

Way We Were

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Did Butch Cassidy rob the Oak Saloon on Main Street?

Chris McLaws, Museum volunteer

There were over twenty bars on Park City's Main Street in the early 1900s. Of them all, the Oak Saloon at 419 Main Street was one of the most popular and longest-surviving. It opened in 1902 with Henry Spriggs as the manager. Its name came from the 30-foot long oak bar inside. The building was destroyed by fire in 1973 and the location is now home to Miners Park Plaza.

Legend has it that in 1910, Kid Parker – a common nickname for Robert Leroy Parker, or, as we might know him better, "Butch Cassidy" – entered the Oak Saloon at 12:30 am and asked for a cup of coffee. He then pulled out a six shooter and told everyone to give him their gold. He got about \$600 worth of goods and, as he was leaving, said he would be back for more. Or so it goes.

In truth, this "Kid Parker" was most likely a copycat of Butch Cassidy. Understandably, many young outlaws in the "Wild West" took on the alias of their hero when committing their crimes.

The real Robert Leroy Parker, the oldest of thirteen children, was born April 13, 1866 in Beaver, Utah, about 200 miles south of Park City. His grandfather, also named Robert Parker, was from Preston, England where he converted to the Mormon religion and immigrated to Utah with the McArthur Enoch 2nd Handcart Company.

When Robert Leroy Parker left home at eighteen, he worked on farms and ranches. He was later a butcher in Wyoming, where he picked up the nickname "Butch." He met and worked with rancher Mike Cassidy whom he admired enough to take on his last name, thus becoming known as "Butch Cassidy."

Parker's first offense was a mild one. He stole a pair of jeans from a closed store and left an IOU on the counter, fully intending to pay for them later. The owner, apparently feeling unforgiving, pressed charges and the ordeal ended in an acquittal. Parker was later part of a group of ten criminals called the "Wild Bunch" and took on bigger crimes such as robbing the San Miguel Valley Bank in Telluride, Colorado. One of his partners in crime was Henry Alonzo Longabaugh, known as "The Sundance Kid," famously portrayed by Robert Redford in the 1969 movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Their adventures in crime included bank robberies, dozens of train robberies, and even murder.

There are many theories about how, where, and when Butch Cassidy died. Most believe he died from a gunshot wound in Bolivia in 1908, making it physically impossible for him to have robbed the Oak Saloon here in Park City in 1910. Others maintain he faked his death in Bolivia and returned to America to live and work for the rest of his days in Nevada.



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Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Kendall Webb Collection

Caption: This photo was taken at the Oak Saloon in the 1950s, some 40 years after it was robbed in the middle of the night by a man claiming to be Kid Parker. Bill Neil, Cap Roach, Alan Mair, and the others pictured here seem like they might have been unfazed by such an event.



Inset: Mugshot from Parker's 1894 arrest for stealing a horse in Wyoming.

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Resources:

Mac Blewer, "Butch Cassidy in Wyoming," <http://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/butch-cassidy-wyoming>

Norma Jackson, *Butch Cassidy, Matt Warner, and the Unknown Outlaw*. Cedar City: Jorlan Publishing, 2007.

Gary Kimball, *Saloons of Old Park City*. Park City: Tramway Books, 2010.