

# BUNGLED BURGLARIES AND ZANY OUTLAWS

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*During the late 1880s, pulp-fiction dime novels created larger-than-life myths and legends of Old West figures like Wild Bill Hickok, Belle Starr, Calamity Jane, and Jesse James. These were followed by Hollywood shooting stars like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. This raises a question: Were there any Old Westerners who might be called intelligence challenged?*

The Old West wasn't a place for the meek. Lawmen had to be as tough and cunning as the culprits they had to deal with. Keeping the peace was a grim and deadly business, but a few did provide peace officers some comic relief. Take, for example, Al Jennings of Oklahoma. During his long and colorful life, Al was a cowboy, a lawyer, a gunslinger, a train robber, a jailbird, a preacher, a politician, an author, and a movie star. In his autobiography, he claimed to have robbed fifteen or twenty trains, but that was another exaggeration. His career as a bandit only lasted 109 days before he was captured and sent to prison. He once claimed to have outshot Jesse James in a shooting match, but his math must have been skewed because Jesse had been dead for several years at the time the match supposedly took place.

Al's first attempted train robbery was almost his last. Unwittingly, he stood in the middle of the tracks pointing his pistol at the approaching locomotive. The train didn't stop, and Al jumped off the tracks just in time. In his second attempt, Al used too much dynamite and accidentally blew up the express car while trying to open the safe. He did manage to salvage a jug of whiskey and an armload of bananas. The third time was the charm, and the robbery netted him \$27. He was captured and given a life sentence in the pen, but in 1904, he received a presidential pardon. Al then went into politics and ran for governor of Oklahoma. His campaign slogan was "I promise to be honest for a year



if I can hold out that long." Al finished third in the primary. After that, he became an evangelist who claimed that passing the collection plate in church was no different from robbing passengers on a train.

Al decided to write his autobiography, *Beating Back*, which embellished his days as a notorious train robber. Hollywood soon came calling. The movie moguls wanted to make a film and asked Al to star as himself. He went off to Tinsel Town, where he was heralded as a "real Old West Outlaw." Soon, Al was a celebrity. He starred in, consulted for, and wrote the screen plays for more than a hundred films. Fortunately, by following his

scripts, Al's train robberies fared much better than the ones he lived.

Al stood only five foot one with his boots on. One might say the only thing tall about him were his tales. He married a woman a foot taller than he and always called her "the little woman."

In later years, he retired to his little ranch in San Fernando Valley and raised chickens.

One evening in 1945, while listening to the Lone Ranger show on his radio, Al was outraged to hear the Masked Man shoot the gun

out of outlaw Al Jennings's hand. "Nobody could ever shoot the gun out of Al Jennings' hand!" he bellowed and promptly sued the Lone Ranger.

The judge and jury were thoroughly entertained by his tall tales but ruled against him, and the lawsuit was thrown out of court.

Sitting on his front porch one night, Al heard a noise in the henhouse. He crept into the coop and took a shot, only to find that he didn't shoot a burglar on the prowl for money but his prize rooster prowling for something else. That, as far as we know, was Al's last gunfight. 

