

The Most Famous Gun Fight That You Never Heard About Right Here in Placer County

The year was 1854 and the very early days of the Gold Rush where a man could leave a shovel on the ground as a claim or leave his rocker unguarded were long gone. As more and more men crowded into the foothills, crime began to rise. While right around Auburn, it was fairly peaceful, out in the remote sections of the county, crimes of all sorts began to be reported.

On December 19, 1854, Captain Jonathan Rutledge Davis, veteran of the Mexican-American War in the South Carolina Palmetto Regiment and two companions, Dr. Bolivar Sparks and James McDonald were out prospecting for gold on an isolated trail in Rocky Canyon about twenty or thirty miles north of Todd's Valley. (I have seen unable to pinpoint the location of this canyon, though one source suggests you can see it from the Ruck-a-Chucky Road)

They were suddenly ambushed by a group of fourteen armed bandits. James McDonald fell dead before he could even draw his pistol. Dr. Sparks was a bit quicker on the draw and fired off two shots before he was severely wounded. The formidable Capt. Davis, however, instantly drew his two Colt revolvers and began a barrage of fire at the bandits. Within seconds, with deadly aim, seven of the bandits lay dead or seriously wounded. With both parties out of ammunition, three of the surviving bandits pulled out Bowie knives and the fourth brandished a short sword. They all lunged at Davis only to find he had his own Bowie knife. He stabbed one of the bandits to death, he disarmed another by knocking the knife from his grasp and slicing off his nose. The last two bandits held back somewhat as they had been injured in a fight a few days before. But with their comrades on the ground, they advanced on the Captain only to be mortally stabbed. The three remaining outlaws fled the scene not wishing to come to the same fate as the rest of the gang.

Capt. Davis quickly tore his shirt into strips and began to bandage Dr. Spark's wounds and even the wounds of the injured bandits. Suddenly three well-armed strangers appeared, at first believing they were more bandits, the Capt. Was mightily relieved to find that they were a group of fellow miners who had observed the whole shoot-out from a nearby hill. John Webster, Isaac Hart and P. S. Robertson helped tend to the wounded but later that night three of the bandits died. Before he died, the leader of the group, the bandit who lost his nose in the fight confessed to the gang's murder of Six Chinese and four Americans in the days right before they encountered Davis and his party. He also identified his companions and named them as two Americans, five Australians (probably Sydney Ducks) four Mexicans, two Brits and one Frenchman.

Davis himself had several flesh wounds and at least six bullets had passed through his hat and eleven more through his shirt and coat. The miners stripped the bandits of their ill-gotten loot, some \$491 in gold and silver coin, two silver watches, seven gold watches and four ounces of gold dust. The miners all decided the plunder should go to Dr. Spark's family.

The next morning another of the bandits died and Capt. Davis and the miners buried all eleven of them in Rocky Canyon. The group were joined by several other miners and they formed a

“coroner’s jury” right on the spot. They prepared a long statement setting forth the facts of the affair and concluded:

“From all the evidence before us, Captain Davis and his party acted solely in self-defense, and were perfectly justifiable in killing these robbers. Too much praises cannot be bestowed upon them for having so gallantly stopped the wild career of these lawless ruffians.”

The miners sent the statement to the closest large camp at Placerville and helped Capt. Davis carry Dr. Sparks to his home near Coloma. The doctor would die from his wounds on December 26th.

All in all, seventeen miners signed the report and John Webster wrote a long account of the affair and sent it to a friend in Placerville. By the time both the report and the Webster letter arrived, the story was a sensation in Placerville. The *Mountain Democrat* published an extra edition to recount the tale. The story was quickly picked up by nearby newspapers and soon by newspapers all over the country.

At first the story seemed so incredulous that many of the newspaper accounts thought it to be an exaggerated report. The editor of the *Mountain Democrat* commented that the story might be “slightly, very slightly, exaggerated, but not impossible.” Capt. Davis was stung by the skepticism and the day after his friend, Dr. Sparks died, he came into Placerville and paid a visit to the editor of the *Mountain Democrat* to confirm that the story was true. Davis offered to take any doubters to Rocky Canyon and show them the graves of the bandits. (It is not noted that anyone took him up on the offer.) Although the *Mountain Democrat* published a follow up account reaffirming the story and stating that the seventeen who signed the “coroner’s” report were “some of the most respectable men in our county” and Captain Davis “was a man who gentlemen in this city have known a long time and well place the most implicit confidence in his integrity.”

Still, many doubted the story. A brother – in- law of Dr. Sparks took it upon himself to find the three miners who witnessed the event. They had disappeared into the mountains and it took him nearly three months to locate them. Upon learning that many doubted the story, they immediately headed for Placerville. They meet up with Capt. Davis and they all went to the office of the *Mountain Democrat*. Judge R. M. Anderson and several prominent local citizens were called in and the Capt. And the eye-witnesses recounted the events of the affair.

As the facts of the matter were set to rest, Jonathan Davis said, “I only did what hundreds of others might have done under similar circumstances and attach no particular credit to myself for it.

The life of Jonathan Davis is hard to follow after the spectacular gun fight in the isolated canyon. A name such as John Davis is mighty hard to pin down in public record! At times what might be assumed to be the Captain, appear in records in San Joaquin County, Shasta County and Butte County. Sometimes listed as a miner and sometimes as a lawyer. We know for sure that in 1887 he received a pension from the government for his service in the Mexican-

American War and at that point his was in California. He shows up in several family trees in ancestry.com but with wildly different facts.

There was a very long ballad written about Capt. Davis, below is a part of it.

*Six feet one, in trowsers and shirt,
Covered with swear, and blood, and dirt;
Not very much scared (though his hat was hurt,
And as full of holes as a garden -squirt);
Awaiting the onslaught, behold him stand
With a twelve-inch "Bowie" in either hand.
His cause was right, and his arms were long,
His blades were bright, and his heart was strong.*

This story of the heroics of Capt. Jonathan Davis was culled from the many stories that have been written in several publications and reprinted on the internet. The American Cowboy Chronicle, The American Hand Gunner, The Guns Magazine, Gold Dust and Gunsmoke, Old West Magazine, *Sacramento Daily Union* December 25, 1854 *Daily Alta* December 24, 1854 and the *Mountain Democrat* in December of 1854 and March 1855. Thanks to Rodi Lee who brought this tale to my attention and for some of the research done on the Captain. Most accounts incorrectly place Rocky Canyon in El Dorado County as Placerville was where the men went to tell the tale.