

The Great Heist

Chapter One

It was a bright, warm, early autumn day on September 17, 1930 in the heart of Lincoln, Nebraska's downtown business district when a blue-black Buick Master Six sedan with yellow wire wheels halted suddenly in front of the Lincoln National Bank on the northwest corner of 12th and O Streets. It looked like a police car, and most people who saw it thought the men inside were law officers.

It was 10:02 in the morning. The bank had just opened two minutes earlier, though employees had been in the offices since eight. One man remained at the wheel while the other five leapt out of the car and swiftly rushed into the Ganter Building in which the bank took up the first floor. The car's engine continued to run; they wouldn't be long.

The men wore dark business suits and carried red and white sacks in one hand and firearms in the other. They wore no masks. None were locals, and wouldn't be known to the residents.

Inside the bank, they immediately ordered everyone to lie down on the ground. The majority of the people in the bank were employees, but about a dozen customers had 5

gotten in early when the doors first opened and were spread throughout the lobby. Everyone hesitated at the sound of the command, uncertain the men were serious. Some thought this might be a practical joke. Others were just too shocked to fully comprehend what was happening. This sort of thing didn't occur in a small town like theirs, or so they thought.

One of the bandits approached Assistant Cashier J.T. Shields and the employee next to him, Phil Hall. Hall chastised the man for disturbing business, and the bandit knocked him over the head with his gun. Immediately, everyone dropped to the floor.

One of the men approached the teller cages and bashed his way in through the cage door, forcing the employees to the floor. To show how serious they were, they smashed two other employees over the head, W.E. Barkley and Marie Becker.

Having control of the lobby, one of the men exited the building and went to the street corner, his gun, larger than most of the others', swinging below his jacket, partially concealed.

The men inside were efficient, moving quickly through the bank like military personnel on a well-coordinated mission. Each man had his own assignment. None of them needed instructions; it had all been choreographed before the morning had begun.

Only one of the men gave occasional orders, the one standing guard at the front door. He told the others to move on to each part of the plan, and made a few adjustments along the way.

They knew the layout of the bank, even the back rooms and hallways where only employees were allowed. The bandits found all the personnel in their offices and had them go out into the lobby and lay on the ground where they could be watched. 6

No one had time to go for a phone except for one employee, Hazel Jones, whose job it was to run the switchboard. One of the bandits clearly knew her position and was on her before she could say anything on the phone. Speaking of the robbery later, she said:

I thought it was a joke but it was no joke... I was sitting clear back where I couldn't see and I was busy with my work. The one who got me off the switchboard had a gun that he put in my face and got me off the telephone and on the floor.

One of the men hurried to the lower level where four bookkeepers were working. One of the bookkeepers, Sterling Glover, remembered the incident later:

The first thing we knew there was someone standing there pointing a gun at us and told us to put our hands up and we thought it was a joke, but when we saw the gun, we knew it wasn't a joke. He herded the four of us up stairs and made us lay down at the nearest place. They told us to keep our heads down.

W. A. Selleck, the bank president, came out of his office to find the dramatic scene unfolding in his lobby. He, too, thought it was a joke. He had recently had a birthday, and he thought friends had hired actors to pretend like there was a hold-up. He went to the robbers, telling them it was a fun gag, but they needed to open the bank to real customers. One of the robbers informed him that this was not a hoax, and he needed to get on the ground. Not believing him, Selleck continued toward the robber, smiling, and commending him on his realistic performance. The robber beat him across the face, sending Selleck to the ground, then hit him two more times to prove how serious he was. 7

By now, everyone was face down on the marble floor of the lobby. The bandits had the bank entirely secured within the first minute of having entered. The leader at the door threatened to shoot anyone who tried to get up. Another walked among the people occasionally cursing at them and acting like he was going to shoot someone.

They were now ready for phase two, but they seemed to be missing a key component; someone who was supposed to be among the captives but wasn't. "Where's Leinberger!" one of the men shouted.

H.E. Leinberger was the assistant cashier, the only one with the keys to the inner vault door during business hours. Once the time lock kicked in at 10 am, only Leinberger had access to it. The employees were surprised to hear the bank robbers say their assistant cashier's name, as only someone familiar with bank policy would be aware of this information.

E.H. Luikart, vice president of the bank, told the robbers that Leinberger was away from the bank on business. Assuming why they wanted Leinberger, Luikart continued to explain that no one else could get past the heavy vault door into the safe. This proved a tricky situation for both the robbers and their captives. If they became furious over the matter, this could become a hostage situation, or they may simply kill everyone in the bank out of pure spite.

The robbers didn't believe Luikart, and continued to search for Leinberger, but he was nowhere to be found. The assistant cashier had indeed left on business before the bank had opened.

During the confusion, one woman managed to slip away from the robbers' sights, found a side door, and got out.

All was quiet outside, as if nothing wrong was happening in the world. People were casually going about 8

their daily business. There was even a patrolman, Elmer Beals, who was wandering the area with no idea what was going on. It had all happened so fast, after all. Barely three minutes had passed since the robbery had begun.

The woman who had escaped spotted the car still idling at the curb. The driver had not seen her; neither had the lookout who was maneuvering between the corner and the front door. Whenever someone came close to the entrance, the gangster just inside opened the door and showed his gun, and the lookout stepped up behind the person and forced them inside, adding them to the pool of hostages. The escaped woman made her way across the street, and to safety.

Another woman, Mrs. Hugh Werner, was approaching the door when she saw what was happening to others who approached. She backed away. The man at the door and the one outside told her to come back. She hurried faster. The lookout threatened her, and Mrs. Warner sprinted across 12th Street. The men continued to shout after her as she weaved through traffic and hopped onto the sidewalk on the other side. She didn't look back, and she didn't listen to the men; she just burst into Crancer's Radio Store and told E.W. Wolfenbarger, an employee, to call the police. He peered through the window, saw what she was talking about, and made the call.

Sergeant Frank Towle was working the desk at the downtown police department. They were used to getting calls for bar brawls, reckless teenagers disturbing the peace, or the occasional violation of the Volstead Act. Big city crimes were hundreds of miles away. Officers carried little more than pistols. There wasn't even a police academy. Joseph T. Carroll, who later served as chief of police, recalled of the time: 9

There was not much training. You were assigned and you worked under the direction and supervision of a seasoned police officer. They gave us a .38 revolver. The foot patrolman carried a night club and handcuffs.

The voice on the phone said to Sergeant Towle, "For god's sake, come to 12th and O!"

"Where?" Sergeant Towle asked.

"Hurry to 12th and O. There's a robbery!"

Believing it was a prank call, Sergeant Towle hung up on the man. But he sent two officers to check out the situation, if for no other reason than to catch the pranksters. The officers he sent were Peter Meyers, a juvenile officer barely over the age of the young hooligans he was used to dealing with, and Forrest Schappaugh, a man with a little more experience. They would naturally have taken the department's one and only squad car, but it wasn't working that morning, so Schappaugh took the motorcycle, and Meyers went on foot.

Back at the radio store, Wolfenbarger stepped out onto the street and told the gangster at the corner that he had called the police. The man waited for him to come close, then grabbed him and shoved him into the front of the bank. Inside, another gangster grabbed him and forced him to lie face down on the floor with the others. Finished with his heroics, Wolfenbarger did as he was told.

When Officer Schappaugh arrived at the bank, he saw the lookout on the corner first. He pointed his motorcycle at the man and approached to question him. The man revealed the long, metallic object he had been holding partially under his jacket. It was a Thompson submachine gun, something they didn't see in this area of the country very often. The man motioned with the gun, indicating for Schappaugh to leave, and said, "Just keep moving." 10

Schappaugh had only his .38, no match for the well armed criminal, not to mention those fortified inside the bank. So without a word, he turned his motorcycle and continued down the road.

Several other people who parked their cars in front of the bank were approached by the same man with the Tommy gun who ordered them to stay in their cars and threatened to shoot them if they tried to drive away.

Inside, the robbers had accepted that the assistant cashier was gone, but did not accept that they couldn't get into the vault. Vice President Luikart sent Florence Zeiser, assistant trust officer, and Sterling Glover, a bookkeeper, to the bank vault to show the bandits that the vault could not be opened by anyone present in the bank. While two of the robbers followed Zeiser and Glover, the others covered the people in the lobby, and looted the teller windows and cashier drawers, scooping piles of cash into their sacks. Several witnesses later described these sacks as pillow cases, but they were actually bags with hoops on the end to make them easier to seal.

Zeiser and Glover led the two bandits to the vault, though it seemed the bandits already knew the way. The outer door of the vault was open, but the inner door directly into the safe, the one with the time lock, was closed. Zeiser had been in the safe earlier, before the bank had opened and the time lock was set to seal the safe off at 10 am. By now the lock would be in place and there was no way to get inside. She pushed down on the dial used to open the safe to show the men that it wouldn't budge, but to her surprise, the dial spun, and the door swung wide open. The time lock had somehow been disabled, or had never been activated in the first place.

Without hesitation, the robbers rushed in and began taking everything they could. There was approximately half a million dollars worth of securities, and some silver, which 11

they stuffed into their bags. Glover later recalled of the incident:

[The men] stuffed everything in a bag something like material pillows were made out of. There wasn't too much cash in the vault, mostly silver. They asked [Miss Zeiser] to open the cash vault and she said she didn't know the combination. One fellow ordered, "Well, shoot her."

Outside, the young officer, Peter Meyers, approached the lookout on foot. The lookout let him get close before he quietly revealed his Thompson and muttered, "Scram." Meyers, entirely unarmed, backed off and walked away.

Now with suspicious eyes watching, the lookout called into the bank for the others to hurry up. Inside, the gangster at the door told the rest of them that it was time to go. Everyone scraped the last of the money and securities into their bags.

In the vault, the robber who was about to shoot Ms. Zeiser instead told her to lie on the ground. She did as he said, and the robbers took what they had and hurried out.

Back at the station, Schappaugh hopped off the motorcycle and rushed inside, telling the department the bank robbery was real, and they needed a lot of backup. He had not been able to call this in since he had no radio on his motorcycle.

Every available officer hopped into two of the civilian cars and they hurried down to the bank, uncertain how they would handle heavily armed gangsters with only their .38 revolvers.

They returned within five minutes of Schappaugh having been there, but the bank robbers were gone.

They had emerged from the bank soon after Meyers' appearance, four of them with bulging bags on their backs, 12

the other two waving their Thompson sub-machine guns in the air to intimidate bystanders. In their hurry out the door, they had bypassed \$200,000 in liberty bonds which had been removed earlier from the vault sitting on a cart in the lobby. As they exited, one of the gangsters was overheard saying to the others, "That's another good job well done."

The first bandit to the car jumped into the back and the others threw their bags in to him. Then two of the men climbed into the back, two climbed into jump seats, and the man who had been guarding the door of the bank climbed into the front of the car. It was all done with militaristic efficiency and incredible celerity.

As they drove, the man in the front passenger seat rested his Thompson against the window, warning off anyone who might approach. They reached a red light at the intersection of 12th and O and stopped, as if they weren't running from anyone. They calmly turned right onto O Street, and began blaring a police siren they had. Everyone in their way pulled off to the side as they raced down the town's most populated street. A block or two down the road, they turned again, and disappeared.

The entire operation had taken no more than eight minutes from beginning to end.

The officers immediately fanned out to find them. The public was alerted, and everyone was on the lookout for a rogue police car, black or dark blue Buick, probably heading south out of town since that was the direction of the nearest state border. The vehicle had Iowa license plates, which should make the car slightly more conspicuous.

Several sightings of the car came from the surrounding area, including reports from in town that had it traveling north, south, east, and west. Witnesses in the nearby town of Kramer, west of Lincoln, reported seeing a car with a police siren racing through town, then turning south. A contradictory report had it in Waverly, east of 13

Lincoln, turning north. One report had it being stopped by a flat tire east of town on O Street. There, the men were helped by a farmer who admired their fancy machine guns which they claimed were hunting rifles. Another report had the car being swallowed up by a truck just a block away from the bank. Another report claimed they had gotten to Milan, Missouri, and had continued on to the Ozarks. And yet another had them in a car accident in Beatrice, and more reports had them in the towns of Tobias and Fairbury, both just west of Beatrice. Other reports had them traveling north toward Omaha, south toward Kansas, and west, near Kearney.

The hunt continued throughout the day. Two airplanes were dispatched to search the flat open prairies for the car. Authorities in every town along the Platte and Missouri rivers were called out to block the bridges, which created un-crossable borders to the east and west. Police in every town within 200 miles of Lincoln were alerted. But as the sun set and night fell, it became clear the bank robbers had gotten away.

The bankers spent the rest of the day tallying up the damage. The gangsters had gotten away with \$2,775,395.12, the largest amount of any bank robbery in the history of the world.