

THE GREAT WILLARD BANK ROBBERY by Glen Haney

Bank robber Willie Sutton is famously known for answering a reporter, who asked why he robbed banks by saying, "*because that's where the money is.*" That, remark sums up very neatly the motivation behind the attempted bank robbery in Willard, Kentucky on a Tuesday night, October 31, 1905.

Willard in 1905, was a thriving community. The railroad had brought prosperity with the timber and mining industries and a population of 800 or so people. There were several grocery stores, two jewelry stores, a number of fraternal lodges and of course a bank to attract robbers.



Willard about 1890

Nowadays bank robbers prefer to go solo. In the old days robbery required more bad guys because it was very unlikely that the victims would submit quietly. Our story has six robbers. Two brothers, from Carter City Charlie and Steve Stamper were the local desperados who blueprinted the plan. The other four were headquartered in Cincinnati where they had been involved in several other bank heists in the Midwest. These four men all used aliases and to this day their real names may never be known but these were listed; Tom Hall, J.W. Wood, Thomas Brown and J.D. Roderick. Most recently, they had with nitroglycerine "tore to pieces" the First National bank in Hagerstown, Indiana. They had escaped with \$5000 and their lives after a shootout with the town citizens.

Exactly how the Stamper boys met up with the Cincinnati gang is unclear. A plausible theory is that the Stamper boys met up with them at a watering hole in the city while they, the Stamper boys, were on the lam from a recent holdup of the Post Office in Carter City.

The game plan, unfolded over foamy glasses of malt liquor, was simple and was sure to be a pushover job for the hardened big city boys partnered up with two local boys.

They would all meet up in Ashland and take the train to E.K. Junction(Hitchins). From there, they would ride the E.K. to Willard, blow up the bank, and then beat it out of town with armloads of loot. There was no law in the burg so who was to stop them?

The first part went well; the train trip from Ashland to E.K. Junction. After that things begin to go downhill. At E.K. Junction they learned that there was no train that late in the day going to Willard. After a quick conference they decided to walk the rest of the way - a five mile trek.

Arriving at dusk in Willard they were pleasantly surprised to see find the E.K. locomotive already under steam under the watchful eye of the night guard Bob Blankenbeckler. The locomotive would be just the thing for their escape out of town, they reasoned. The gang sized Blankenbeckler, bound and tied him to the engine then moved on to the bank. Causing no alarm they posted guards, entered the bank and went to work on the vault. Their stock in trade, nitro was put to work with the result being a tremendous explosion. The blast blew the door of the vault clear through the front of the brick bank and drew attention for miles around. Choking their way through the dust the bandits moved in for the loot but to their dismay they found another door inside the vault under lock and key. Another charge was being readied to blast the enter door when the guards they had posted gave the alert that it was too late - they had to make a run for it. Townspeople, armed with shotguns, muskets and pitchforks where being held at bay but were not about to let their savings go without a fight.



The Willard Bank

Trading shots with their pursuers the robbers dashed to the locomotive, untied Blankenbeckler and steamed off.

Perhaps anticipating a hot reception when they arrived at E.K. Junction the bandits decided to abandon the locomotive after a mile or so and made their way up Bens Run. The gang didn't know it but a posse

Led by the bloodhounds of George Vincent along with George Belcher, William McDavid, James H. Williams, Joe Riley and John Yates was on their trail.

Becoming disoriented in the dark the robbers were resting when the posse caught up with them after sunrise and a running gun battle ensued which lasted until early afternoon and resulted in the two of the bandits being wounded and the other four captured. A few days later, one of the wounded, Roderick, who had been shot twice in the stomach died. Before dying he provided his real name (he had said it was Smith) and ask that his mother in Athens Tennessee be notified. Arrangements were made and his body was sent there for burial.

The remaining five were jailed in Grayson where a month later Tom Brown and Steve Stamper made a jail break. They walked all night to Greenup but tracked by Robert Lewis and Fred Porter. As Brown and Stamper were about to ring the bell for the ferry to take them across to Ohio, Lewis and Porter made the arrest.

In February 1905 all five pleaded guilty. Wood and Allen got four years and Steve Stamper five. Brown and Charley Stamper got nine years. Brown and Stamper were to have to have been tried at a later date for the escape attempt but Charley did not survive his five years in the pen.

The Willard Bank did not survive much longer either. The bank withered until 1910 when the bank's head P.H. Burley was sent to jail for accepting deposits with knowledge that the bank was insolvent.

SOURCES:

Primary source, Carter County pictorial History by George Wollford
Carter County History 1938-1976
The Portsmouth Times
The Lima Ohio Times Democrat

In research for this story I ran across the following interesting article which I will let rest on its own merit.:

Per Carlos Webb, Pamplico, South Carolina, Frank and Jessie James stayed overnight with James and Rebecca Webb at Caney Falls, near Webbville, Kentucky, after having robbed the bank at Willard, Kentucky. The Webbs did not know at the time that the James gang had robbed this bank. James Webb served in Civil War, Company C, 40th Regiment, Kentucky. Buried James C Webb cemetery, Rt 1, Caney Falls, near Webbville, Lawrence Co, Kentucky, on the road to Louisa.