

When the James Gang came to town

By **CARLOS ARMINTOR**
The Facts

The James Gang may not have found the riches it was looking for when its members came to Brazoria in the 1860s, but one member remained in the city for a prize of a different sort.

According to a 1967 article in The Angleton Times, Jesse James had probably heard of Brazoria, which was the wealthiest city in Texas at the time, when he was robbing bank vaults in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma in the 1870s.

Those tales of riches were based on the antebellum days when Brazoria was a port city and there were many plantations.

"In those days, Robert Mills and his brothers stacked silver bars like nail kegs in the counting room of their business, and stored Mexican pesos in nail kegs," the article said. "A story like that would be apt to interest Jesse and his



friends and legend tells that they made the trip to Brazoria to see about relieving the town of its burdensome wealth."

While the James Gang was seen by some as cold-blooded killers, others saw them as modern day Robin Hoods in the aftermath of the Civil War. The gang, which included Cole Younger and Jesse's brother, Frank, and others, robbed their first bank in Liberty, Missouri, making off with \$60,000. They continued their bank robbing spree for 15 years.

When the gang arrived in Brazoria about 1867, they didn't

find the riches of which they had heard in tale.

"It was during Reconstruction, and Brazorians were more concerned with paying their taxes than with storing excess wealth any place," the article said. "As for the Mills, they had long since packed up their silver and gone to Galveston."

Doris Setzer, a member of the Brazoria Community Historical Museum, said Brazoria's wealth may not have been the only reason the gang was in town. Some believe

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Jesse James had family in the area, she said.

While Jesse James and his gang did not find what they were looking for, a member of the gang, William Fort Smith, did. A young Brazoria woman caught his fancy.

According to marriage records, William Fort Smith married Judeth C. Watt on Jan. 8, 1868.

Julia Graves O'Neal wrote about the couple in her memoir, "Memories of Brazoria."

"He saw a young woman and said, 'She is the prettiest girl I ever saw and I am going to marry her,'" O'Neal wrote.

However, Jesse James thought there was no room for a woman in the life of one of his gang members, O'Neal wrote.

"He was told, 'the men with us have no right to have wives,'" O'Neal wrote. "He said, 'all right, then, I will quit if you let me.' They did and he married the girl."

Their home was located on Highway 332 in Brazoria,

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— 1967 Angleton Times article

where the American Legion Hall is now.

The gang met its undoing in Sept. 1876 when it attempted to rob a bank in Northfield, Minnesota. The gang was surprised when the town people returned fire. All except Frank and Jesse were killed, wounded or captured.

In 1882, Jesse James was shot while hanging a picture. The shooter was Bob Ford, a man he recruited to help him rob banks. At the time, there was a \$10,000 reward for James — dead or alive.

Meanwhile, Smith settled into a comfortable life in Brazoria. He became a lawyer, was well thought of and lived in Brazoria until his death in 1897, O'Neal wrote.

It was a peaceful ending for a man with a bloody past.

