

# “Cussed and Discussed”

## The 1917 Waynesville Bank Robbery

by Laura Huffman

John “Jink” Starling was often “cussed and discussed” in small towns throughout Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri in the early 1900’s. If he had remained in earshot of Waynesville after he blew the bank’s safe, he would have heard an earful. Instead, he and his gang collected their ill-gotten gains and casually strolled past the shocked citizens, waded across the Roubidoux Creek, and fled into the night in their stolen five passenger Model T Ford.

The Starling gang had stolen the Ford from Dr. Ingram in Monett, Missouri on June 10th, 1917, a little less than two weeks before they blasted the safe and shot up the town of Waynesville in the early morning hours of June 22<sup>nd</sup>. After lifting the car, they eventually made their way east and passed themselves off as vacationers to Mr. Hooker near the Big Piney River. Hooker allowed the four men to camp on his land for two days. He even loaned the travelers a hammer.

### THE HEIST

Pulaski County Presiding Commissioner George William Gan returned home from a fox chase about half past midnight. Gan was sitting on his front porch when he saw a Ford approach town on the Dixon road. The gang positioned the car a quarter mile north of town on the Richland road. A getaway driver remained with the car. The remaining three gang members then double backed towards the town square, cutting the telephone

wires as they crept towards the Bank of Waynesville. One crew member stationed himself as a lookout across the street in front of the bank. Another positioned himself at the rear of the brick bank building on the east corner. Starling, the crew’s “yeggman”, stealthily forced his way into the bank and made a beeline for the vault.

Starling opened his tool kit and retrieved a hard steel wedge with a paper thin edge and a hammer, the very same hammer that he had borrowed from Mr. Hooker. He hammered the wedge into the crack at the top of the door of the safe. Next he made a lip from soap and stuck it to the front of the safe over the wedge. He stuck another strip of soap over the bottom crack

of the safe door and two more six inches or so up both sides of the door. He carefully extracted the nitroglycerin that he carried in a rubber jar and poured the explosive liquid into the lip he had made at the top of the safe door. It was dangerous work. Nitroglycerin began to flow down the cracks around the door and pooled onto the putty-like soap at the bottom of the safe door. Starling stood off to one side of the safe, and with Hooker’s hammer tapped the remaining nitroglycerin.

At 1:50 a.m. a blast rocked the square and rolled up the hillsides. Thinking that it was a fire alarm, residents, bleary eyed with sleep, shambled into the streets prepared to fight flames. Before they could make it to the commercial row, word was passed that the bank was being robbed.

### THE DOWNTOWN SHOOTOUT

According to the *Pulaski County Democrat* Fred Scott, Charles



Lola Elliott was one of the Waynesville telephone operators in 1917. Courtesy of Linda Neely.

Colley, and Dr. Dawe were talking on the front porch of the Black Hotel when a shotgun blast rang out, scattering the men, and shot, over the porch. J. R. Burchard, who lived on the hillside behind the bank, lit a light in his front room and stepped outside. The lookout at the rear of the bank ordered him back into the house and fired a shot from a high powered rifle directly above Burchard’s head. The shot shattered the window behind Burchard and rained down glass on his daughter who was sleeping in a bed below the window. Tess Degraffenreid was making his way down the hill when a shot in his direction, and a shouted warning from Burchard, changed his mind. He took cover in his home. One of the lookouts warned J. J. Dake, who lived about 25 feet behind the bank, to keep his family in the house.

The night bell at the switchboard office began to alarm. Waynesville residents had begun to call for news of the explosions and commotion. The lookout stepped to the window of the office and ordered Mrs. W. L. Anderson, the attendant, to answer no calls. She paid no heed to the warning and the bandit busted the glass windowpane with a revolver and warned her again. She was making her escape out the back door when the bandit, and his gun, warned her to stay inside.

Sam T. Rollins, the cashier of the bank, along with Fred Scott, John Rollins, Leonard Crismon, Dr. Tice, and Tom Rollins armed themselves and slipped to the courthouse. Cashier Rollins took a place behind a large tree in front of the courthouse and started firing towards the bank and the vault inside. The bandits fired back, shot for shot. John Rollins positioned himself behind a tree near the well in front

of the courthouse. Tom Rollins had gathered ammunition from his father's hardware store and was crossing the street towards the courthouse. The bandits fired two shots at him and he took shelter behind a telephone pole in the street and opened fire. Sheriff Lee Baker cut through Commissioner Gan's yard and worked his way to the ditch in front of the bank. He fired until he ran out of ammunition. Leonard Crismon, Winchester rifle in hand, headed for the courthouse. Sam Rollins commandeered the high powered weapon and fired all three shots in the direction of the vault. The bullets lodged in the wall near the vault door. Bullets and shot had also marked Dr. Tice's drugstore, J. R. Burchard's store, trees in the courthouse yard, and the courthouse itself. Tom Rollins and Crismon began to make their

way back to Rollin's Hardware to gather more ammunition but the gang held them at bay.

#### THE ESCAPE

Forty-five minutes after Starling first struck the nitroglycerin with the hammer, amidst the confusion, shouting, explosions and gunfire, a final blast shook the square. Starling had finally succeeded at blowing the doors of the safe and vault. A slab of steel 5x15 inches was launched through the heavy plate glass bank window, across the street, and ripped a hole through the central office wall. Starling emerged from the rubble with a satchel of tools and stolen loot in hand. He hollered for his cohorts and they ran down the street towards the creek. When they reached the home of Fred Manes, they slowed to a walk and warned

citizens to get into their homes or they would "blow your damn heads off." The townsfolk were out of ammunition. The Starling gang, unconcerned, nonchalantly strolled towards the Roubidoux and their waiting car. Not a single shot was fired in their direction as they walked to the stolen Model T.

#### THE CHASE

As the sounds of gunfire stilled, before the smoke had completely cleared, Waynesville's citizens began to leave their homes to view the damage. Carloads departed for Crocker and Richland to send telegrams of the heist across the state. An hour after Starling and his gang forded the creek, the first posse— J. T. Burchard, W. J. O'Hare, James Clark, and James Locker—sped south. At Lee Hobbs' home, the posse learned that a car with four

men had passed an hour before them. Following the tracks of the Model T, the posse continued into Bloodland. There, Dr. Mallette relayed that a car, with four men inside, came to the crossroads at daylight and lingered near the public well, puzzled, before speeding off towards Big Piney.

Back in Waynesville, Sheriff Baker had returned from sending telegrams about the crime. Learning that the bank robbers were headed south, he formed another posse with J. J. Dake, S. G. Ballard, and Leonard Crismon. Former sheriff G. M. Laquey, W. H. Smith, Lucian Christeson, and Roy Jones formed a third posse and joined the chase.

#### THE VAN ZANT CREEK SHOOTOUT

The first posse had now passed through Big Piney, Success, Hug-

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gins, and Bendavis. Along the way, they asked oncoming traffic about their prey and phoned to towns ahead. Around 10:00 a.m., the men came around a sharp curve near Brushy Knob school northwest of Dunn and spotted the Starling gang filling the Model T's radiator with water from Van Zant Creek. The posse stopped at once, Burchard jumped out, and fired from behind the posse car towards the bank robbers with a pistol. O'Hare also jumped out and fired a rifle shot at the gang. The bandits fired back. Locker took shelter in an oat field where he hugged the earth for protection. Clark hunkered down in the automobile to avoid the bullets and then took shelter behind a telephone post.

This shootout was over almost before it began. While the Waynesville men took cover, the fugitives fled into the woods. A half hour passed without another shot. When the mail carrier bumped down the dirt road, he found the two automobiles motionless, the posse's car engine still running. The Waynesville men shouted to the mail carrier to shut their car off and came out from their hiding places. Armed neighborhood farmers and a carload of men from Mountain Grove soon swarmed the road. The posse advanced to the stolen Model T and discovered that Starling and his men had abandoned the satchel of money, their suitcases, a coat, and tools—including Mr. Hooker's hammer. The posse recovered the stolen property, including the Model T, and turned back north for Waynesville. On the return trip, they met both Sheriff Baker and former Sheriff Laquey's posses. These groups of men continued south on the hunt for the fugitives.

#### THE RESCUERS

Burchard, O'Hare, Clark, and Locker returned to Waynesville as heroes. They recovered \$764.25 of the almost \$1,200 that was stolen by the Starling gang. \$112 of the returned money was in currency, \$647.21 was in silver, and \$5 was in gold. The stolen automobile that they recovered was a 1917 model. The motor number had been filed off and the car had a stolen Oklahoma license tag. Dr. Ingram was

reunited with his motor car and rewarded the posse members with \$50. The posse posed for photographs with the recovered loot. On the back of one of the photographs someone later penciled "The Rescuers."

#### THE TRAIL GOES COLD

The gang had staved off the armed citizens of Waynesville, survived two shootouts, and eluded capture for eighty miles. They took

to the woods at Van Zant creek and continued to outfox their pursuers. Sheriff Baker ended the manhunt at 9:00 p.m. June 22, after learning that one of the bandits had asked a woman near Dunn for supper. It was also reported that a stranger went to the back door of the blacksmith's at Dunn Friday evening and asked to buy something to eat. The blacksmith sent him to Charles Higgins' store where the man purchased two cans of pork and beans and two cans of Vienna sausages. The stranger told Higgins that he was a mover and had camped near the church. That lie didn't hold water for long but the man was not there when the area was searched. Texas County Sheriff Jack McCaskill and several men staked out the church but the stranger did not return. Both Sheriff McCaskill and Baker had scoured the countryside and searched passing trains. Sheriff Baker conjectured that the bandits were on the run towards the Shannon county wilderness where they could evade capture and live a happy, carefree life in the mountains. The trail had gone cold.

#### THE BANK OF WAYNESVILLE

Sam T. Rollins, the Bank of Waynesville cashier, released a statement to the *Pulaski County Democrat* the following week. He reported that the vault doors and the big safe inside were "completely wrecked." A new four ton screw door safe had been ordered. Bank records were intact and had not been damaged. Rollins also reported that shortly after sunrise assistant cashier Elkins, aided by Cashier Stevens from the Bank of Dixon, Thomas Rollins, and Tess Degraffenreid began clearing away the wreckage at the bank. By 9:00



Although the men in the picture are not identified, they are probably the first posse (J. T. Burchard, W. J. O'Hare, James Clark, and James Locker) responsible for recovering \$764.25 of the stolen loot. Courtesy of the Pulaski County Historical Society.

a.m. the bank had borrowed cash from a neighboring bank and was open for business. Rollins thanked those who took part in the defense and chase and had "no words of criticism to offer against those who stayed in" as it was probably a wise thing to do.

#### JINK STARLING - CAREER CRIMINAL

On July 21, 1917, the *Springfield Missouri Republican* published that law enforcement in several states had been searching for Starling as a suspect in the Bank of Waynesville robbery. Starling was no stranger to the wrong side of the law. The article referred to him as a "notorious bank and post office robber" and mentioned that his criminal career had began as a boy near Moody, Howell County, Missouri. The young preacher's son had stolen a team of mules and sold them at West Plains. He was sentenced to two years.

Most recently, as an adult, in 1915 he had been convicted of blowing the post office safe at Willow Springs, also in Howell County. It had been reported at the time by the *Daily Free Press* of Carbondale, Illinois that the bandits lifted \$2,000 in stamps and \$300 in cash. Jink confessed to the crime and led officials to the

stash of stolen stamps hidden near Willow Springs. While locked up at Springfield, Missouri, awaiting trial for the Willow Springs post office robbery, Starling spoke with the *Springfield Missouri Republican*. He claimed to the reporter that at one time he had been worth over \$15,000, every bit of it stolen. The stolen money often financed his defense attorneys. He vowed to the reporter "when I get out of this scrape I am going to reform." Less than three months later, the career criminal had escaped from the Greene County jail. Starling was on

the run for six weeks before being captured at Van Buren, Arkansas. His identity was confirmed by the absence of the earlobe of the prisoner's right ear. It had been bitten off in a fight by his partner in crime while both men were held at Springfield, Missouri. During October, 1915, a federal grand jury returned a true bill against Starling for the post office robbery and he was arraigned by the court shortly afterwards. One of the members of the grand jury was Lee Baker of Waynesville. Judge Wilbur F. Booth sentenced Starling to two years on

both counts, to be served concurrently at Leavenworth, Kansas. He was released from prison two weeks before the Bank of Waynesville heist.

#### JINK STARLING - A WANTED MAN

The July 21, 1917 *Springfield Missouri Republican* article related that Starling had been seen and recognized, although not captured, by a police officer at Jonesboro, Arkansas. In September the *Pulaski County Democrat* reported that County Clerk L. A. Carmack had received notice from Missouri Governor Frederick D. Gardner that the state had issued a reward of \$100.00 each for the arrest and conviction of the unknown parties who had robbed the Bank of Waynesville. That October bandits blew the safe of the First State Bank at Glen Rose, Texas with nitroglycerin. One of the bandits was killed in the getaway. In early November, Starling was arrested by Deputy Sheriff W. L. Robbins of Muskogee, Oklahoma at Morris in connection with the failed robbery at Glen Rose. In addition to being wanted in Missouri for the Waynesville heist he was also wanted in Illinois. Less than a week after Starling's arrest, Sheriff Baker and the star witness,



The Bank of Waynesville the morning after the robbery. A slab of steel was hurled through the large window at far right. Hundreds of citizens viewed the damage over the next three days. Courtesy of Jim Mitchell.

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Mr. Hooker, had extradited the prisoner from Oklahoma and returned him to Waynesville for trial. It had been decided that Missouri had a stronger case against him in the Waynesville robbery than Texas had for the botched heist at Glen Rose. The *Rolla Herald* reported that Starling had served four penitentiary terms for bank and post office robberies. On December 16, 1917 the *Morning Tulsa Daily World* reported that "two more members of the band of Oklahoma bandits, who, it is alleged, robbed the safe of the bank at Waynesville, Pulaski county, Mo., on the night of June 22, 1917, have been arrested by Okmulgee county officers are now in the Okmulgee county jail awaiting extradition to Waynesville for trial." The paper stated that the men held were "Hook Rogers and Bill Starling, both well known to the authorities of this state." The article also related that Starling is a brother of Jink Starling who was being held in jail at St. Louis awaiting trial at Waynesville in January.

#### THE WALLS

The March 24, 1918 Springfield Missouri Republican reported that Jink Starling was sentenced to twenty years in the penitentiary for blowing the vault at Waynesville. The jury received the case late

Thursday night and reported at 9:30 the next morning.

Starling wasn't the type of man to resign himself to his fate. Just over a year after being behind the walls at Jefferson City, the *Monroe City*

*Democrat* reported that Starling had an escape plan in place and in motion. A fellow convict, John Wolster, had illegally purchased a pair of shoes from Starling, who worked in the prison's shoe factory. Wolster sang like a canary and told the guards that Starling had guns in his cell. That confession spurred the guards to conduct a search which yielded "two automatic pistols and a box of shells." Authorities were on the lookout for Mrs. Starling, whom they suspected of smuggling the guns into the prison. Starling also sang and told Warden Gilvin that he had planned to escape in less than a week by cutting through an air shaft that ran through his cell. He and his cell mate, once out of their cell, would overpower the guard in the cell house, and then release five other convicts. Then



Jink J. Starling

they would have made their way to the light plant and cut the wires. Under cover of darkness, they would have scaled the prison walls.

The details of the hunt for Mrs. Starling (Sarah Frances Stamps Starling) in connection to the weapons smuggling have been lost to time.

However, it is known that while she was living in Bryan County, Oklahoma in October, 1920 she filed for divorce from Starling on grounds that he was a convicted felon and imprisoned in the penitentiary. "Sallie", as she was also known to family and friends, had also filed for divorce in 1911 while Starling was an inmate at the South McAlester (Oklahoma) Penitentiary. In that petition she had asked for possession of the couple's two young children, a boy and a girl, and restoration to her maiden name. On May 28, 1921 she married Harry McNeely at Durant, Oklahoma. The couple moved to Salina, Kansas. Harry passed away in 1931 and Sallie, who may have used the name Frances after her second marriage, passed away August 23, 1950.

Seven years into his sentence, in 1925, the *Sedalia Democrat* report-

ed that the Board of Pardons and Paroles held a parole hearing for Jink Starling. Starling's attorney, June R. Rose of Jefferson City, was prepared to argue that Starling had, in the last two years, turned into the deputy warden four revolvers which he had secured from fellow convicts. Rose maintained that another convict who had also turned in a revolver to guards had been paroled for his "service to authorities." Rose maintained that the same treatment should be afforded to his client. Citizens of Pulaski and Laclede counties, along with the Missouri Banker's Association mounted strong opposition against any lenience for Starling. Roy W. Rucker, a prosecutor from Sedalia, appeared on behalf of the MBA at the hearing. Rucker's arguments against Starling's parole were successful as Starling remained at the Walls until November 22, 1929 when he was released under the "3/4 time" rule.

#### AFTER THE WALLS

Jink Starling returned to Tulsa after his release from the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1929. The 1930 Federal Census finds him managing a hotel, valued at \$125, near 124½ East First Street, Tulsa. A later newspaper article in the *Jefferson City Post Tribune* states

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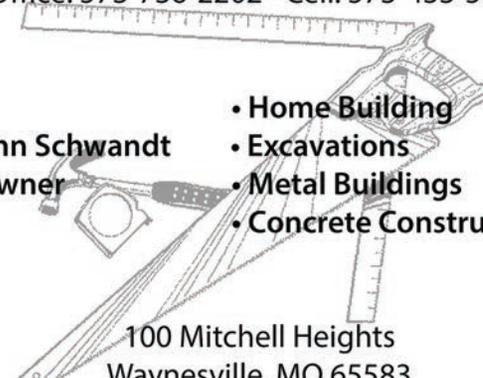
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that Starling was released from the penitentiary at Jefferson City with \$3,380. Starling claimed that the cash had been earned from pool tables that he operated in the prison. That same article stated that Starling had used the money to purchase a small hotel and intended to "go straight." As the old proverb warns, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Once again, Jink failed to keep his promise to himself to stay on the right side of the law. He did change his modus operandi, however. In the early morning hours of February 8, 1931, Starling, along with five other masked bandits, including his 31 year old nephew, W. S. Helson, held sawed-off shotguns on a crowd of 450 guests at Club Belvedere in Hot Springs, Arkansas. The orchestra

continued to play while two of the bandits looted the cash register of \$3,000. None of the guests were harmed during the hold-up. A vehicle that was abandoned during the ensuing pursuit was traced back to Starling. The bandits left behind clothing and shotguns in the car.

Starling returned to his roots during September, 1932, albeit on a smaller scale. Starling targeted a Tulsa filling station and bound and tied up the owner while he looted the safe of \$45.

Starling's last escapade was fatal. On January 8, 1933, he and two other men were arrested at a roadhouse near De Soto, Jefferson County, Missouri. During the arrest, Starling resisted and was struck in the head with a gun by Deputy Sheriff Archie McKee.

The blow fractured his skull and Starling died in the county jail the night of January 11. The *Sedalia Democrat* reported that "the trio refused to give their names to officers and it was only after the other two men were informed of their companion's death that they told the sheriff they could learn the dead man's identity by calling Miss Florence Starling, Jordan hotel, Tulsa." His identity was confirmed by the absence of the earlobe of the prisoner's right ear. The coroner's inquest jury exonerated Deputy Sheriff McKee and the other officers in Starling's death. Starling's brother, Oscar, of Tulsa, arrived January 13 to claim the body. Oscar escorted Jink's body back to Tulsa where his brother was buried at Memorial Park Cemetery. Although she had

divorced Jink and remarried, Sallie was buried by Jink's side when she died seventeen years later.

Laura (Abernathy) Huffman has been researching the history of Pulaski County for almost a decade. She is one-half, along with Dawnmarie Cecora, of the Roubidoux Case Research team. Together they produce the *Cemeteries of Pulaski County* and the *Encyclopedia of Pulaski County* on Facebook. They also host the *Pulaski County, Missouri Obituaries* blog and *Population 91*—a travel/history blog that focuses on rural destinations. Laura is also well known in the community for her work at the Pulaski County Tourism Bureau in St. Robert. This is her first article for the *Old Settlers Gazette*.



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