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The Secret Story of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's Last Tango

| THE LOST YEARS |



For six years they managed to elude the most powerful detectives on the planet and outrun their past across the wilds of South America.

Patrick Symmes

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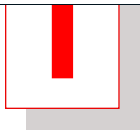
verything comes to an end, even a tango party in Argentina. It was a perfect combination, that night in early 1904: a warm spring evening, a house full of the great, and a yard full of the good.

The great: That would be the new governor, Dr. Julio Lezama, accompanied by the chief of police, military surveyors, and various political functionaries. And the good: That would be the 80 or so people standing on the grass, almost the entire population of this remote valley in the Andes. Among the guests were families, local laborers, and misfits from many nations. Some were broke South American cowboys; others immigrants from Italy, England, Wales, and America. Some were indigent; others, like the hosts of the party, seemed to have it all: money, land, houses, and cattle.

He was a man of many accomplishments: a doctor

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Somewhere in the party, mingling with ease and leading the festivities—because this was their house, their life—were three people, each with a \$10,000 bounty on their head. Back home they were criminals, efficient and daring experts in the art of separating powerful people from their money. Here, under new names, they were upstanding citizens, free from the past.

One of the two hosts, James “Santiago” Ryan, had once worked as a butcher, and outside the cabin, he must have cast a critical eye on the men grilling the lamb and beef. The other man, Henry “Enrique” Place, spoke better Spanish than his friend and business partner, and would have spent more of the evening inside with Ethel, his wife. She was the one who made this frontier house sparkle, the social one, the music teacher who spoke Spanish well, whose elegant presence remade the lives of three criminal fugitives into something whole and wholesome-looking. Despite having her face on WANTED posters all over the globe, she took a turn around the cabin floor with Dr. Lezama.

“Back home they were criminals, efficient and daring experts in the art of separating powerful people from their money. Here, under new names, they were upstanding citizens, free from the past.”

The party lasted until 2 a.m. The governor himself stayed overnight as a guest of Place and Ryan. In another life, they had gone by other names. Many other names, in fact; the men put on aliases the way other people put on coats. In Argentina, they hoped to conceal forever the names history would remember them by: Butch and Sundance.

In the 1969 Oscar-winning film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the famous outlaws are shown escaping America to a decrepit village in Bolivia. According to the movie version, they died side by side, guns blazing, in the crosshairs of half a Bolivian regiment. It’s a great Hollywood ending that happens to be true, mostly: they left America... then died in Bolivia.

What Hollywood didn’t know is that Butch and Sundance escaped.

For six years they managed to elude the most powerful detectives on the planet and outrun their past across the wilds of South America. Hidden, for years, in the tranquil frontiers of Patagonia and the deep forests of the Andes, they started new lives as law-abiding citizens. They roped cattle, built ranches, and spent their ill-gotten gains on glorious living, including tango parties and cabin concerts where a governor—and even lawmen charged with arresting them—were honored guests.

They tried to let go of the past. But they were hounded for a crime which we now know they did not commit, and the past caught up with them. Found out, the Old West’s smartest robbers responded by going on an epic spree of bank jobs that filled their saddlebags and humiliated law enforcement in three countries. Given the real story of what Butch and Sundance pulled off in South America, it’s no wonder the authorities tried to forget those years.



Honesty is the best disguise, the ultimate trick for such famous criminals. During the 1890s, Robert LeRoy Parker and Harry Longabaugh, a.k.a. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, carried out a streak of bank robberies across five U.S. states with the help of a revolving host of associates known as the Hole in the Wall Gang. Often planned by the meticulous Butch and executed by the quick-thinking Sundance,

his plans grew increasingly ambitious and elaborate with practice. In 1898, he escalated his war dramatically by boarding an express train of the Union Pacific railroad in Wyoming. After politely releasing the passenger carriage, the gang swiped \$30,000 from the train's safe, along with diamonds and negotiable bank notes. They blew a bridge to prevent pursuit, and when Sundance was later cornered by a sheriff's posse, he managed to shoot his way out and escape.

E.H. Harriman, owner of the Union Pacific, hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency to track the men down and eventually raised the price on their heads from \$1,000 to \$10,000 each. The gang responded by pulling off a string of rapid-fire robberies over the next two years, hitting trains and banks and escaping with impunity. Sympathetic and charismatic, able to vanish overnight into raw wilderness, they executed their heists with such audacity, it was as if they were toying with the banks and powerful corporations they robbed.

But they were smart enough to know the streak couldn't last forever. Sometime in 1899, they started making plans to get out. In a letter to a friend, Butch explained what made their flight to South America possible: \$30,000 they had "inherited" from an uncle.

"Sympathetic and charismatic, able to vanish overnight into raw wilderness, they executed their heists with such audacity, it was as if they were toying with the banks and powerful corporations they robbed."

The "uncle's" name was the National Bank of Winnemucca, Nevada, and the inheritance was withdrawn at gunpoint in September 1900. This was the last of the Wild Bunch robberies—in the U.S., anyway. But instead of fleeing into the deepest badlands of Idaho or Wyoming as before, the trio of Butch, Sundance, and Ethel hid in a another kind of wilderness, the teeming streets of New York City.

By this point, they were not a duo but a trio. Ethel—not Etta, as history misrecalls her—began to associate with the Wild Bunch in the 1890s. Pinkerton reports, one source for their South American idyll, described her as 5'5" and quite thin, with pale skin, green eyes, and brown hair. In photos, she has the calm self-possession of many a beautiful woman.

There are more absences than known facts in her record: no last name, no evidence of a legal marriage, no letters, no clue as to her final fate. But she and Sundance were already a common-law couple of many years by the time they left for South America, and he introduced her as his wife, even to his family in Pennsylvania. Decades later his grandnieces would identify her, perhaps fancifully, as a West Virginia-born music teacher. But the only solid data tells a less charming story: As Anne Meadows relates in her book *Digging Up Butch and Sundance*, Ethel had resided for a time in Fort Worth, Texas, at an address near the cattle yards that was listed as a "Class A" house of prostitution. The frontier drew many young women into brothels, and virtually all of them would be looking for a way out. By 1900, Sundance and Butch were on the way out of the hemisphere with her.



Sundance and Ethel, in New York City in 1901
Granger; Bain Collection/Epics/Hulton/Getty

In January 1901, the trio took the best suite in a boarding house on East 12th Street, about a 20-minute walk from the offices of their nemesis, Pinkerton National Detective Agency. The outlaws spent a month living large. Butch bought a gold watch at Tiffany's for the modern equivalent of \$1,200, and Sundance and Ethel had their picture taken at a celebrated photography studio. On Feb. 20, they boarded the SS *Herminia*, a luxurious new steamship which offered only first-class accommodations, and set sail for South America.

The *Herminia* delivered the trio to Rio de Janeiro, where they spent several months considering Brazil as a home before moving on to Argentina. In Buenos Aires, they sampled the cafes and parks of a fast-rising capital city, its ports thronging with immigrants from every part of Europe, its wide avenues lined with aristocratic mansions and European architecture. It even had a new "underground train," like those in London.

But there were still too many eyes around, and by the end of the year the trio were far south, across the Río Negro, the traditional border to Patagonia, the sparsely settled region every bit as wild as the American West at the turn of the century. They finally came to rest in the tiny ranching settlement of Cholila. Surrounded by jagged, snow-capped peaks, Cholila was so remote, it wasn't even clear yet whether it lay in Chile or Argentina. This was, it seemed, the end of the world, an ill-defined frontier at the farthest edge of civilization.

When the Americans arrived in Cholila, they raised the valley's population to 43. Butch and Sundance introduced themselves, respectively, as James ("Santiago") Ryan and Henry ("Enrique") Place. Sundance introduced Ethel as his wife.



Sundance, Ethel and Butch at the Cholila cabin
Public Domain

Butch and Sundance filed a claim for a landholding by a brook, and later built a spacious cabin which grew quickly into a compound with outbuildings, sheds, and corrals. (The buildings still stand; I visited them as part of the research for this article.) A steady stream of furnishings and fixtures arrived, some from as far away as Europe. The four rooms were decorated with polished wainscoting and a pink floral wallpaper. They imported a porcelain washbasin and windows from England.

The newcomers dressed like wealthy men, in red corduroy suits, and bought the finest saddles, bridles, and spurs. According to visitors, they also loaded themselves with weapons, including state-of-the-art repeating rifles and an array of pistols; each man often carried three, including tiny derringers tucked into vest pockets.

Almost their first order of business in Cholila, in June 1901, was buying 16 horses for \$855 from Francisco Preston, the manager of several ranches in the area. Owning a herd also required branding the animals, and on October 30, they registered the “Place y Ryan” brand:

The men found it easy to ingratiate themselves with the other English-speaking colonists, many of them Americans or British citizens who had spent time in the United States. The *norteamericanos* had an easy way with their neighbors and even the local police. When a police officer needed a character witness when filing for his own cattle brand, Henry Place was happy to oblige. The other signed witness on that document was John Gardner, a Scotsman who had been in Patagonia for more than a decade. Ethel shared English books and magazines with Gardner, and he became a regular guest at the cabin and their closest confidant. The trio welcomed overnight visitors, including an Italian draftsman who described a house “notable for a shining cleanliness, geometric distribution of objects, walls with picture frames and displays of weavings, North American magazines, many and beautiful weapons and lariats made of braided horse hair.”

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Butch Cassidy's cabin in Patagonia as it looks today.

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After three years of hard and peaceful work, Santiago Ryan and Enrique Place had each amassed 450 head of cattle and 20 bulls, and according to a survey of Cholila, their personal goods were valued at \$1,500 to \$2,000 each.

Not all was relaxation, however. The Italian described the two men as “cautious of speech, nervous, watchful.” Ethel, while often seen well dressed and reading a book, was also known for dressing and riding “like a man” and carrying two revolvers in her belt.

An Englishman who passed through in 1904 recorded seeing Ethel shoot an eagle out of the sky with one bullet from a Winchester rifle. Another witness recalled her shooting two beer bottles off a gate while galloping on a horse, holding the reins in her teeth. Once Butch entertained visitors by demonstrating his quick-draw technique, spinning out his revolver and shooting a tiny box of matches propped on a wall. When someone insinuated this was luck, he did it again from farther away.

In a letter to a friend in Utah, Cassidy is by turns nostalgic about his youth and melancholy, noting his isolation from the gossip and daily concerns of his Spanish-speaking neighbors. But he also sounds content:

I like the place better every day. I have 300 cattle, 1500 sheep, and 28 good Saddle horses, 2 men to do my work, also good 4-room house, wearhouse [sic], stable, chicken house and some chickens. The only thing lacking is a cook, for I am still living in Single Cussedness and I sometimes feel very lonely... [For cattle] the country is first class. it can't be beat for that purpose, for I have never seen a finer grass country, and lots of it hundreds and hundreds of miles that is unsettled and comparatively unknown... there is plenty of good land along the Mountains for all the people that will be here for the next hundred years... The summers are beautiful... And grass knee high everywhere and lots of good cold mountain water...

For three of the most wanted criminals in the world, this was the life they had always dreamed of. Soon the governor would visit, dance with Ethel, and sleep away the dawn in the cozy and comfortable confines of their Wyoming-style log cabin. By all accounts, they had reinvented themselves completely, and escaped.

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The morning when the governor finally woke up after the tango party, someone robbed a man driving a cart across the plains of Patagonia. He was taking a load of goods from the coast to the English ranches along the face of the Andes.

The robbery occurred 350 miles away from Cholila. Yet that distant crime would ultimately upend the new lives of the three fugitives. If their end had a beginning, this was it.

Near the coast, police quickly caught two Americans named Evans and Wilson with the stolen money in hand. Like Butch and Sundance, they were American cowboys who had relocated to Patagonia, probably to escape a life of crime. One of them had even visited the cabin in Cholila.

But despite the clear evidence that Butch was having breakfast with the governor hundreds of miles away—perhaps one of the greatest alibis in history—something linked him to the crime. It may have been a pistol from Butch, or a horse branded with their trademarked P&R. He may have helped conceive and plan the crime; in the American West, Butch had sometimes organized every detail of the Hole in the Wall Gang robberies but then sat out the actual assaults. The evidence is lost to history, but there must have been some, if the police reached 350 miles across Patagonia to arrest him. Butch was hauled all the way to Rawson on the coast and locked up.

Butch and Sundance had tried to appear ruler-straight in Cholila, but they were always trailed by whispers. They stood out. They were wealthy but handled animals like veteran cowboys. They carried state-of-the-art weapons at all times and routinely displayed a practiced efficiency with them—this in a gaucho culture where the knife was preferred to the pistol. They kept company with governors but also thugs. Butch was reported to have bragged drunkenly about his criminal capers back in America. Their names and stories could never have been perfect.

“Butch and Sundance had tried to appear ruler-straight in Cholila, but they were always trailed by whispers.”

And the Pinkertons had never stopped looking for them. The Chicago-based agency was perhaps unique in the world, a kind of private intelligence agency and police force that had done everything from protecting President Abraham Lincoln to breaking strikes. The Pinkertons were synonymous with persistence and famous for their global reach, so the escape of two celebrity criminals was a wound to their reputation. After missing the men in New York, the detective agency had searched Europe, traced one lead all the way to Tahiti, and distributed wanted posters in Spanish throughout South America. Robert Pinkerton, son of the founder, was clearly infuriated that the duo had eluded him and wrote a personal letter to the chief of police in Buenos Aires, warning him to watch for the Americans, and even describing, all too prophetically, how Butch and Sundance would strike:

They are all thorough plainsmen and horsemen, riding from 600 to 1,000 miles after committing a robbery. If there are reported to you any bank or train hold up robberies or any other similar crimes, you will find that they were undoubtedly committed by these men.

In 1903, a small, jowly Pinkerton agent named Francis P. DiMaio was on an assignment in Brazil. “Frank” DiMaio was an intrepid investigator who had successfully penetrated the Sicilian mafia posing as a forger, and who had once solved an assassination case by getting himself arrested and locked in prison with his

Soon after arriving in Buenos Aires, DiMaio got a tip from George Newbery, one of the country's more unusual characters. Newbery was a dentist—but also a wealthy aristocrat, land owner, and diplomat, who worked on the teeth of Argentina's wealthy, including the president. He owned a large estancia, or ranch, not far from Cholila, and had received a letter from his foreman, passing on gossip that a pair of American newcomers—Place and Ryan—were not what they seemed. Perhaps they were even fugitives.

Intrigued, DiMaio sent a telegram to the Chubut provincial police, inquiring about the Americans. He also made plans to go see for himself. Curiously, Newbery talked DiMaio out of going, exaggerating the distance and time required, and claiming that the rainy season made travel impossible in the “jungle.” (The route is actually through a barren landscape with almost no greenery, let alone jungle).

It's possible Newbery was protecting the men; he was, after all, more compromised than he let on. Among his many projects, Newbery had proposed the creation of a special colony in Patagonia to attract English-speaking immigrants. Butch and Sundance, as Place and Ryan, had been among the first people to sign a petition supporting the plan. If it came together, everyone would make money.

Yet Newbery also offered to lure the two cowboys to Buenos Aires, on the pretense of signing deeds for land in the new colony. He promised to inform DiMaio if “apples,” “citrus,” or “peaches”—code for Butch, Sundance, and Ethel—ever showed up.

DiMaio's telegram to the Chubut police had thrown suspicion on the household, adding to the rumors. But discouraged in his journey by the aristo-dentist, DiMaio turned for home without visiting Cholila. Instead of the peerless Pinkertons, it was local police on the coast, clueless about the international reward and Pinkerton inquiries, who lucked into arresting the American.



Ethel in Patagonia
Public Domain

To free Butch, Sundance and Ethel mounted up and rode across Patagonia to the Atlantic Ocean, arriving so quickly that Ethel's endurance riding was noted in the local newspaper as a spectacular feat for a woman. (The Argentine historian Marcelo Gavirati uncovered many Spanish-language court documents and accounts that have never appeared in English before). To add to the confusion, Evans and Wilson, the

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ride back across Patagonia, the trio caught a steamer around the tip of South America to Chile, disembarking at a spot much closer to the Argentina border region and Cholila.

But even back home, there was no safety. Because of Newbery, the president of the republic had been alerted to the presence of two possibly dangerous American fugitives. Soon the provincial governor and chief of police went from being houseguests to antagonists. The outlaws' hope of going straight had all but evaporated. When your past catches up to you, it's hard not to regress to being who you were.



Patagonia has a faraway sound, but before the Panama Canal opened in 1913, virtually all travel and trade between the Atlantic and Pacific worlds had to go around the tip of Cape Horn. The largest port was at Rio Gallegos, the southernmost town in Argentina, where industrial goods came in and exports of wool, lamb, and beef flooded out of the steppe to global markets. When gold fields opened in the interior, Rio Gallegos became a boom town.

In January 1905, two American men rode into town and checked into the Hotel de la Bolsa under the names Linden and Brady. Linden was described as 5'11" with blond hair and a beard. Brady was shorter, with green eyes and a cropped dark beard. They chatted with an American salesman, telling him they were ranchers looking to set up a large estancia. They seemed to have the money.

The salesman introduced them to a 24-year-old Englishman named Alexander MacKerrow, treasurer of the Bank of Tarapaca, which represented the interests—and deposits—of the Anglo South American Bank, the Bank of London and South America, and Lloyds Bank. The new arrivals visited MacKerrow at work, and, according to the local paper, opened an account and deposited 7,000 pesos, or a couple thousand turn-of-the-century dollars. They explained that they represented a large livestock company that planned to buy major tracts of land around the province.

Linden and Brady spent at least three weeks living it up in Rio Gallegos. They left generous tips for waiters at the Café de Farina and smoked cigars with MacKerrow and his friends at the Club del Progreso. They also visited him repeatedly at the bank to exchange small amounts of British sterling—and, presumably, to take careful note of the bank's hours, layout, and staffing.

The Americans bought horses and supplies, including a telescope and a compass, and rode frequently into the country on long tours under the pretense of searching for land allotments. On these rides they memorized the roads into and out of Rio Gallegos, the locations of fords, springs, and settlements, and the route of a telegraph line connecting the town to the interior of the country.

At one point a traveler discovered the men, who he had already met in town as Brady and Linden, drinking beer in a tent in the countryside. They invited him in to drink, and then paid him to carry their supplies onward to a hotel 15 miles from Rio Gallegos. They returned to town without the string of extra horses they had left with.

On Feb. 13, they went to the Bank of Tarapaca and withdrew all the money in their account. The next day, they returned and withdrew everyone else's money.

At 2 p.m., MacKerrow and his assistant manager, Arturo Bishop, were alone in the bank, closing out the day's accounts, when Brady and Linden entered. According to MacKerrow, Linden—his new friend, client, and card-playing partner—jumped onto the counter with a Colt revolver in each hand. He ordered Bishop to stand back and put his hands on a railing. Brady, with whom MacKerrow had shared many whiskeys at

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counter, keeping their hands visible. While one of the thieves stood guard, the other went outside and put the sack on his horse. Its contents were worth about \$100,000 in today's dollars.

About a minute later, as Bishop told the local paper, "I heard the one who was outside say in English something like 'all set.' The other assailant at once went outside, and they immediately took off in flight on horses that they had already prepared."

MacKerrow rushed outside and saw the robbers rounding a corner at full gallop, heading toward a ford in the Gallegos River. He ran to the Café de Paris, where a policeman was posted, and raised the alarm. Bishop called police headquarters from a nearby telephone.

Within minutes, a handful of civilian volunteers took off after the bandits. An hour later, a five-man posse set out under the command of Sergeant Eduardo Rodriguez. The telephone and telegraph should have given authorities a head start; indeed, that afternoon the alarm reached a police station almost a thousand miles north, where Chilean cavalry patrolled the distant border. But telegraph lines to the west, the direction the robbers were fleeing, were all dead. While the robbery was under way, someone had shot the glass resistors off the tops of the poles.

After a flat-out sprint, the robbers reached the hotel where they had sent their supplies with the traveler days earlier. They collected their belongings and seven more horses before quickly moving on. Rodriguez was determined but out-planned. Unlike Brady and Linden, none of the pursuers had cached food and extra horses (and beer) along the route. None of the lawmen had recently cased each dirt trail and back road in the distant countryside. After two days of pursuit, the posse's mounts gave out at a spot in the wilderness called Bajo de la Leona, where, the sergeant reported, they lost the trail of the robbers, "who relied upon elements of mobility of the first order." The only sign of the outlaws were three exhausted horses they had left behind.



Butch Cassidy's cabin in Patagonia as it appears today.

Patrick Symmes

The timing, tools, and methods all point to the trio of Butch, Sundance, and Ethel. Many details of the thieves' physical descriptions matched the trio, right down to Linden's upper lip, which curled in an exaggerated way when he talked, just like Sundance's. (Brady's reported beard and eye color didn't match

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border, allowing them to easily outride their exhausted pursuers. And it's hard to imagine that third rider was anyone but Ethel, the sharpshooter. At Rio Gallegos, there had been talk that one of the men had a sister, dubbed "la Americana."

After Rodriguez's posse returned empty-handed, two detachments of Argentine cavalry spent the next three weeks searching the province from the coast to the Chilean border. A unit of Chilean police even joined the search, and at a place called Ultima Esperanza, Last Hope, they found more abandoned horses. But there was no sign of the fugitives. Whoever they were, the robbers had disappeared into the vast outback of the Andes, a terrain of towering peaks, glaciers, and unknown valleys. The ride from here back to Cholila, depending on the route, would be 600 to 1,000 miles—exactly what Robert Pinkerton had predicted in his letter to the Argentine police.

They had escaped Rodriguez and even the cavalry, but evading capture in the Andean wilderness did not mean freedom. While Pinkerton ace DiMaio had decided to head back to the U.S., and no one was formally declaring that the Rio Gallegos robbers were Butch, Sundance, and Ethel, the trio knew that they were, at best, under suspicion. DiMaio, Newbery, and even Argentina's president had made or overheard too much noise. The bucolic life they had tried to build in Cholila was now impossible, and they were left with only bad choices. Return to their ranch and keep up the pretense of innocence, risking arrest, deportation, or worse. Or run, and be convicted in public opinion.

They ran.

In the spring of 1905, the trio disappeared on horseback. Many fantastical accounts emerged of what happened to them next. In his book *In Patagonia*, Bruce Chatwin claimed that they died in a shootout in Argentina, but he misdated their adventures by years. Other accounts had them appearing in Pennsylvania or Spokane. But in fact, instead of traveling thousands of miles, they simply hid out in an inaccessible valley just above Cholila. There they set up well-equipped canvas tents along the Rio Tigre, near a huge alpine lake. (I visited the hideout, which is still known locally as the Lake of the Gringos.) Supplies came via their trusted ranch foreman, who used coded whistles to signal his approach, and left food and other items at a drop point without ever actually seeing the fugitives.

The Americans spent a few months in this gorgeous setting, mostly doing paperwork. They sent a stream of letters, paid off debts, transferred money, and asked that an order of clothing they were expecting be given to a friend instead. They began selling off their cattle and the ranch itself. On May 1, 1905, Cassidy wrote to one of his local friends, a former Texas sheriff, asking him to reimburse a debt Cassidy owed to a local police officer, adding, "My best estimate is that we will leave today."

They went north next, riding to the alpine vistas of Bariloche, where they gave their horses to their foreman and took a series of small boats across the border to Chile. It is one of the most stunning passages in the world, through sheer mountains that would be impassable if not for seven long, thin lakes connected by short portages.

As they made their way west, the landscape changed from arid brown to humid green as the mountain mists closed in. They knew they had reached Chile when it started to rain.

"I never want to see Cholila again."

— Harry "Sundance Kid" Longabaugh

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deal as satisfactory. He asked him to tell a long list of friends, neighbors and employees how much he appreciated them, and included a request to deliver an occasional ration of meat to a solitary old man they both knew.

It was a clean break. "I never want to see Cholila again," Sundance wrote.

According to historian Anne Meadows, Sundance and Ethel returned by ship to San Francisco. But by December, Sundance—and perhaps Ethel, the record is unclear—was once again in South America, crossing back into Argentina.

There is no doubt about who pulled off the next robbery. In mid-December, four men rode into Villa Mercedes, a prosperous trading town near Córdoba in northern Argentina. The identities of the two extra riders have never been established with certainty, but the events that followed show that Butch and Sundance were the principals in the group. They checked into the Hotel Young and for a week established themselves by way of a now-familiar strategy: posing as American ranchers looking to buy land. They spent money, met important people, and cased a branch of the Banco de la Nación, Argentina's largest bank.

On the morning of Dec. 19, the four were seen drinking whiskey in a bar two blocks from the bank, which was itself two blocks from a police station. Around 10:30 a.m. they struck. One man stayed outside to hold the horses ready, and three stormed inside.

This time, nothing went right. The robbers fired three shots in the air and started collecting money. But a customer and the bank manager resisted, and the robbers beat both men brutally with pistols. The bank manager's daughter heard the commotion from next door and rushed to her father's aid, bringing a pistol of her own. The wounded manager took the gun and opened fire.

It was the start of a gun battle that went on for so long that a bank employee had time to run home, grab a shotgun, and rejoin the fight. Somehow, no one was hit. After 15 minutes of shooting, the four bandits made it to their horses and took off with a haul of about 14,000 pesos, or about \$6,000 at the time—perhaps \$170,000 today.

The police chief led a six-man posse that caught up with the men later that day as they were changing horses. But two of the robbers opened up with Winchester rifles from 200 yards away, while the other two calmly saddled their new mounts. Under a barrage of bullets, the commander and his men decided to return to town "with the idea of getting more men."

The next day the robbery was reported in Buenos Aires newspapers, along with speculation that two of the criminals were the same ones who had struck in Rio Gallegos six months earlier. Someone at police headquarters dug out the old Pinkerton circulars about Butch and Sundance and concluded that they were likely the same men.

In quick succession, police units were dispatched, border guards were notified, and several civilian posses formed up in pursuit. Soon newspapers published the famous photo of the duo taken in Fort Worth in 1900. On Christmas Eve, the newspaper *La Prensa* identified Butch, Sundance, and Ethel by their real names, pinned the Rio Gallegos robbery on them, and included a summary of their crimes across the American West. Their past had caught up with them.

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A copy of the New York Herald from 1906.
New York Herald

Reported sightings of the outlaws started coming in from all over Argentina. As far south as Neuquén, in Patagonia, three Americans were spotted riding the train, one of them a “sad-looking” woman who supposedly resembled Ethel. (The three were arrested and held for days, but one man turned out to be a rotund redhead, while the other was too short). On Dec. 30, witnesses reported seeing the criminals near the southern town of San Luis, while other witnesses placed them 250 miles south of there. Police received reports of 11 different Americans wandering the countryside with Winchester rifles, and the fugitives were variously seen swimming across the Rio Salado on a raft made of inflated rubber boots, nursing gunshot wounds in Mendoza, and stealing horses in Maximiliano Salinas.

Amid the swirl of false reports, the Argentine police never found the real outlaws. By the spring of 1906, it was reported they had escaped into Chile. Gardner was the last to hear from them, and mentioned that his old neighbors were headed for Bolivia. There was a reported sighting of Ethel arguing with Sundance in a hotel in Antofagasta, the northernmost town in Chile. Knowing what awaited her companions, did she choose this moment to exit their story? She disappears, finally and totally, probably because she caught one last boat to San Francisco and the end of this particular dream.



In Bolivia, Butch became James Maxwell and Sundance became H.A. Brown. They took a series of jobs through 1906, mostly running mule trains full of supplies for the country's many mines. Bolivia was rich in gold, silver, and tin, and the Americans took notice of both the precious metals that left the mines and the cash that flowed back to pay the miners. They eventually found work protecting payroll deliveries, and in so doing learning the schedules and became trusted confidants of the very people they were about to fleece.

Around that time, an American named Hiram Bingham was crossing the border into southern Bolivia when he encountered two “rough looking Anglo-Saxons.” Bingham was an ambitious young professor from Yale on his way to Peru, where he would discover Machu Picchu and become world famous. In an account unnoticed by historians of Butch and Sundance because it focused on his archaeology, he wrote that one of the Americans confessed to being a robber, “driven out of the United States by the force of law and order and hounded to death all over the world by Pinkerton detectives.” The men sounded defeated,

In the flatlands of eastern Bolivia, Butch and Sundance found territory ideal for cattle, with the same knee-high grass and flowing streams they had left behind in in Cholila. Ranches were starting up and skilled American cowboys were in demand. Once again they dreamed of a new beginning. All they needed was a stake to get started. "I have found the place I have been looking for for 20 years," Butch wrote to a friend. But his mood was less optimistic than it was in Cholila. They had been on the run for almost two decades. In the same letter, he wrote: "Dear God, if I could go back 20 years... I would be happy." He seemed all too aware that he was running out of time and places to hide. "I will be living here very soon," he told his friend, "if I don't die."



The News

Here's how the story ends. The Hollywood version is true, sort of.

They would die in a gunfight. The big-screen version from 1969 shows how Butch and Sundance took to robbing mule trains in Bolivia, and then were cornered and killed in a dusty town. The film ending is exaggerated but more or less accurate.

In 1907, the two men had ambushed a mining supply train of mules in the grubby canyon lands of southern Bolivia. When the thieves reached the village of San Vicente a day or two later, word of the robbery had preceded them. Arriving in late afternoon, the Americans spent time stabling their horses and finding a house to sleep in, but someone recognized the mules and notified a policeman. The Bolivians responded with initiative and speed: The mayor, police chief, a single soldier, and a volunteer took up rifles and moved on the house so quickly that Butch and Sundance were caught carrying their saddles.

A gunfight erupted. The Americans fired their pistols while retreating quickly into their room. The soldier was shot and killed, but in their rush for cover the outlaws left their rifles outside and were soon outgunned. With dusk falling, the Bolivians peppered the doorway and room with bullets until a sudden silence fell. At dawn the Bolivians finally entered the building and found both men dead. According to the local police report, one of the men had clearly been killed in the initial battle, while the other was found with his arms clasped around a barrel, in an agonized posture, as if he had died slowly of gunshot wounds.

they lived, and that was how they died.

Before burying the bodies, the Bolivians recorded a few details about the assailants. One stands out: a gold pocket watch one of the men carried, which looked expensive enough to come from a place like Tiffany’s.



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Patrick Symmes

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