

ALFRED PACKER

It was at the Hinsdale county courthouse at Lake City where a man was tried and convicted of one of the most infamous crimes in U. S. history. Here in district court, May 19, 1883, Alfred Packer was sentenced to die for murdering five of his companions. Details of the court testimony painted a revolting picture of Packer's crime. The murders were committed with a cold-blooded, inhuman design--cannibalism.

Alfred Packer had started out with a group of 21 gold seekers from Salt Lake City in the fall of 1873. The party stayed a few weeks at Ouray, Colorado, then left in February, against the advice of the great Indian Chief Ouray. Packer continued with five of the group into the still winter-bound San Juan country.

There followed weeks of difficult travel, sometimes without direction, so vast and unchanging was the snow covered countryside. When their food supply ran out they subsisted on dry berries, buds, boiled moccasins and tree bark. But this was not enough to ease the pangs of hunger. At this point, Packer is believed to have killed for food, his companions, Israel Swan, George Noon, Shannon Bell, Frank Miller and James Humphreys.

Alfred Packer stumbled into the Los Pinos Indian agency in the spring of 1874. He told a grim tale of being left alone after falling ill, of terrible hunger and exhaustion at the mercy of the elements. One fact, however, aroused immediate suspicion. For all his hardships, Packer looked well fed.

Under questioning, Packer admitted he had killed and cannibalized one of the party, Shannon Bell, but he insisted it was in self-defense and only after Bell had killed the other members of the party for food. Packer guided a search party to locate Bell's body, but claimed he couldn't find the way after the party reached the Lake Fork of the Gunnison river.

In an argument with a Los Pinos agency clerk, who was with the party, Packer reportedly tried to kill the man and was taken to Saguache and jailed. He escaped shortly thereafter and fled to Wyoming.

The story might have ended there, except that later that year a traveling artist found the bodies of the five missing men at a campsite near Lake San Cristobal, a few miles from Lake City. Strips of their flesh had been cut away.

With this evidence contradicting his original story, Packer became a hunted man; but he wasn't captured and brought to trial until nine years later. In the Lake City courtroom he was found guilty and sentenced by Judge M. B. Gerry, whose masterful recrimination concluded with this famous passage:

"The judgment of this court is that you...be hung by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead, and may God have mercy on your soul."

An equally famous, however inaccurate, version of the sentence was reported by a Saguache barkeeper, Larry Dolan, who quoted the judge as saying:

"There was only seven Demycrats in Hinsdale county and ye et five of 'em, ye voracious, maneatin'....."

Later, freed on a legal technicality, Packer again was brought to trial in 1884 in Gunnison on a manslaughter charge, was convicted and sentenced to 40 years in the state penitentiary.

After serving only six years of his sentence, he received a parole. In defence of Packer it is noted that all evidence against him is circumstantial. He swore his innocence just before he died in 1907.