

'Hello, here.'¹

By Michelle Pollard

On January 12, 1895, an interview with Finis Farr, former secretary to Governor Thomas T Crittenden, appeared in the Knoxville Journal. It told of how, on the morning of April 3, 1882, Jesse James had retired to the living room after breakfast with the two Ford brothers. It told of how they watched him first open a window and then remove his guns for fear passersby might see them. It told of how they continued to watch as he lined a chair up under a picture and climbed upon it with his back to them, and finally it told of how, thus exposed, the great outlaw had been shot in the back of the head and killed by Bob Ford. It was a story so very much like all the others, but there was one event in Farr's narrative that has become the antagonist, the motive, the much needed explanation for an outlaw's uncharacteristic behaviour and for a young man's sudden determination to take full advantage of it - Jesse James' sensational last minute discovery of the surrender and confession of Dick Liddil.

In late 1881 the James gang were in hiding; split up and scattered after their September robbing of a train at Blue Cut with every intention of meeting up at a prearranged time and destination, as was their custom. But on December 4, fellow gang members Wood Hite and Dick Liddil collided at the Harbison Place in Ray county, Missouri, home of Martha Bolton, sister of the Ford brothers. The pair had often argued, but on this occasion a deadly gunfight broke out leaving Hite, a cousin to Jesse James, mortally wounded, Dick Liddil with a bullet in his thigh, and Bob Ford an unlikely participant.² With the gang's rendezvous imminent, Liddil realised that to 'return without [Hite] would lead to enquiry and to tell that he had killed him would seal his own doom', so he decided to lie low and hope the gang moved off without him. Loyalty meant the gang initially waited for the pair, but when that failed, suspicion sent them in search of answers.³ Wounded and narrowly escaping a raid on the Harbison Place by Sheriff Timberlake, Dick Liddil also 'had reason to fear if Jesse ever learned the fate of his cousin,' and so surrendered to the authorities on January 24, 1882, under a veil of secrecy secure enough 'to effect [sic] the capture of the notorious Jesse himself.'⁴

Despite the fear he felt, Liddil seemed to trust the protection offered to him by law fully. He travelled to Liberty, Missouri, 'where, under the name of Joe Anderson, he personated a friend of Sheriff Timberlake, stopping at his hotel until recently,' and walked about so freely that his intentions did not remain secret for long.⁵ He was soon seen 'on the streets of Kansas City hundreds of times,' and had been spotted 'in Independence, and all over this and Clay counties.'⁶ On one occasion a relative saw him 'coming out of the police station in [Kansas] city' right behind Captain Craig, and another man told a reporter how 'Liddil had said to him that he had turned state's evidence.'⁷ News of Liddil's surrender officially leaked on March 27, 1882, eight days before Jesse was killed. Three days later, the Kansas City Journal featured the headline, 'DICK LIDDLE [sic] OF THE NOTED JAMES GANG – Reported To Have Been Captured And To Have Been Given His Liberty On Turning State's Evidence,' and the St Louis Globe Democrat reported, 'JAMES GANG - Dick Little [sic] Surrenders to the Authorities.' On March 31, the news appeared in the St Joseph Herald, while the Kansas City Daily Times continued its coverage with, 'DICK LITTLE [sic] – Surrender of the Notorious Outlaw.' When asked, 'How did the news that Liddil had surrendered become known at Independence?' a local officer replied, 'It came from his own friends.'⁸

Despite contemporary writers suggesting that 'unfortunately for Jesse, this news would not reach him until several days later,'⁹ Kansas City reporters remained certain he would hear of it. The fact that Dick Liddil was 'the principal topic of conversation' urged them to question officers on what they thought Jesse's reaction might be to such sensational news.¹⁰ The answer surprised them - 'Jesse James and his pals have known for weeks that Little [sic] was in Kansas City in communication with officers.'¹¹

Indeed Jesse James had first shown signs of knowing something of Liddil's betrayal at approximately the same time as Sheriff Timberlake. Aware that Liddil frequented his uncle's house in Adairsville, Kentucky, Jesse had contacted his cousin, Clarence Hite, with a clear warning. 'He said...that I had better leave home,' Clarence later recalled, 'Dick was in with the detectives and they would soon take me away.'¹² But Clarence was sick with tuberculosis, was unable to travel, and was subsequently arrested at his home on 13 February 1882, the same day Bob Ford surrendered to Captain Craig.¹³ Of course it is possible that Jesse was not overly concerned by the surrender of Liddil or the arrest of his cousin; gang members had been captured before and let go for lack of evidence, or else had been found guilty, sentenced and eventually released, leaving the famed leaders to remain

free. Furthermore, although details of Liddil's confession were leaked to the press by April 1, the content was highly questionable. In fact it seemed the law officers were more outraged by Liddil's surrender and subsequent immunity than the gang he was so blatantly betraying seemed to be. Details of the surrender stated that he would 'be granted immunity from punishment by the Governor; that he be paid \$1,000 cash immediately on giving himself up; and that he receive \$5,000 more in the event of the five train robbers now at large being captured through his instrumentality.' This caused 'some dispute between the county officers and Police Commissioner Craig,' wrote a Kansas City reporter, 'the latter desiring to honor the parole given to Little [sic] while the former declare that inasmuch as he has contradicted some of his statements and may be playing false with the authorities, he should be arrested.'¹⁴ What should have concerned Jesse more was news that Dick Liddil was a prime suspect for the murder of Wood Hite, an act Jesse supposedly knew nothing about.

News of Clarence Hite's arrest inevitably appeared in all the major newspapers, and with it, details of his brother's demise. Even the Liberty Tribune, a weekly, managed to remind its readers on March 10 that Wood had been 'killed in this state some weeks since.' Indeed the Kansas City papers were covering news of Liddil's surrender and Wood Hite's death so efficiently that even if Jesse were not in a self confessed position to 'find out all,' he could have easily read about it weeks before he was killed.¹⁵ By April 1, 1882, the explosive events of December 4 were well known, the location had been fixed as a farm just outside Richmond and Liddil was known to have 'killed Wood Hite with whom he had trouble in Kentucky.'¹⁶ In fact the only thing the newspapers failed to report was what Jesse planned to do about it.

Suspected by his own family of killing Wood Hite and secretly aware of a betrayal among his number, Jesse questioned Bob Ford 'closely about Dick Liddil' when the young man arrived at the outlaw's home in St Joseph on March 24, 1882, three days before the streets of Independence hummed with news of his surrender and six days before it appeared in any of the newspapers Jesse read daily.¹⁷ Although keeping Jesse away from those newspapers seemed a sensible strategy during the final stages of capturing him, it proved an altogether unrealistic one. Jesse had long been a patron of the media and would have no doubt demonstrated a keen interest in the trial of the Blue Cut robbers, details of which were regularly printed alongside all the latest news regarding Liddil's surrender.¹⁸ 'He would buy the St Joseph and St Louis papers,' Bob later told the Governor, 'and I wanted to get the Kansas City papers and

after he had read them we would exchange.’¹⁹ With the Governor publicly criticising the Kansas City reporters for relaying details of their plans, Bob’s choice of reading material appears nothing short of suicidal. However, on April 4 it was suggested that Liddil may have ‘entered into an arrangement with Rob Ford and his brother, by which they were to feign anger, and report to Jesse James the fact that [Liddil] had given himself up.’²⁰ What the paper failed to record was how Jesse reacted to such eager bearers of old news, how much his response was thought to have impacted upon the Ford brother’s plans, and whether or not Jesse ever acquired information regarding the surrender of Bob Ford. After all, ‘such news travels fast and [the James brothers] would be the first to know of it.’²¹

Although it is often said that the Ford brothers assassinated Jesse James minutes after witnessing him read about the surrender of Dick Liddil in the morning newspaper, that is unlikely. Evidence suggests that Jesse had known about the betrayal for some time before he was killed, that he had every opportunity to discover the truth about Wood Hite, and that his self confessed ability to ‘find out all’ should have relinquished details of the Ford involvement in both. It is therefore more likely that Bob Ford has been misquoted; that Jesse did not read about Liddil’s surrender for the first time that morning, although the event itself was an integral part of their plan and no doubt offered some small amount of justification. It is equally likely that the story, once created, continued to flourish because it somehow explained why the greatest outlaw of all time could be so easily deceived, disarmed and ultimately destroyed. For surely the real question remains stoically unanswered – why, if Jesse James knew about Wood Hite’s death and Dick Liddil’s betrayal, did he choose to do nothing?

Notes and sources

1. Jesse's traditional response to reading news of Dick Liddil's surrender on the morning of April 3, 1882.
2. The Blue Cut robbery occurred on September 7, 1881. Bob Ford claimed that he had joined in the fight between Dick Liddil and Wood Hite because he feared his sister might be hurt in the cross fire. *New York Daily Tribune*, October 21, 22, 1882.
3. *Kansas City Daily Journal*, April 1, 1882.
4. Ibid. Ted Yeatman, *Frank and Jesse James the Story Behind the Legend*, Cumberland House, 2000, p262. *St Louis Globe Democrat*, April 1, 1882. The Harbison Place was raided on January 6, 1882.
5. *Kansas City Daily Times*, April 6, 1882. Sheriff Timberlake owned the renowned Arthur House in Liberty, Missouri.
6. *Kansas City Daily Journal*, April 1, 1882.
7. *Kansas City Journal* March 30, 1882, *St Louis Globe Democrat*, March 30, 1882, *St Joseph Daily Herald*, March 31, 1882.
8. *St Louis Globe Democrat*, March 30, 1882, *St Joseph Daily Herald*, March 31, 1882.
9. Marley Brant, *Jesse James, The Man and the Myth*, Berkley Books, 1998, p224
10. *Kansas City Evening Star*, March 30, 1882.
11. *St Louis Globe Democrat*, March 30, 1882.
12. TJ Stiles, *Jesse James - Last Rebel of the Civil War*, Alfred Knopf, 2002, p374.
13. Harold Dellinger, *Jesse James – The Best Writings on the Notorious Outlaw and His Gang*, The Globe Pequot Press, 2007, p 190.
14. *New York Times*, April 1, 1882.
15. Jesse James letter, printed in the *Sedalia Daily Democrat*, May 20, 1882.
16. *Kansas City Evening Star*, March 30, 1882. It wasn't until after Jesse's death that the Fords were officially implicated in Wood's death, largely due to Bob's confession and his sudden willingness to lead officers to the body. Wood Hite's body was discovered on April 5, 1882. Although most newspapers had openly linked Liddil to the murder before Jesse was killed it was Bob Ford who, in the aftermath of it, led officers to the body, was arrested and charged with the murder. He was later acquitted. Dick Liddil was arrested for murdering Wood Hite and taken to the jail in Richmond in 1891. Newspapers seemed to have been more interested in his success at the racetrack. *St Joseph Herald*, April 7, 1882, *Kansas City Evening Star*, October 26, 1882. *Kansas City Times and Star*, April 23, 1891.
17. When George Hite Jnr was asked who he thought had killed his brother, he replied, 'At first thought it was Jesse, but I don't think so now.' *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 10, 1882. *Farr interview*, *Knoxville Journal*, January 12, 1895. Both brothers testified that Jesse bought newspapers in their presence.
18. *Kansas City Star*, April 4, 1882. Although around eleven men were arrested for the Blue Cut robbery, only three were taken to trial in late March – John Bugler, Matt Chapman and John Land, the latter having confessed and named himself as leader. Prosecutor Wallace doubted their guilt, however, and became convinced of it after speaking with the Ford's, Liddil, and Clarence Hite. When confronted, Land confessed to making it all up. Wallace dropped the case entirely on April 5, 1882, largely due to events in St Joseph. Yeatman, p 256, 274, 284, Settle, p 116.
19. *Farr interview*, *Knoxville Journal*, January 12, 1895
20. The Governor wondered who knew more about his attempts to capture Jesse James – the detectives or the reporters. *Kansas City Evening Star*, April 4, 1882. The quote regarding the deal between Liddil and the Ford's was relayed by Mattie Collins, Liddil's 'wife'. *Liberty Tribune*, 4 April, 1882.
21. George Shepherd's response when asked if he thought Jesse was aware of Liddil's betrayal. *Kansas City Daily Times*, April 3, 1882.