

Nuggets from the Past  
Faithful stage horse 'Old Joe'  
By Norman McLeod  
Remembered 90 years later

Stage driver Henry Crockett cracked his whip at his eastbound six-horse team, at the same time relaxing his hold on the reins as the animals quickened their gait almost to a run at the bottom of the grade on the Foresthill Road. The time was a few minutes after 9 p.m., still daylight on July 3, 1901. Henry, an old hand at driving, had been hauling freight and passengers for years on the divide. People knew him as a blustery, outspoken character who, for instance, let it be known in no uncertain language he had no use for those newfangled contraptions, those noisy horseless carriages that occasionally sped by his stage, frightening his team nearly out of its harness. At the bottom Henry tightened his reins to slow his horses to a fast walk, when he noticed a slight figure of a man standing alone on the road's shoulder. Henry's experience warned him something about the man spelled danger, especially the man's mask and shotgun. He also wore goggles over his mask and his feet were covered with burlap sacking. A worn, black fedora hat was pulled down to the middle of the man's forehead. As the stage approached, the stranger pointed his shotgun at Henry and shouted in a slight, squeaky voice, "Stop the stage! This is a holdup!" Old Henry cursed as he reined in his team, but only for the moment. Quickly analyzing his chances he suddenly cracked his whip over his horses' heads, spurring them into a gallop. With an oath the bandit fired his gun at the lead horse's head. The animal's knees buckled and its heavy body sagged to the ground. This dead weight forced the stage to a stop. The sight of his dead lead horse pushed Henry into a rage. Shaking his fist at the gunman he yelled, "You've killed Old Joe, the best horse in the county and by god, you'll pay for it!"

The highwayman did not waver. He continued to silently point the barrel of his weapon straight at Henry's chest. Henry glared at him but in the end threw down the Wells, Fargo strongbox. After taking about \$7 from the few passengers, the robber picked up the box and disappeared into the nearby oaks. It is believed he followed an old miners' foot trail down to the Middle Fork.

According to Wells, Fargo, the chest contained no more than \$70. Years later it was found by an Indian lad deep in the Middle Fork Canyon, its lock broken but with some papers still inside. When Old Henry rode into Foresthill about 8 p.m., he soon had its citizens in an uproar when he told them of the holdup and the killing of Old Joe. Knowing how much the popular Henry loved his horses, the townspeople next morning rode back to the robbery site, where they dutifully buried the faithful horse beside the highway next to the spot of the crime. Over his grave they placed an American flag that occasionally is replaced by someone, even to this day.

On July 8, Wells, Fargo issued an all-points bulletin covering the crime, describing the bandit as being about five feet seven and one-half inches tall, weighing approximately 145 pounds, with a light, sandy complexion, age about 35. A \$600 reward was posted for the bandit's capture. Not long after, a young man was arrested in Suisun and charged with the banditry. His name was Henry Wise, an itinerant from Arizona, who left behind him a prison term in that state for stage robbery. Prior to the holdup he'd been a low-key Foresthill resident for several months.

Old Joe was the victim of the last recorded stage robbery on the Foresthill Road. Henry Crockett continued to drive stage on the Foresthill run until one year later he died in a tragic accident. While picking up mail for Foresthill at Auburn's Southern Pacific station, he was struck and killed by a moving freight train.

The stolen Wells, Fargo strongbox today is in the Placer County Museum in Auburn. This writer has personally seen it. It is constructed of wood, not particularly large.

This day I again visited the site of the stage heist. The spot is identified by an original rock and concrete monument to Old Joe, plus a wooden posted sign giving a brief history of the crime. On top of the monument someone has placed a bouquet of artificial flowers. These two markers are located about 200 yards west of the former Log Cabin roadhouse, on the south side of the highway.

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**Footnote:** *Story update(s): submitted by Sandy Simester, June 19, 2013*

+ The strongbox is now in the Foresthill Divide Museum.

+ *The monument is maintained by the Native Sons of the Golden West.*