

Christopher Evans

Evans was one of those old west outlaws who was quick-tempered, quick on the trigger and brutal on the job. The fact that he robbed trains and killed people in doing so is without doubt. He also killed people in trying to preserve his freedom. There is no excuse and no mitigating circumstances for such actions. But, there was more to the famed outlaw than just being the leader of the Evans-Sontag Gang.

He was born in the little Canadian town of Bells Corners, near Ottawa on February 19, 1847. He claimed to have come to the States to fight the struggle for freedom and free the slaves. After the war, he says that he was a soldier fighting the Indians. So far, no official records to document these activities have been found.

He arrived in Visalia, California, where he worked as a teamster, logger and miner. He married Mary Jane "Molly" Byrd in 1874 and they had several children and a home in town, a farm outside of town and a summer cabin known as Redwood Ranch in the mountains.

He met his partner in crime, John Sontag, in 1874 and offered him a job helping with his horses. He allegedly told Sontag, "I have to be particular who I have, on account of the children. I don't want a man who will swear at my horses, or before my children." Both held a big grudge against the Southern Pacific Railroad, as did most people. Their contempt led to series of train robberies in California.

On February 22, 1889, they robbed their first train near Pixley, which reportedly netted them \$400 to \$600 and resulted in the death of two passengers. Less than a year later, on January 20, 1890 they robbed their second train near Goshen. This time the haul was reported as \$20,000 to \$40,000 and some reported as low as \$2,000 and ended with only one death.

Their next attempt was near Ceres, on September 3, 1891, and was a complete failure. Even after blasting a hole in the side of the railroad car, the messenger still held his ground and refused to open the door. Then two railroad detectives began firing on the bandits and they left. One detective was wounded in the neck and recovered. No loot, no deaths.

Their fourth and last effort, on August 3, 1892, near Collis, was successful, but it took six sticks of dynamite to overcome another stubborn messenger who refused to open the express door. The

reported take - \$30 to \$50,000, probably less, but apparently no casualties.

This was the last one only because one of the longest and largest manhunt in California history was about to begin. Up until this time, his family was probably not aware of his role in the train robberies as the identity of the robbers was unknown. Evans' seventeen-year-old daughter had become engaged to Sontag. Some of the robberies had even been attributed to the Dalton Gang. Only when George Sontag, John's brother, began to do too much talking in a local bar, was the suspicion brought to Evans and Sontag.

On August 8, 1892, a posse arrived at the Evans home to talk with Evans, and they were not expecting trouble. Eva opened the door and allowed them into the home. Evans entered the room with a drawn pistol and Sontag with a shot gun and began firing, wounding three officers and one died the next day. Evans and Sontag escaped into the night. A large reward was posted, but the fugitives could not be found.

Evans' strong ties to his family brought him back home and into a couple of near captures. But the pair evaded capture for over a year. In September 1892, two more officers were killed in a big shoot out, but the pair remained at large. Then on June 11, 1893 a posse caught up with the pair at a place called Stone Corral and a fierce gun battle took place just as the sun was setting. Early the next morning Sontag was found in a haystack, seriously wounded. He was taken to jail and died three weeks later. Evans had once again escaped, but a shot gun blast had almost severed his right arm and knocked his right eye out of its socket. He walked and/or crawled some miles to a friend's house where he was captured the next day. He recovered from his wounds, but not his right eye and some sources say he lost his right arm.

Eva testified for him in court to support his claim of self-defense in the death of the two officers. He was convicted in December of 1893 and sentenced to life in prison. Before the year was out, an admirer of Eva named Ed Morrell smuggled a gun to him and he was again on the run. It was falsely reported that one of the children was sick and he was lured into capture at his home in February. That was his last hurrah and he became a model prisoner. He was paroled from Folsom Prison and on April 14, 1911, he returned home. Just before he left prison he wrote Eva a letter expressing his love for her, "Cheer up, my

darling we will be having a happy time in the sweet bye and bye.” He returned to Molly and the younger children in Portland Oregon. Eva was now in Los Angeles with her third husband.

On February 9, 1917, Eva was awakened in the middle of the night to find that her father had passed away and took comfort that he was “free at last from grief and pain.” He was buried in the Mount Calvary Cemetery in Portland, Oregon.



Sources: Wild West Magazine, August 2008, Article: *Chris Evans: Outlaw, Family Man and Myth* by Jay O’Connell; Wild West History Association Journal, February 2011 Article, *Sudden Death for a Railroad Detective*, by Harold L. Edwards; WWAHA Research Center, *Chris Evans*.