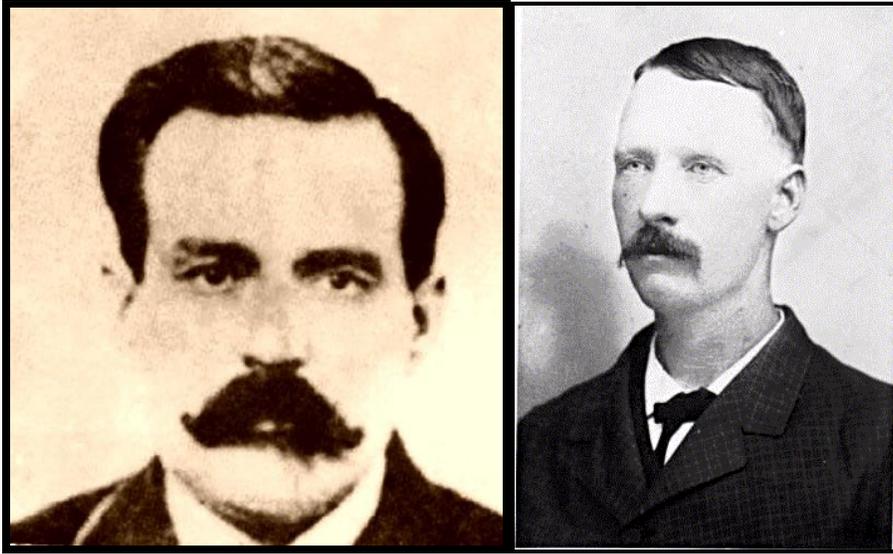


## **Knickerbocker Outlaws: The Ketchem Brothers**

By Tom Ashmore



**Tom Ketchem**

**Sam Ketchem**

If you drive through Knickerbocker today you would not even know that it is a town or ever was. Sixteen miles southwest of San Angelo and just off Dove Creek it consists of a post office/community center and two churches. However, in the late 1800s it was a growing little town, central to the growing number of cattle ranches in the area. With two saloons, three stores, a stage stop, blacksmith, two hotels, and a Tuberculosis sanatorium, it looked to become a thriving community. Also springing up from the wild cattle ranches was an ornery breed of young cowpunchers gathering at those two saloons on a regular basis. Two of these cowpunchers were to become two of the most infamous outlaws Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona ever saw – Tom and Sam Ketchem.

The Ketchem brothers were born into a large family with six other brothers and sisters that migrated to San Saba County in 1863. However, tragedy struck the family when the father died in 1867 and the mother followed him in 1873. This left the elder brother, Green Berry Ketchem Jr. (known as Berry), to take care of the family. At the time Berry was around 22, Sam was 19 and Tom was 10.

In order to provide for the family elder brother Berry began working nearby ranches, leaving his brothers and sisters alone much of the time. This, undoubtedly, had a traumatic effect on both Sam and Tom. They grew up getting whatever work they could at the cattle ranches and soon became acquainted with cattle rustling. Sam was also looking back at a failed marriage by the time he was twenty-five.

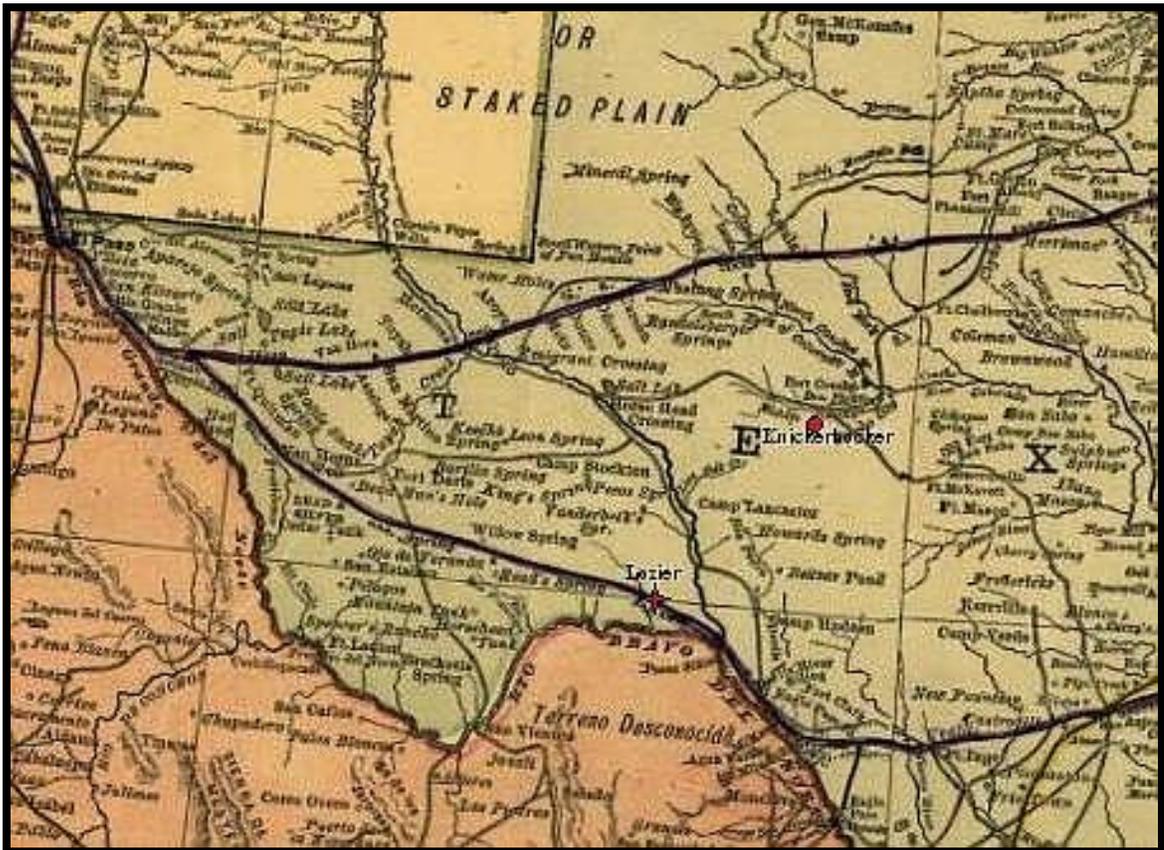
In 1880 Berry decided to move to Knickerbocker to start a horse and cattle ranch. Both Tom and Sam worked for Berry initially but soon began hiring out to other ranches, probably due to disagreements with the older brother. Tom would stay at Berry's ranch when not working other ranches, but it came to a head in 1889 as Berry was leaving to fetch his bride-to-be in San Saba, Texas. He told Tom, "Be out of the house for good when I return." Tom and Sam both left to begin drifting, first south to Sonora, Texas to work on the Sixes Ranch and then north into New Mexico and later Colorado. They worked many ranches and trail drives, getting to know the territory from northern New Mexico down to old Mexico.



During the 1880s and 1890s many of the ranchers of the rugged Guadalupe continued to drive their cattle several hundred miles northeast to Clayton, N.M., because it had a more direct rail route to their markets. The men who made that trail drive in 1889 sat for this portrait in Clayton, surrounding a clerk from a Clayton general store who asked if he could join them for the picture. "Black Jack" Ketchem, who was hanged at Clayton in 1901 for train robbery was a Guadalupe cowboy and a member of this trail drive. He stands at the center, rear. (Courtesy Southeastern New Mexico Historical Society of Carlsbad)

The year 1895 found Tom and Sam back in the Knickerbocker area. Sam tried going into business with a friend named Will Carver (later part of Butch Cassidy Wild Bunch) to start a saloon and gambling hall in San Angelo. Tom fell in with a young man named Dave Atkins, who also worked ranches in the area. During this time a Knickerbocker rancher named John "Jap" Powers got on the bad side of Tom, incurred a debt to Sam and Will Carver from their gambling business and, unbeknownst to him, his wife was also having an affair with his foreman. His wife hatched a scheme with the four boys to help everyone out. She hired them to kill her husband. Apparently they had quite a bit of animosity for this man because they gladly took on the job, ambushing him in his own pasture. After an investigation the sheriff issued a murder indictment for Tom Ketchum and Dave Atkins, but all four were long gone to New Mexico. They spent the next two years drifting and beginning their life of crime, stealing and robbing businesses when they could get away with it.

By 1897 the four were back in Texas, this time looking to begin a new crime spree. This time they would go after the railroads. Payrolls, carried in safes on the trains, was much more lucrative for the bandit now. All they had to do was hop on the train when it stopped at a lonely outpost for water, blow the safe in the express car, and disappear into the night with their plunder. Their first train robbery was in May 1897 at Lozier, Texas, a water stop close to the Mexican border between Del Rio and Langtry. In all they got away with \$42,000 in currency and gold. Supposedly they brought their haul - at least initially - back to Knickerbocker.



**1890 map of Southern Pacific rail line, Lozier and Knickerbocker, Texas**

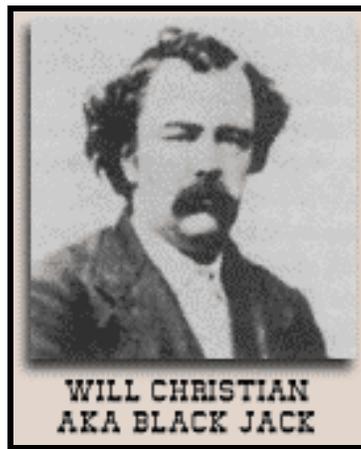
Soon enough it was time to head back to New Mexico and continue their spree in earnest. They set up their hideout in Cimarron, New Mexico, and were often at local establishments spending their money and impressing the ladies. They pulled another train robbery near Folsom, New Mexico in September of that year, getting away with about \$20,000.

During this same time another gang was terrorizing New Mexico and Arizona. This gang was Will 'Black Jack' Christian and the High Fives Gang. 'Black Jack' Christian was killed by a posse near Clifton Arizona and a telegram went out, "Black Jack killed by our posse yesterday." A follow up stated the man killed was Tom Ketchem, not Black Jack. A deputy U.S. Marshall later further confused the issue by telling a newspaper reporter that he was "absolutely sure that the bandit called Tom Ketchem was killed in the fight near Clifton last spring..." He spoke in reference to his tracking of the 'Black Jack' gang and tried to explain that he thought 'Black Jack' was actually "Bob Christian," but by this time it was apparently so mixed up the mistake

could not be rectified in the press. It's possible part of the initial mix-up was also due to these two outlaws looking very much alike.



**Tom Ketchem**



From this point on the newspapers referred to Tom as “Black Jack” Ketchem, even after it was determined that he was still alive and the bandit killed was misidentified. Later, while in prison, Ketchem denied ever being ‘Black Jack.’



**Actual Arizona reward poster**

The next train robbery was a bungled attempt in December 1897 near Stein, New Mexico. A terrific gun battle ensued between three men in the express car and the gang. One gang member was killed, four wounded, but the gang slipped away and were never trailed.

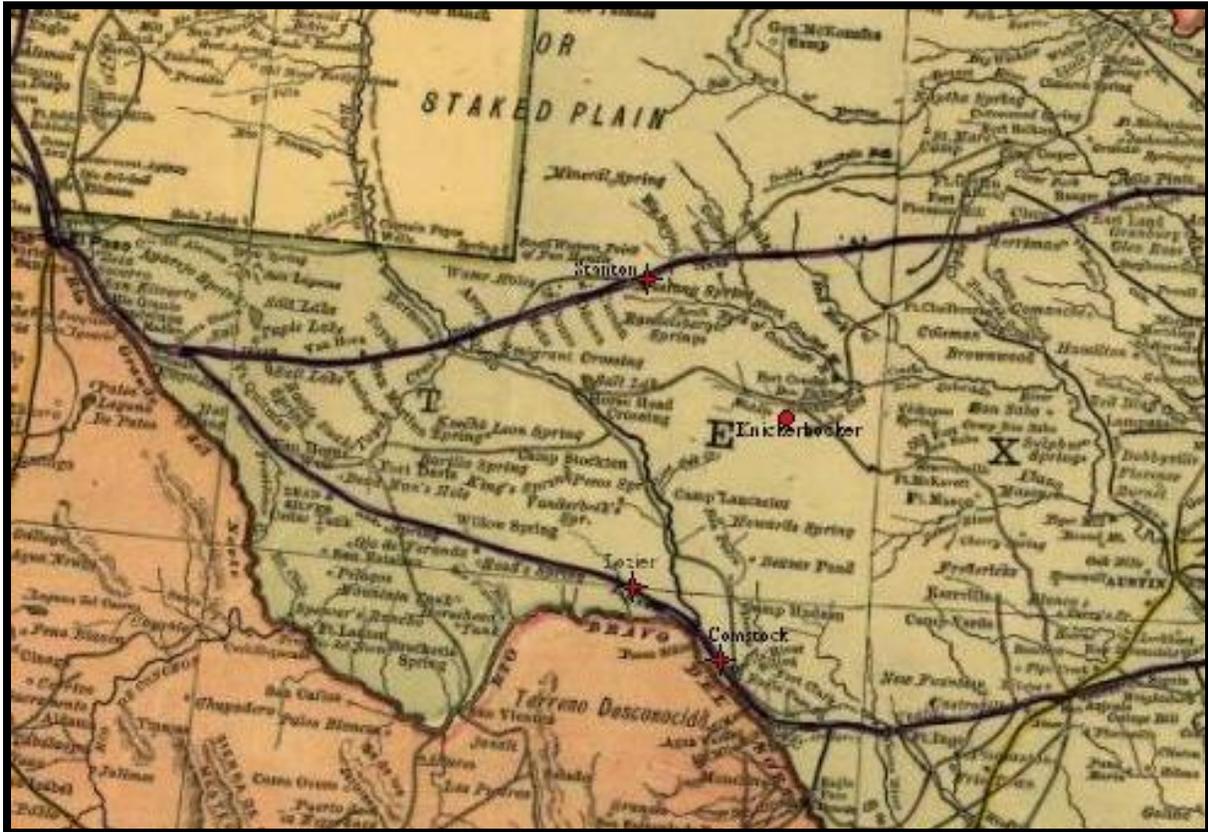
With the heat on in New Mexico they decided it was time to head back to Texas for another try at the Southern Pacific. They chose Comstock, an area not too far away from the

Lozier location of their first robbery. It was April 1898 and this attempt went well. They forced the engineer to unhitch the passenger cars and pulled the express car further up the tracks to blow the safe. They got clean away with an unknown amount of money – by one account \$20,000.



**Southern Pacific circa 1895**

From there they headed north, probably back into the Knickerbocker area for a few weeks before continuing to the Stanton, Texas area in July for another train robbery. Stanton is just east of Midland. The reports of their haul varied widely from \$500 to \$50,000. Again they got away clean and again headed back to New Mexico.



**1890 map of Southern Pacific rail line, Comstock and Stanton, Texas**

Something happened in New Mexico during the next year of 1899, which nobody has quite been able to figure out. Sam Ketchum and Will Carver must have had a falling out with Tom. Tom was given to wild and unpredictable mood swings. He would even beat himself on the head with his own gun in some kind of self-flagellation during moods of depression. Whatever the reason for the split, this began the downfall of the two brothers. It appears Tom drifted off to Arizona after the split.

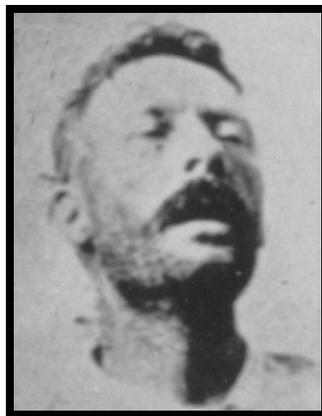
Throughout this time the Ketchums continued to work part time for ranches needing cowhands. In fact, this is how the various members of Butch Cassidy's eventual gang and the Ketchum's gang came to know each other. They all hired on to large ranches for short periods during large cattle drives. During one period of these drives Sam Ketchum met 'Elzy' Lay (Butch Cassidy's closest friend) who ended up joining Sam, along with gang members Will Carver and Dave Atkins, and 'Red' Weaver, for another train robbery.

The time was July 1899 and the plan was to rob the same train and in the same way as their 1897 heist near Folsom, New Mexico. The plan went well and they got away with probably \$70,000. They had a good hideout in a place called Turkey Creek Canyon and, feeling they had gotten away clean, were relaxed, waiting for the heat to die down.



**Turkey Creek Canyon hideout**

They were unaware that a posse had been able to find out about the hideout through some good detective work after the robbery. The posse caught them by surprise and there was a shootout. Sam Ketchem took a bullet to the shoulder and was captured. He died of blood poisoning in the territorial penitentiary on July 24th.

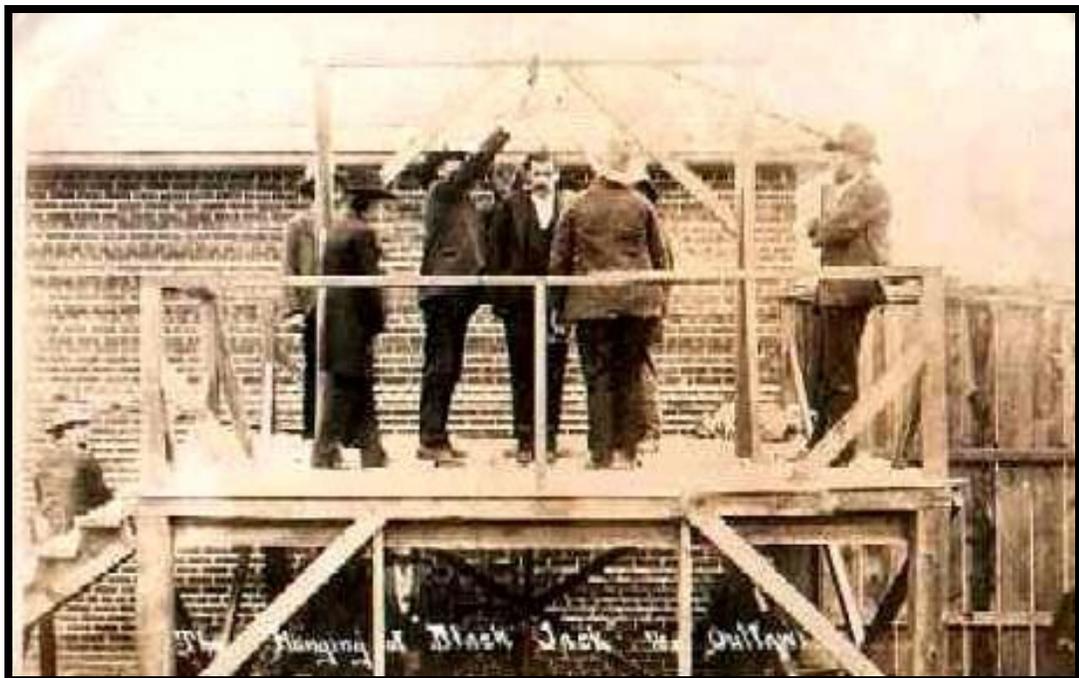


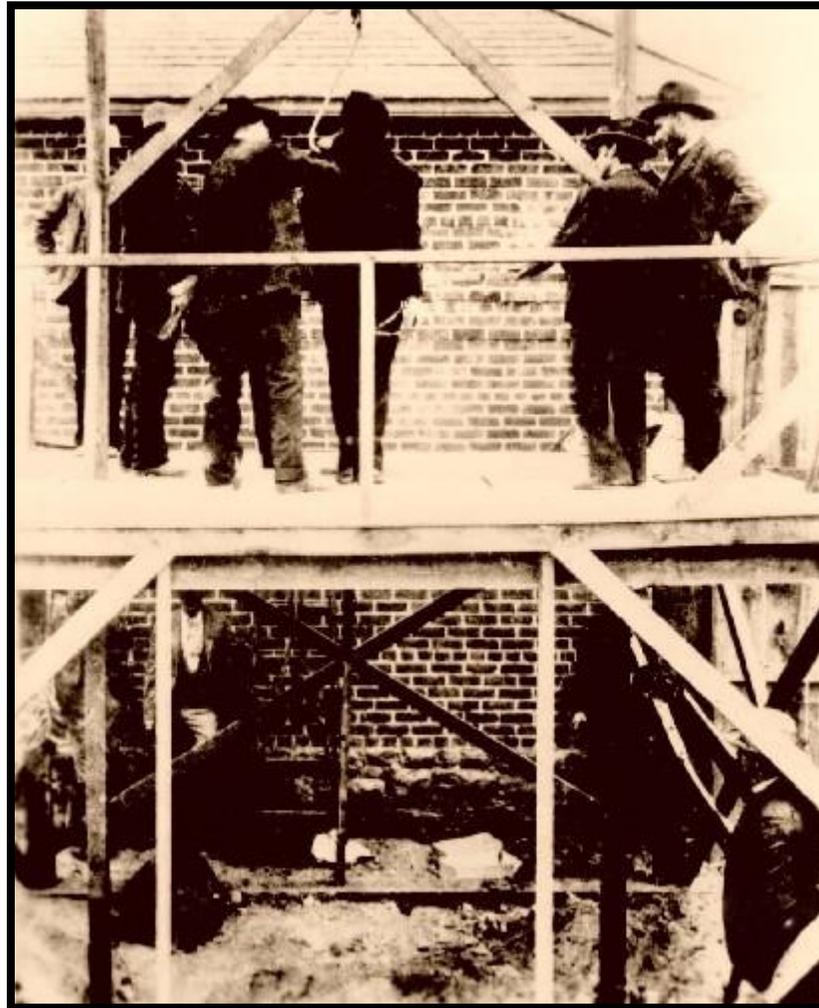
**Death photo of Sam Ketchem**

Knowing nothing about his brother's latest escapades Tom was again on the run in Arizona for murdering a storeowner and his clerk. He slipped a posse and headed back to New Mexico. Not being able to find his brother and not hearing the news he decided to rob a train on

his own – the same train his brother robbed the month before. He also chose the same location – Folsom, New Mexico. He snuck onto the train during a stop at the station and proceeded to the engine to get it stopped about four miles outside of town. Then began a series of fateful errors. The train was stopped on a curve so the cars could not be unhitched. The mail clerk stuck his head out to find out what was going on and got shot for it. The conductor, who was tired of their train getting robbed, had brought a shotgun along and was waiting for a clear shot from the baggage car. He got the chance and took it, blowing Tom Ketchem's arm almost off. Tom fell off the train and the engineer got the train up and running to leave the scene. The next day they found Tom not 100 yards from the scene, ready to surrender.

Tom Ketchem's arm was amputated, he was convicted of train robbery and sentenced to be hanged. He spent a total of 21 months in prison going through the legal proceedings, finally scheduled to hang on April 26<sup>th</sup> 1901. The hanging is now famous for how it was botched by the local sheriff, Salome Garcia. They had never done a hanging in Clayton, New Mexico and someone made the rope too long. When Ketchem dropped through the trap door he was decapitated – one of only a few penitentiary hanging decapitations in history.





**Ketchem with head ripped from body still covered by a hood**

And so goes the end of the Ketchem brothers and the grizzly death of Tom Ketchem. Or does it...?

It is documented that Berry Ketchem traveled from San Angelo to Clayton, Arizona to visit Tom. Ross McSwain, in his syndicated piece Out Yonder, reported, “When his brother, Tom ‘Black Jack’ Ketchem, was awaiting the hangman’s noose in Clayton, N.M., Berry Ketchum made the tedious trip from San Angelo to visit him in Jail. However, toughman Tom refused to see him. Berry left some spending money for Tom with the New Mexico jailer and returned home.”

Berry was a fairly well off rancher by this time, raising fine horses on his Knickerbocker ranch. He was well known for breeding sought after racehorses. Berry’s longtime foreman was Jim Harkey. Jim kept a family secret for many years, never speaking a word to anyone – except his son. Years later Jim’s son (also named Jim Harkey) relayed a story to a local rancher in San Angelo that puts a very strange twist into this story. According to the younger Harkey, the elder Harkey helped Berry Ketchem take 100 head of their horses to New Mexico shortly after Berry returned. He believed Berry had cut a deal with the sheriff to help Tom escape in exchange for the 100 head of horses. The story goes that the switch by the sheriff who used an already dead Mexican in place of Tom explained the decapitation. How this could have been accomplished is baffling, given the number of people involved and viewing the hanging. But there is more.

Shortly after their return Harkey went outside one evening and saw Tom’s dog at the ranch. Tom’s dog had not been there before and was known to always be with Tom. The next day the dog was gone as was the best horse on the ranch. Later, Jim Harkey, Berry, and Nancy (Berry’s sister) were out riding and Nancy asked Berry, “Do you think he made it OK?” With the subject broached Harkey asked Berry, “I wonder what he did with the horse.” Berry replied, “I imagine he cut the brand off and turned him loose.”

Jim Harkey later moved to the town of Monahans and told his son that years later he saw Tom Ketchem on the streets of Monahans.

Another source tends to support this theory and it comes from a man who grew up with the Ketchum boys and knew the Ketchum family intimately. His name was Basil D. Arthur and the story comes from the San Angelo Standard Times.

The Arthur family neighbored the Ketchum family ranch. As a boy and young man Bass Arthur was a good friend of Tom, Sam and Berry Ketchum. Arthur, at the age of 82, stated in an interview that he never believed Tom Ketchum actually died in Clayton, New Mexico. Arthur said he was with some of the Ketchum family at a picnic near Knickerbocker the day of the hanging. He said there was no sign of anxiety or grief among the family members that day. Although none of the family said anything one way or the other, Arthur believed there was some sort of trick and Black Jack was allowed to slip away.

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