

Outlaw BILL TIBBETTS

by Erik Taylor

Early in the morning of July 24, 1924, Joe Tibbetts passed a crowbar through the bars of the Moab City, Utah jail house to his brother Bill and his friend Tom Perkins. Held on charges of cattle rustling but fearing the process of justice was hopelessly biased against them, Bill and Tom bent the bars of the jail just enough to squeeze out, stole a rowboat and set sail down the Colorado River. Hours later they would engage the pursuing sheriff in a gunfight (nobody was injured) and sabotage his motor boat forcing him to walk over 10 miles back to town.

For the next few months, Bill and Tom lived among the river bottoms of the Green and Colorado rivers in territory that is now part of Canyonlands National Park. Relying on their knowledge of the terrain gained by running cattle in the area for years, as well as depending on stashes of food and horses arranged by Bill's devout Mormon uncle Ephraim who had opposed the provocative actions by Bill that had led to these circumstances, Bill and Tom evaded the persistent efforts of local law enforcement to catch up to them.

The controversy had begun when drought had forced Bill and his uncle Ephraim, his partner in the cattle business, into a difficult decision. They knew there wouldn't be enough feed to make it through the winter where they normally grazed the herd down at the lower elevations along the rivers. They had two options as they saw it; they could either sell out or they could move the herd up higher on to public land where everyone had the same legal right to graze



Bill Tibbetts

Images courtesy of the Tibbetts family and the Canyonlands Natural History Association.

their animals. The problem was that even though it was legal, by convention a handful of tight families controlled and grazed all the land up on top of the plateau.

Ephraim wanted to sell and avoid controversy, but Bill was not about to give up on what they had spent years building and was more than willing to fight for his share of public land. Ephraim eventually agreed, and since he was older and knew the families he said he would do the talking, but early encounters ignited Bill's temper causing negotiations to get off to a bad start. It would be the death of a calf that would eventually give the incumbents the legal grounding they needed to prosecute Bill. He claimed the calf belonged to him.

Given the motivation to drive Bill out, how foolish it would have been for Bill to kill one of their calves when tensions were high, and the fact that no proof was ever provided by the accusers as to ownership, I tend to believe it was Bill's calf. From his hideout Bill wrote a letter to the Moab newspaper explaining his side of the story.

Finally, when law enforcement deployed airplanes to fly over the territory to look for them, unbelievably extreme measures in 1924, they decided they needed