

Elmer McCurdy

Almost every famous, or infamous, person is so noted for things that they did during their lifetime. That is not the case with Elmer. We are taking a look at him solely on the basis of his activities during death. The Good Book tells us that the "dead know not anything." In Elmer's case both states are the same, he was completely brain dead in life and in death. He was a low-level outlaw that was too lazy to work and too dumb to steal. It only took Elmer 32 years to die, but it took almost 66 years to bury him. And it was what he was doing during those 66 years that made him famous, or infamous.

Elmer was born in Washington, Maine, in January of 1880. Around the beginning of the new century he took Greeley's advice and went west, probably not knowing who Greeley was. He worked a variety of meaningless jobs and did a stint in the army. He had a brief, and entirely unsuccessful career as a bank robber, train robber, drifter, and general ne'er-do-well with no societal values.

In the spring of 1911, he joined some other fellows in a successful train robbery just across the Oklahoma line in Kansas. That must have made him think it was easy. He recruited a pair of brothers and made plans for another train robbery. His plans did not include robbing the wrong train or escaping the posse that might chase him after the robbery.

On the night of October 6, 1911, his little group stopped Katy Line train number 29. The plan was working fine for a while. They uncoupled the engine and the express car from the rest of the train and moved it on down the line. When the express car only had \$46, Elmer's gang realized they had stopped the wrong train. Elmer stole the conductors watch, two bottles of whiskey and set out on foot alone. The Osage Hills had been a great hide-out for outlaws for years, but those years were past. He drank the whiskey as he walked and got drunker and drunker. He also wasn't aware that a posse and bloodhounds were on his trail. The posse found the first empty bottle of whiskey and knew they were after someone whose corral was a few horses shy of full.

Elmer reached a ranch and continued drinking with the cowboys before heading to the barn for some sleep. The posse arrived and waited for daybreak and for Elmer to exit the barn. He was quite surprised to find a bunch of badges waiting for him. Elmer hadn't killed anyone in the robbery, so he would have been smart to just surrender. As in the case with most crooks, smarts was the very thing he was lacking. The posse reported that Elmer got off several shots at them before they opened fire. They exchanged fire for an hour before a bullet killed him. That should be the end of the story. But if it were, Elmer would never have been a person of interest.

The mortician of the little town where Elmer was taken had a great idea. He preserved Elmer with an arsenic solution that turned him into a mummy. He put the ossified mummy in the back room of the undertaking parlor and charged a nickel a person to view Elmer. Elmer wasn't even successful in his new occupation, but he hung around for about five years as "The Bandit Who Would Not Give Up." Around 1916, a young man showed up and requested to gain possession of his brother so that he could receive a proper burial. The undertaker, taking sympathy with the stranger, turned Elmer over to him. But, the stranger was a phony and Elmer was off to a new career in the carnival.

Elmer also wasn't very successful on the road. So he was used for a while in theater lobbies to promote western movies. When their popularity dwindled he was unemployed and in storage for about two decades. That was

followed by a period of travel, and he spent time with Sonney's Museum of Crime, a mobile waxworks. He moved on to Craft's Carnival Circus. His next stop was called the Hollywood Wax Museum in a place called the Nu-Pike Amusement Park where he was featured as "The One-Thousand-Year-Old Man." He stayed there until the museum went out of business, but the owner retained Elmer and put a hangman's noose on him in a display called Laugh in the Dark Fun House.



Mummified Elmer

On December 8, 1976, there was to be a filming of an episode of **The Six Million Dollar Man** at the Fun House. When a crew member needed to move Elmer, an arm broke off and the horrified members discovered the dummy was a real human dummy. When the authorities were called in, the task of identifying Elmer fell upon famous Los Angeles County coroner, Dr. Thomas Noguchi.

The task was not as hopeless as one might expect, as the body did contain some unusual clues. The presence of all the arsenic indicated that Elmer had been embalmed prior to 1920. The slug had passed on through the body, but the copper jacket that was left behind proved to be .32-20 which came into use in 1905. So, there was a time frame of approximately 15 years to work with.

One of the coroner's examiners found some unusual clues in Elmer's mouth; a 1924 penny and ticket stubs from "Louis Sonney's Museum of Crime, So. Main St, LA." The coroner could begin to trace Elmer's travels back across the years. Louis Sonney, a noted police officer in his own right, had been dead since 1949. But his son knew that his father had bought Elmer forty or fifty years before.

Elmer was now becoming famous through the publicity, and the investigators were in contact with an elderly gentleman from Phoenix, Dwayne Esper, who had gotten Elmer in about 1926 from a retired Tulsa coroner. Esper knew enough of the history to state that Elmer was an outlaw that was shot and killed in a little town near Tulsa.

The last bit of confirmation was provided by a world-famous forensic anthropologist from Oklahoma who found a scar on Elmer's wrist to match a known scar. Then he used high tech cameras to compare a post-mortem

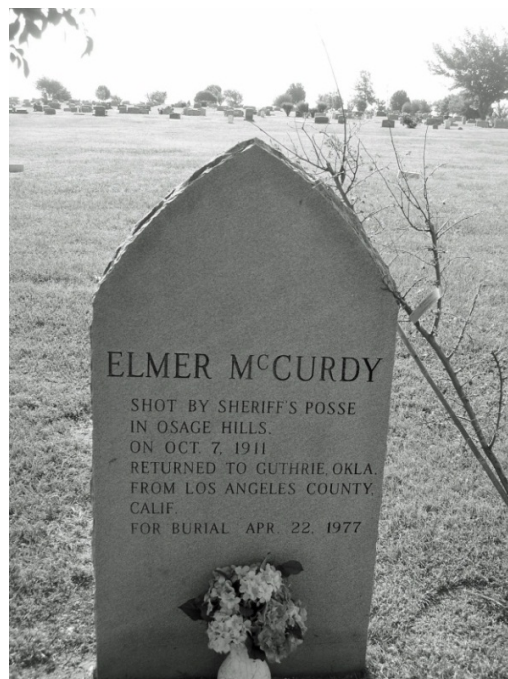
profile photo of Elmer to a profile of the mummy. With all that evidence Dr. Noguchi signed a death certificate stating the body was definitely Elmer McCurdy.

Elmer made one last trip as he was returned to Oklahoma where he was buried in the boot hill section of the Summit View Cemetery in Guthrie on April 22, 1977. He was given a fine funeral and in a spring rain he took his last ride, in a horse-drawn antique hearse with the glass windows and fancy curtains. He was escorted by a mounted posse and given a fine graveside eulogy.



Lowering Elmer's Coffin

To make sure he stayed in place, his grave was covered by a couple of yards of cement and a nice tombstone placed at his head. And he would be pleased if he knew that he is resting next to Bill Doolin, a real outlaw and very close to some other notorious Oklahoma bad men; Little Dick West, Bert Casey, Tom Capers and Charley Pearce.



Tombstone on the grave of Elmer's final resting place in the Summit View Cemetery in Guthrie, Oklahoma.

Source: *Outlaw Tales of Oklahoma*, by Robert Barr Smith

