

The Great Sleeper Train Robbery

By Gary Knehans

They hatched the plot in Springfield, this unlikely trio of bandits. They would "lay up" the Frisco Cannonball on an eastbound run at some vulnerable point on the line. The men had stolen some money while bumming around together. But now, they wanted more, much more.

Perhaps feeling some heat in Springfield, the trio moved to Lebanon to case the Frisco line for a vulnerable point and to formulate and perfect their plan. One of the men went to Clark Brothers' dry goods and bought a pair of lady's hose from Ralph Burley, the clerk there. The hosiery was to be used as masks during the intended robbery.

After loitering around in Lebanon around a week, these "los malo hombres" and three other people boarded the "St. Louis Limited Express Eastbound" in Lebanon sometime around 1 a. m. on April 1st, 1896. No one noticed anything suspicious about them as they stepped aboard.

The train promptly pulled out of the station under a bright moon, which bathed a leafless, seemingly lifeless landscape in serene, hauntingly surreal silver. Only the new passengers and crew members had occasion to reflect on the beauty of the night as the train began to pick up speed. Most of the passengers were in

blissful repose back in the sleeper car. Conductor C. J. Meyers later recalled:

"We left the station at Lebanon at 1 o' clock this morning, after taking on a half dozen passengers. I usually begin at the front end of the train and walk to the rear in taking tickets; but this time I got on the rear Pullman sleeper, 'Cinaloa,' and walked toward the baggage car. I reached the front end of the baggage car when we were about six minutes out of Lebanon. A man, who afterwards turned out to be one of the robbers, was in the smoking car and he gave me a ticket for St. Louis. When I opened the door leading to the blind baggage, two men

who were standing on the rear platform of the express car, masks over their faces and revolvers in their hands, began cursing me. They ordered me back into the car and began firing into the air to frighten the passengers and myself.

"I went back into the smoker, but as I did so the bandits pulled the bell rope and the man from whom I had taken the ticket covered his face with a white cloth that had two holes cut in for his eyes, and leveled his revolver at me as I brushed by. By the time he got on the platform the train had stopped and I rushed on through the train, where the women folks and some of the men were frightened

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nearly to death. I cautioned all of them against putting their heads out of the windows and told them that the train was being robbed. I also told them to be quick in concealing their valuables, as the robbers would probably go through the train."

The conductor's warning set off a wave of pandemonium as passengers madly scrambled for their valuable possessions in order to hide them as best they could. Their anxiety level reached fever pitch as the shots were fired in the front of the train.

"The women were too frightened to cry, but they made things darned uncomfortable for the other passengers because they were always trying to stick their heads out of the windows," explained Conductor Meyers. "There was one young woman who was more brave than the rest and she was for leaving the sleeper...with a revolver in her hands and giving the bandits a fight."

The frightened passengers had no way of knowing what was taking place at the front of the train. One of the bandits later filled in the details.

"When the signal was given, I crawled on to the tender and lay down on the coal," Charles Simmons bragged. "The fireman and engineer could not tell whether I was a man or a child. I held two cannons on 'em

and you bet they were good. (Bob) Bell and (Mike) Trainor were on either side of the train. They popped away a few dozen times, scaring all the jays."

Fireman Joe Harris recalled first spotting the masked bandits while glancing back from the cab into the tender. They were crouching on the coal, each pointing a revolver his way. The shots fired into the air had punctuated the outlaws' command to stop the train. Brakes were quickly applied and Frisco Train number 6, the "Cannonball," squealed to a grinding stop at a slough on Sleepy Hill, about 4 miles east of Lebanon.

Bell and Trainor alighted from the train, leaving Simmons on the coal in the tender to guard Fireman Harris and Engineer Price. The men immediately proceeded to locate the money safe.

Meanwhile, Simmons ordered the fireman and the engineer to leave the engine cab and stand on the embankment, adding that he would give them a "few pointers about robbing a train." Engineer Price responded that he could do nothing but watch.

Meanwhile, Express Messenger William R. Mc Coy tried to put out the lights in the baggage car, but was ordered to stop by the two armed men, who stood outside looking through

glass window panes. One of the men entered the car and located the local safe, but it contained no money. Mc Coy was escorted to the engine to join Fireman Harris and Engineer Price. All three were warned that the third outlaw would open fire on them at the slightest provocation. The two bandits then returned to the baggage car and located the through safe. They blasted it open with two charges of dynamite and emptied the contents in a bag.

The two men carried the bag of money to the engine and ordered Engineer Price and his fireman to uncouple the engine from the rest of the train. The three robbers then got into the cab, pulled the throttle, and took the engine about three miles eastward before stopping it and making their getaway. The engineer, fireman, and express messenger were left behind.

"Bob and Mike got the coin," Simmons later bragged. "Then we got into the engine, rode her three miles, killed her, and tramped off."

The robbers' flight left passengers in the detached cars in a stage of anxiety and confusion.

"Then I heard the engine puff up and the train began to move backwards down Sleepy Hill," Conductor Meyers, who was back in the train,

later stated. "I didn't know what the robbers were up to, as (I thought) they were going back towards Lebanon. But I soon realized that the engine was detached and we were going downhill at a pretty lively rate. I applied the automatic brakes and stopped the train before the cars reached the bottom of the grade."

"When I got off the train I saw the engine steaming away in the distance, going at a rapid rate. My engineer, William Price, and his fireman, were sitting on the edge of the track, also watching the engine."

Meyers ran along the track back to Lebanon to report the robbery. Depot authorities telegraphed the St. Louis police and the railroad and express companies. Meanwhile, Engineer Price and several of the passengers walked ahead on the track and found the engine had been stopped and its fire had been extinguished by the bandits. A new fire had to be built before the engine had enough power to back up to where the cars were stranded and to couple back up.

Far up the track, 178 miles away in St. Louis, Frisco authorities reacted quickly to news of the holdup. Telegrams of instruction were sent to Lebanon in rapid succession to direct on-the-scene operations. The train, with its dynamite damaged express



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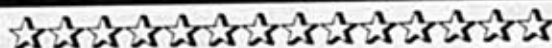
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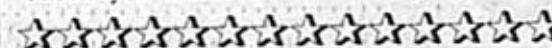
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and baggage car, was ordered to proceed on its run to St. Louis.

When the train reached Valley Park, Superintendent George B. Simpson of the Wells-Fargo Company boarded the "badly used up express and baggage car" and rode it in to Union Station.

Superintendent Simpson's investigation revealed that one side of the car had been ripped open by the blast of the explosion. Every pane of glass on the car had been shattered. Fragments of iron, wood, paper, glass, merchandise, and feathers were scattered around in wild abandon. The old through safe exhibited a gaping hole, through with the robbers looted its valuable contents. There was a pungent odor of dynamite and burnt feathers.

The stifling smell of the feathers at first puzzled investigators. The natural assumption was that the blast ripped a crate of chickens asunder. But express people later disputed this assumption. There were no crates of chickens consigned to the car. But there had been a bale of feathers, which the robbers must have used to try to cover up the dynamite blast.

The train and its passengers and crew were met at Union Station by Frisco General Superintendent J. R. Wentworth.

News of the daring holdup quickly spread in St. Louis, with tales of a great stash of cash having been stolen. Wells-Fargo Superintendent Simpson promptly acted to quash the sensational stories.

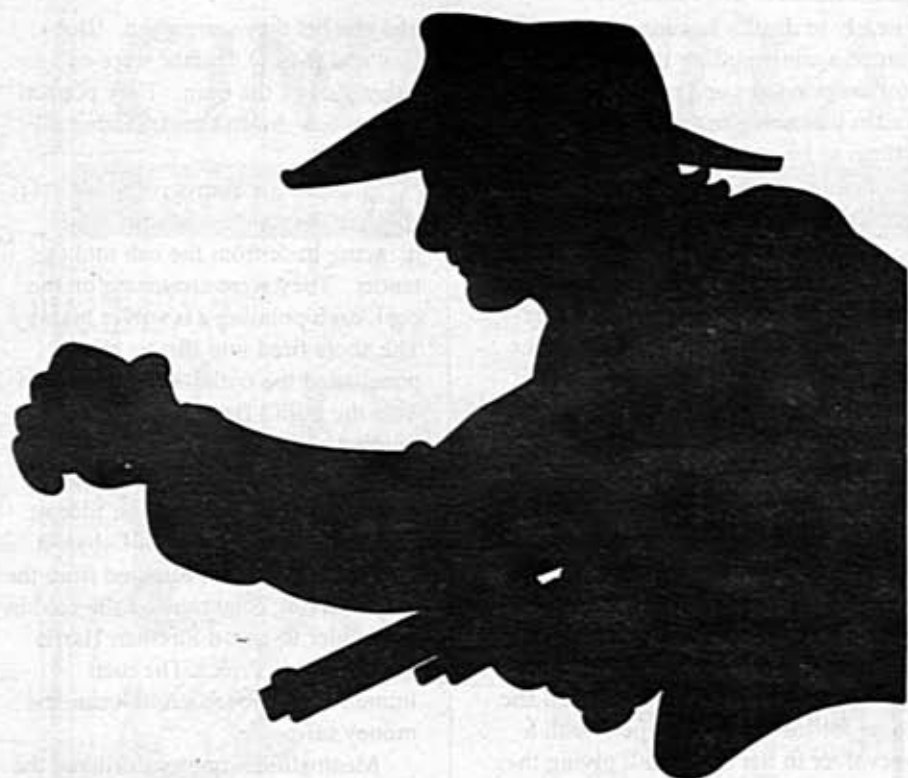
"Our loss in money I now figure up at precisely \$1,252, all in small packages, C. O. D. matters, et cetera," he told reporters. "At first it seemed to be somewhat more, but we have accounted for all this amount."

"I have been amused at the silly story in an afternoon paper that the safe contained from \$30,000 to \$70,000. The truth is (that) express

companies rarely carry large sums of money, except on special occasions, when we provide against any such happening as this.

"As it is the loss is heavy enough. It is the biggest of the ten holdups since I have occupied my present position, and it amounts to rather more than the entire loss on the others."

"At Augusta, Kansas, in August, 1892, we lost \$125. At St. James, Missouri, on August 17, 1893, the robbers got off with \$500. On September 3rd of the same year, there was an attempted holdup at Mound Valley, Kansas, but it realized nothing. Unhappily, however, Messenger Chapman was shot and killed. Only two days later, on September 5th, came the Pacific, Missouri, holdup, when again no booty was captured. On July 18, 1894, the Cook gang held up at Red Fork, but only \$6.85 was afterward found to be missing. On August 2nd, there was another attempted robbery, in which Messenger Ferguson and one of the road agents were wounded. At Verona, Missouri, in November, of the same year, we were victimized to the extent of about \$250. In February, 1895, at Marionville, Missouri, the robbers once more had their trouble for nothing. On October 6 last, at Castor, Indian Territory, a holdup netted its protractors the dismal sum of 85 cents. Altogether, these nine cases yielded considerably less than a thousand dollars--not much of a compensation for such desperate work. On the other hand, we have spared neither money nor pains to capture the culprits to bring them to justice and to have them punished as they deserve. In all these nine instances, we have succeeded in locating the robbers. Some of them have been killed while resisting arrest, a few have turned state's evidence, but most of them have been



sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Four men, convicted in the Castor case, now await sentence at Fort Smith.

"Our detectives leave at once for the spot. The descriptions thus far given of the three men amount to little, but we confidently expect to catch them and to send them to the penitentiary."

Superintendent Simpson's confidence was bolstered by the offering of a \$300 reward for the arrest of the train robbers. The actual amount of money the thieves had pilfered from the train turned out to be around \$900.

Meanwhile, back in Laclede County, Sheriff Frank Jones rode out to the robbery scene at around 4 o'clock, but came up empty-handed of clues. Prior to leaving Lebanon, Night Operator Martin had supplied the sheriff with descriptions of three men seen loitering around the depot before train number six pulled into the station. This information eventually led to the identification of one of the bandits.

Meanwhile, the three thieves made their way eastward, first to the Stoutland area and then to points even farther east. The big break in the case came April 7th, when the bandit Missouri authorities had identified as Robert Bell was arrested in Litchfield, Illinois, on a charge of carrying a concealed weapon. He tried to escape arrest, but was wounded in the head for his efforts.

Even so, Bell might have been released from custody in a day or two. But he made the mistake of offering a bribe to the Sheriff there in a bid for earlier freedom, telling the lawman where the loot was stashed. The officer recovered the bag of stolen money and discovered it was powder-burned. He interrogated the prisoner, who finally broke down and admitted

robbing the train with help of two assistants. Bell told the law officer their names and where they could be found. When Charles Simmons and Michael Trainor were located and arrested, officials were surprised to learn they were only 15 and 17 years old respectively. The boys readily confessed to having committed the crime.

The Sheriff in Litchfield promptly notified Missouri law officials of the trio's apprehension. Laclede County Sheriff Frank Jones telegraph his Illinois counterpart to hold the bandits while extradition papers were prepared. Missouri Governor Stone sent the requisition request to Illinois Governor Altgeld, who agreed to the extradition. Bell hired an attorney to obtain a writ of habeas corpus. Before it could be served, however, the train robber was on his way to St. Louis in the custody of Laclede County Sheriff Jones, Wells-Fargo Superintendent Simpson, and F. J. Dodge of Litchfield.

Once in custody, Bell was in a talking mood, making a detailed statement of the robbery to officials. He confessed to being the chief conspirator, saying that he first met Trainor and Simms a few days before the robbery and recruited them for the crime. He said the boys readily agreed to taking part in the train holdup and followed his instructions to the letter. Bell told authorities that he gave Trainor money to buy the dynamite and instructed his youthful follower on how to use it.

After the robbery, Bell had given each boy ten dollars of the stolen money and kept the rest. He left the youths, telling them to meet him in Litchfield, Illinois. The revolvers used in the holdup were thrown into a river, probably the Gasconade. Bell told law officers that he made his way





Messenger W.R. McCoy

slowly to St. Louis. After staying there a day, he crossed over the Mississippi River to East St. Louis, where he boarded a train for Litchfield. The two boys were waiting for him there, and the trio mingled with a gang of tramps on the outskirts of town before Bell was arrested.

Officials soon learned that Bell's real name was Conroy Gorman. He had served time in San Quentin Prison, California. While incarcerated there, he had killed another inmate over an argument about a boxing match. He pleaded self defense and was exonerated.

Despite a garrulous nature, Gorman quickly impressed lawmen with the fact that he was not only an experience criminal, but a dangerous one as well. Sheriff Jones later admitted that he was uneasy all the time he was in the train robber's presence.

Law officials brought Gorman and his youthful accomplices under heavy guard to Lebanon for a preliminary hearing. Arriving at night on April 28th, Sheriff Jones and his prisoners still attracted a large crowd at the depot. Ringleader Gorman was still wearing a bandage on the head wound he had received while attempting to escape from being arrested. Many in the curious crowd were astonished to learn that two of these bold bandits were only teenagers.

Sheriff Jones escorted the robbers to the Laclede County Jail, which was only a few blocks away. Once there, the prisoners were locked in separate cells, Gorman in the small women's cell on the first floor and the two boys in the men's cells upstairs on the second floor.

The next day they were arraigned before Squire W. P. McMillan. All three waived their right to a preliminary hearing. After perhaps inform-

ing the defendants that a new law passed in 1895 provided for penalties ranging from ten years in prison to hanging upon conviction of train robbery, McMillan bound Gorman, Simms, and Trainor over to the August term of Circuit Court. The justice set bond at \$10,000 for Gorman (alias Bell) and \$5,000 each for Simms and Trainor.

Addressing Gorman, McMillan asked if he could furnish bond. The defendant replied that he couldn't under the circumstances, as it was a "larger sum than he got out of the train robbery."

The justice informed the men that they could have legal counsel, if they wanted it. But Gorman said they had no need of it, as all three would plead guilty, asking only the mercy of the court in providing a light punishment.

They confessed to the robbery, and said the statements made to the Chief of Police in St. Louis were completely accurate. They had nothing more to add and appeared resigned to their fate.

One of the boys, Mike Trainor, was taken to Springfield by express company detectives and Sheriff Jones to identify the store where he bought the dynamite with the money Gorman gave him. Both boys were taken to

the robbery scene east of Lebanon to identify some clothing.

A joke soon circulated in Lebanon that Constable Vincent of Stoutland unwittingly helped one of the boys the morning after the robbery while looking for a clue in the case. Young Charles Simms, whom the constable encountered on his search, told the lawman that he was searching for a lost hat. Vincent located it and gave it back to the teenage bandit without suspecting the youth of involvement in the train heist.

Had he been more suspicious, he might have collected the \$300 reward for cracking the case.

The constable and others in the Stoutland community quickly refuted the rumor as untrue.

Shortly after the preliminary hearing, Sheriff Jones took the prudent step of taking Gorman to St. Louis for safekeeping. This came after the ex-con was discovered to have secured a piece of steel shoe spring and to have cut partly through one of the bars in the main floor cell in the Laclede County Jailhouse in Lebanon.

Perhaps as a result of this incident, Laclede County authorities decided to

schedule a special term of Circuit Court in early June. A special grand jury panel consisting of W. P. Bowman, C. C. Clendenin, W. G. Garrison, J. M. Wheeler, Oliver Sharp, Ed Robinson, J. W. Appling, W. T. Murrell, C. E. Vernon, R. Sam Brown, Charles Manning, and John D. Robison, quickly returned an indictment against Gorman, Simms, and Trainor.

In a matter of only a few hours, the train bandits were arraigned, entered guilty pleas to train robbery, and were sentenced. Circuit Judge Bland sentenced the ringleader, Conroy Gorman, to 15 years in prison. His teenaged accomplices were sent to the Reform School for Boys at Boonville until they reached the age of 21.

The following Sunday, the Sleeper Hill Bandits once again left Lebanon by train, this time in a much different capacity. This time, they were in chains and in the custody of Laclede County Sheriff Frank Jones. They were headed for imprisonment for holding up Frisco Train Number 6 on April 1st, April Fool's Day. The joke, it turned out, was on them, a thought that may have passed through their minds as the train began its slow climb up the long Sleeper Hill.

Pulaski County's State Representatives

In 1966, the concept of one man, one vote ended Missouri's practice of allocating one state representative seat to each county of the state. Those who took office in 1967 represented *districts* instead of *counties*.

Pulaski County had a state representative as early as 1834, when the eighth general assembly was in session.

Following is a list of all the state representatives who served Pulaski County and the year they were elected. Without an exception, they were Democrats, even during the time Waynesville was occupied by forces of the Union Army during the Civil War and during the period of reconstruction that followed.

1834 Edward C. Moore
1836 C. L. Persell
1838 Robert Montgomery
1840 John S. Burnett
1842 Bland N. Ballard
1844 Washington A. Dodge
1846 Lewis Keedy
1848 William Henderson
1850 Allen Hamer
1852 Allen Hamer

1854 V. B. Hill
1856 V. B. Hill
1858 John B. Ellis
1860 John B. Ellis
1862 John B. Ellis
1864 Solomon Bartlett
1866 John B. Ellis
1868 G. W. Colley
1870 W. E. Davis*
1872 John B. Ellis
1874 T. J. Montgomery
1876 W. E. Davis*
1878 Benjamin D. Dodson
1880 A. L. Mc Gregor
1882 C. R. Wilson
1884 John B. Rackliffe
1886 Henry E. Warren
1888 John O. Morrison
1890 William L. Bradford
1892 John W. Stewart
1894 James H. Ross
1896 James H. Ross
1898 Henry Clay Murphy
1900 William H. Locker
1902 William H. Locker
1904 James Larkin Johnson
1906 William A. Lumpkin
1908 James Larkin Johnson
1910 A. J. McDonald

1912 W. D. Johnson
1914 Albert L. Crumley
1916 Albert L. Crumley
1918 George W. Berry
1920 W. C. Christeson
1922 James W. Armstrong
1924 James W. Armstrong
1926 James W. Armstrong
1928 James W. Armstrong
1930 James W. Armstrong
1932 James W. Armstrong
1934 Tom A. Shockley
1936 Tom A. Shockley
1938 Guy Winningham
1940 J. C. Underwood
1942 J. Ellis Dodds
1944 George W. Lane, Sr.
1946 George W. Lane, Sr.
1948 Tom A. Shockley
1950 Tom A. Shockley
1952 J. Ellis Dodds
1954 J. Ellis Dodds
1956 Chris C. Cole
1958 Chris C. Cole
1960 Chris C. Cole
1962 Chris C. Cole
1964 Chris C. Cole

*Not sure of first name initial.