

Alferd Griner Packer

We know Packer was a cannibal because he confessed to being such. We know he wasn't technically a murderer because the Colorado legislature had repealed the murder law in effect at the time Packer killed his victim. We know he was convicted of manslaughter; what we don't know is whether his victim was killed in self-defense.

Packer was the sixth child, and first son, born to James and Esther Packer on January 21, 1842, in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. The family began moving west, first to Indiana, and then on to Minnesota before the start of the Civil War. There, on April 22, 1862 he enlisted in Company F, 16th Regiment of the U.S. Infantry for a term of three years.

By July of 1862, he was in the hospital and diagnosed with typhoid fever. The fever broke, but left him with epileptic seizures and some loss of eyesight. He was transferred to Fort Ontario, Oswego, New York, where he was given a disability discharge for the reason of epilepsy on December 29, 1862.

Packer went to Iowa after his discharge, but he was determined to serve his country. On June 10, 1863, he again enlisted for three years, this time in Company L of the 8th Iowa Cavalry. He made his medical condition known at the time of his enlistment. By April 15, 1864, he had participated in several battles in Tennessee and Georgia. By April 25, he had served one year, six months and twenty-two days on his combined enlistments. However, his company commander stated in another certificate of disability that, "To my certain knowledge this soldier has been unfit for duty sixty-six days in consequence of epilepsy..." He went on to say the seizures happened every 48 hours and often twice in 48 hours. On April 25, 1864, he was discharged again.

Packer returned to his family home back in Indiana. The family doctor gave him no hope for a full recovery. He headed for the west and in 1865 he was in Georgetown, Colorado Territory which was booming with mining industry. He found work, but his sickness caused him to miss weeks at a time. Soon he was out of a job and headed for Utah where gold and silver mines were busy. He found work as a miner. A neighbor reported that on several occasions he would observe "Packer falling to the ground in a struggle ...and remain prostrate for several days unable to perform any labor."

He hung around in the area until 1873 when he went on the move and ended up in Salt Lake City. There he joined up with a group of men that were planning to go prospecting in the wild, dangerous and hostile San Juan Mountains of Colorado. They made two serious mistakes. It was a beautiful fall season with the changing of colors providing, but that was exactly the wrong time of year to be heading on a difficult trip into the high mountains. They also poorly provisioned the trip and were eating their horse food long before they were

anywhere near Colorado. They found no game and were ill-equipped to live off the land.

The eleven starved, exhausted men stumbled into the camp of Ouray, chief of the Uncompahgre band of the Ute tribe. Ouray welcomed the travelers and provided them food and a place to camp where they regained their strength. Amazingly, the group had not learned their lesson. Chief Ouray had many conversations with them about continuing their journey and tried to get them to wait for warmer weather. Their destination was the Los Pinos Agency, forty miles away across the Rocky Mountains. Soon five of the party grew tired of waiting around and took off on foot. Only through a couple of miracles did this group reach safety. A week later the remaining six people decided to take off. This group consisted of Shannon Bell, James Humphreys, George Noon, Frank Miller, Israel Swan and Alferd Packer. They were also on foot and carried what provisions they could in blankets. Nine days later their provisions were totally depleted and they were in the midst of a horrible snow blizzard. They were completely lost. In the snow they could not tell where they had been or where they were going.

Packer would later tell of their struggle to survive, "Our matches had all been used, and we were carrying our fire in an old coffee pot. Three or four days after our provisions were all consumed we took our moccasins, which were made of Rawhide, and cooked them, and, of course, ate them. Our suffering at this time was most intense, such, in fact, that the inexperienced cannot imagine. We could not retrace our steps, for our trail was entirely drifted over. In places the snow had been blown away from patches of wild rose bushes, and we were gathering the buds from these bushes, stewing them and eating them, and our feet encased in pieces of blankets, we were enabled to travel along steadily. Now my friend you can imagine our condition, on top of the mountains, with nothing to kill for food and not even any of those rosebushes."

"Starvation had fastened it's deadly talons upon us, and was slowly but most torturously driving us into the state of imbecility; in fact, Bell, the strongest and most able-bodied of our party had succumbed to the power of mental derangement and was causing the party to be very much afraid of him, as well as that which they felt to be the inevitable doom of each, mentally. I am at a loss to fully express our feelings at this stage, but we consulted each other and conclude to come down off the mountain. For we could not tell whether we had passed agency or not, for it was either snowing or blowing constantly."

The group made a camp and early the next morning Packer decided to climb up on a hill to see if he could spot the agency or any sign of life. When he returned to camp he "saw no one but Bell. I spoke to him, and then, with the look of a terrible maniac, his eyes glaring and burning fearfully, he grabbed the hatchet and started for me, whereupon I raised my Winchester and shot him. The

report from the rifle did not arouse the camp, so I hastened to the campfire and found my comrades dead. Can you imagine my situation-my companions dead and I left alone, surrounded by the midnight horrors of starvation as well as those of other isolation? My body weak, my mind acted upon in such an awful manner that the greatest wonder is that I ever return to a rational condition."

Packer told that he looked about and discovered that Bell had cut a piece of flesh from Miller's leg and placed it on the fire. As men before and after him, he made the decision that he would survive by consuming the flesh of his fellow travelers. He also claims to have lost much of his memory of the events after that and had no idea as to how long he remained in the camp. As the weather warmed he could tell from his tracks that he had been wandering farther from the camp. He claims to be completely surprised when in April of 1874 he looked up and the Los Pinos Agency was in front of him. Miraculously, for a frail man with epilepsy, he had survived for 66 days on his own.

The agent in charge dispatched a search party of 12 or 13 men, including Packer, to the campsite to investigate and bury the dead. After a while Packer refused to go any farther and reportedly tried to murder the leader with a large knife he had hidden in his clothing.

Then Packer began to change his story to say that Swan died about ten days out and was consumed by the remaining five. Four or five days later Humphreys died and was also eaten. Packer also took Humphreys' money. Sometime later Packer says he was out cutting wood and when he returned was told that Miller was killed accidentally. Bell then killed Noon with Swan's gun and Packer killed Bell. He cut a large piece of meat and walked 14 days into the agency.

Packer was known to be broke when they left Ouray's Camp and was quite flush when arrested on suspicion of murder. Packer was taken to the nearest settlement and turned over to Sheriff Amos Wells. Having no Jail, Wells took him to his ranch and put him in shackles. Packer managed to escape while Wells was away one day. He managed to remain a free man for 10 years, first in Pueblo, Colorado, then in Arizona. By March of 1876, he was in Deadwood, South Dakota. In the fall of 1882 he was in Wyoming and using the name John Schwartze. An original member of the party formed in Salt Lake City spotted him and notified authorities.

Packer's trial was held in Lake City, Colorado, in April of 1883, and he was found guilty of premeditated murder. He was sentenced to be hanged on May 19, 1883. A series of appeals and stays of execution was begun. On May 11, 1883 the Colorado Supreme Court declared his conviction unconstitutional on the grounds that at the time of the killings there was no law against murder in the state. He was placed in a jail in Gunnison, Colorado, until a decision could be made as to what to do with him. After three years it was decided that he could not be tried for

murder, but could be tried for manslaughter. In 1896, he was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 40 years.



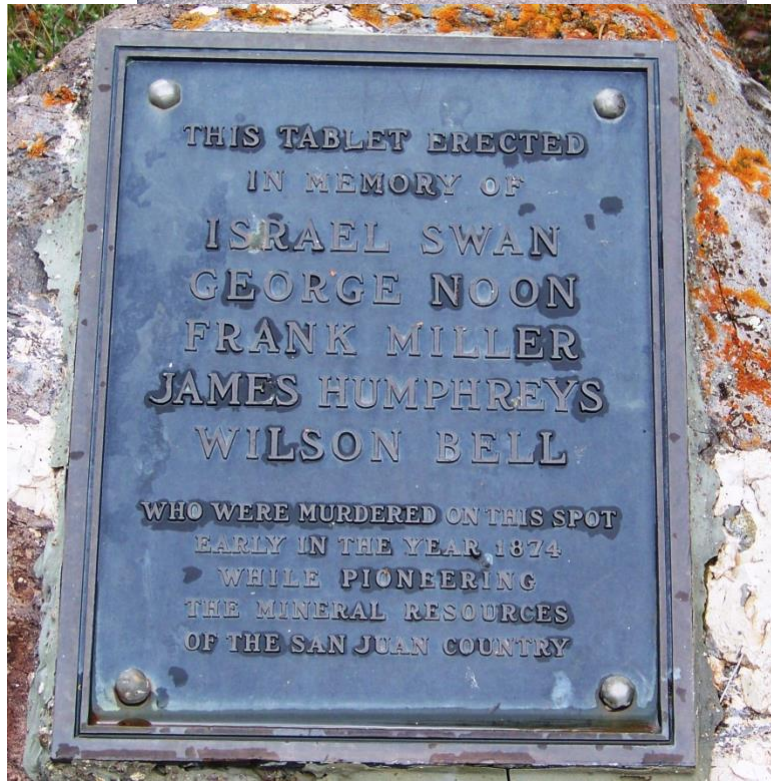
Packer continued to appeal, the Colorado Supreme Court continued to reject and every appeal brought new public sentiment to Packer. As his final act in office Governor Charles S. Thomas pardoned Packer in 1901, because of his failing health and not for any redeeming value he felt in Packer.

Packer lived another six years and died in Littleton, Colorado, on April 23, 1907, and was given a full military honor burial in the Littleton Cemetery.



The University of Colorado student body renamed its grill “The Alferd G. Packer Grill in the mid '60s. The *Alferd Packer High Protein Cookbook* was published in the '90s.

Packer’s victims are all buried together in an area called Cannibal Plateau just outside of Lake City, Hinsdale County, Colorado.



Source: *Alferd G. Packer: Soldier, Prospector and Cannibal*, by Ann Oldham