

Stephen Thorning
Wellington Advertiser
21 April 2000
Valuing Our History

Bank holdup created excitement for Morriston residents in 1931

Banking offices have done business in Wellington County for about 160 years, but they have attracted armed robbers only rarely – certainly less than a dozen times.

None aroused more excitement than the holdup of the Bank of Toronto's Morriston branch on Friday, 13 Nov. 1931.

It was one of the least important of that bank's branches, open only Tuesdays and Fridays, and staffed by two employees from the Freerton branch.

The incident began in Kitchener, on Glasgow Ave., when a noise aroused Mrs. Harry Behling from her sleep about 4:30 am. She did not pay much attention. The West Side Dairy, co-owned by her husband, operated nearby. Early morning noises were the norm.

But this morning, things were anything but normal. Someone had broken into the garage attached to the dairy, and was hiding out, waiting for the main door to be opened.

An hour or so later, one of the drivers for the dairy arrived, started one of the trucks, opened the door, and drove out.

Two minutes later, about 5:45 am, Harry's brown Ford drove out, driven by the intruder. A witness across the street noticed that the car stalled briefly, then drive on.

The itinerary of the car and its unauthorized driver over the next 5 hours are a mystery, but they must have toured some back roads because it became plastered with mud. A little after 11 am the car, occupied by two men, pulled up in front of the Bank of Toronto in Morriston, which occupied the south half of the large yellow brick building known as the Morrison Block, on the west side of the Brock Road.

One of the men, a short fellow wearing a leather jacket, got out of the car, stepped around some young children playing near the steps of the bank, and went inside. Manager Fred Small was talking with a customer.

Small later remembered the time: 11:15 am. The man approached the teller, a Miss Gray, and asked to have a \$5 bill changed into \$1 bills. He fumbled in his pockets for a few moments, looking furtively around the office. Then he approached the teller again, asking to have a \$1 bill changed into silver.

The man then left the bank, got back into the car, and drove off.

Some five minutes later he was back. This time, he had a handkerchief tied over the lower part of his face, and a taller companion, also masked. Both brandished pistols. The pair strode behind the counter, and shorter man informed the teller that a holdup was in progress by muttering "Stick 'em up" through clenched teeth.

Manager Small sat frozen, his own .32 calibre automatic pistol on a table beside his desk. Before he could marshal his senses, one of the bandits entered the manager's office, and waving his pistol in Small's face, demanded the manager's revolver.

For a moment, the bandits were not sure what to do next: they debated whether they should lock Miss Gray and Mr. Small, the only two employees, in the back room; have them stand facing the wall with their hands above their heads; or forcing them to lie face down on the floor.

Eventually they settled on the latter course.

The shorter man then started scooping up the contents of the teller's drawer. He had no container for the money, and couldn't find one immediately, so he merely stuffed the money into his pockets. He cleaned the drawer out, including the silver.

Now emboldened, the pair told the bank staff to not move for five minutes, and not to make any phone calls. To emphasize the point, they yanked a wire from the wall. It was the alarm wire, not the telephone. They went out the door, and looked suspiciously up and down the street. It was deserted, except for the small children on the sidewalk. Then they took off toward Guelph at high speed and with a shower of loose gravel.

The noise attracted the attention of 14-year-old Jimmy Martin, who was making some purchases at the Morriston General Store next door. He saw the car speed away, "as fast as I ever saw a car go," he told police, and thought that the licence number started with "S".

When he heard the car leave, Fred Small immediately grabbed the telephone. Within seconds he had Guelph Police Chief J.A. Rae on the line.

The Chief immediately sent Detective Hauck, two constables, and an OPP traffic officer, who happened to be in the office, to Morriston. He noted the time: 11:34 am, only 5 minutes after Small reported the robbery had started. Chief Rae then picked up the phone again, and called OPP headquarters in Kitchener with the news.

The Guelph car with four officers arrived in Morriston in less than 10 minutes. Tire marks in the gravel from the fast getaway of the bandits were obvious. Hauck was able to trace them up the highway toward Guelph, and then down a side road to the west.

Near Puslinch Lake, some seven miles from the scene of the robbery, stuck in a

swamp, the officers stumbled upon the car, abandoned with the keys in the ignition. They noted that someone had smeared mud over the licence plate to make it illegible.

Meanwhile, Morriston at noon presented quite a contrast to the deserted hamlet of a half hour before.

Virtually the entire population milled about the door of the bank, the amateur sleuths among them offering theories and opinions as to the destiny of the thugs to anyone who would listen. The gathering in front of the bank did not disperse until late evening.

Through the front window, the calendar was clearly visible: "Friday 13." The OPP had put out a radio call, and Const. Culp of Freelon had arrived promptly on the scene. A few minutes after 12, Sgt. Cousans of the Kitchener OPP Headquarters pulled up to take charge of the investigation, accompanied by Constables Richardson and Stewart.

With the arrival of the OPP, the Guelph city police returned home, where they learned the car they had discovered had been stolen earlier in the morning from Harry Behling in Kitchener.

Reporters soon showed up as well, including a stringer for the Toronto Star, which published a brief front page story in its later editions that day.

The Morriston robbery rated a banner headline in both the Guelph Mercury and the Kitchener-Waterloo Record that afternoon. Manager Small told reporters that the loss had been between \$1,500 and \$2,000.

There had been a rash of armed robberies in recent months all over Ontario, and the OPP was under pressure to end them. Later in the afternoon, the Deputy Commissioner of the OPP sent Inspector A.B. Boyd from Toronto to take charge of the investigation, heading a team of 10 officers drawn from Toronto, Guelph, Kitchener and Hamilton.

Boyd concluded that the bandits had taken refuge in one of the Puslinch swamps after abandoning the car.

He sent for bloodhounds to track them down, but the quadrupeds became so excited that they chased policemen instead, and had to be sent back to their kennel.

To help in the search, the police enlisted the assistance of area farmers, more than 100 of them, some of whom took off into the area around Lake Puslinch armed with pitchforks.

By late afternoon the bandits had gained the reputation of desperate and vicious cut throats. Women locked their doors, and mothers refused to let their children out of the house.

The search continued past dusk. A couple of RCMP officers joined in the pursuit, as

well as a county constable. More than two dozen police officers were on the case, as well as the volunteers. Police refused to give the number of people involved in the manhunt, but estimates placed it at 150 to 200.

Late in the evening there was a report, which the police refused to substantiate, that the desperadoes had stolen another car.

The search continued all night. Shortly after dawn, the band of weary, cold officers and their volunteer assistants abandoned the chase, having searched most of the western half of Puslinch Township and into Waterloo County.

Inspector Boyd and Sergeant Cousans, who had been on the job all day and most of the night, returned to the job after a few hours sleep.

Boyd remained convinced that their quarry had taken refuge nearby. There was a report, false as it turned out, that two suspects had been nabbed in Galt.

The police had only a meagre description of the men. Both Fred Small and Miss Gray, agitated by the day's events, could recall that they were nondescript. One, about 5 feet 4 inches, with a shiny leather jacket, seemed to be in charge. His sidekick was 4 or 5 inches taller.

The police did have a couple of leads. Farmers had reported seeing the stolen Ford heading west at high speed on the first sideroad north of Morriston, double back to Morriston, then head east again, as if looking for someone or something.

Other farmers near Crieff had noticed a large car parked at the side of the road late in the morning, with the driver dressed in a uniform.

In Toronto, the Bank of Toronto's head office announced the actual amount taken: \$1,458.15.

The excitement in Morriston soon died down. Inspector Boyd, though, remained on the case, hinting at a "definite lead" late on Saturday. On Wednesday of the following week he refused to discuss new developments in the case, and offered only an enigmatic smile when a Kitchener-Waterloo Record reporter asked if an arrest was imminent.

The O.P.P. net continued to tighten.

Next week: The conclusion of the case, and further excitement at the Morriston bank.