

Montana Territory in the 1870's and 80's was a hostile environment. The dangerous job of a lawman required deputies with tested courage and confidence to handle whatever problem that came their way. It was a perfect fit for The Conley Boys.

The Conley Boys of Montana

By Jim Blodgett

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THE CONLEY BOYS OF MONTANA

JIM BLODGETT

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-958878-88-0

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-958878-89-7

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-438-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2023

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Blodgett, Jim

The Conley Boys of Montana by Jim Blodgett

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022923853

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Chapter 11: The Conley Boys in Miles City

When Tom Irvine was elected Sheriff in 1880, he urged Jim Conley to stay with him and continue as one of his primary deputies and jailer. When Jim accepted, Irvine was pleased to have the experienced Conley to serve by his side.

In the summer of 1882, young Frank Conley returned to Miles City from his employment at Yellowstone Park. That job was completed, and Frank was once more in search of an opportunity to work alongside his brothers.

Frank approached Sheriff Irvine and made his pitch for a deputy job. He had just turned seventeen a couple of months earlier and Irvine was naturally hesitant.

The awesome and dangerous job of a lawman in Montana Territory required a man of experience, tested courage, and ability to handle whatever problem came their way. Besides, Irvine could not recall a deputy as young as Frank in the territory or any of the surrounding territories. But then again, there had never been brothers quite like the Conley boys.

Frank was well over six foot at the time, had broad shoulders, a trim waist, powerful build, a mature manner, and appearance. All three of the brothers, especially Jim, were known as expert marksmen with the pistol, rifle, and shotgun. Jim assured Irvine he would vouch for Frank and be there if needed, to look out for him. Irvine trusted Jim's judgement, "If Frank is half the man, you and Jack are Jim, I believe he would make an excellent lawman. Besides, there is only one way to find out."

Irvine decided to take a chance on Frank and sealed the deal with a handshake.

After five years serving as a packer and scout with the Military during the Indian Wars, Jack Conley decided to relocate to nearby Miles City and seek other employment. He was ready to make a change from his incessant travel and the demanding life on the trail.

Most warring tribes in Montana and Dakota Territories had resentfully settled into their designated reservations, and the role of the Army was reduced to isolated incidents of renegade Indians.

Jack's job was done. He had served his country admirably and left with deep respect for those he fought with and against. He considered Sioux Chiefs Sitting Bull and Gall, and especially Nez Perce Chief Joseph as great leaders who did what they could to preserve their people's way of life and homelands. Jack commented that he regarded Joseph's retreat from Idaho as "one of the finest displays of military strategy in history." He was also heard to repeat the words "God Almighty made Sitting Bull a leader of his people, to be free, not a common Agency Indian."

Jack realized many of the encounters and tragedy's he witnessed during those years would linger with him for the remainder of his life. He had no regrets regarding the battles he participated in and hoped his personal and professional actions would be recalled, under the circumstances, as honorable.

As soon as Sheriff Irvine heard Jack was available, he did not hesitate to offer him a job. Once Jack accepted, Sheriff Irvine now had all three of the Conley boys in his employ.

Finally, the Conley brothers had the opportunity to make their mark on Montana law enforcement individually as well as collectively. They did not waste time setting their goals in motion.

Chapter 20: A Wild Town

Jack Conley arrived in Livingston in the summer of 1883 to begin his duties as undersheriff and night watchman. He preferred to work during the daylight hours, but most trouble occurred after dark into the early morning hours. It only took two evening shifts before Jack discovered the situation was more serious than he anticipated.

Chinese railroad workers who remained in town after the rail crews moved on introduced opium to the new community. When Jack discovered where the dens were located, he arrested seven China men and three customers. He destroyed the opium he could find and burned the dens to the ground. End of problem, at least temporarily.

Drunken, frolicsome cowboys amusing themselves by riding through the streets firing their pistol at a full gallop was a common sight in Livingston. Previous deputies attempted to control those responsible, but after receiving physical and sometimes armed resistance, they backed off.

That was the situation until it was realized a new deputy had come to town who could not be intimidated. Jack put the brakes to the dangerous and disruptive activity by taking away pistols and even their horses with a commitment to return them when the offenders sobered up and got out of town. If they were already sober all they had to do was to get out of town. When he received physical resistance, he dealt with it.

The numerous saloons and whore houses in town were open 24 hours a day, generating a continual flow of drunks, fights, and damage to property. Jack immediately established new hours of operation for every one of them. It was not popular by the owners and patrons, but it was a new local law and Jack intended to enforce it.

Jack and his deputies were making headway but severely restricted due to the lack of a local jail. On a busy night, it was not unusual to have 10-12 prisoners at one time and no secure place to confine them.

Chinamen under arrest were wandering around chained together under the watchful eye of one deputy. Drunks were held in one unlocked boxcar, and several others were handcuffed inside a second boxcar.

Those prisoners detained for fighting or drunkenness were held until they sobered up then released. Others held for serious crimes were detained until transportation could be arranged to the County Jail in Bozeman.

In late 1883, Livingston constructed a temporary jail which finally allowed the deputies to spend more time out in the community rather than guarding offenders.

Everything was going Jack's way. It took a great deal of courage and energy to put the brakes on the lawlessness in Livingston. Jack lived up to the Conley reputation proving he was the man for the job.

Unfortunately, in early October 1883, a tragic turn of events struck the Conley family. The only child of Jack and Maggie, eighteen-month-old Edna, took sick and died. Maggie was said to be distressed as expected, but extremely bitter, blaming the loss on the move to Livingston. The new community lacked medical resources and Bozeman was 25 miles distance away. Unless the train schedule corresponded with the event, a long, frigid winter ride to Bozeman would be necessary.

Before they moved, Jack had an excellent job, and they had the convenience of Miles City and its medical facilities. Maggie could not help thinking if they were still living in Miles City when Edna first took sick, she might well have survived. With those thoughts in mind, Maggie blamed the move and Jack for the death.

Jack and Maggie accompanied the body of little Edna on the train to Miles City where a family service and burial was conducted. The solemn occasion was reminiscent of the death and burial of the Conley boys 19-year-old brother Michael in Pylesville, Maryland over ten years ago.

After the death and damaged relationship with his wife, Jack felt it was time to take a well-deserved break from law enforcement and follow another of his passions. It had been two difficult years in Livingston and the 31-year-old felt he had accomplished what he set

out to do, and now it was time to move on and follow one of his dreams, gold mining. It was something he enjoyed and proved in the past he was successful at.

Sheriff Blakely hated to lose Jack but gave him a tip of an opportunity in the Deer Lodge valley, so that is the direction he decided to head.

Maggie remained in Livingston at least on a temporary basis until Jack could get settled. With her experience in Livingston and loss of baby Edna, Maggie made no commitment she would follow.

Chapter 29: Forty Below

An 1884 Christmas Letter from Miles City, Montana Territory,
author unknown.

Dear Sister Lily,

It was indeed a cold Christmas Eve here in Miles City. Even the owl for all his feathers appeared unusually cold.

I went to bed early, aching a bit as you do dear, with our family Rheumatism, but Charles sat up the whole night to keep the fires burning.

At six in the morning of Christmas the temperature outside was still forty degrees below zero! But in our snug new house all was warm and bright. Ernestine was difficult to restrain in her eagerness to see what St. Nicholas had wrought in the parlor. We had breakfast of creamed codfish and hot biscuits and steaming hot chocolate. Then at last Papa threw open the parlor door and we three sang "Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum." Ernestine, in her red merino wool robe, stood in rapt silence a moment, then danced toward the tree to touch a silvered walnut. The doll was swept up in her arms and she turned to her own little chair to see the greatest surprise of all. It was a gleaming white deer skin costume just to fit a little girl, all embroidered in sky blue crystal beads, a gift of Charles's Indian friends.

O my sister, who can describe the look of a little girl on a magical Christmas morn of deepest cold and snow but warm and safe in her own snug parlor? In that moment I was near to Vermont in our Bethel home with Mama and Papa, you, Dan, Mary, and Annie.

With dearest love to you, Lily, and our heart's warmest wishes for your happiness in 1885.

*Your devoted sister,
Cynthia*

Maurice Sullivan rode most of the early hours of Christmas Day hoping to find safe, warm shelter from the freezing weather for his horse and himself. About 9 miles outside of Miles City, he stopped at the cabin of John Owens and his wife. Owens allowed Sullivan to warm-up and offered him a cup of hot coffee. Owens' wife Ida clearly was not comfortable with having Sullivan stay longer, so Owens bid Sullivan good luck, and he was on his way again in the snow and cold.

Just before sundown, sixteen miles from town, he arrived at the Sunday Creek Ranch owned by Dr. Andrew Burleigh a local physician and attorney in Miles City.

Sullivan noticed a light in the window of the ranch house and the welcome sign of smoke from the stone chimney. He rode up to the adjoining barn, led his exhausted horse inside, pulled his saddle and settled him into a feeding stall. At the least, if allowed, he would be happy to stay within the shelter of the barn.

He walked over to the ranch house front door and knocked. John P. Fallensbee, a half-breed who was managing the ranch for Dr. Burleigh, opened the door cautiously. Sullivan responded immediately,

“Sorry to disturb you, but I have been riding several hours in this weather and wondered if I might get a chance to warm up a bit and will be on my way again.”

Sullivan introduced himself as Bob Sullivan with certainty word of the shooting could not have reached the ranch. “I was heading to Miles City from the big dry country and found myself a bit lost because of the blowing snow.”

Fallensbee responded, “We have a full house tonight but certainly, come in and warm yourself by the fire.”

Sullivan entered the cabin and was surprised to see four adults and three children occupying the small cabin. Fallensbee introduced Sullivan to his friend Charles Wall and visitors Dr. Cass Carlin, Carlin's wife Sarah (who was in the later months of pregnancy) and their three small children: Maude, age 7, Claire, age 5 and little Claude, age 3.

During discussions with Dr. Carlin, Sullivan discovered Carlin and his family were friends and guests of Dr. Andrew Burleigh. Burleigh

had invited the Carlin family to stay with his family in Miles City for the holidays and during the final term of Sarah Carlin's pregnancy.

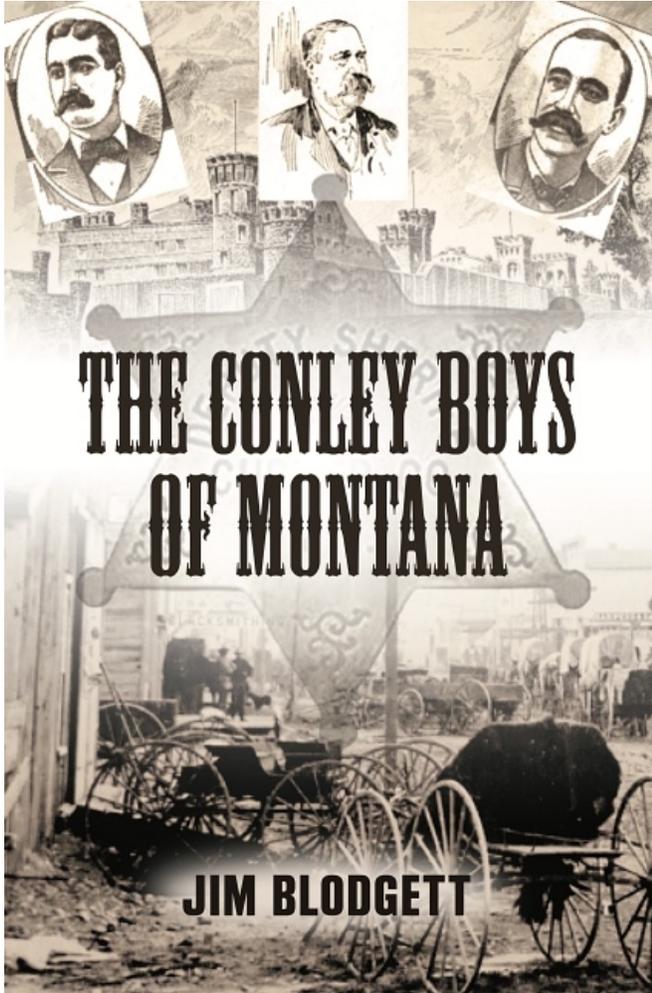
Dr. Carlin shared, "We are looking forward to the care the Miles City hospital can offer Sarah. We originally planned on spending Christmas in Miles City with the Burleigh's, but the weather waylaid our plans. So, we are making the best of the circumstances with this small tree and modest gifts for our children."

Fallensbee or the Carlin's had no reason to not trust Sullivan, but his occasional peering out the frosted window did create some question. No doubt it was thought it was only Sullivan's apparent angst regarding his desire to get on his way to Miles City with hope there would be a break in the weather.

After several hours, there was slight improvement as the winds increased creating limited visibility and blistering cold. Under the circumstances Fallensbee and the Carlin's could not turn anyone away, so they asked Sullivan to stay the night "if he did not mind sleeping on the floor." Sullivan gladly accepted.

It did not take long for everyone to settle in as the winds howled and the crackling fire warmed the small cabin. Follansbee's friend Charles Wall was bedded at the far end of the cabin, but his snoring echoed off every wall. Fallensbee made his hasty bed near the only door of the cabin. Dr. Carlin and Sarah were huddled in the only bed with their three children.

Maurice Sullivan lay on the rough wood flooring, eyes wide open, in deep thought. He was certain he had fired a fatal shot into Bob Roberts, and he was filled with regret. He was confident no one observed the direction he fled and even if they did, he doubted anyone would attempt to pursue him in the current weather condition. He decided he would stay if allowed and wait out the weather. Once he had the opportunity he intended to head out for Fort McGinnis. Sullivan had many friends in Fergus County, and he felt safe there, regardless of the circumstances.



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