

Gunplay Maxwell

James Otis Bliss, AKA “Clarence L. Maxwell”, “Gunplay Maxwell” (1860 to August 23, 1909) was a late 19th-century Old West gunfighter and businessman from Boston, Massachusetts.

Born the son of a hotel manager (Alfonso Bliss), he received a good education, but in 1875 he was involved in a bar room brawl that resulted in him shooting and killing a friend of his. Maxwell fled to Texas, and later Montana, to avoid being arrested for the murder. While in Montana and working as a cowboy, he began selling his gunman skills during the cattle-sheep wars. He later became involved in a cattle rustling in Wyoming and Utah, resulting in his being arrested and sentenced to 3 years in the Wyoming State Prison in 1893. While in prison, he became associated with Butch Cassidy, and the two were released within a week of one another. It was later said that he attempted to join Cassidy’s gang “The Wild Bunch”, but was rejected.

In 1898 he and another man robbed the Springville, Utah bank, taking \$3,000. More than 200 posse members pursued them, killing Maxwell’s partner, and capturing Maxwell after a brief shootout. He was taken to the Provo, Utah jail, but never revealed the identity of his partner, but that he was dead. Maxwell was convicted of robbery and was sent to the Utah State Prison. Five years later, after he helped stop a prison escape, his sentence was commuted.

He worked as a mine guard and discovered the ozokerite near Colton, Utah and filed a claim, then started the mining company “Utah Ozokerite Company”. The mine soon became the largest known ozokerite mine in the world and Maxwell opened it to the public. Despite the success of his business, for unknown reasons he moved on. He went to Goldfield, Nevada where he worked for mining companies by spying on striking miners. Also while there, he killed a man named Joseph Smith during a dispute, but wasn’t prosecuted.

Later In 1907, in San Francisco, California, he married a wealthy widow Bessie Hume, with whom he eventually moved to Ogden, Utah. However, by June 1908 he was again on the move where he robbed a Wells Fargo in Rawhide, Nevada with a man named William M. Walters. Both captured, but never brought to trial.

On August 23, 1909, Maxwell confronted Deputy Sheriff Edward Black Johnstone in Price, Utah, who had been tasked to stop a possible robbery that Maxwell had been planning. Maxwell confronted Johnstone in the Price Saloon where Maxwell drew his pistol and opened fire, but missed. Johnstone returned fire, hitting Maxwell in the elbow and the chest, knocking him to the ground. Maxwell tried to fire again, but Johnstone fired a third shot, hitting him in the lung and killing him.

When preparing Maxwell’s body for burial, it was discovered that his arms were covered with track marks, and opium was found in his pocket, giving rise to the suspicion that he had become a drug addict. He was, at the time, going under the name William H. Seaman, and was buried in the Salt Lake City Cemetery. His location is Plat K, Block 12, Lot 16, Grave 3 East.

