

# EDWARD BONNEY, DETECTIVE

By DORIS M. REED

**I**N 1850, there appeared in Chicago a privately printed account of crime in the Mississippi Valley, which attained considerable popularity in the decade following its publication and continued to be reissued almost to the opening of World War I. The author was given as Edward Bonney. The title was *The Banditti of the Prairies, or, The Murderer's Doom!! A Tale of the Mississippi Valley*. The book purports to be a true account of robberies and murders committed by a gang of outlaws centered in the Mormon community at Nauvoo, Illinois, and the pursuit and capture of some of them by Bonney.

Nauvoo was one of the way stops of the members of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints in their trek across the continent in search of a site where they could practice their religion free from interference by unfriendly neighbors. Having been driven already from Ohio and Missouri, the Mormons purchased land in the vicinity of Commerce, Illinois, in 1839, renamed the town Nauvoo, and made it their headquarters until their expulsion from the state in 1846.

Initially, the Mormons were welcomed to Illinois particularly by the politicians, who, on the eve of a hotly contested presidential election, were quick to notice the voting strength of the newcomers. This fact was probably responsible for the extraordinary charter granted to Nauvoo by the state legislature in 1840. In effect, it created what was practically an autonomous state with power to pass any ordinances not in direct conflict with the state and federal



constitutions, with a municipal court which could issue writs of habeas corpus in cases involving local ordinances, and with its own militia, which, though subject to call by the governor of the state, was empowered to rule itself by its own courts-martial.

This charter, plus the town's rapid growth and constantly changing population, was admirably suited to making Nauvoo the headquarters of the criminal elements which infested the Mississippi Valley and spread through Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and sections of Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. They were a part of the frontier life of the region where sparsely settled areas and slowness of communication made law enforcement difficult, and where the banks of the Mississippi River and its tributaries provided innumerable hiding places for the murderer, the robber, the counterfeiter, the horse thief. To what extent these outlaws of *The Banditti* were Mormons cannot be ascertained. Certainly some of them were, and some of them were not.

In dealing with a subject of this character, in which the reputations of many of the principals are at stake, it is peculiarly difficult to separate fact from rumor and conjecture. This is reflected in the available materials on Bonney as well as in those relating to the banditti and to the Mormon relationship to the criminals of Nauvoo. The most we can hope to do here is to bring together certain information and allegations from printed accounts supplemented by biographical data omitted in the printed version of *The Banditti* but given by Bonney in a preliminary manuscript draft in the Indiana University Library. At best, the truth remains clouded at many points.

The story told in *The Banditti* is definite. While a number of crimes are treated, the narrative is concerned



principally with two robberies and murders in which Bonney was active in tracking down the perpetrators, the Miller-Leicy case, and the Davenport case. In the former, the home of John Miller, a German who had recently emigrated to Iowa Territory from Ohio, was entered on the night of May 10, 1845, by three men bent on robbery. In the ensuing struggle, Miller was killed, and his son-in-law, Leicy, was fatally wounded. In this case, Bonney identified a cap found at the scene of the crime and was instrumental in the arrest of two of the criminals who were subsequently executed.

The major part of *The Banditti* relates to the murder of George Davenport, an Englishman who had come to America at an early age and acquired wealth as an Indian trader near Rock Island, Illinois. In 1833, he had built the home on Rock Island where he was murdered on July 4, 1845, by three men who came to rob him while his family was attending a celebration at the town of Rock Island on the Illinois mainland. Bonney undertook the pursuit and capture of the murderers. Posing as a counterfeiter in order to win the confidence of the suspected men and their friends, he followed the trail from Illinois to Missouri, then on to Indiana and Ohio. In the latter state, he brought about the arrest of three of the suspects and returned two of them to Rock Island. From information provided by him, five others were arrested as being involved in the crime. Friends of the accused men counterattacked by filing charges of counterfeiting against Bonney in the courts at Fort Madison, Iowa, and Springfield, Illinois. The case at the former place was dismissed since no witnesses appeared against Bonney. At Springfield, the supporters of the accusers were present in considerable strength, but Bonney was acquitted.



Edward Bonney was born in Essex County in northeastern New York state on August 26, 1807. He was the son of Jethro and Laurana Webster Bonney, who is said to have been a relative of Daniel Webster. On his father's side he was descended from Thomas Bonney, a shoemaker, who emigrated to America in the ship "Hercules" of Sandwich, England, in 1634, and settled in Duxbury, Massachusetts. The most illustrious American ancestor in the paternal line was James Bishop, Deputy Governor of Connecticut from 1683 until his death in 1691.

On January 17, 1832, Edward Bonney and Maria L. Van Frank were married in Homer, New York. Between the years 1832 and 1848, four daughters and one son were born to them. Just when Bonney left New York state and moved westward is not clear. That it was before 1843 appears from his own account in the preliminary manuscript draft of *The Banditti* in the Indiana University Library. In explaining his move to Illinois, he relates that in the early part of 1843 he was thinking of changing his location from Indiana, where he then lived, and settling somewhere along the Mississippi River. In March of that year, however, he was stricken with an eye inflammation which rendered him temporarily blind. By February, 1844, he had recovered sufficiently to be able to set off on horseback for the Mississippi, where he visited various towns before reaching Nauvoo. Impressed by its rapid growth and the business advantages growing out of its river location, he decided to settle there and engage in the mercantile business. He states that he knew nothing of the Mormons and that he was not "much of a religionist." Returning to Indiana about the first of April, 1844, he moved with his family to Nauvoo in the following May. In his absence, events in Nauvoo had affected its desirability as a place to



settle. Seeking a more satisfactory location, he visited Galena and other settlements, but concluded to remain in Nauvoo until the spring of 1845, taking a job in a store there for the winter. He says that in April, 1845, he purchased property in Montrose, Lee County, Iowa Territory, across the river from Nauvoo, moved there in the same month, and began "making arrangements for Building a Store house and Engaging in the mercanteel Business."

Contemporary opinion of Bonney at this period is reported in J. Monroe Reid's *Sketches and Anecdotes of the Old Settlers and Newcomers, the Mormon Bandits and Danite Band . . .* (Keokuk, Iowa, R. B. Ogden, 1876). Since various later writers have based their accounts of Bonney on Reid, usually without reference to the source of their information, it seems desirable to give his opinion in his own words. On page 36 of his book, he says:

Edward Bonney, more familiarly known as the man who created a great sensation as the author of a little book called the 'Banditti of the Prairies, or the Murderers Doom,' over thirty years ago, then lived at Montrose where he kept a livery stable. He was frequently at Nauvoo and traveled much on the river on steamboats and had an extensive acquaintance with all classes of people, knew in detail all the secret operations of 'Danites' and their confederates. Time has left little doubt but what he was an unmitigated scoundrel and the scheming projector of all the operations of the band, which resulted in getting money. Though not himself a Mormon, he knew them all, consulted with and advised the perpetrators of crime, and no doubt shared the proceeds of their villany. When they failed he pursued and arrested them to get the reward, and when they were hung or sent to the penitentiary their mouths were closed against him forever. Though not personally present at the perpetration of a crime, putting little facts and cir-



cumstances together, and still greater revelations which have since come to light; there is little doubt that he was an accessory generally before and always after the fact.

Speaking of the Miller-Leicy murders, Reid continues:

Bonney, who it will be seen, appeared as a witness on the indictment, and took an active part in having the murderers arrested and convicted, was heard to remark at West Point that he came up with them on the same boat from St. Louis, and that from their big German boxes and general surroundings that they were a better class of Germans than generally came to the country and *that they must have plenty of money!* He was no doubt on the look-out.

Reid goes on to relate (page 44) that at the time of the Davenport murder:

The murderers who had met at the hotel of one Loomis in Nauvoo, before they went to Davenport, asked Judge Edmunds, who was going over to Montrose to take a note to Bonney. On the way to the ferry he met Bonney and delivered the note.

Because of the unfavorableness of Reid's account, it may be of interest to know something of his qualifications for expressing an opinion. In the preface of his book, he states that the information included came "from tales of old settlers whom we have known personally." Reid was a Hoosier who had gone to Iowa to read law in the office of his brother, Hugh Thompson Reid, a graduate of Indiana University in the class of 1837, who defended Joseph Smith, the Mormon, when on trial in Carthage, Illinois, in 1844, and who became a brigadier general of volunteers in the Civil War.

J. Monroe Reid was admitted to the bar in Lee County, Iowa, served as soldier and officer in the Civil War, and



practiced law in Keokuk for many years. Edward H. Stiles, in his *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa . . .* (Des Moines, Homestead Publishing Company, 1916), says that Reid was an eccentric but interesting man familiar with the history of Keokuk and acquainted with nearly all the early inhabitants, that his anecdotes were real though expressed in plain language, and that some of his personal references were downright harsh.

At some time following his return from his search for the banditti late in September, 1845, Bonney moved to Rock Island, Illinois, for he was living there at the time of his trial for counterfeiting at Springfield in December, 1846. Little has been discovered of his later activities, though he could not have remained long in Rock Island. Alfred T. Andreas, in his *History of Chicago from the earliest period to the present time . . .* (Chicago, A. T. Andreas, publisher, 1884), volume I, page 503, reports that Bonney lived near Prospect Park in Du Page County, Illinois, at one time, and the fact that the "Illinois Election Returns," volume XLI, list an "Edward Bonny" as a defeated candidate for Justice of the Peace in Du Page County in an election of August 2, 1847, may indicate that he moved there from Rock Island.

It is known that Bonney lived for a time in Aurora, Kane County, Illinois. One of his neighbors there was William Beckman, a stage driver for the Frink and Walter Stage Company, who moved to California in 1852 and later became president of the People's Savings Bank of Sacramento. In a letter to Judge F. M. Annis of Aurora, written when Mr. Beckman was seventy-nine years old and published in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical*



*Society*, volume VII, page 131, April, 1914, Beckman recalls Bonney as

. . . one of our neighbors after he captured the bandits . . . . He used to come over, and I played checkers with him a great deal and I was intimately acquainted with him.

His house had wooden shutters at all the windows which were all closed as soon as night came, and he would not go out of the house after dark. The way I remember it was that when he captured these fellows he had to go among them and commit some depredations also, and after he exposed them and sent them to state's prison their friends swore vengeance against Bonney.

Bonney died in Chicago on February 4, 1864. A death notice, appearing in the *Chicago Tribune* of February 7, stated that the funeral would be from his late residence at the corner of Leavitt and Madison Streets, but gave no biographical information. Probably little would be known of him today if he had not written his *Banditti*. Before the 1850's were over, it had appeared in six printings. They are:

1. *The Banditti of the Prairies, or The Murderer's Doom!! A Tale of the Mississippi Valley*, by Edward Bonney. Chicago, Edward Bonney, Publisher, 1850. 2 p. l., [9]-196 pp., plates, port. 21½ cm. The cover carries the imprint, Chicago, W. W. Danenhower, 1850; below imprint: Chicago Democrat Steam Presses. Copies in the Library of Congress, the Wisconsin State Historical Society Library, the Illinois State Historical Society Library, and in the possession of Everett D. Graff of Winnetka, Illinois. The Illinois State Historical Society copy is imperfect, lacking the cover, the title page, the two preliminary leaves, pages [9]-10, and pages 187-196. That of the Wisconsin State Historical Society has been rebound, and the original covers have not been preserved.



2. *The Banditti of the Prairies, or The Murderer's Doom!! A Tale of the Mississippi Valley*, by Edward Bonney. Chicago, W. W. Danenhower, No. 123 Lake Street, 1853. 2 p. l., [9]-196 pp., plates, port. 21 cm. Copy in the Yale University Library.
3. *The Banditti of the Prairies, or, The Murderer's Doom. A Tale of Mississippi Valley and the Far West; an Authentic Narrative of Thrilling and Hair Breath Adventures in the Early Settlement of the Western Country*, by Edward Bonney. Embellished with Illustrative Engravings. Philadelphia, T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 306 Chestnut Street. 224 pp. On the verso of the title page: Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1855, by — Cooke & Co. In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the Northern District of Illinois. Copies in the Library of the State Historical Society of Iowa and in the British Museum.
4. *The Banditti of the Prairies. A Tale of the Mississippi Valley; an Authentic Narrative of Thrilling Adventures in the Early Settlement of the Western Country*, by Edward Bonney. 25th thousand. Chicago, D. B. Cooke & Co., 1856. 2 p. l., [9]-196 pp., plates, port. 21½ cm. Copies in the Library of Congress, the Yale University Library, the Illinois State Historical Society Library, and the Chicago Historical Society Library. The copy in the Chicago Historical Society is imperfect.
5. *The Banditti of the Prairies. A Tale of the Mississippi Valley; an Authentic Narrative of Thrilling Adventures in the Early Settlement of the Western Country*. Chicago, D. B. Cooke & Co., 1857. No copy of this printing has been found. The authority for its existence is an entry on page 4 of the catalog of a sale at the Anderson Galleries in New York on April 9, 1929, of *Americana, Selections from the Library of Francis A. MacNutt, Bressanone, Italy, together with American Autographs, Americana, Maps, American Colored Views, etc. from Other Collections*.



6. *The Banditti of the Prairies. A Tale of the Mississippi Valley; an Authentic Narrative of Thrilling Adventures in the Early Settlement of the Western Country*, by Edward Bonney. *Fiftieth Thousand*. Chicago, D. B. Cooke & Co., Publishers, Portland Block, 1858. Paper cover, [5]-196 pp., 2 blank leaves at end. Copy in the Newberry Library of Chicago.

Following the 1858 printing, *The Banditti* does not appear to have been issued again until 1881, when Belford, Clarke & Company of Chicago published a 248-page edition, of which the New York Public Library has a copy. In the same library and in the Illinois State Historical Society Library, there are copies of an undated edition with a variant title: *The Prairie Bandits. A Tale of the Rock River Valley; an Authentic Narrative of Thrilling Adventures during the Early Settlement of Northern Illinois*, by Edward Bonney. Printed and published by the Register-Gazette Company, Rockford, Illinois, it has 89 pages and is printed in double columns. *The Banditti* ends on page 81, and the remaining pages are taken up with other reminiscences of early crime in the region. This edition was not for sale, but was given free to subscribers of *The Register-Gazette* and *The Farmers' Monthly*. Probably it was published at some time between 1891, when *The Register-Gazette* was founded, and 1895 when *The Farmers' Monthly* appears to have ceased publication. In 1893, Morrill, Higgins & Company of Chicago issued a 248-page printing, a copy of which is in the Ellison collection in the Indiana University Library. An undated printing of 248 pages by the Homewood Publishing Company of Chicago has been variously dated [1890] and [190-]. There are copies of it in the Library of Congress, the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, the Illinois State Historical Society



Library, the Chicago Historical Society Library, and the University of Minnesota Library. Another undated printing, 248 pages, was issued by the W. B. Conkey Company of Chicago. Copies are to be found in the Ellison collection in the Indiana University Library, the University of Washington Library, the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, and the University of Minnesota Library. *The Banditti* continued to be of enough interest to be run serially in the *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield) from October 4, 1909, through January 17, 1910, in the *Freeport Journal* from November 17, 1909, to January 19, 1910, and in the *Aurora Beacon-News* shortly before World War I. The first two of these are in the Illinois State Library and the Illinois State Historical Society Library, respectively. The last is referred to in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, volume VII, page 129, April, 1914. No attempt has been made to locate all extant copies of the various printings of *The Banditti*, but an attempt has been made to find and obtain a description of at least one copy of each issue.

It is of interest to note that, of the early printings, those of 1850, 1853, 1856, and 1858, all of Chicago, each had 196 pages. Of the later ones, those of 1881, 1893, and the undated printings of the Homewood Publishing Company and the W. B. Conkey Company, again all of Chicago, each had 248 pages. The only different paging in the early period was the Philadelphia edition with 224 pages, and in the later period the undated Rockford, Illinois, edition with 89 pages and the serial printings. This would seem to indicate that in each period of its publication the Chicago issues of *The Banditti* were probably reprintings rather than resettings.



There are in the Indiana University Library two partial manuscript drafts of *The Banditti*. The earlier of the two consists of pages 1-24 and 30-[33]. It includes somewhat less than the first one sixth of the printed version. Pages 30-[33] are actually only notes in diary form. The later draft consists of 270 pages and is a complete draft, except that pages 157-160, inclusive, are lacking, and pages 1-4 are imperfect. Neither is the final draft from which the book was printed. Considerable rewriting, polishing, and condensation was done between the later draft and the printed version. The drafts contain names and dates not in the book, and the longer draft includes transcriptions of many letters and documents not included in the printed version. Some of these are merely mentioned in the book; others are paraphrased, usually briefly. In the accounts of the trial of the men accused of the murder of Colonel Davenport and of Bonney's defense against the charges brought against him by the gang, testimony, attorneys' speeches, and documents are much more fully given in the manuscript than in the printed version. In some places, names in the book differ from those in the manuscript in such a way as to make it appear that the differences are the result of typesetting or proofreading errors.

It has been suggested that Bonney was not the author of *The Banditti*. Alfred T. Andreas, in his *History of Chicago* . . . (volume I, page 503), definitely attributes the book to Henry A. Clark, a Chicago attorney, an occasional contributor to literary journals, and author of a novel, *The War Scout of Eighteen Hundred and Twelve*, published in Chicago in 1850 by W. W. Danenhower. Andreas notes that at the time of publication the authorship of *The Banditti* was credited to Edward Bonney, but that "later, however, it became well known that Mr. Clark was the author."



The *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, volume XXXIX, page 364, September, 1946, also suggests that *The Banditti* was possibly ghostwritten. The evidence presented for this conclusion is that a manuscript quite different from the printed version exists and that Bonney would have been expected to write another book after such a phenomenal success. Whether the manuscript referred to here is that now in the Indiana University Library is not known, but in any case it would seem that the evidence cited is not sufficient to warrant a conclusion that Edward Bonney was not the author.

The fact that the Indiana University Library manuscript drafts of *The Banditti* were found in the possession of a granddaughter of Bonney's may very well indicate that he was indeed the author of the book. Some other person, possibly Henry A. Clark, may have served in an editorial capacity, making the account more literate, polishing, correcting spelling, putting in punctuation and capital letters, and cutting. Certainly the manuscript at hand indicates the need of such editing.

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