far enough for a food tray to be passed through. She died on December 2, 1961, and was buried in the Memorial Park Cemetery in Memphis.



Sources: Ernst, Donna B. "Wild Bunch Women" ("True West Legends" feature). *True West*, Aug. 1997, p. 31.

Schoenberger, Dale T. "Love Behind Bars." *True West*, Apr. 1992, p. 21.

Selcer, Richard F. "The Woman Who Loved The Wild Bunch." *Wild West*, Dec. 1994, p. 50.