

## Alfred G. "Alferd" PACKER



A.K.A.: **"The Colorado Cannibal"**

Classification: **Murderer ?**

Characteristics: **Cannibalism**

Number of victims: **5**

Date of murders: **February-March 1874**

Date of arrest: **May 8, 1874 / Escape / March 11, 1883**

Date of birth: **January 21, 1842**

Victims profile: **Shannon Wilson Bell, James Humphrey, Frank Miller, George Noon and Israel**

**Swan** (gold prospectors)

Method of murder: **Shooting ?**

Location: **Lake City, Colorado, USA**

Status: **Sentenced to death April 13, 1883. Reversed. Sentenced to 40 years in prison on June 8, 1886. Paroled on February 8, 1901. Died April 23, 1907**

### [photo gallery](#)

Convicted of cannibalism after killing and eating five companions in the Colorado Territory.

Evidently Packer was amused when a dyslexic tattoo artist misspelled his name as "ALFERD" and it became sort of an in-joke.

### Timeline

Nov 1873	Alfred Packer and 20 others depart Provo, UT for the San Juan Mountains in the Colorado Territory.
9 Feb 1874	Alfred Packer and five other men break away from the rest of their group and head for Gunnison.
6 Apr 1874	Alfred Packer emerges from the woods alone.
8 May 1874	Alfred Packer signs his first confession.
8 Aug 1874	The corpses of Alfred Packer's five missing companions are found, two miles outside Lake City, CO.
8 Aug 1874	Alfred Packer escapes from jail.
11 Mar 1883	Fugitive Alfred Packer captured in Cheyenne, WY. Packer had been living under the alias John Schwartze.
16 Mar 1883	Alfred Packer signs his second confession.
7 Aug 1897	Alfred Packer signs his third confession.
7 Jan 1901	Alfred Packer paroled by the governor of Colorado.
23 Apr 1907	Alfred Packer dies and is buried in Littleton, CO.

## **Alfred Packer**

**Motive:** Food

**Crimes:** Al Packer killed the other 5 members of his prospecting party - Swan, Miller, Humphrey, Noon and Bell, when they got stranded in the Rocky Mountains for the winter. He then proceeded to eat them to keep himself alive.

**Method:** According to forensic evidence, Packer bludgeoned his victims to death, using a hacksaw and a rifle butt.

**Sentence:** At first Packer was sentenced to death by a Democrat judge. But after a retrial by a Republican judge (the victims were Democrats) Packer served only 15 years.

**Interesting facts:** At the time of the trial Packer claimed that he had not killed the men, but that Bell, another prospector, had, and that Packer had shot Bell in self-defence. In 1989, Professor James Starrs unearthed the remains of the dead men. This study showed that none of the bodies had been shot, but that they had put up a struggle before they were killed. Due to lack of evidence of physical characteristics, it is still uncertain which of the two men really did kill the others.

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**Alferd Packer** (January 21, 1842 – April 23, 1907) is popularly known as one of only two Americans ever imprisoned for cannibalism, alongside Albert Fish. First tried for murder, Packer was eventually sentenced to 40 years in prison after being convicted of manslaughter.

### **Packer's life**

Packer was born (as Alfred G. Packer) in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. He served in the American Civil War, on the Union side presumably in an Iowa regiment, but was mustered out due to epilepsy.

In November, 1873, Packer was with a party of 21 who left Provo, Utah, bound for the Colorado gold country in Breckenridge. On 1874-01-21, he met with Chief Ouray (known as the *White Man's Friend*) near Montrose, Colorado. Chief Ouray recommended they postpone their expedition until spring, as they were likely to encounter dangerous winter weather in the mountains.

In spite of Ouray's advice, a party of six that included Packer left for Gunnison, Colorado on February 9. The other five men were Shannon Wilson Bell, James Humphrey, Frank Miller, George Noon and Israel Swan.

At an unknown date, the party got hopelessly lost, ran out of provisions, and became snowbound in the Rocky Mountains. Packer allegedly went scouting and came back to discover Bell roasting human meat. According to Packer, Bell rushed him with a hatchet; Packer shot and killed him.

On April 16, 1874, Packer arrived alone at Los Pinos Indian Agency near Gunnison. He spent some time in a Saguache, Colorado bar, meeting several of his previous party. He initially claimed self-defense, but his story did not pass in court. During the trial, the judge is widely reputed to have said:

*"Damn you, Alferd Packer! There were seven Dimmycrats in Hinsdale County and you ate five of them!"*

An alternate version of the judge's outburst is

*"Packer, you depraved Republican son of a bitch! There were only five Democrats in Hinsdale County and you ate them all!"*

Both versions are considered apocryphal.

Packer signed a confession on August 5, 1874. He was jailed in Saguache, but escaped soon after, vanishing for several years.

On March 11, 1883, Packer was discovered in Cheyenne, Wyoming living under the alias of "John Schwartze." On March 16, he signed another confession. On April 6, a trial began in Lake City, Colorado, Hindsdale County.

On April 13, he was found guilty and sentenced to death. Packer managed to temporarily avoid punishment again: in October 1885, the sentence was reversed by the Colorado Supreme Court as being based on an *ex post facto law*. However, on June 8, 1886, Packer was sentenced to 40 years at a trial in Gunnison.

On June 19, 1899, Packer's sentence was upheld by the Colorado Supreme Court. However, he was paroled on February 8, 1901 and moved to Deer Creek, in Jefferson County, Colorado. He is widely rumored to have become a vegetarian before his death, reputedly of "*Senility - trouble & worry*" at the age of 64. He was buried in Littleton, Colorado and was formally pardoned of his crimes on March 5, 1981.

### **Not guilty?**

Recent evidence suggests that Packer was a cannibal, but *not* a murderer. On July 17, 1989, 115 years after Packer consumed his companions, an exhumation of the five bodies was undertaken by James E. Starrs, then Professor of Law specializing in forensic science at George Washington University. Following an exhaustive search for the precise location of the remains at Cannibal Plateau in Lake City, Colorado, Starrs and his colleague Walter H. Birkby concluded "*I don't think there will ever be any way to scientifically demonstrate cannibalism. Cannibalism per se is the ingestion of human flesh. So you'd have to have a picture of the guy actually eating.*"

Through some unexplained process, Packer's head, dissected and carefully preserved, has come to be in the possession of Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum in the French Quarter of New Orleans, where it is on permanent display.

### **Popular culture**

Packer is a legend in popular culture. He has been quoted as having said, in jest, "the breasts of man...are the sweetest meat I ever tasted." In 1968, students at the University of Colorado at Boulder named their new cafeteria grill the *Alferd G. Packer Memorial Grill* with the slogan "Have a friend for lunch!" Even today students can enjoy the meat-filled "El Canibal" underneath a giant wall map outlining his travels through Colorado. In 1982 the university dedicated a statue to Packer, and graduate Trey Parker, creator of *South Park*, made a student film, *Cannibal! The Musical*, based loosely on his life in 1993. Also, in 1982, Jim Roberson made *The Legend of Alfred Packer*, a film that, surprisingly, took many more liberties with the story than Parker's did, including having Bell fall on a knife, exonerating Packer of any wrongdoing.

Folksinger Phil Ochs composed a song about his life, included on "The Broadside Tapes 1". The singer C.W. McCall also wrote (with Chip Davis) and sang a song about Packer called "Comin' Back for More." Death metal band Cannibal Corpse's 1990 debut, *Eaten Back To Life* is dedicated to Packer with the inscription "This Album is dedicated to the memory of Alfred Packer, The First American Cannibal (R.I.P.)"

A 1999 movie, *Ravenous*, was loosely based on aspects of the Alferd Packer story, which screenwriter Ted Griffin says he first encountered when reading *The Thin Man* by Dashiell Hammett.

### **Notes and references**

1. The spelling of Alferd/Alfred Packer's name has been the source of much confusion over the years. Official documents give his name as Alfred Packer, although he may (according to one story) have adopted the name Alferd after it was wrongly tattooed on to one of his arms. Packer sometimes signed his name as "Alferd", sometimes as "Alfred", and is referred to by both names. In many documents, he is referred to simply as A. Packer or Al Packer.

2. Nash, Robert Jay (1994). Alferd Packer. In *Encyclopedia of Western Lawmen & Outlaws*. Da Capo Press. pp. 250-251. ISBN 0-306-80591-X. Google Print. Retrieved 2005-04-13.

3. Grove, Lloyd (1989). *Just How Many Democrats Did Al Packer Eat? GWU Professor Digs Into the Legend*. The Washington Post.

## Resources

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- Gantt, Paul H (1952). *The Case of Alfred Packer, The Man-Eater*. Denver: University of Denver Press.
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### The Story of Alferd E. Packer

"The Colorado Cannibal"

On February 9, 1874, Alferd Packer and five other men departed from the camp of Ute Chief Ouray, near what is now Montrose, Colorado. They were resuming a trek that had begun several months earlier in Provo, Utah, hoping to reach newly discovered gold prospects in Breckenridge, Colorado.

While the original party was considerably larger, only Packer (as guide) and Israel Swan, Shannon Wilson Bell, George Noon, James Humphrey, and Frank Miller dared risk the sometimes brutal Colorado winter in search of riches. And brutal it was, as not long after leaving the safety of Chief Ouray's camp, the group was engulfed in a furious blizzard near the present site of Lake City, Colorado.

Packer was next seen on April 16, 1874, straggling into the Los Pinos Indian Agency with little more than a rifle and a skinning knife belonging to members of his party. The story Packer told at that time was that, once the storm hit, he had set up camp while the others went forward in search of food. They never returned, and Packer subsequently headed out for Los Pinos.

After recovering, Packer left for Saguache, Colorado, where by some accounts he suddenly became a 'big spender' at the local saloon. Unfortunately for Packer, in Saguache he encountered several men from the original Provo group who were dubious about his version of the story.

Indian Agent Charles Adams took Packer back to Los Pinos for questioning about the matter, and on May 8, 1874, extracted the first of Packard's two conflicting confessions. According to Packer, Israel Swan had died and the others, being without food, had eaten him. Subsequently, three others had died from exposure and starvation. Then, Packer admitted to killing Shannon Bell, claiming it was in self-defense.

Packer was transported back to Saguache and jailed outside of town, not in the town's jail house as some have told. In August, Packer escaped from custody and wasn't seen again until March, 1883, when Frenchy Cabazon, one of the original prospecting party, found him quite by accident in Douglas, Wyoming.

By coincidence, on the day of Packer's escape from Saguache, the ghostly remains of the missing prospectors were found in a valley overlooking what is now Lake City, Colorado. There was evidence of a struggle and foul play. The gravesite is now marked and fenced as a tribute to the murdered men.

In March, 1883, Packer was taken to Denver, Colorado, and questioned again about the incident. In his second confession, Packer stuck with his original claim of self-defense, but admitted to stealing the rifle and \$70 in cash from the dead men. Packer was charged with the murder of Israel Swan, the first to die, and was taken to Lake City for trial.

The jury wasted no time in finding Packer guilty of murder, and Judge Melville B. Gerry pronounced that

Packer *"be hanged by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead..."* .

Packer appealed his conviction to the Colorado Supreme Court where the verdict was reversed. He was tried again and this time found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 40 years in the state penitentiary.

After serving only 17 years of his sentence, Packer's cause was championed by a grass-roots campaign in Denver. In 1901, Governor Charles S. Thomas granted Packer's parole request.

Packer moved to Littleton, Colorado, where by all accounts he became a model citizen, well liked by all of his neighbors. He died of natural causes on April 23, 1907, and was buried with military funeral in Littleton Cemetery.

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### **Alfred Packer**

American Folk Figure. Known as the "The Colorado Cannibal". His name is often misspelled as "Alferd," an error that stems from his own illiteracy.

His victims were Frank "Butcher" Miller, Israel Swann, James Humphreys, George Noon, and Shannon Wilson Bell.

Born in Pennsylvania, he enlisted on April 22, 1862 in the 16th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War, and was mustered out at Fort Ontario, New York on December 29, 1862 suffering from epilepsy. On June 10, 1863, he reenlisted again, in the 8th Iowa Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, and was mustered out again just ten months later in Cleveland, Tennessee, again due to his epilepsy.

In 1873, he was in Provo, Utah, looking for gold in the rich Utah hills. In November 1873, he was with a party of 21 that left Provo for Colorado, to attempt to find gold in the Rocky Mountains. In early January 1874, the party met with Cheyenne Chief Ouray at the Indian encampment near Montrose, Colorado. On February 9, 1874, he and five others decide to push on for gold, leaving the others behind in the Indian encampment.

Two months later, on April 6, Alfred Packer arrived alone at the Los Pinos Indian Agency near Gunnison, Colorado.

A month later, he wrote his confession, stating that Bell killed the other men, and he killed Bell in self defense. Since there was no food, and they had brought inadequate provisions, he lived by eating the dead men. (A second confession, written in March 1883, gives more detail, and a third confession, written on August 7, 1897, is even more detailed. However, each confession contradicts the earlier confession in numerous details as to how the men died, and who killed whom. The only consistent "facts" are that Packer admits to killing Bell after Bell attacks him, and that he ate some of the dead men's flesh due to starvation hunger).

A search party that was dispatched to the site found the bodies as described. Alfred Packer escaped from jail, and went into hiding under the alias "John Schwartze." In March 1883, a former fellow miner, Frenchy Carbazon found him hiding out in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He was arrested and returned to Colorado, where he was tried and sentenced to death.

In 1885 his death sentence was reversed by the Colorado Supreme Court due to a "grandfather's clause," and he was retried and sentenced to forty years in prison.

In January 1901, Colorado Governor Thomas, convinced by newspaper muckraker Poly Pry, granted Packer conditional parole, and he was freed from prison but not allowed to leave the state of Colorado. Upon release from prison, he moved to Deer Creek, Jefferson County, Colorado, where he lived for the rest of his life, as a vegetarian. He died in Phillipsburg, Colorado. In 1980, the story was made into a movie, "The Legend of Alfred Packer," and a folk song was written about the incident by Phil Ochs.

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### **Alferd Packer (also spelled Alfred)**

This was the first case of cannibalism to have been tried in the U.S. Courts, and while he has many supporters to this day who believe his consumption of human flesh was justified by starvation, a modern forensic analysis has dispelled all doubt about what he really did.

In 1874, Packer was hired to guide five prospectors through the Colorado Mountains, the youngest of whom was a teenager. Six weeks after they set out, Packer came alone into the Los Pinos Indian Agency looking fit and well-fed, and spending money from several wallets. He claimed that the harsh weather had killed the others, but then strips of human flesh were found along the trail. That cast some doubt on his shifting story. A few months later, the five skeletons were located, and Packer fled across the state line.

Nine years went by before he was caught and brought to Lake City, Colorado, for trial. A prospector who had seen the victims in their decomposing state described hatchet wounds on one of the skulls, and on slim evidence Packer was convicted of premeditated murder. In a second trial, held due to legislative error, he was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to forty years in prison. Eventually supporters won him a pardon in 1901. His reputation restored, he was viewed as a victim of circumstances.

Then a forensic expedition in 1989 exhumed the bones, which were in a surprisingly good state of preservation, and the analysis was conclusive: there were defensive wounds on some of the victims, and clear evidence that they had been attacked by a hatchet and defleshed by a knife. Packer had been an outright cannibal.

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### **The Other Side Of The Coin**

by Helen E. Waters

Alferd Packer (and that is believed to be the way he usually spelled it), like the bad penny, turned up often enough in his day to satisfy a lot of people.

But, while history records his bad reputation, there is another side to the coin.

Packer, Colorado's alleged cannibal, spent his final years at Phillipsburg, and a number of people in the Littleton and Deer Creek Canyon area remember him kindly. They say Packer liked children - and they were children at the time. It has been recorded that children followed Packer "like the Pied Piper". One account states that Packer died from natural causes in 1907 in Littleton, Colorado, and was mourned by the children, for whom he had bought candy and spun yarns in his declining years."

The Packer story has been told many times. Briefly, he was the sole survivor of a party of six who disregarded warnings and left Chief Ouray's camp on a prospecting trip in the fall of 1873, bound for gold fields near Breckenridge.

Beset by storms, the party took a wrong turn and became hopelessly lost, and ran out of provisions.

According to one of Packer's confessions - and there are several - he left his friends and climbed higher on the mountain to scout around. When he returned, he said, he found only one of his companions alive. This one man, he said, was in the act of roasting a piece of human meat. When the man saw Packer, he allegedly came at him with a hatchet, and Packer shot him in self-defense.

To shorten a long story, whose details are available in many books, Packer then stumbled, sick and half frozen, (according to one of several versions of the story) into the Los Pinos Indian Agency on Cochetopa Creek in April, 1874.

When it was later discovered that the other five men had been killed, Packer was jailed. He escaped, and for nine years, under the name of John Swartz, remained free. He was subsequently brought to trial and

imprisoned for 17 years before his parole in 1901.

One of the more colorful stories states that a judge spat at Packer, "There were seven Dimmycrats in Hinsdale County and you et five of them!" The truth, apparently, is that the judge was a very literate man and made no such statement.

Packer, in about 1905, moved to a cabin in Phillipsburg near the site of the present building, once known as the Lone Pine Dance Hall. He is said to have had a number of mining claims in the area.

Fred Clark, former resident of Phillipsburg, and one-time owner of the dance hall, now living in Littleton, described Packer as having "kind of short, black whiskers, and his hair was a little long, not too long, and he seemed to have awful piercing black eyes." Clark, who was a little boy at the time, said he saw Packer only once.

Another lifelong resident, the late William Couch, said, "Packer lived between the store and the dance hall. There were four slab buildings there then. He worked on ranches." He continued, "He was an awful nice man. I was a kid, and he used to talk to my dad. He did what he did to protect himself. He never was the kind of man they say he was."

About the murder of the five men, all of whose deaths were blamed on Packer, Couch said, "Packer went off for something to eat, and when he came back, one man came at him with an ax and he had to shoot him. They were starving to death. Packer said he tried to eat a piece of the one man's hip, but it made him deathly sick and he never did it again. Just after that, they found him, I guess."

Alma Clawson Thorpe of Littleton said she lived in Phillipsburg before Packer did, and didn't know him, but that she saw him several times after she moved to Littleton. "He was said never to eat meat after he came back," she reported. She said she didn't believe the cannibal stories about him, and that Packer gathered children about him and gave them candy and told them stories.

Laura Kuehster, who spent most of her life at Critchell, a few miles south of Phillipsburg, said Packer lived at Critchell before going to Phillipsburg, and that one Christmas, he gave her a doll.

"I was a little kid four or five years old," she said, "and I thought he was great."

In late 1906, so the story goes, a state game warden found Packer unconscious in the yard of the Conaly Ranch about a mile from his home. A Mrs. Van Alstine assumed his care for the remaining months of his life. Clark said Mrs. Van Alstine's home was where the McKinney Ranch now stands. According to the U.S. Geological Survey map, the ranch lies along "Van Alderstien Gulch."

In 1940 Bishop Frank Hamilton Rice led six of his followers plus a goat to the Packer gravesite in the Littleton Cemetery, and in a macabre ceremony absolved Packer and his victims of sin, transferring those sins to the goat, who, according to record, was unimpressed.

Whatever you may believe of the Packer story, and Alferd Packer seems to have engendered strong feelings either for or against him from those who knew him, the little wide spot known as Phillipsburg has its permanent place in Colorado history as the last home of Alferd Packer.

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### **Alferd Packer**

**Alferd Packer**, a Cannibal, was born in Allegheny County, PA., January 21st, 1842. He was by occupation, a shoemaker. At the age of 20, he enlisted in the Union Army, April 22nd, 1862, at Winona, Minnesota, and was honorably discharged December 29th, 1862, at Fort Ontario, New York, due to disability. He went west working at his trade and engaged in prospecting.

On November 8th, 1873, as a guide for a party of 21 men, he left Bingham Canyon, Utah to go to the gold fields of the Colorado Territory. Part of their food supply was accidentally lost crossing a river on a raft. A most severe winter made travel extremely hazardous. The food ran out. Late in January of 1874 they found shelter and food at Chief Ouray's camp near Montrose, Colorado. On February 9th, Packer and

five companions left the camp, contrary to the advice of Ouray.

Packer arrived alone at the Los Pinos Indian Agency, near Saguache, Colorado on April 16th, 1874. He was fat and had plenty of money. His conduct invited suspicion and questioning by Otto Mears and General Adams. Packer broke down and made two confessions. He admitted that he had lived off the flesh of his five companions the bigger part of the sixty days he was lost between Lake San Cristobal and the Los Pinos Agency.

The five bodies were found. Packer was placed in a dungeon in Saguache, but made good his escape through the aid of an accomplice on August 8th, 1874. He was arrested eight years later near Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, March 11th, 1883. He was tried in Lake City, Colorado, April 6th-13th, 1883, found guilty and sentenced to death.

The Lynch Mob was ready to take over. To prevent this, Packer was moved during the night to the Gunnison jail, where he remained for three years. His case was appealed to the Colorado Supreme Court and reversed on October 30th, 1885 (8 Colo. 361, 8 Pac. 564) due to a technicality, because he was charged after a Territorial law, but tried under a State law. The second trial was held in Gunnison, Colorado, August 2nd-5th, 1886. The jury returned a verdict of guilty of manslaughter for each of the five victims, or a total of forty years.

Packer served in the penitentiary at Canon City, Colorado from 1886-1901. Sob sister Polly Pry of The Denver Post, and lawyer Wm. W. "Plug Hat" Anderson were given the task of getting Packer paroled. "Plug Hat" came up with the proposition that the offense, having occurred on an Indian Reservation, the trial should have been in a Federal court and not a State court. There appears to be merit to this theory.

Bonfils and Tammen, owners of The Denver Post and the Sells-Floto Circus, wanted Packer as a sideshow freak. Governor Charles S. Thomas sent to Salt Lake City for ex-Gunnison County sheriff, Doc Shores. Doc told of intercepting Packer's mail. Doc testified that Al was filthy, vulgar, selfish, and to sum it up, a disgrace to the human race. The Post was winning the fight, but the Governor had an ace up his sleeve. On January 10th, 1901, Packer signed a parole agreement that provided, "He (Packer) shall proceed at once to Denver, and there remain, if practicable, for a period of at least six years and nine months from this date."

Packer had earned about \$1,500 making hair rope and hair bridles while a prisoner. He paid "Plug Hat" a fee of twenty-five dollars. Bon and Tam demanded half of the fee. An argument developed in Bonfils' office. Present were Bonfils, Tammen, Polly Pry and Anderson. Bonfils struck Anderson across the face. Anderson went across the street, got his gun and returned to the office, entered without knocking and shot Bonfils in the neck and chest and Tammen in the shoulder and chest. Both ducked under Polly's full skirt. Anderson had fired four times and had one shot left in his gun. He was waiting to use that last bullet. Bonfils raised Polly's skirt to see what was going on. Anderson noticed that Bonfils was shaking like a leaf and that he was dripping wet. This struck Anderson's funny bone, and he jumped up and down and rocked with laughter. That laughter saved the lives of the owners of The Post.

Anderson was tried three times for the crime of assault with the intent to murder. The first trial started April 19th, 1900 and lasted nine days. The jury disagreed and was discharged. The same result was produced after a nine-day trial on August 2nd, 1901. The third trial started November 12th, 1901, and four days later the jury returned a verdict of "not guilty."

The defense attorney, Col. John G. Taylor, made the statement, "I believe that The Denver Times was fairer to us than any other paper. The tone all the way through showed the facts exactly as they were, and I desire to give due credit to the stand the paper took in the matter." The trial judge said to Anderson: "Your motive was admirable, but your marksmanship was abominable."

Packer died April 23rd, 1907 and is buried in Littleton, Colorado. Thousands of tourists visit his grave every summer.

Gene Fowler, Ralph Carr, Herndon Davis, and Fred Mazzulla popularized the Packer Story. The four men organized "The Packer Club". For *one dollar fifty*, one could buy a Packer sandwich along with an official membership card. The card read: "They was siven Dimmycrats in Hinsdale County, but you, yah voracious, man-eatin' son of a bitch, yah eat five of thim!" At the bottom of the membership charter form it continued: "I agrees to eliminat five Nu Deal Dimmycrats witch makes me a mimber of th' Packer Club of Colorado". Even official "Execution Of Alferd Packer" invitations were drafted and signed by the sheriff of Hinsdale County.



Let's not condemn poor Packer  
Nor crowd his soul with abuse  
Though he hardly would merit approval,  
"Hunger" is a valid excuse.

Politicians, historians and authors  
Have scoured his very last bone.  
Yet out through the timeless forever  
His soul wanders alone.  
- - Olive Nagel Porter - -

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## ALFRED PACKER: THE MANEATER OF COLORADO

By Katherine Ramsland

### **A Fateful Journey**

In the Colorado Rockies  
Where the snow is deep and cold  
And a man afoot can starve to death  
Unless he's brave and bold

Oh Alfred Packer  
You'll surely go to hell  
While all the others starved to death  
You dined a bit too well

---from *The Ballad of Alfred Packer*

The strange odyssey of Alfred G. Packer has generated much controversy over the years, from those who believe he murdered and cannibalized five men for his own profit to those who insist he was innocent of murder and merely ate human flesh to survive. He's considered something of a local hero in some parts of Colorado, and despite evidence that supports his more nefarious side, people continue to defend him.

From books to newspaper accounts during the time of tabloid journalism to official documents in the Colorado State Archives, there are nearly as many versions of the story as Packer himself told. All rely on him as the sole witness, with the exception of those who saw the results of what he had done.

In 1873, Alfred Packer, 31, went with a group of 20 other prospectors from Bingham Canyon, Utah, near Salt Lake City, into the San Juan Mountains in Colorado to seek wealth from mining minerals, including gold. He claimed to have been the guide for this expedition, but there is evidence that this may have been an exaggeration if not an outright fabrication. Apparently some of the food supply was lost along the way, and the would-be miners grew hungry and desperate.

The party arrived in January 1874 into Chief Ouray's Ute camp in northwestern Colorado, near Montrose, where they were cared for and urged to remain until spring. At that time of year, the mountain passes were treacherous, the Ute said, and snow could bury men. It would not be wise to proceed.

Nevertheless, a handful of these prospectors could not wait. They wanted to get to the mines before anyone else. Five of them, frenzied by the prospecting spirit, decided to risk all and continue over the mountains to the Los Piños Indian Agency on Cochetopa Creek near Saguache and Gunnison. Packer joined them. They left on February 9. (Many years later, Packer claimed that another group of five had gone out before them.)

With a 10-day supply of food for a 75-mile trip (they apparently thought it was 40), the doomed men who left Chief Ouray's camp with Packer were Shannon Wilson Bell, Israel Swan, James Humphrey, Frank "Reddy" Miller, and George "California" Noon, who was only 18. Aside from Packer, that was the last time anyone saw these men alive.

More than two months passed and people wondered where they were. The next event is confusing. Either a party of prospectors came through in the spring and asked about them, sending out search parties, or Packer himself emerged. The popular story has it that Packer came out alone from the winter wilderness and walked into the Los Piños Indian Agency. It was April 16 (the Colorado State Archives say April 6). Some witnesses say they saw him in the nearby town of Saguache more than a week earlier.

Oddly, when he arrived, he had several wallets in his possession from which he extracted rolls of money, and although he professed having gone for more than a day without food, he asked for nothing to eat. He just wanted some whiskey. He mentioned that he'd hurt his leg and had fallen behind, so he was not sure where the others from his party were. He had expected them to beat him out of the mountains.

But the prospectors had not been seen. People who listened to his tales at the saloon thought that he'd taken the dead men's possessions. Then, an Indian guide walking along the trail found strips of meat, which turned out to be human flesh. Packer's tales began to sound like outright lies. From all appearances, he had killed the others, survived off their meat, and enriched himself with their assets.

The pressure was on to get a coherent account out of him.

### **Packer's Confession**

About a month after he emerged from the wilderness alone, Packer admitted that he knew what had happened to the others in his party and he was willing to provide details. On May 8, his confession was given and signed under General Charles Adams' supervision at the Los Piños Indian Agency.

Right away, poor weather conditions hindered the party's progress, Packer said, and their supplies eventually ran out. Streams and lakes were too frozen or treacherous to fish, and wild game was scarce. They could not turn back, but they were not optimistic about going forward, either. Since they were already starving, their situation looked bleak. Packer's statement to General Adams indicated that the other five men had died at various stages of their journey, either as starvation overtook them or as they were killed in self-defense from one another's hunger-maddened attacks. Ultimately, the bodies were found at various places along the trail.

Israel Swan, being the oldest at around 65, died first, about 10 days after the group departed, and the survivors had all taken pieces from him to eat. Then four or five days later, James Humphrey died and "was also eaten." He proved to have \$133 in his pocket and Packer admitted that he had taken it. The man was no longer going to need it, so why not? Why the other two did not search the body or question Packer's theft is not clear.

The third man to die — Packer referred to him as "the Butcher" — was Frank Miller, in an "accident" that occurred while Packer was searching for wood. He did not specify what kind of accident. The other two who were still alive decided to eat him, since he was dead, and Packer returned to find this activity already in progress. The next to go was the boy, George Noon. Packer reported that while he was off for several days hunting for game, Bell had shot "California" Noon with Swan's gun. Packer had returned and together they ate him. That left only Packer and Bell.

Despite the fact that they had just dined, it seems that Bell decided that he was going to be the only survivor.

"Bell wanted to kill me," Packer's report indicates, "struck at me with his rifle, struck a tree and broke his gun." So Packer had killed him first.

And that left only one.

Why Packer had not offered this tale immediately upon returning to the settlement is not made clear in his confession, and perhaps was not even questioned. He swore that this statement was the truth "and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

Knowing that the five prospectors lay out in the open somewhere, a search party went out, led by a reluctant Packer. He took them where he believed he had last seen the others, but they failed to find the missing prospectors.

It seems clear in retrospect, in view of what came next, that Packer was scheming for a way to clear himself or get away. But before he could do anything, he was arrested and jailed in Saguache on suspicion of murder.

Apparently the authorities did not believe his account. Their suspicions were soon confirmed. As it turned out, the lost prospectors had not been killed one by one and left along the way. Packer's confession was a lie.

### **A Grisly Find**

In August 1874, John A. Randolph, an artist sent out to Colorado for *Harper's Weekly Magazine*, came across a startling sight at Slumgullion Pass: Five sets of human remains lay in a cluster near the bank of the lake fork of the Gunnison River, just two miles from present-day Lake City. He realized at once that this had to be the prospectors. (One account states that a road-building crew found the remains first, but there are no records about the find at that time, so it's likely untrue that anyone had discovered them before Randolph.)

Among the remains were pieces of torn clothing, blankets, and some shreds of flesh, but weather and animals had clearly done damage to the evidence. Their feet were still bound in the blankets that they had torn for that purpose, and Randolph found no shoes, cooking utensils, or guns around them. It appeared that they had not only been murdered where they lay but also horribly ravaged, and one set of remains was missing its head. Two had pieces of flesh cut out, one out of the breast and one out of the thigh, and one appeared to have put up a fight. Randolph spent some time at the site, sketching them all in a detailed composition that would be immortalized, and then reported his discovery.

The Hinsdale County coroner, W. F. Ryan, hurried to the spot with 20 other men to hold an inquest, but unfortunately for history, he put nothing into writing. A member of the original party that had left Utah, Preston Nutter, identified the remains as those of his former companions, and by a process of elimination it was determined that Frank Miller was the one without a head.

The coroner made sure that the witnesses all got a good look for the approaching trial and then had the bodies buried together in graves on a high bluff nearby, overlooking the spot of their discovery. Individual slabs were set up to memorialize each of the deceased. Randolph also sketched the burial place, and the area became known as "Dead Man's Gulch."

After they finished this grisly deed and returned to town to confront Packer with his obvious lies, they learned that he had escaped from the sieve-like jail at Saguache. Some said he'd had the assistance of an accomplice. Where he might have gone, no one knew.

### **Alfred or Alferd?**

There's long been confusion over the correct spelling of Packer's name. Official documents from the military, court proceedings, and even his tombstone list it as Alfred G. Packer. Yet during his first stint in the military, he had written it as Alferd, and had that spelling tattooed on his arm. (Or the tattoo artist made the error, which amused him, and he subsequently adopted it—depending on which account is to be believed.) He was known to spell it this way on other occasions as well. The invitations to his hanging followed suit.

Packer was born on November 21, 1842 (some say January 21) in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. As he grew up, he learned the cobbler trade. Then the Civil War broke out, involving Pennsylvania, and he was of the right age to enlist.

When he was 19, he went west and enlisted in the 16<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry in Winona, Minn., but by the end of the year, epilepsy had forced him out with an honorable discharge. By June 1863, he was back, enlisting in the 8th Regiment in the Iowa Calvary. Once again, he didn't last. He was "mustered out," due to epilepsy. One report says that he served with General Custer, as a scout.

Ten years later, he was among those who left Utah on a mining expedition. He said that he'd driven one wagons in some mining camps, which gave him the expertise to guide, but it turned out to everyone's misfortune that he actually knew very little about the area to which they were going.

The fact that he had taken the opportunity to escape from jail, rather than face a tribunal of his peers, suggested to many that he was a liar, thief, and murderer.

Yet it was a big country and he knew his way around the wilderness, so it seemed probable he might disappear rather than be brought to justice. Months went by, and then years.

### **Caught**

Packer managed to elude the law for nine years by living under the assumed name of John Schwartze. No one knows how he made a living for all that time or why he ventured back so close to where people knew him, but finally in March 1883, Frenchy Cabizon, a former member of the original party, recognized his laugh in a saloon in Fort Fetterman, Wyo. Packer was captured only 300 miles from where he'd begun to run. Unmasked and rearrested, he went before a grand jury, which returned five indictments against him for the hatchet murders of the five hapless prospectors. Packer offered yet a second confession on March 16, 1883, again under the supervision of the same General Adams.

He said that he and the others had left Chief Ouray's camp with seven days' worth of food provisions for one man—in other words, not much. After two or three days, they encountered a snowstorm. As they moved from mountain to gulch, they found the deep snow impenetrable in places. By the fourth day, they had only a pint of flour left out of all their provisions. They just kept going.

Ten days into their treacherous trek, as they were surviving on rosebuds and pine gum, some of them showed signs of serious depression, even madness. They came upon a lake and cut holes in the ice to fish, but had no luck. They continued on.

Swan was growing angry and told Packer to go up the mountain with the rifle and scout out the terrain. Packer claimed that he was a guide for the others. He said that when he went scouting, all he could find was more snow. The situation looked hopeless, especially since Bell had been acting crazy that morning, as if hunger were twisting his mind.

When Packer returned with nothing positive to report, he said that he found Bell sitting by a fire roasting a large piece of meat, "which he had cut out of the leg of the German butcher," i.e., Miller.

"The latter's body was lying the furthest off from the fire down the stream, his skull was crushed in with a hatchet. The other three men were lying near the fire, they were cut in the forehead with the hatchet. Some had two, some three cuts."

As Packer approached the fire, Bell picked up the bloody hatchet to attack him, too. In self-defense, Packer claimed, he shot the man through the stomach, sideways. When Bell dropped his hatchet and fell onto his face, Packer grabbed it and used it on him, hitting him in the top of the head to ensure that his would-be attacker was indeed dead. Then he spent the night in despair. He tried to leave the camp the next day, leaving the four dead men behind, but the snow was too deep, so he had to return to the gruesome arena. He covered the dead, but for several weeks, lived on the flesh that Swan had already cut from one of them.

Each day, he made a renewed attempt to leave, but each day the snow thwarted him, so he took more flesh from the dead. He estimated that he survived this way for about two months. "I could not eat but a little at a time."

Finally, when the snow looked to be thawing and crusting over, Packer packed a few pieces of human flesh, a gun, \$70 dollars he had found on the men, and went on his way. Just before he reached the Agency, at his very last camp, he consumed the last pieces of meat. (He does not account for how some strips of human flesh were found along the way.)

He admitted that when he had led the 1874 party in search of the bodies, he had not gone all the way back because he had not wanted to venture closer to that site.

Packer added that he had escaped from jail by using a penknife as a key and had initially gone to Arkansas and Arizona before heading to Wyoming.

Once again, he claimed that this was a true confession, voluntarily made and sworn before a notary

public. It was not his final version of the story.

### **Tried for Murder**

Alfred Packer's trial began on April 6, 1883, at the Hinsdale County Courthouse in Lake City, Colorado, for the murder of the elderly Israel Swan. According to witnesses, Swan's remains had shown evidence of a hand-to-hand struggle, implicating Packer in a much more violent episode than shooting a man in self-defense. Besides, it was not Swan he had claimed to shoot, but Bell. So why had Swan appeared to have struggled to save himself?

Judge Melville B. Gerry presided. Preston Nutter, who had identified the five victims in the clearing, testified as a lay witness to what he had seen and what he knew. Using illustrations, he described for the jury the positions of the bodies as they had been found and said that all but one bore hatchet wounds to the head. That lone individual had been struck hard in the back of the head, which was "mashed in."

Oddly, the coroner — the man in the best position to offer a professional analysis — did not testify at all. He wasn't even called to do so. Since he had never recorded his observations of the condition of the remains, there was nothing in writing about the details to which the court could refer. In fact, no one who was experienced in criminal investigation testified at this trial. It was mostly a matter of who the jury would believe, and no one was a true eyewitness of the events save Packer himself.

When recalled later in the trial, Preston Nutter described a hole he had seen in a bone severed from one of the bodies, and in his layman's opinion said it looked like a gunshot wound. He also described how the clothing of the deceased men had been "cut and ripped up." He offered no explanation as to what he meant.

Taking the witness stand, Packer defended himself for more than two hours, and in the process told several significant lies. He lied about his age, the nature of his military service, the fact that he had enlisted twice and been discharged twice, and the cause of his epilepsy, which he said had resulted from walking guard duty.

Addressing the issue at hand, he denied any blame in the deaths of most of the party, but he admitted that he had shot and killed a hatchet-wielding Wilson Bell in self-defense. He also spoke of the deaths of the others, and said that some of those who had survived longer had eaten the others to stay alive (a direct contradiction of his second confession, in which only Bell had done this). However when all of this gruesome activity allegedly had occurred, Packer himself had been scouting for a trail or for food. He returned to find human remains already boiling in a stewpot, although he did admit to taking meat from the bones of two of the deceased (Bell and Miller) to stay his own hunger.

Because he'd offered several versions of his experiences at different times, and had admitted to taking the victims' belongings and money, despite his superficial patter, things did not go well for him. Worse still, on the witness stand, he was quarrelsome and flippant. Some of his fabrications were transparent attempts to save himself.

Like most liars, Packer believed he had made his case with his detailed presentation, but the jury did not accept his version of the tale. On Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of April in 1883, nine years after he had emerged from the wilderness, Alfred Packer was convicted of the premeditated murder of Israel Swan.

Legend has it that Judge Gerry then pronounced the sentence as "Stand up yah voracious man-eatin' sonofabitch and receive yir sitince. When yah came to Hinsdale County, there was siven dimmycrats. But you, yah et five of 'em, goddam yah. I sintince yah t' be hanged by th' neck ontill yer dead, dead, dead, as a warnin' ag'in reducin' th' Dimmycratic populayshun of this county. Packer, you Republican cannibal, I would sintince ya ta hell but the statutes forbid it."

What Gerry, a literate man, actually said, according to court documents, was, "Close your ears to the blandishments of hope. Listen not to the flattering promises of life, but prepare for the dread certainty of death." He was apparently convinced that the motive for the murder was robbery, not survival or self-defense.

In a long statement, Gerry claimed that the sentence was painful for him to pronounce: "I would to God the cup might pass from me!" He mentioned that the murder was "revolting in all its details" and that the trial had been fair, with a jury of 12 impartial men. Gerry's version was that the five victims laid down to

go to sleep and Packer exploited their trust and vulnerability to effect his attack. Although he had been convicted only of the death of Israel Swan, the assumption in Gerry's admonition was that Packer had willfully murdered the entire crew.

"To other sickening details of your crime I will not refer," said Gerry. "Silence is kindness." Clearly, he was referring to the cannibalism of human remains.

He did seem to think that Packer's conscience had bothered him all these years and kept his crimes fresh in his mind. "You, Alfred Packer, sowed the wind. You must now reap the whirlwind Your life must be taken as the penalty for your crime."

Alfred Packer was condemned to be hanged on May 19, 1883, "until you are dead, dead, dead, and may God have mercy upon your soul."

Contrary to many stories told years later, and even today (see Internet biographies), Packer was never charged with, tried for, or convicted of cannibalism, or crimes related to cannibalism.

But it was not over yet. The Maneater was not about to be hanged, and he had one more version of the story to tell.

### **Second Trial**

Two years later, Packer won the right to a new trial, to take place in Gunnison, about thirty miles away. The Colorado Supreme Court had set aside the murder conviction, based on a technical legislative oversight: Packer could not be tried in 1883 for a crime he had committed in 1874, because there had been no state murder statute in 1874 that allowed for it. In other words, he had been arrested when Colorado was a territory but tried when Colorado was a state. Some later said that he had committed the crime on an Indian reservation, so by all rights he should have been tried in a Federal court, not a State court. At any rate, he was retried in 1896 for all five deaths — not just Israel Swan — on a different charge: voluntary manslaughter.

The jury in that trial also convicted him (some reports say it was the same jury) but they only sentenced him to 40 years (eight for each of the five deaths) in the state penitentiary.

On August 7, 1897, he wrote a letter to D.C. Hatch of the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, with the longest version yet of the events that had taken place on that snowy mountain pass. Much of it was reprinted in the newspaper—though dramatized a bit.

He claimed that even before the six men set out, the entire party of 21 had been suffering from extreme hunger due to lack of planning and supplies on the trip from Utah. They were living on horse feed. Chief Ouray gave them assistance and they camped near his settlement. He told them that the mountains were impassible.

He then said that a man named Lutzenheiser and four others decided to go on across the mountains to the Agency. Ouray supposedly told them that it was only 40 miles away, when in fact it was 80. They soon ran out of supplies and cast lots to see who would become food for the others. But they spotted a coyote, and so spared anyone from being killed. Not long after, they came across a cow and killed that as well. The cow's owner followed Lutzenheiser's tracks and took him back to a camp. He found the others and aided them as well. When they revived, they started out again. (Packer claims that this was all a matter of court record.) They were again picked up near exhaustion and starvation.

At this point, Packer returns to the experience of his own party of six. They left about a week after Lutzenheiser's party and took a different trail. Their provisions lasted about nine days. Three days after the food ran out, they cooked and ate their rawhide moccasins, wrapping their feet in blankets.

"Our suffering at this time was most intense," he wrote, "such in fact, that the inexperienced cannot imagine."

They kept going, since the snow quickly buried their trail from behind. He again points out that Wilson Bell suffered mental derangement from starvation, and everyone else was frightened of him. They finally descended to the lake fork of the Gunnison River and camped there. In the morning, Packer went to look

for signs of civilization. When he returned, he saw Bell alone, just as he had related in a prior telling. But in this retelling, Bell came at him, he shot in self-defense, and *then* he realized that the other men were murdered.

"Can you imagine my situation? My companions dead and I left alone, surrounded by the midnight horrors of starvation as well as those of utter isolation?"

He could hardly believe he had ever returned in a rational frame of mind.

He sat down and saw the flesh that Bell had cut from Miller, cooking on the fire. But he did not partake. Instead, he laid it aside and covered his slain comrades. Finally in the morning, he ate some of the flesh and it made him feel ill. "My mind at this period failed me." He did not want to believe it but he thought he must have eaten some of the flesh. He could not recall.

He stayed there for some time, he did not know how long, but in his wandering, looking for food, he somehow stumbled into the Agency. Without realizing it, he had traveled 40 miles.

Although by all reports, he came in looking quite healthy, he claims in this letter that he had to be taken care of for three weeks. He learned the Lutzenheiser and his party also made it out, and the rest of the 21 men who had begun the trip had come over with the Ute. Packer says that he confessed at once that he had killed Bell but had attributed the deaths of the others to Bell (not consistent with his initial confession before General Adams). He claimed that he had been unable to show anyone where his comrades had lain because deep snow had driven them back.

He was then arrested and he said that it was the sheriff who actually let him go and told him to go away. The sheriff apparently had taken compassion on him for all that he had been through. (He does not explain why, if he was freed by the law, he then had to live under an assumed name.)

"Am I the villainous wretch which some have asserted me to be?" he asks. "No man can be more heartily sorry for the acts of twenty-four years ago than I."

He felt he had been unjustly dealt with, there having been no motive for why he would attack his fellow man. The ghosts of the dead men, he believed, knew that he was innocent.

Eventually, with some political assistance, he was freed from prison.

### **The Maneater's Last Days**

After serving 16 years in prison, Packer made a petition for parole. His case was reviewed and parole was denied. A reporter at the *Denver Post*, Polly Pry, grew interested in his case and believed he was innocent. She began a campaign for Packer's release, and with the paper's support, got the attention of the governor.

Packer made another application for parole, based on his deteriorating physical condition, and in 1901, the parole was approved. The prison physician had certified that Packer was suffering from Bright's Disease, which made further confinement dangerous in terms of its aggravating factors. In addition, Packer had persuaded prominent men around the state, notably reporters and the owners of the *Denver Post*, to sign a petition on his behalf. The owners believed they could get Packer to be a side-show freak in the Sells-Floto Circus for their profit.

The governor had not changed his mind about the offenses, so Packer was not pardoned, but he did see warrant in permitting him to be released from imprisonment.

He went to Denver and worked at the newspaper as a guard, but city life did not please him, so he moved to Deer Creek Canyon in Jefferson County. Yet he did not have long to enjoy his freedom. His final years were spent managing two mines and telling children the stories of his adventures as he dealt with his liver and stomach ailments. Many said that he was a nice old man.

Late in 1906, a state game warden found Packer unconscious a mile from his home, and for the few months that remained to him, he came into the care of a Mrs. Van Alstine. Just before he died on April

24, 1907, from a stroke (listed as "senility—trouble & worry"), he wrote a letter to the governor to request a full pardon. No action was taken. Buried in Littleton, Colorado, at Prince Avenue Cemetery, Lot 65, he had (and continued to gain) many supporters who believed that he was a victim of circumstance and had killed other men because he was starving -- although at both of his trials, he himself had eschewed this claim.

He was buried at government expense, because he was considered a military veteran and for years had received a disability pension of \$25 a month—for which he had filed from prison claiming his epilepsy had derived from his stint in the military.

The military also paid for a tombstone, which read, "Alfred Packer, Co. F. 16 U.S. Inf."

According to the Littleton, Colorado newspaper, the *Independent*, Packer's last words before he died were, "I'm not guilty of the charge."

Years after the fact, in 1928 (or 1968), the citizens of Lake City erected a monument for the victims and threw a community fish fry. Exactly where the victims had been buried, however, proved to be a source of some contention.

In 1981, Governor Lamm denied Judge Kushner's posthumous pardon of Alfred Packer. Then in 1989, an event occurred that drew the nation's attention back to this man.

### **Another Look at the Victims**

James E. Starrs, a law professor from The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. visited Gunnison one day in 1989 and heard some of the stories. Having long been curious about Packer's two trials and his chosen defense, he looked for the spot where the victims had been buried. Townspeople directed him to various places like Dead Man's Gulch, but no one was altogether certain. Starrs decided to ask the owners of the property on which a monument with the victims' names had been erected if he could dig down and find evidence of the remains. They granted permission, he obtained insurance and several grants, and planned for an archaeological dig. He wrote about the experience in his own newsletter, *Scientific Sleuthing Review*.

The dig commenced on July 17, 1989, a bright sunny day, with a team that included anthropologists, archaeologists, photographers, student diggers, a lawyer, and other forensic personnel. Local media were on hand from around the state to document anything that was found. After checking the soil composition and pH level, Starrs started the dig with a team of experts who had brought in a ground-penetrating radar device. After they ran the machine over the area, they told him they suspected that whatever anomaly was below the surface was not very deep—possibly only a foot. They advised against using a backhoe, lest the shovel crush bones that might be close to the surface.

So the anthropologists and students took over with hand trowels and it wasn't long before they discovered human remains. Digging for the rest of the day, they uncovered all five victims, laid out side-by-side. The bones were not intermingled, which made things easier for the forensic anthropologists, and they were photographed, boxed, labeled, and taken to the anthropology lab at the University of Arizona at Tucson.

There the bones were laid out and carefully examined, while a few pieces were sent on to the anthropological curator of the Smithsonian Institution, Douglas Ubelaker, for dating and age analysis.

Using known data, they managed to figure out the identities of each set of remains, and then did a more detailed examination for bone damage.

It can be difficult to make decisions about cause of death on skeletal remains unless there has been a wound from bullet, knife or blunt force that penetrated or broke a bone. In this case, given the various witness accounts, they did expect to find trauma, so they were careful to document everything.

One of the anthropologists, upon seeing the bones, had shouted that there was a bullet hole in one set of remains, but it turned out to be a hole that animals had gnawed and could not be ascertained as having been made by any weapon. (Nevertheless, the story got into the newspapers erroneously.) Three of the bodies had blunt force blows to the head, as well as cuts to the arms and hands, which Professor Starrs interpreted as defensive wounds. He also believed that nicks on the bones that appeared to have been



made by a knife was evidence of defleshing.

While not everyone on the team agreed about how much actual support there was for making a definitive statement, Starrs went on record as saying that Packer was a murdering cannibal and liar.

The remains were reburied in a wooden box in the same spot, with a solemn ceremony.

In the meantime, in 1997, a curator for the collection of the Museum of Western Colorado in Gunnison, claimed to have discovered Packer's revolver, an 1862 Colt. It had been collected from the massacre site, he said, when the victims were initially discovered. It was loaded, with three bullets in the chamber. According to some reports, including curator David Bailly's, this discovery corroborates the details of Packer's account—or at least of one of his confessions.

Starrs disputes that Packer owned such a gun and says there are no records that a revolver was recovered when the victims' remains were found.

Regardless of whether Packer owned such a gun, the fact that he'd shot a bullet or two is no indication that he killed in self defense. He might have shot at some game, or he might have outright murdered one or more of his party. Even a bullet hole located on any member of the party would not clarify that issue.

Packer's guilt or innocence may always remain a mystery, but his story continues to fascinate scholars and lay people alike.

### **The Legend Lives On**

People have not forgotten Alfred (or Alferd) Packer. While a collected archive of documents exists in Colorado, from his prison record to the court cases to his bid for parole, other forms of entertainment poke fun at the man.

The University of Colorado at Boulder named their student cafeteria The Alfred Packer Memorial Grill, apparently as a derisive statement about the food served there.

A documentary movie was made, *The Legend of Alfred Packer*, as well as two musicals (which appear to be mostly a joke). One is supposedly called *Cannibal! The Musical*, and the other *Alferd Packer The Musical*. The former is said to have been made by the creators of *South Park*, while the latter is a clearly amateur attempt either at film-making or Internet practical jokes.

Roadside attractions on the way to Lake City, along "Cannibal Trail," make light of the fact that five men died with caricatures and cannibal collectible dolls.

At the Hinsdale County Museum, one can see an alleged skull piece from one of the victims, the shackles that Packer wore in prison, and buttons from the clothing of the victims.

Thousands of tourists visit his grave every year.

**CrimeLibrary.com**

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### **Colorado State Archives - The Alfred Packer Collection**

Colorado.gov

#### **First Packer Confession**

Los Pinos Agency  
5/8/1874

Old man Swan died first and was eaten by the other five persons, about ten days out from camp; four or

five days afterwards Humphrey died and was also eaten; he had about one hundred and thirty three dollars. I found the pocket-book and took the money. Some time afterwards while I was carrying wood, the Butcher was killed as the other two told me accidentally and he was eaten. Bell shot "California" with Swan's gun, and I killed Bell; shot him - covered up the remains, and took a large piece along. Then traveled fourteen days into the "Agency" Bell wanted to kill me, struck at me with his rifle, struck a tree and broke his gun.

I A.G. Packer do solemnly swear that the above statement is true and nothing but the truth So help me God.

A. G. Packer

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 8th day of May A.D. 1874. James P. Downer J.P.

The above is noted to be a "copy of statement made by Alfred Packer at Los Pinos Agency 1874" which was "filed April 4/83" Arthur P. Cook, Clerk.

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### **Second Packer Confession**

Denver

3/16/1883

I, Alfred Packer, desire to make true and voluntary statement in regard to the occurrences in Southern Colorado during the winter of 1873 - 1874. I wish to make it to General Adams because I have made one once before about the same matter.

When we left Ouray's camp we had about seven days of food for one man, we traveled two or three days and it came a storm. We came to a mountain, crossed a gulch and came onto another mountain, found the snow so deep, had to follow the mountain on the top and on about the 4th day we had about a pint of flour left; we followed the mountain, until we came to the main range, do not remember how many days we were traveling then - about 10 days - living on rosebuds and pine gum and some men were crying and praying. Then we came over the main range we camped twice on a stream which runs into a big Lake, the second time just above the lake. The next morning we crossed the lake cut holes into the ice to catch fish, there were no fish so we tried to catch snails, the ice was thin, so some broke through. We crossed the lake and went into a grove of timber, all the men crying and one of them was angry - Swan asked me to go up and find out whether I could see something from the mountains - I took the gun and went up the hill. Found a gulch and came onto another mountain, found a big rosebush with buds sticking through the snow, but could see nothing but snow all around. I was a kind of a guide for them but I did not know the mountains from that side. When I came back to camp after being gone nearly all day I found the redheaded man [Bell] who acted crazy in the morning sitting near the fire roasting a piece of meat which he had cut out of the leg of the German butcher [Miller] the latter's body was lying the furthest off from the fire down the stream, his skull was crushed in with the hatchet. The other three men were lying near the fire, they were cut in the forehead with the hatchet some had two some three cuts - I came within a rod of the fire, when the man saw me, he got up with his hatchet towards me when I shot him sideways through the belly, he fell on his face, the hatchet fell forwards. I grabbed it and hit him in the top of the head. I camped that night at the fire, sat up all night, the next morning I followed my tracks up the mountain but I could not make it, the snow was too deep and I came back, I went sideways into a piece of pine timber set up two sticks and covered it with pine boughs and then made a shelter about three feet high, this was my camp until I came out. I went back to the fire covered the men up and fetched to the camp the piece of meat that was near the fire. I made a new fire near my camp and cooked the piece of meat and ate it. I tried to get away every day but could not so I lived off the flesh of these men, the bigger part of the 60 days I was out. Then the snow began to have a crust and I started out up the creek to a place where a big slide seemed to come down the mountain of yellowish clay there I started to get up but got my feet wet and having only piece of blanket around them I froze my feet under the toes and I camped before I reached the top of the hill making a fire on top of a log - and on two logs close together [and] I camped [there]. I cooked some of the flesh and carried it with me for food. I carried one blanket. There was seventy dollars amongst the men I fetched it out with me and one gun. The redheaded man had a 50 Dollar Bill in his pocket all the others together had only 20 Dollars. I had 20 Dollars myself. If there was any more money in the outfit, I did not know of it and it remains there. At the last camp just before I reached the Agency I ate my last pieces of meat This meat I cooked at the camp before I started out and put it in to a bag and carried the bag with me, I could not eat but a little at a time. When I went out with the party to search for the bodies, we came to the mountains overlooking the stream but I did not want to take them further. I did not want to go back to the camp myself. If I had stood in that vicinity longer I would have taken you [Mr. Adams] right to the place, but they advised me to go away [refusing to tell the names of the parties]. When I was at the Sheriff in Saguache I was passed a key made out of a pen knife blade with which I could unlock the irons I went to the Arkansas and worked all summer for John Gill 18 miles below Pueblo, then I rented Gilberts

ranche still further down, put in a crop of corn, sold it to John Gill and went to Arizona.

State of Colorado  
County of Arapahoe

I, Al Packer, of my own free will and voluntarily do swear that the above statement is true, the whole truth and nothing but the truth  
So help me God

(s) Alferd Packer

Subscribed and sworn before me this 16th day of March A.D., 1883

Sim. W. Cantril  
Notary Public

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**Judge Gerry's Death Sentence of Packer**

Hinsdale District Court  
Case # 1883DC379

"It becomes my duty as the Judge of this Court to enforce the verdict of the jury rendered in your case, and impose on you the judgment which the law fixes as the punishment of the crime you have committed. It is a solemn, painful duty to perform. I would to God the cup might pass from me! You have had a fair and impartial trial. You have been faithfully and earnestly defended by able counsel. The presiding Judge of this Court, upon his oath and hid conscience, has labored to be honest and impartial in the trial of your case, and in all doubtful questions presented you have had the benefit of the doubt.

A jury of twelve honest citizens of the county have set in judgment on your case, and upon their oaths they find you guilty of willful and premeditated murder - a murder revolting in all its details. In 1874 you in company with five companions passed through this beautiful mountain valley where stands the town of Lake City. At this time the hand of man had not marred the beauties of nature. The picture was fresh from the hand of the Great Artist who created it. You and your companions camped at the banks of a stream as pure and beautiful as ever traced by the finger of God upon the bosom of the earth. Your every surrounding was calculated to impress upon your heart and nature the omnipotence of Deity, and the helplessness of your own feeble life. In this goodly favored spot you conceived your murderous designs.

You and your victims had had a weary march, and when the shadow of the mountains fell upon your little party and night drew her sable curtain around you, your unsuspecting victims lay down the ground and were soon lost in the sleep of the weary; and when thus sweetly unconscious of danger from any quarter, and particularly from you, their trusted companion; you cruelly and brutally slew them all. Whether your murderous hand was guided by the misty light of the moon, or the flickering blaze of the camp fire, you can only tell. No eye saw the bloody deed performed, no ear save your own caught the groans of your dying victims. You then and there robbed the living of life, and then robbed the dead of the reward of honest toil which they had accumulated; at least so say the jury. To other sickening details of your crime I will not refer. Silence is kindness. I do not say these things to harrow your soul, for I know you have drunk the cup of bitterness to its very dregs, and wherever you have gone, the sting of you conscience and the goadings of remorse have an avenging Nemesis which have followed you at every turn in life and painted afresh for your contemplation the picture of the past. I say these things to impress upon your mind the awful solemnity of your situation and the impending doom which you cannot avert. Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. You, Alfred Packer, sowed the wind; you must now reap the whirlwind. Society cannot forgive you for the crime you have committed. It enforces the old Masonic law of a life for a life, and your life must be taken as the penalty of your crime. I am but the instrument of society to impose the punishment which the law provides. Will society cannot forgive it will forget. As the days come and go, the story of your crimes will fade from the memory of men.

With God it is different. He will not forget, but will forgive. He pardoned the dying thief on the cross. He is the same God today as then - a God of love and of mercy, of long suffering and for kind forbearance; a God who tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, and promises rest to all the weary and heart-broken children of men; and it is this God I commend you.

Close up your ears to the blandishments of hope. Listen not to its flattering promises of life; but prepare for the dread certainty of death. Prepare to meet thy God; prepare to meet that aged father and mother of whom you have spoken and who still love their dear boy.

For nine long years you have been a wanderer upon the face of the earth, bowed and broken in spirit; no home; no loves; no ties to bind you to earth. You have been indeed, a poor, pitiable waif of humanity. I hope and pray that in the spirit land to which you are so fast and surely drifting, you will find that peace and rest for your weary spirit which this world cannot give.

Alfred Packer, the judgment of this Court is that you be removed from hence to the jail of Hinsdale County, and there be confined until the 19th day of May, A.D. 1883, and that on said 19th day of May 1883, you be taken from thence by the Sheriff of Hinsdale County, to a place of execution prepared for this purpose, at some point within the corporate limits of the town of Lake City, in the said County of Hinsdale, and between the hours of 10 A.M. and 3 P.M. of said day, you then and there, by the said Sheriff, be hung by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead, and may God have mercy upon your soul."

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### **Third Packer Confession**

Letter to D. C. Hatch of Denver  
Rocky Mountain News 8/7/1897

Mr. D.C. Hatch, 842 Larimer Street, Denver, Colo.:

My Kind Friend - Your welcome favor of the 22nd inst. Has been received, and in reply to your request I gladly comply by giving to you as complete a statement as it is possible for me to, viz: In the fall of 1873 a party of men left Salt Lake City by wagon, there being teams and pack animals. In leaving we were deficient in supplies for the entire journey. But this matter can hardly be attributed to either myself or anyone else of the party of twenty one (21), for the agreement was that the men who owned the teams were to furnish our sustenance. But unfortunately our supplies were exhausted by the time that we reached the Green River, at the head of the Colorado. And now, my kind friend let me impress upon you the painful fact that thus early in our journey we were suffering most terribly from the pangs of hunger. For about five days we had been surviving on horse feed, which was chopped barley. Just at this point we ... Ouray and a band of fifty Indians, from whom we received assistance. And, being informed by Chief Ouray that the mountains were impassable, owing to the great amount of snow, we availed ourselves of his invitation and camped within two miles of him, and from whom we purchased supplies.

After having been in this camp for about one week a man by the name of Lutzenheiser and four other men started for the agency, having been informed by Chief Ouray that from his camp to the Indian Agency it was forty miles, while in fact, by air line, it was eighty miles. Lutzenheiser and his party had no other provisions, only what each man carried, they being on foot.

As a result their provisions soon became exhausted. And these five men had concluded to cast lot to see who should be food for the others. But just at this time a coyote was seen, which was immediately killed, and was the means of saving one of that party from a tragical fate. And, as this party neared the cattle camp where Gunnison now stands, Lutzenheiser saw a cow fast in the snow and he crawled up to her and shot her with his revolver. The man who had charge of the cattle, happening to be out looking for his herd saw the tracks which Lutzenheiser had left, and, following these tracks, he soon found Lutzenheiser in an exhausted condition. He took him into this camp and followed his trail back and found the remaining four of the party, whom he also took into the camp, a man by the name of George Driver being the last, who was carrying the head of the coyote. Here they remained until they had become physically recruited, when they started for the Los Pinos agency, which was forty miles into the mountains, at which place they were again picked up in a fainting condition. All of which was sworn to at the time of my trial and is a matter of court record.

And now I return to my own party, which composed six men, myself included. There being two trails to the agency, about one week after Lutzenheiser's party left, we took the upper trail for the purpose of reaching the same destination. We also were on foot, and carried what provisions we could in blankets. After nine days our provisions were entirely exhausted. The snow being deep, we were compelled to keep on top of the divide, in order to travel at all. And these divides led to the top of the Rocky mountains. Our matches had all been used, and we were carrying our fire in an old coffee pot. Three or four days after our provisions were all consumed we took our moccasins, which were made of raw hide, and cooked them, and, of course, ate them. Our suffering at this time was most intense, such, in fact, that the inexperienced cannot imagine. We could not retrace our steps, for our trail was entirely drifted over. In places the snow had been blown away from patches of wild rose bushes, and we were gathering the

buds from these bushes, stewing them and eating them. In following these divides we soon gained the tip of the Rocky Mountains, and the snow being blown away from the top of the mountains and our feet encased in pieces of blankets, we were enabled to travel along steadily. Now my friend, you can imagine our condition, on top of the mountains, with nothing to kill for food and not even any of those rose bushes.

Starvation had fastened its deathly talons upon us, and was slowly but most tortuously driving us into the state of imbecility; in fact, Bell, the strongest and most able-bodied man of our party, had succumbed to the power of mental derangement and was causing the party to be very much afraid of him, as well as that which they felt to be the inevitable doom of each, mentally. I am at a loss to fully express our feelings at this stage, but we consulted each other and conclude to come down off the mountain. For we could not tell whether we had passed the agency or not, for it was either snowing or blowing constantly. And, as it happened, we descended to the lake fork of the Gunnison river. We camped one night just above the lake. In the morning I ascended the mountain for the next purpose of ascertaining if there were any visible signs of civilization on the opposite side. The snow being very deep, it required the entire day to make this trip and return.

As I neared the camp on my return I was confronted by a terrible sight. As I came near I saw no one but Bell. I spoke to him, and then, with the look of a terrible maniac, his eyes glaring and burning fearfully, he grabbed a hatchet and started for me, whereupon I raised my Winchester and shot him. The report from rifle did not arouse the camp, so I hastened to the campfire and found my comrades dead.

Can you imagine my situation - my companions dead and I left alone, surrounded by the midnight horrors of starvation as well as those of utter isolation? My body weak, my mind acted upon in such an awful manner that the greatest wonder is that I ever returned to a rational condition.

In looking about I saw a piece of flesh on the fire, which Bell had cut from Miller's leg. I took this flesh from the fire and lay it to one side, after which I covered the bodies of my dead comrades. I remained here with them during the night. In the morning I moved about 1,000 yards below, where there was a grove of pine trees. I distinctly remember of taking a piece of the flesh and boiling it in a tin cup. I also know that I became sick and suffered most terribly. My mind at this period failed me. But I am satisfied that I must have eaten some of the flesh, but my mind was a total blank for a considerable period of time. When my mind returned I found, by my tracks, that I had been visiting around the adjacent territory, seeking rose buds, which I apparently found, for I noticed that by force of habit I had been stewing them in my tin cup. The record of time now becomes a nonentity. I do not know how long I remained here. I did not know how near I was to the close of the year. I could not tell how near spring was. But the weather began to moderate and I wandered around seeking rose buds for food, when all of a sudden I was confronted by the Los Pinos agency. It would be a mild assertion for me to say that I was surprised. And most agreeable it was, too. I found out that in my searching for food and civilization I had traveled forty miles from the lake fork of the Gunnison.

For three weeks I was taken care of at the agency. I have learned that Lutzenheiser and his party had crossed the mountains into Siwatch. The remaining of the twenty-one men now at the end of this three weeks came through with a band of Indians. They questioned me as to where my comrades were. I replied that I had killed Bell and that evidently he had killed the others. In a day or two we left the agency and started with the teams to go over to Siwatch. We remained in Siwatch until General Adams, the Indian agent, returned from Denver. I then explained to the general all I knew about my dead comrades, and an expedition was fitted out to return and bury them. We had not gone far on this journey before we were compelled to turn back to the agency, owing to the great depth of snow and the crust which was upon it. After returning to the agency I was turned over to the sheriff of Siwatch, with whom I remained until the middle of July. At this time the sheriff, Amos Wall, asked me if I could realize what I had passed through. In reply I gave him as complete an explanation as I could, after which he told me to go away and not permit it to longer worry me.

I did as he advised, so far as to the going away, and after the lapse of ten years I was arrested in 1885 upon the charge of having murdered my companions. The result of my trial is well known to all; how the supreme court granted me a new trial, and how I was convicted of manslaughter upon five different indictments, tried by one and the same jury, receiving an accumulative sentence of forty years, being eight years for each.

Now, my kind friend, in conclusion permit me to say that I am to-day, as ever before, a member of the human family, although isolated and away from that which is dear to the heart of every man. Am I the villainous wretch which some have asserted me to be? No man can be more heartily sorry for the acts of twenty-four years ago than I. I am more a victim of circumstances than of atrocious designs. No human being living can say that I in cold blood, with evil intent, murdered my companions upon that awful occasion. What could be the object of my taking their lives in a wanton manner? I bear no malice towards

living man. Even though I may feel that I have been unjustly death with, still that Supremacy which rules over all knows that I forgive as I would wish to be forgiven.

In this the darkest hour of my earthly existence I feel, as I have long felt, that I would have far better off had my execution taken place years ago, and I might now be with those companions, whose ghosts, I assure you do not haunt me, for if the soul has existence beyond this mortal life, each and every one of those unfortunate men knows that I am innocent. As it is there is some unexplainable power which retracts my hand from freeing my soul. Hence all the brightness in the firmament of my earthly future is centered in the hope that I may eventually be given an opportunity of proving to the world that I am "less black than has been painted." And to all my kind friends I can but reiterate that my heart to-day, as before, abounds with thankful gratitude for your many expressions of good will. I should like to be set at liberty under the banner of a pardon, but if that should not be deemed best, I would gladly avail myself of the opportunity that a commute would give of showing that I came into existence under circumstances similar to that of others, and that I still possess a desire to live and do right. O! my friend! Were it not for the flame of hope which forever burns within the human heart, life would certainly be beyond endurance. Gratefully Yours,

Alfred Packer

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### **Governor Charles S. Thomas' Conditional Parole**

1/7/1901

#### Conditional Parole

Alfred Packer #1389, heretofore made application for parole, at which time his case was examined and parole denied. He has since renewed his application which has been approved by the properly constituted authorities, the principal additional ground there of being upon his bad physical condition. It is certified by the prison physician that he is suffering from hydrocele and Brights' Disease, which with his advanced age makes his condition extremely precarious and continued confinement dangerous. He also presents a petition signed by leading men of different sections of the State urging his release under the provisions of the indeterminate sentence act. Without changing my opinion concerning the offense, and because of the second recommendation and additional grounds therefore, I am constrained to grant the application confining the prisoner, nevertheless, within the limit of the State of Colorado.

It is, therefore, ordered that the said application be granted and that the said Packer be paroled and permitted to go at large, but within the State of Colorado subject to the terms and conditions of said act, and the rules prescribed and to be prescribed thereunder, and the agreement to be signed by him as a condition thereof.

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### Alfred G. "Alferd" PACKER



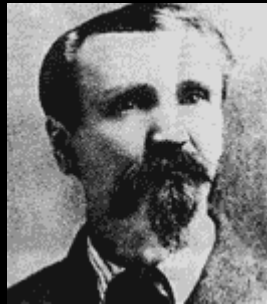
Alfred Packer, 1886.



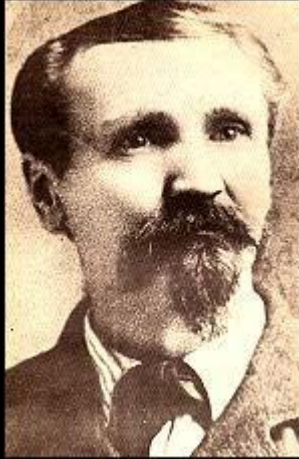
Alfred Packer



Alfred (Alferd) Packer, arrested in 1883.



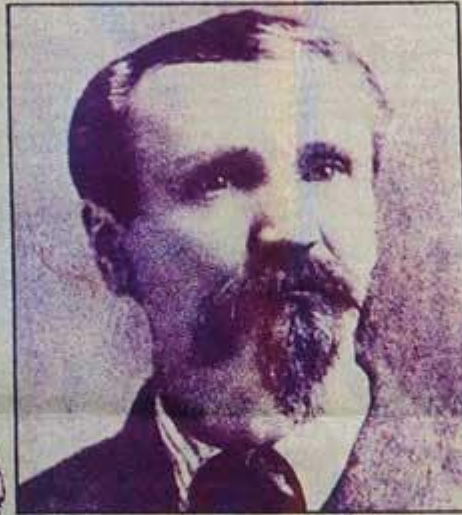




Alfred Packer

# REWARD

Colorado Cannibal Consumes Companions



## AL PACKER Cannibal

**A**LFRD PACKER: Age 32. Native of Pennsylvania. Of medium height, plump build. This fiend escaped Saguache jail on Aug. 8, 1874, after confessing to killing & eating 5 companions while snow-bound in Southwest Colorado mountains for 60 days during winter of 1873-74.

### INFORMATION

ON THIS MAN-EATER WILL BE ACCEPTED AT LAKE CITY



Alfred Packer

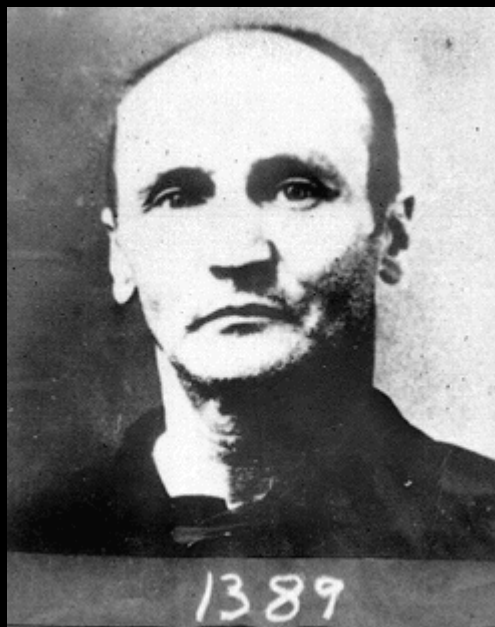


Al Packer #1389 First Penitentiary Photograph

7389 W. Taylor  
Crime - Manslaughter  
Term - 40 years  
County - Gunnison  
Age - 38 Hair - Chestnut  
Height - 5-10 1/2 Cmn - Hargess Mrs.  
Cmn - Light Build - Slender  
Eyes - Blue  
Wounds & Scars  
1st & 4th Finger off left hand  
Small scar over right eye



Sketch of remains as found



Al Packer's Second Penitentiary Photograph



Alfred Packer grave