

## John Joseph Price (1836-1905)

John Joseph Price was born on October 16, 1835 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Little information is known about his early life including the names of his parents. In 1858 John married Elizabeth Bowen and they resided in Hamilton County, Ohio.<sup>1</sup> Together they had five children: Joseph I, Glenn, Clara, Elizabeth, and Ella.<sup>2</sup>

During the United States Civil War, John enlisted in Company I of the 138<sup>th</sup> Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry. He enlisted on May 2, 1864 with the rank of corporal.<sup>3</sup> His unit was organized at Camp Dennison, Ohio on May 14, 1864 and served 100 days. The 138<sup>th</sup> mostly served guard duty at numerous defense posts which included guarding rebel prisoners, guarding telegraph lines, and intercepting blockade runners and Rebel mail carriers throughout Washington, D.C. and Virginia. John and the rest of his regiment mustered out of service on September 1, 1864.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after his service in the Civil War ended, John and his family moved to Bloomington where he established a farm located at North Water 3 West of Orchard Lane (today known as Allin Street).<sup>5</sup> However his career as a farmer was short lived. According to an article published in *The Daily Pantagraph*, it was reported that John was no longer able to tend his farm himself due to “a severe affliction with asthma.” Because of this, he was forced to rent his farm out.<sup>6</sup>

In 1874 John ran unsuccessfully for McLean County Sheriff. Prior to this, he had served as an acting bailiff of the McLean County Court and Eighth Judicial Circuit Court and as acting sheriff as well. Although he was highly praised as a candidate and had won the confidence and esteem of other officers of the court and members of the bar (which he had served faithfully), he was not victorious in his campaign.<sup>7</sup>

In the early 1880s John began a new career as a conductor of a Pullman sleeper car on the Chicago and Alton Railroad. As a Pullman conductor, his main job was to sell tickets and calm passengers when an accident or some other emergency occurred. It was in this capacity as a Pullman car conductor that John earned a spot in the history books as a perilous victim of the James-Younger gang which robbed the train which he was working on in 1881.

During the late 1880s, notorious outlaw Jesse James and his gang of thieves terrorized railroads and banks across the United States. James was from a family of slave holders from Missouri. His brother Frank had been a member of a pro-Confederate guerrilla band which caused Union Militia men to target the James’ family with violence. Jesse himself also joined a group of Confederate Guerrillas and participated in terrorizing pro Union Supporters and Union troops. It is thought that it was his family’s poor treatment by Union soldiers during the Civil War and his guerrilla activities which turned Jesse and his brother to a life of crime and violence. Jesse and his brother still held a grudge against the Union and the victorious “radical Republicans” who victimized the South and their home state of Missouri in particular. Jesse, his

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<sup>1</sup> “John Joseph Price,” Researcher summary and Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census 1870

<sup>3</sup> H.A. Axling, Joseph B. Furaker, James S. Robinson. *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of The Rebellion 1861-1866 Vol VIII, 110-140<sup>th</sup> Regiments-Infantry*. (Cincinnati: The Ohio Valley Press, 1888) p. 675

<sup>4</sup> Axling, Furaker, Robinson, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of The Rebellion 1861-1866 Vol VIII, 110-140<sup>th</sup> Regiments-Infantry*, p.663

<sup>5</sup> *The Bloomington City Directory, 1875-1876*

<sup>6</sup> “John J. Price for Sheriff,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 16, 1874. P.4 col.3

<sup>7</sup> “John J. Price for Sheriff.”

brother, and several of their former comrades in arms, formed a gang that would target Northern industry. They used their anger to begin vengeful attacks on northern railroads and banks in order to cripple the Northern economy. He also constructed a myth of himself where he was a Robin Hood of sorts; robbing rich Northern banks and railroads to help poor Missourians who had been “crushed” by Northern tyranny. In letters he wrote that were published by an ex-confederate soldier and newspaper editor, he “proclaimed his innocence of specific crimes while wearing the general outlaw mask stating that he and the members of his gang were not thieves but bold robbers.”<sup>8</sup>

The James-Younger gang began their crime spree in 1869 by targeting a bank in Gallatin, Missouri run by a man who they felt was a Union sympathizer. In broad daylight Jesse and his brother rode in, shot an unarmed teller, and made off with a few bits of “worthless” paper. This was just the beginning of a long successful crime spree of robbing trains, banks, and stagecoaches. Their success was due in part to aid from Confederate sympathizers who helped Jesse and members of his gang escape time and time again in the 1870s.

In 1876 Jesse and his brother laid down their guns after a disastrous robbery in Northfield, Minnesota. Jesse tried to live the quiet life and attempted to make an honest living but the draw of the lucrative life of crime was too much. So in 1879 Jesse returned to his old ways and attempted to pick up where he had left off. It was this return to crime where Jesse James and Joseph Price would cross paths in James’ final train robbery of his career.

At 9:00 p.m. on September 7, 1881 Joseph Price was working his usual job as a conductor of a Pullman sleeping car on the Chicago and Alton Railroad. The train he was working on had just left St. Louis, Missouri and was headed west, bound for Kansas City, Missouri. As the train neared Glendale, Missouri the conductor, Jim Hazelbaker, saw a red lantern and a blockade of rocks and wooden boards in the middle of the tracks signaling the train to stop. The train was approaching an area known as the “Blue Cut,” a deep ravine which forced trains to slow down to twenty-five miles per hour. Hazelbaker must have been somewhat suspicious of this unexpected signal since a year before Jesse James had robbed the same train in the same location, and a month earlier a train had been robbed in Winston, Missouri not far from where the train was stopped. Price would have had his work cut out for him as well, calming the passengers in his car who were probably on edge because of this unexpected stop at the site of a previous train robbery. But, the conductor heeded the warning and stopped the train.

The train cars were boarded by twelve men wearing white masks resembling the Klu Klux Klan. As the train was being boarded, Price recalled that his first warning about the robbery being in progress was “when the conductor came running in [to his Pullman car] and said ‘gentlemen and ladies, robbers are on the train, hide your valuables.’” Price stated that “at once everyone took off their watches, rings, diamond earrings and hid them as best they could. Several ladies quickly pulled off diamonds and in one case I saw one lady put her earrings in her stocking while another one quickly transferred her valuables to her bosom and then put her shawl about her. I shall never forget the scene and in less than fifty seconds as it seemed to me, all was quiet on the car.”<sup>9</sup> The engineer of the train, L. Foote, was ordered down from his engine at gun point. As the gang pointed revolvers at Foote and the fireman, John Steading, the express messenger of the train, a man by the name of Fox, ran and hid in the bushes out of fear since he

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<sup>8</sup>American Experience: Jesses James, [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)

<sup>9</sup> Carl W. Breihan, *The Escapades of Frank and Jesse James*, p.265-270

held the keys to the safe.<sup>10</sup> Members of the gang threatened to kill Foote and Steading if Fox did not come out of hiding, so he did. Fox was then beaten over the head with a revolver until he relinquished the keys to the safe. However, to the gang's dismay the safe was nearly empty so they resorted to robbing the passengers and crew of their valuables instead.

The members of the gang proceeded to approach every passenger asking for their money, jewelry, and watches. The robbers pinned Hazelbaker down and took the \$15 he had hidden under a seat cushion. Another man lost the \$450 he was carrying. The robbers were even so bold as to take the rings right off the lady passengers on the train as well. Price recalled that just before one of the robbers ("a short man with a mask"), rushed into his car with a pistol in each hand, he had removed his gold watch and hid that and \$100 cash in the water cooler in the car. One of the robbers then entered the car and shouted "everyone hold up your hands; we are robbers!" More men quickly followed the short man into Price's car and all of them had shotguns or revolvers. One of the robbers had a pillow case in which he instructed the passengers to empty all of their watches, jewelry, pocketbooks and "whatever else they got." Price stated that he went to the back of the car and then two of the robbers approached him and said "here, damn you where is your money?" To which Price lied and replied he had no money. The robbers clearly knew he was lying and one of them cocked a pistol in his force. Price said he then went to the water cooler and retrieved his gold watch and money and gave it to the robbers. He was the last man robbed in his car.<sup>11</sup>

After the last car had been thoroughly cleaned out, the robbers marched the operators back to the engine where they instructed them to remove the boards and rocks obstructing the tracks after they escaped. The robbers also took Price and the porter from his car to the front platform where they were told to remain until they departed as well. With that, the James-Younger gang skipped out into the darkness of the surrounding woods. All totaled, it was said the robbers made off with about \$2,500 from the express car and \$3-4,000 in jewelry and money from the passengers and crew of the train.<sup>12</sup>

On September 9, two days later, news of the robbery was printed on the front page of *The Pantagraph*, and probably in many other newspapers across the country. Price's account of the incident was among those witness statements printed in the paper as well. He may have become somewhat of a local celebrity after this event as others in his position had been killed during other robberies committed by the James-Younger gang. This one bad experience did not discourage Price from continuing to work as a conductor on the Chicago and Alton Railroad and he continued until 1885.

After he ended his career as a conductor, he lived quietly for the rest of his life as a farmer. He passed away at his home at 1102 E. Grove Street on August 29, 1905. He had been in poor health for several years prior to his death. In his obituary, he was called "one of the old and esteemed residents of the city" and was "very highly honored, upright citizen and his death will be mourned among his friends."<sup>13</sup> He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

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<sup>10</sup> "Glendale No. 2," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 9, 1881; p.1 col. 1-4

<sup>11</sup> "Glendale No. 2."

<sup>12</sup> Carl W. Breihan, *The Escapades of Frank and Jesse James*, p.265-270

<sup>13</sup> "John J. Price," *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 30, 1905; p.6 col.4