

Martin County Bank Robberies

Today's criminals frequently utilize sophisticated methods in their attempts to achieve their goals. Before the advent of these contemporary methods involving the different forms of white collar crime, identity theft, and a variety of cyberspace crimes, there were a number of bank robberies that took place in Martin County that in today's world might be considered as an "old fashioned" means of criminal intent, namely, blatant face to face bank heists with the robbers brandishing weapons. Although many of these robbery attempts from the past might seem a bit archaic in today's world of sometimes transparent criminals; nonetheless, their unlawful efforts were additionally met with the also less sophisticated methods of law enforcement of the era, which eventually prevailed.

Monterey, now Trimont, experienced two bank robberies in the early part of the last century. The first occurred in 1908 when the bank was entered at night and the safe door was blown off its hinges. The robber made off with \$1,500.00 escaping on a three-wheeled hand cart stolen from a railroad section house at Monterey. He drove it over the railroad tracks to Sherburn where he abandoned it. Sheriff E. E. Ward's investigation found torn scraps of a picture and letter near the abandoned hand car. The letter, a love letter, came from the robber's girl friend and it had a St. Paul return address. Sheriff Ward meticulously pieced the letter together, and then went to St. Paul. Within a few days, he arrested the suspect who pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years in Stillwater.

A headline in the December 12, 1939, edition of *The Fairmont Daily Sentinel* read, "Monterey Bank Holdup Brings FBI Sleuths." The article went on to say, "G Men, state, and county officials today in search for a lone, armed bandit who held up the Farmers State Bank of Monterey Monday and escaped with \$700.00 after forcing Elmer F. Peterson, cashier, and Bob Rippel, assistant cashier, into the vault." The bandit had a note stating the following: "This is a stickup. No false moves. Or else. Put the money in there." Elmer Peterson stated, "I never knew a gun looked so big from the small end." A. E. Peterson, vice president, missed the excitement as he was in the washroom during the robbery, and was quite surprised when he came out to find what had happened. Elmer Peterson stated, in giving his account of the robbery to the *Sentinel*, "It was the first loan we ever made without getting a note for it." This was the first armed holdup of a bank in Martin County since the Bank of Sherburn robbery in 1896, and was the second bank robbery in Monterey.

Another daring bank robbery occurred in Ceylon in 1948 when two young Martin County men held up the Ceylon State Bank escaping with \$5,000.00. One of the men singlehandedly robbed the bank while his accomplice, who watched from a nearby café, was drinking coffee with his family. According to the May 22, 1948, edition of *The Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, a lone bandit masked in a dirty white handkerchief holding a large nickel plated revolver entered the bank and stated, "This is a stick up. Put 'em up and let's have no monkey business." Next, the young man forced the bank employees into the vault, forcing another employee to then lock the vault. Although the bandit made off with \$5,000.00, he failed to notice \$1,674.00 in a cash drawer and another \$3,500.00 in another vault. His accomplice conveniently left the cafe, commandeered the getaway car, and picked up the robber around the block after he left the bank. Within two hours of the robbery, one of the robbers returned to the bank and informed one of the bank

employees that his revolver, which had been purchased at Colvin's Store in Fairmont, had been mysteriously stolen. Deputy Bill Musegades, who was in the bank at that time, felt this story to be somewhat suspicious. Consequently, he kept the suspect under surveillance, eventually approaching him and asking where the money was hidden. Shortly thereafter, Sheriff A. R. Batterman and a bank employee drove to the farm of the parents of the suspect. There it was learned that the two young men had in fact divided the \$5,000.00 at that location. It was further determined that the money was hidden in the barn on the farm site and in a tree by a creek. Upon their apprehension, the two boys pleaded guilty. They were sentenced to 40 years in jail; however, because they were minors, they were remanded to the custody of the Youth Conservation Committee.

Perhaps the most brazen, and deadly, of these historic bank jobs occurred in Sherburn in 1896. The *Martin County Sentinel* reported the following on October 16, 1896: "Sherburn, the scene of the most dastardly crime in the history of Minnesota, one of the blackest deeds in the annals of crime." That crime was the burglary of the Bank of Sherburn. Two men entered the bank one October day in 1896 and, without warning, shot and killed two men in the bank. The two victims were the assistant cashier, George Thorburn, and Olof J. Oestern of Luverne. The two robbers, both in their twenties, made their escape on bicycles heading west out of town with an estimated take of \$1,000.00 to \$2,000.00. In swift pursuit were Sheriff W. P. Hill and his deputies of Fairmont, Sheriff Dunn of Jackson with a posse of 200 men, and other concerned citizens from the area. One of the suspects was finally located at a farmhouse fourteen miles east of Elmore; however, when approached by law enforcement, he opened fire on the posse killing Sheriff William Gallion of Bancroft, Iowa, and although wounded himself, attempted to again escape on his bicycle. Sheriff E. E. Ward of Fairmont fired and wounded the fugitive; however, before he could be apprehended, the robber put his weapon to his head and killed himself. The second fugitive, a brother of the robber killed near Elmore, was captured at Lake Mills, Iowa. He made a complete confession to this reprehensible crime, which included his account to the effect that his deceased brother was in fact responsible for the deaths of the two people in the Bank of Sherburn.

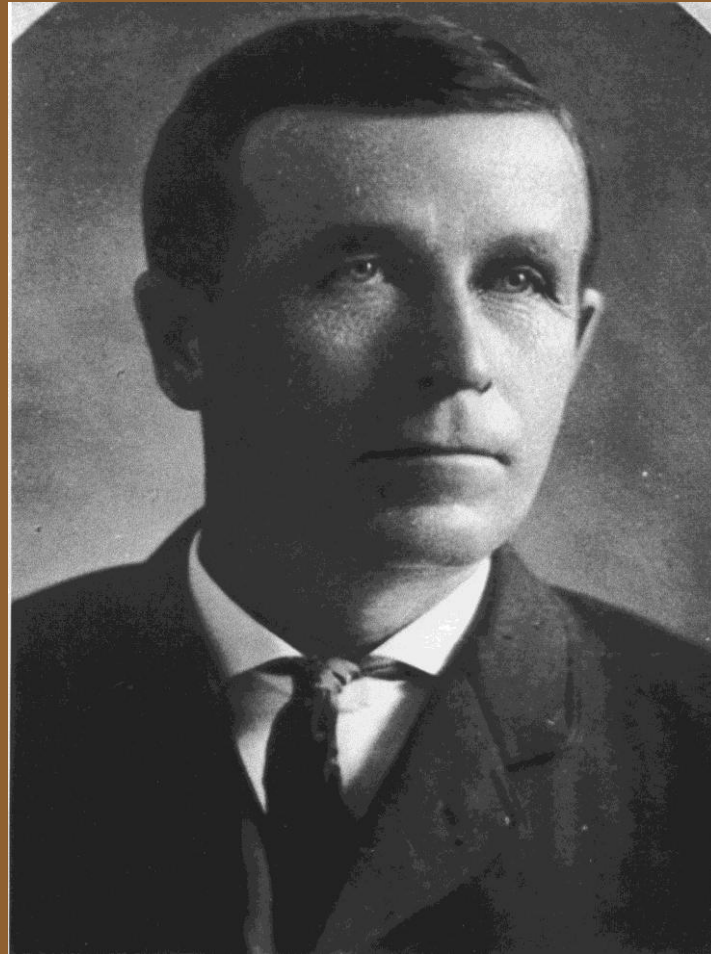
These are a few of the criminal acts regarding bank robberies that have taken place in Martin County, and been solved by Martin County Law Enforcement officials over the years. Crime has existed in the history of Martin County, as has the effectiveness of law enforcement officials in capturing criminals and thereby preventing further crimes. Crime, coupled with law enforcement methods and procedures, has certainly evolved over time. Although law enforcement is constantly challenged by the criminal element in our society, their efforts and accomplishments continue to keep our society safe.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

Sheriff A.R. Batterman



Sheriff E.E. Ward



Sheriff Washington P. Hill



Sheriff William M. Musegades

