

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Suspect was captured in cornfield near Prairie City

As Residents Sleep, Robbers Blow Up Bank Vault

It was about 1:30 in the morning on October 28, 1902, when Prairie City dentist, Dr. S. B. Gidford, woke up in his room across the street from the bank. As he stuck his head out a window, a “loaded 44-caliber Colt” was “presented to his face” by a stranger who told him his life was “worth less than 30 cents.” That was enough to convince Gidford to retreat to his room.

Other town folks were awakened too. But most, like Dr. W.P. McConnaughy, heard the disturbance and thought it was a group of young men who were known to run down to Pella occasionally, where they became “more or less intoxicated.” They typically rode the midnight train back to Prairie City after their night of carousing. And they usually created a disturbance as they made their way to their homes. So, most residents ignored the sounds and went back to sleep. But there was plenty of activity taking place at some local businesses, and it wasn’t the antics of the local boys.

Night Marshal Alex Erskine had been overpowered by a gang of men who locked him in Little & Gill’s hardware store. Pointing loaded revolvers at him, they warned him to keep quiet or risk losing his life. Then they unloaded five shots into the air, just to let him know they meant business.

As three men stood vigil, two others broke into the depot and the blacksmith shop gathering up crowbars, drills and tongs. They made their way to the bank and set to work. It took three hours of work and eight attempts with explosives; but eventually the robbers broke open

the vault, safe and cash box. They made off with about \$4,000. They left 81 cents behind but took a box with \$10.50 worth of pennies.

The marshal never got a look at the men, so he wasn't able to provide a description. But a witness said they were unmasked and one was a "tall, well-dressed" fellow with a "magnificent physique." Harry Taylor, the town shoemaker, said he saw the men hurrying out of the bank; and one said, "We will camp at the water tank west of the depot." They took off on foot.

When bank officials heard about the robbery, they used telephones and telegraph to spread the news to local communities. But locals were slow in pursuing the robbers. Several hours after news of the robbery spread throughout the town, two buggies with two men in each headed south and southeast out of town to see if they could catch sight of the robbers. But they returned several hours later. People suspected the robbers were hiding along the river where there was dense growth and thick timber. It was said to be "one of the wildest pieces of country" in the state.

By evening a pack of bloodhounds had arrived from Knoxville. They followed scents from the bank, across the public square, to the edge of town. Then the dogs stopped. Heading back to the bank, the hounds rested a bit, had supper and returned to the hunt. But they were never successful in tracking down the robbers.

A couple days later, locals heard a stranger had been seen in a cornfield outside town. The marshal put together a posse. Surrounding the field, the marshal and his helpers flushed out the man and hauled him to the town jail. He wasn't talking at first. But the marshal said he was adopting the "sweating process" to convince the suspect to open up. He expected more information would be forthcoming.

Meantime, bank officials worried residents had lost faith in the bank. They feared a run on the bank, so cashier Albert Meller was dispatched to Des Moines to get some cash to shore up the Prairie City bank. Accompanied by a detective, Meller brought back \$10,000 to handle "emergencies" that might come up at the bank.

It's unclear if the robbers were ever caught. Residents of Prairie City believed they had escaped over the border into neighboring Missouri.

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Sources

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