



Buffalo Tales



Volume 17, No. 6 Buffalo County Historical Society November-December, 1994

THE KEARNEY BANK ROBBERY

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

On Saturday morning, January 20, 1934, shortly after ten o'clock, four masked men entered the Fort Kearney State Bank and robbed it of \$10,000 or more in cash. The bandits, who were heavily armed, escaped in a waiting car with a fifth man at the wheel, taking five employees as hostages. Even though Sheriff William F. Flake and Postmaster Herman Mattson, Jr. were on their trail within a few minutes, not a trace of the five robbers was found, and none of the money was retrieved.

According to the news story in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of that date and of Monday, January 22, the bandits got away without a trace even though police and sheriffs' men from Buffalo, Kearney, Phelps and Harlan Counties and the state sheriff's deputies were on the alert.

To set the scene of this 1934 event, the bank involved was the 3-story building at the southeast corner of the intersection of Central Avenue and 21st Street. It had been built in 1890 for the City National Bank. Subsequent banks in the building were the Fort Kearney State, the Fort Kearney National and the First National. During the 1950's the third floor was removed. Presently (1994) it is an office building. At the time of the robbery a part of the first floor, with its own entrance from the street, was the business office of Guaranty Trust Company. Central Avenue was the highway south from the city, crossing the Platte River bridge into Kearney County. The Model Grocery at that time was located on the east side of Central Avenue, three doors south of the bank.

(Continued on Page 3)

THE KEARNEY DAILY HUB

5 BANDITS ROB KEARNEY BANK

LOOT ESTIMATED TO BE \$10,000 IS SECURED BY MASKED MEN IN HOLDUP

Make Good Their Escape in Ford V-8 After Taking Five Employees With Them As Hostages.

ALL ARE RELEASED IN SHORT TIME UNHARMED

Three Were Reluctantly and One as Greater Cash Is Spurred Up

FAIL TO ENTER THE SAFE

Several Parties in Search For Cash and Try to Enter South of Highway

ROAD TO OPPOSE BURGLAR

Demands to Enter the Garage

CONVICTS ARE LIED AND AIDED AFTER ESCAPE

Several Parties Take on Police in Battle Near St. Catharines, Ont.

DESCRIBE THE CAPTURE

Describe How They Were Taken to the Jail

PHYSICIANS EXAMINE DR. ALICE WYTHELOW

DISAPPROVE DORMITORY AT KEARNEY

Facts Insufficient to Justify Huge Expense.

CONGRESS HAS PLAN TO RAID THE TREASURY

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

NORTH PLATTE CITIZENS ENRAGED AS MAN KILLS WIFE AND HER FATHER

Authorities Take Precautions Against Threat of More Violence as Search for Suspects Continues.

WILL SAVED MORMONS

Some Are Trying to Secure Their

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

WILL SAVED MORMONS

Some Are Trying to Secure Their

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

WILL SAVED MORMONS

Some Are Trying to Secure Their

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

WILL SAVED MORMONS

Some Are Trying to Secure Their

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

PLAN EXPENSIVE PROJECTS

Other Projects Viewed at Present Hearing

Headlines in Kearney Daily Hub on the day of the robbery.

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

By the time you read this message you will have cast your vote and are now preparing to celebrate Thanksgiving Day with your loved ones.

We have a great deal to be thankful for in this country. The preservation of the history left to us by our forefathers from the first Thanksgiving and on down through the years.

We should all be very thankful that we have a Historical Society in our County and so many willing people who volunteer their time and resources to make it one of the best in this area. I just hope we can all continue to work together for the future of our Museum and Historical Society in the year to come.

We are getting ready for our Christmas Tree Walk at the Museum and hope every one will be willing to help out when called upon. Invite your friends and relatives to visit the display.

Thanks to all those who helped move the articles from the storage near UNK to the new wagon barn on October 22nd.

Bob Guge repaired and painted the milk cart. Thank you!! The milk cart, fire engine and wagons have all been moved into the new barn.

Phil Holmgren did a great job presenting a program on transportation in Shelton on October 30th, but the attendance was small.

I want to thank every one who has helped make this year a success and I look forward to working with all of you in 1995.

—Larry K. Nansel, President

For Christmas Giving

Tales of Buffalo County, Volumes I, II, III & IV, contain researched stories of events and people of the Buffalo County area.

Paperback, many illustrations, indexed.

\$10.00 per volume, plus \$1.00 postage if mailed.

Special Price for all four volumes, \$36.00, plus \$2.50 if mailed.

Tales of Buffalo County are also on sale at ABC Drug and Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney Centre, and "read all about it" at Hilltop Mall.

Gift Memberships are an ideal gift.

Basic Family	\$15.00	per year
Institutional	20.00	per year
Supporting	25.00 +	per year

Life Memberships (one time payment):

Individual	\$150.00
Husband and Wife	200.00

MEMORIALS RECEIVED from

- Mardi Anderson, in memory of Maxine Schroeder and Chas. Pflaum
- Margaret and Henry Hohnholt, in memory of Maxine Schroeder and Chas. Pflaum
- Doris Huddell, in memory of Maxine Schroeder
- Dorothy Carmann, Emma, Freida, Kermit Wiles, Kathy Reynolds, Don and Naomi Schroeder, Theresa and Joe Colgan, in memory of Chas. Pflaum

NEW MEMBERS

New Life Members
Robert and Norma Guge, Kearney

New Basic Member
Betty Lou Geist, Kearney

In 1934 most business and professional offices were open on Saturdays, grocery and drug stores closing as late as 9:30 or 10:00 p.m. On this particular Saturday, January 20, four bank employees were at work: Paul Kanno, vice-president; Mrs. Tom Russell, bookkeeper; Eunice Shields and Dan Miller, bank clerks. Edith Rydberg was also at her desk in the Guaranty Trust Company office.

Three of the robbers entered the bank at the front door, two of them carrying machine guns. The fourth entered through the office of the Guaranty Trust Company, herding Miss Rydberg and Ralph M. Barney, a customer, ahead of him. At first the employees and customers, who numbered about twenty, were told to put their hands up as they were lined up against the front partition wall. Then realizing that the bank's large front windows would readily show people on the street the row of all the hands sticking up over the top of the partition, the robbers told them to keep their hands down and their eyes straight ahead toward the partition wall.

One of the gang stood just inside the front door with a machine gun. As customers came in he would swing the gun into the customer's ribs and point him to the rest of the group behind the partition. When one of the group turned and tried to "steal a look" at what was going on, he was properly threatened so no one else dared to look.

The largest bandit, who seemed to be the leader, gathered up all the currency himself, as well as some of the silver. The time lock on the safe kept most of the cash reserve



The above photo, courtesy of the Kearney Public Library, predates 1934 by many years. However, the front entrance to the bank on Central Avenue, and the side entrance on East 21st Street at the left, which housed the Guaranty Trust Company at the time of the robbery, are shown. At the extreme right, the frame building of the Nye Cash Grocery was the location of the Model Grocery at the time of the robbery, the frame building having been replaced by a modern brick building by 1934.

unobtainable to the robbers. Witnesses said the whole operation didn't take ten minutes. The men wore felt hats with handkerchiefs concealing their faces up to eye level, so descriptions were vague.

When the robbers left they took with them as hostages all of the bank employees and Miss Rydberg. All were herded into a Ford V-8 sedan with a driver waiting. The car headed south, stopping to let four of the hostages off at the courthouse. Eunice Shields, the fifth hostage, was released at the south end of the Platte River bridge. No shots were fired and the hostages were unharmed.

County Sheriff Flake was called from the barber's chair in a nearby shop. He and Postmaster Herman Mattson, Jr., a former police officer, started in pursuit within minutes. Chief of Police Lloyd Frank, hearing that the bandits had been seen near Axtell, also headed south a short time later with a posse. Other police officers in the area joined in the search, heading on toward Holdrege, but no trace of the men was found.

Clerks in the Model Grocery a few doors south of the bank had noticed the bandit car parked outside the bank for at least an hour before the robbery occurred. Not realizing the purpose of the car in Kearney, they paid little attention to it and could give no good description of the men or the driver.

It was thought that the robbers had probably switched to two cars at a point southeast of Kearney, on the supposition that five men in a car would attract more attention than two or three. The car in which the gang left Kearney was recovered and returned to the city, but it bore no fingerprints. Pictures in a "rogues' gallery" sent to the police from the state sheriff, also failed to yield an identification.

Later on it was found that the car used in the hold-up was stolen on January 6 at Manhattan, Kansas. The license plates it carried were stolen from a Grand Island car on December 31. The car bearing the stolen plates had been sighted in Kansas City around January 13. Lincoln police said the descriptions of the robbers were in many ways similar to those of a bandit gang who a few days earlier had attempted to rob the Central Nebraska Bank in Columbus. However, none of the clues yielded



Buffalo County Courthouse, where four hostages were freed.

solid evidence.

Meanwhile at the bank, confusion reigned. As described in the *Hub*:

"Employees tried in vain for a time to reach an estimate of the amount stolen, while scores of people swarmed into the bank seeking news of the holdup. "As Kallow and the other hostages returned, the crowds were cleared out and a hasty check of the loot was made. The safe, protected by a time lock, kept most of the currency from the bandits, but counter cash estimated at at least \$10,000 was missing."

When the bank reopened late in the afternoon, there was plenty of money available to meet the ordinary needs of the business. The loss was fully covered by insurance.

In the early 1930's there was a rash of bank robberies in Nebraska and other states in the midwest. This was the period of the dust bowl days, plus an economic slump nationwide following the stock market crash of 1929. The state American Legion suggested that cities form a vigilante committee, but, according to George Munro, local commander in 1934, such a vigilante team would have been of little or no help in preventing the robbery, or in helping capture the robbers.

A news item in the *Hub* of January 31, 1934, announced the capture of the notorious Eno brothers, Clarence and Otis, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They were suspected in bank robberies in Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska, but it is not known whether they were the robbers of the Kearney bank.

Local police and sheriff's records are not now available, the successor First National Bank has no record, and the state sheriff's office was succeeded by the State Highway Patrol a few years later so its records are not available. Oldtimers in Kearney remember the bank robbery, but have no recollection of the bandits being caught, or any of the money being recovered.

SOURCES

Kearney Daily Hub, January 20, 22, 31, 1934.



Platte River Bridge.
Hostage Eunice Shields was freed at the south end of the bridge.

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.

1994 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:
 Basic Membership \$15.00
 Institutional Membership \$20.00
 Supporting Membership \$30.00 +
 Life memberships are \$150.00 for an individual;
 \$200.00 husband and wife.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 1995: Glen Wisch, Philip Holmgren, Larry Nansel, Floretta Sullwold.

Term expiring June 1, 1996: Susan C. Lynch, Margaret Hohnholt, Wilma Harder, Helen Kinnaman.

Term expiring June 1, 1997: Mardi Anderson, Janet Eickmeier, Dan Speirs, Susan Underhill.

Officers (1 year term)

President Larry Nansel
 Vice-President Philip Holmgren
 Secretary Margaret Hohnholt
 Treasurer Mardi Anderson

WINTER WONDERLAND AT TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM
 December 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 & 11 — 1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Activity continues at the Museum. Flower beds are cleared, the wagons have been put in their new home for the winter and plans for the CHRISTMAS TREE WALK are nearing completion. New organizations are being included so you must come and see! We will be adding some new decorations both inside and out. It all should put you in the mood for Christmas. We again plan to have a food sale, so come to find new goodies and bring some of your goodies to sell. The sale is continuous. We have a new supply each day.

You may also pick up gifts from our gift shop. We will have many new items just for Christmas. The entire series of TALES OF BUFFALO COUNTY will be available. (Volumes I, II, III & IV)

Christmas Trees may be viewed from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. each day from December 3rd through December 11th. Many new displays are planned — Truly a WINTER WONDERLAND!

(If there are any questions, call 234-3041, 237-7327, 237-2697.)

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

Buffalo County Historical Society

Box 523

Kearney, NE 68848-0523

Address Correction Requested

Non-Profit Organization
 Bulk Rate
 U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Postal Permit No. 7
 Kearney, Nebraska

B
 VIVIAN E BLOMENKAMP
 1023 FOREST AVE
 PALO ALTO CA 94301