

The Mystery of the Arbuckle Brothers' Disappearance Solved!

By Gary Dorman Wiggins

Elmore and Seth Arbuckle made their living as photographers who traveled around the West Central Kentucky area taking pictures for people. Often they would be away from home for long periods of time, but they failed to return from one of those trips. Around 1895, Elmore Arbuckle (b. September 19, 1872 in Ohio County, KY) married Martha O. Jarnagin (b. October 1876 in Tennessee). On April 6, 1896, Seth B. Arbuckle (b. March 12, 1874 in Ohio County) married Laura Eva Jarnagin (b. May 1874 in Ohio County). Both of their wives were pregnant at the time the brothers disappeared, so a rough approximation of when that occurred can be deduced from the birth dates of their youngest children. Seth and Eva had only one male child, Adrel, b. April 1898. Elmore and Mattie had 2 children, Oral Neal, b. June 1896 and Reba, b. August 1898. Therefore, the brothers had to have gone missing around the end of 1897 or early 1898. It was assumed that something dreadful had happened to them, although no evidence of foul play or an accident was ever found. Sometime after their disappearance, the brothers were declared legally dead, and both sisters re-married. (1)

From the December 25, 1871 Ohio County marriage of James Drinkard Arbuckle and Sarah Mahetable Ranney, six children were born—3 sons and 2 daughters. One of the daughters, Juda, died at the age of six, and the other was my maternal great-grandmother, Florence L. Arbuckle, who married George Washington Dennis. The sons in order of their birth were Elmore Vechel, Seth B., and Zibe William Arbuckle.

In 2012, I was contacted by Lucinda Duffy, an Illinois resident, who believes that Elmore Vechel Arbuckle and her grandfather, John Daniel Duffy, are one and the same person. John Duffy died in Monticello, Piatt County, IL at age 86 on June 30, 1958. Lucinda Duffy has compelling evidence to support her case. She writes, “The story my grandfather always told was that he and his brother ran away from their home in the Owensboro Kentucky area. He always said that his brother went to Missouri and changed his name to Sam Bradley. The connections I found between Elmore and my grandfather are:

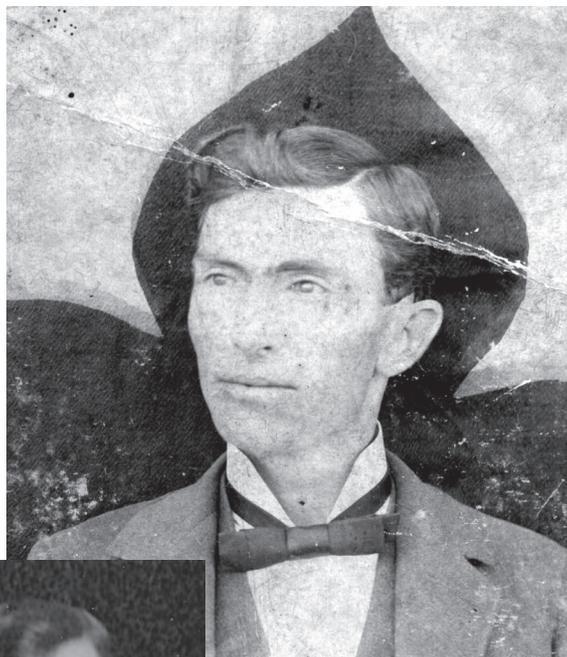
- same birth date
- same number of brothers and sisters, with a brother named Zibe
- parents’ first and middle names are the same, and [very similar] mother’s maiden name
- common location in Kentucky.” (2)

Ms. Duffy has significant documentation that supports the case for an assumed identity by her grandfather:

- Common birthdates of September 19, 1872
 - John D. Duffy’s social security application (which lists Owensboro, Daviess County, KY as his birthplace)
 - His WWI draft registration card
 - His death certificate

- Document written by her father, Harry Dean Duffy, that summarizes the information given to him by his father. (It lists a brother Zibe and has John D. Duffy's father as James Drinkard [Duffy] and mother Sara Mahetebal (sic) [Duffy] with her maiden name O'Ranney.)
- Wedding certificate where he lists Ohio County, KY as his birthplace.

The name Elmo Duffee was used on his wedding license. In the 1900 census of St. Clair County, IL, Lucinda Duffy found an "Elmore Duffy," a single man listed as a servant in the household of Joseph Denkelback. (3) He gave Kentucky as his birthplace and September 1872 as his birth date. Elmore Arbuckle was born on September 19, 1872. According to Ms. Duffy, her grandmother, Carrie Winfield Duffy, met her husband in Alton, Madison County, IL, a Mississippi River town just north of St. Louis and in the next county north of St. Clair County, IL. She was from the Windsor, Shelby County, IL area, the second county south of Piatt County, IL, the place where she and Mr. Duffy were living by the time of the 1910 census. Aside from the 1900 census record, I could find no other evidence that this Elmore Duffy existed. Ms. Duffy notes that her grandfather was actually married under the name Patrick Elmo Duffy. "We were always told he changed his name from Patrick Elmo to John Daniel [Duffy]. By the 1910 census he is using John Daniel [Duffy]." (4)



In 2006, Ms. Duffy received corroborating information on the disappearance of the Arbuckle brothers from J. Wade, a great-great granddaughter of Seth Arbuckle: "My g grandfather Seth Arbuckle was married to Laura Eva Jarnagin; her sister Mattie was married to Elmore. The Arbuckle brothers earned some or all of their living by traveling around the countryside taking pictures on tin types. Sometime in the summer or fall of 1896 [NB: actually late 1897 or early 1898, based



Above: Elmore Arbuckle
Left: John D. Duffy as a young man
Below: John D. Duffy in later years



on the birth dates of their youngest offspring —GW] they left to ply their trade and were never heard from again. Pinkerton agents were hired but were unable to find any trace of them or their horse and wagon. Both Eva and Mattie were expecting and it was pretty much ruled out they had abandoned their families. It was never proven, but the conclusion was they were killed during a robbery or drowned crossing a river. Eva and Mattie and their children appear on the 1900 census of Cromwell District Ohio Co. under their father Nelson A. Jarnagin." (5) (6)

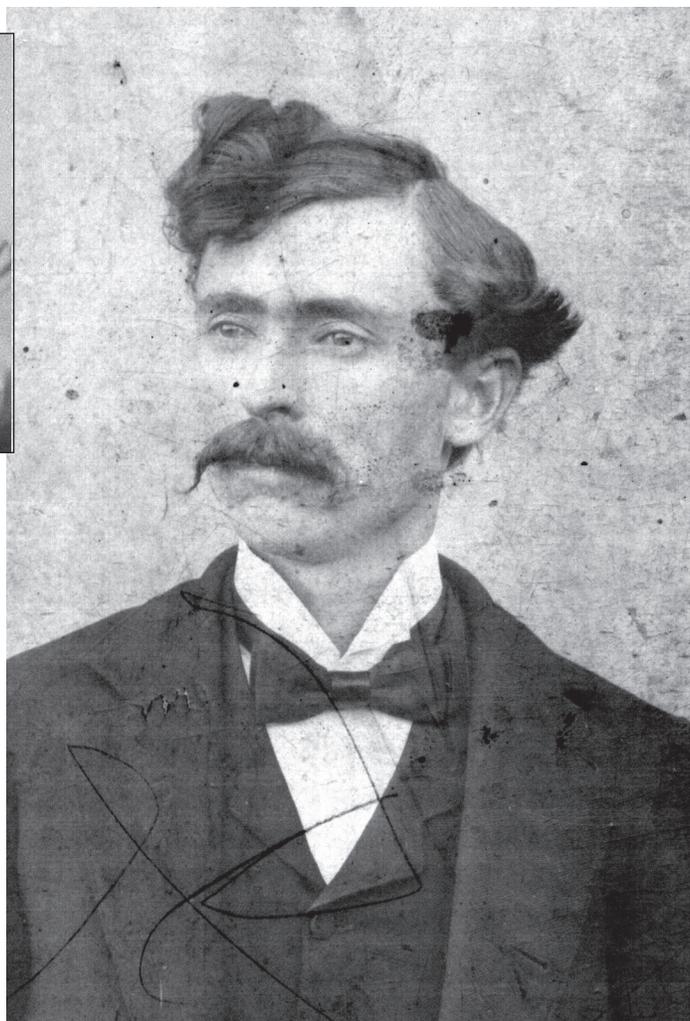
After corresponding with Ms. Wade, Lucinda Duffy and her son traveled to the Ohio County, KY area to further research the connection between John Duffy and Elmore Arbuckle. They found only a 1973 newspaper article that said Seth and Elmore Arbuckle got on their horses, rode away, and were never seen

again. (7) In my own family, there was a story that someone had caught a glimpse of the brothers outside Kentucky, possibly in Missouri, shortly after their disappearance, but he was unable to catch up to them to confirm their identities. Given this anecdote and the hard evidence that Lucinda Duffy possesses, I am convinced that John Daniel Duffy and Elmore Vechel Arbuckle were one and the same.

Initial attempts to locate a plausible Sam Bradley, the assumed name chosen by Seth Arbuckle according to Lucinda Duffy's grandfather, were fruitless. (8) After pursuing a promising false lead, I eventually returned to Ancestry.com for another try at finding a Sam Bradley who might have been Seth Arbuckle. This time I stumbled upon Samuel Oscar Bradley, who was born in Kentucky on the same date as Seth B. Arbuckle, March 12, 1874. (9) Since John Daniel Duffy had kept the true birth date of Elmore Arbuckle, I conjectured that the Arbuckle brothers decided before they parted that life would be simpler if they did not have to invent new birthdays for themselves, as well as new names.



Right: Seth Arbuckle
Above: Samuel Oscar Bradley



The chance of finding another Sam Bradley with exactly the same birth date and state of birth as Seth is undoubtedly very small. Nevertheless,

there are several family trees on Ancestry.com that consider this Sam Bradley to be the son of James Bradley and Florence Stephens of Floyd County, KY, whose son, Samuel, was only 4 years old at the time of the 1880 census. Samuel Oscar Bradley's birthdate would have made him 6 years old under the criterion established by the Census Bureau for listing someone's age in the 1880 census, i.e., the last birthday before June 1, 1880. Despite the age difference, the compilers of the family trees on Ancestry.com cite the 1880 census as proof of his Kentucky birth. (10) Several of them were asked by e-mail why they concluded that the Floyd County Samuel Bradley is actually Samuel Oscar Bradley, but no responses were received. The compilers undoubtedly have no hard proof that the Samuel Bradley they list was truly born in Floyd County, KY, one of the easternmost counties in Kentucky. They must have simply assumed that this had to be Samuel Oscar Bradley, since no other reasonable candidate was found in the available public records.

Sam O. Bradley married Oda V. (Mitchell) Morgan in Arkansas County, AK on July 11, 1901, about 4 years after Seth and Elmo Arbuckle's disappearance. (11) They had a daughter Ruth Isabella (Bradley) Vizzier Modesto, who was 103 years old when she died in 2011. This was Oda's second marriage; her first husband was E. D. Morgan. Oda was dead by the time of the 1910 census. That census has Samuel "D." Bradley living in Chester Township, Arkansas County, AK, with daughter Ruth I., age 2, and he is listed as widowed. (12) He married Lula Ann McConnell on October 14, 1914 in Pushmataha, OK. In the 1920 census he is found under Allen Braddy. Ancestry.com links this record to Samuel Bradley, and it appears that the handwritten name in the original census record should actually be Oscar Bradley if you look at it the right way. That census lists two children, Grace and Samuel H. (13) The 1940 census includes seven children living with Sam and Lula in New Mexico. They are Samuel Houston, Earl Dempsey, Cecil Eggbert, Mary Margaret, James Edward, Eula Mabel and Lavon Stella. Sam O. Bradley was 66 at that time, and Lula was 47. (14)

On September 20 and 26, 2013, I talked by phone with James Edward Bradley, the 87-year-old son of Samuel O. Bradley. He stated that his father was from Butler County, KY. (15) To my mind, this was a very significant link between Samuel O. Bradley and Seth B. Arbuckle. Butler County and Ohio County are contiguous counties south of Owensboro, Daviess County, KY. Whereas Elmore and Seth were born in Ohio County, KY, the other children of James Drinkard and Sarah Mahetable Arbuckle were born in Butler County, KY. There are many other Arbuckles from Butler County, KY, and Seth and Elmore Arbuckle were probably living there when they decided to leave their wives and children. James E. Bradley also stated that his father had told of living at one time with an uncle who treated him harshly and that he went from Kentucky to Tennessee where he worked in a store before moving to southern Arkansas to work in the lumber industry. (16)

Further evidence that Sam O. Bradley was in fact Seth Arbuckle was received from James E. Bradley's nephew and niece, Jay Dempsey Bradley, son of Earl Dempsey Bradley and Connie Atkins, daughter of Eula M. (Bradley) Woodson. Jay Bradley writes, "Our Grandpa never said too much about his past, except for a comment or two... He had requested to be buried with his Bible and an old picture of a friend [known] by the only name he ever used 'Duffy'." Connie Atkins notes that her baby book has information obtained directly from Sam O. Bradley by her mother at the time of Connie's birth in 1947: ". . . in it she had written that Grandpa Bradley's father's name was James D. Bradley. The D is for Drundard (sic). His mother's name was Sarrah Isabella Rainey (sic)." Clearly, the given names are very close to those of Sam/Seth's true mother and father. Concerning the photograph, Mrs. Atkins writes, "He had a photo that he carried everywhere they moved and never let the kids mess with it. He kept it in his Bible. He never told anyone who the picture was or how he had it, but kept it and requested Aunt Mary to be sure and put it in the Bible and bury it with him." Mrs. Atkins remembers seeing the picture when she was a child, but her uncle, James E. Bradley, had no recollection of it, although he confirmed that the Bible was buried with Sam. Jay Bradley kindly sent along some pictures of Sam O. Bradley taken at different times in his life, and those are included in the appendix. (17)

I am convinced that thanks to Lucinda Duffy's detective work in identifying John Daniel Duffy as Elmore Arbuckle and my own efforts to link Samuel Oscar Bradley to Seth Arbuckle, the mystery of the disappearance of the Arbuckle brothers is finally solved. Although we will likely never know the reasons

they decided to abandon their original families, there can be no doubt that the Arbuckle brothers were living under the new identities of John Daniel Duffy and Samuel Oscar Bradley long after they were declared legally dead. (18) (19)

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Acknowledgements: The facts in this article would never have been uncovered without the persistent search for truth by Lucinda Duffy and the active assistance of several of Samuel O. Bradley's descendants, in particular Jay Dempsey Bradley and James Edward Bradley. I am very grateful for the information that all of them and others have shared with me.

References and Notes

- (1) Laura Eva Arbuckle married John R. Cooper on October 4, 1908 in Ohio County. Martha O. (Mattie) Arbuckle married Francis Marion Whalin on December 28, 1904 in Ohio County. This was the second marriage for Francis Whalin. His first wife, Emma V. Frazier, died in Chilton, Carter County, MO, on February 12, 1899.
- (2) Ancestry.com e-mail message from LucindaDuffy51 to garydormanwiggins on March23, 2012.
- (3) Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls. 1900 Census Place: Sugar Loaf, St Clair, Illinois; Roll: 342; Page: 4B; Enumeration District: 0129; FHL microfilm: 1240342.
- (4) Personal e-mail from Cindy Duffy on August 4, 2013.
- (5) A version of this account can be found at: <<http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/ARBUCKLE/2006-08/1156380758>>. The date of disappearance noted by J. Wade is clearly wrong if the information about the wives being pregnant at the time of their husbands' disappearance is correct. Assuming the brothers were truly the respective fathers of the children and the child born in August 1898 was not extremely premature, they must have gone missing toward the very end of 1897 or early 1898.
- (6) The two Arbuckle wives and their children are listed under Nelson Janargin in: Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls. Year: 1900; Census Place: Cromwell, Ohio, Kentucky; Roll: 546; Page: 12B; Enumeration District: 0103; FHL microfilm: 1240546.
- (7) Tinsley, Harry D. "Ranney Family – Arbuckle." (Lineage Lines) The Ohio County News v. 99, no. 42, p. 4 (18 October 1973). The disappearance of the Arbuckle brothers also merited a footnote on page 16 of Leslie Logan Arbuckle and Nathaniel Francis Arbuckle's "Historical and Biographical Sketch of the Arbuckle Family," written around 1939. Floy Arbuckle Gruen and her brother Willis, carried their father and uncle's Arbuckle history to 1976.
- (8) Ancestry.com can sometimes lead us astray. I conducted a search on Ancestry.com for the son of John Daniel Duffy, Harry Dean Duffy (Lucinda Duffy's father). This led me by chance to the 1940 census and another Harry Duffy in Illinois, the son of Gertrude (Pyitak) Duffy and her husband, Frank Edward Duffy (August 16, 1870—November 6, 1935). Frank and Gertrude lived in Streator, La Salle Co., IL. It was really surprising to see that their first daughter was named Florence (my great-grandmother Arbuckle-Dennis's given name) and that their first son was named Elmore (the true given name of John D. Duffy). That struck me as quite a coincidence, and it led me to wonder if this Frank E. Duffy could have been Seth Arbuckle, who adopted the surname Duffy, as did his brother, Elmore. However, there is a well-documented family tree on Ancestry.com that has Frank E. Duffy as the son of John M. Duffy (1838-1913) and Mary Dempsey (1845-1916). On August 14, 2013, I received an Ancestry.com message from William Wilson, a descendant of Frank E. Duffy. His grandfather was Elmore Duffy, the son of Frank E. and Gertrude Duffy. He had never heard anything about the Arbuckle brothers, and he considers it a coincidence that Florence happened to be Elmore's sister. Thus, despite the fact that two of his children's given names were also those of Seth Arbuckle's

siblings, Frank E. Duffy was not Seth Arbuckle. The family tree in which they appear can be viewed at: <<http://www.mundia.com/ca/Tree/Family/5546727/990350424>>

- (9) The Find-A-Grave record created by Delma Ingram shows Samuel Oscar Bradley's tombstone and lists him as having been born in Boone County, KY on 12 March 1974. Find A Grave Memorial # 16533648.
- (10) Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Year: 1880; Census Place: Middle Creek, Floyd, Kentucky; Roll: 413; Family History Film: 1254413; Page: 49A; Enumeration District: 124; Image: 0689.
- (11) For the marriage of Sam Bradley to Oda Morgan on 11 Jul 1901, See: FHL Film no. 976440. Ancestry.com. Arkansas, County Marriages Index, 1837-1957 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. Original data: "Arkansas County Marriages, 1838-1957." Index. FamilySearch, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2009, 2011. "Arkansas County Marriages, 1838-1957," database, FamilySearch; from Arkansas Courts of Common Pleas and County Clerks. Digital images of originals housed at various county courthouses in the State of Arkansas.
- (12) Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Year: 1910; Census Place: Chester, Arkansas, Arkansas; Roll: T624_43; Page: 1B; Enumeration District: 0003; FHL microfilm: 1374056.
- (13) Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. (NARA microfilm publication T625, 2076 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Year: 1920; Census Place: Arlington Heights, Tarrant, Texas; Roll: T625_1848; Page: 12A; Enumeration District: 87; Image: 238.
- (14) United States of America, Bureau of the Census. Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1940. T627, 4,643 rolls. Year: 1940; Census Place: Dexter, Chaves, New Mexico; Roll: T627_2440; Page: 9B; Enumeration District: 3-15.
- (15) Personal phone conversations with James E. Bradley on September 20 and 26, 2013.
- (16) The Tennessee connection might have come from the second marriage of "Sam's" father, James Drinkard Arbuckle, to Virginia Miller on 25 September 1884, when Seth had just turned ten years old. Virginia's mother, Jane Bershers, was born in Tennessee. Children from the second marriage of James D. Arbuckle were Elizabeth C., Anna, John B., and James Ellis Arbuckle.
- (17) Personal e-mail correspondence with Jay Bradley and Connie Atkins, September 24-25, 2013.
- (18) Why did the Arbuckle brothers run away from home in the first place? A clue can be found in correspondence from Connie Atkins. She wrote to Jay Bradley on September 25, 2013, "Grandpa Bradley had a tattoo on the inside of his wrist that was only the letters of S.O.B. Your Dad always said that this was a type of brand. Maybe he put that on his wrist because he ran off and left his family... Aunt Mary said he had lots of scars on his back and she would ask him how he got them and he would always tell her that you do not mess with married women."
- (19) How did Seth Arbuckle come to choose the family name Bradley? One link between the Arbuckle and Bradley family names is the marriages of two half-sisters of James Drinkard Arbuckle. On page 19 of Leslie Logan Arbuckle's family history document, it is noted that Mary Jane Arbuckle married Carroll Bradley on July 5, 1850. She died on March 8, 1870 in Butler County, KY, and Carroll Bradley soon married another half-sister, Juda (m. October 22, 1870 in Butler County). This was the second marriage for Juda, whose first husband was Levy Plummer (m. May 13, 1858 in Butler County). They moved to Macon County, MO in 1858, and Levy died 3 years later. Another Bradley connection was the marriage of Maynard Bradley to Thelma Arbuckle. In the 1940 census, they were living in Gallatin County, KY. Gallatin County is on the Ohio River, downriver one county from Boone County, which the Find-A-Grave record lists as the birthplace of Samuel Oscar Bradley.