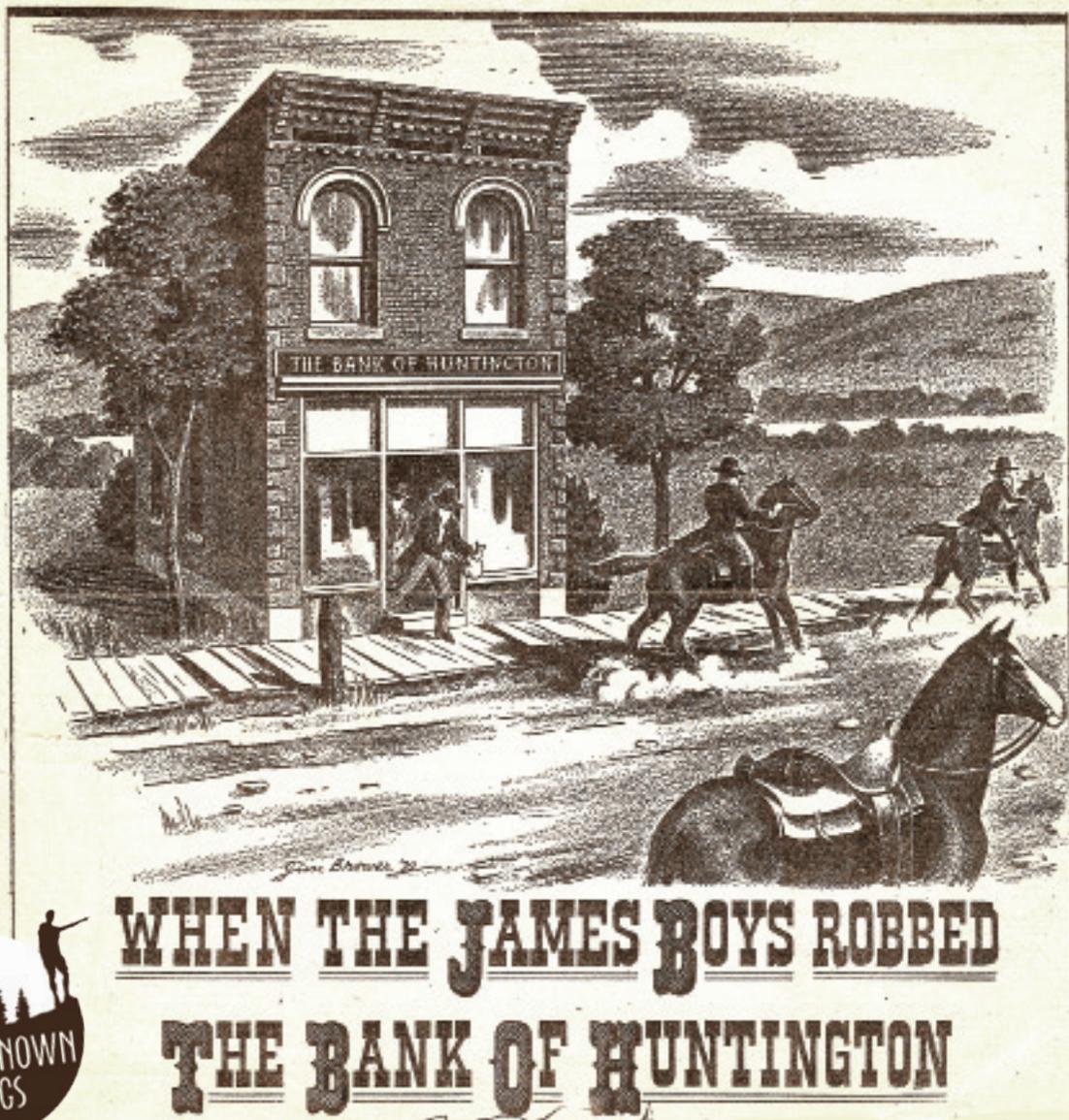


HUNTINGTON BANK ROBBED!

September 6, 1875

By James E. Casto

5 cents



This sketch illustrated a 1939 newspaper feature recalling the legendary robbery. Sketch courtesy of the *Herald-Dispatch*

While many experts on western history are dubious, local legend blames Jesse James and his gang for the daring holdup of the Bank of Huntington on September 6, 1875.

Missouri-born Jesse and his brother Frank were Confederate guerrillas during the Civil War, leaving a bloody trail wherever they rode. After the war, they turned to crime, robbing banks, stagecoaches, and trains. They often partnered with fellow outlaw Cole Younger and his brothers John, Jim, and Bob, as well as other former Confederate raiders. With each brazen robbery the gang's notoriety grew. Eventually, their names would become automatically linked to virtually every robbery that took place.

Maybe it was the James-Younger gang and maybe not, but the Huntington robbery clearly fit their pattern. The gang's style was to hold up a bank in the middle of the day, with well-armed men and good, fast horses. Thus, four riders made their way into Huntington on the afternoon in question. After tying their horses to the hitching rack across the street from the bank, two men stayed with the horses and the other two strode into the bank.

Cashier Robert T. Oney was the only person in the little two-story bank when the robbers entered. Ordinarily, John Hooe Russel, the bank's president, would have been there, but he was at lunch.

Once inside the bank, the two gunmen jumped over the counter. Oney lunged for a pistol that was lying on a desk, but he wasn't fast enough. One of the gunmen grabbed it up. Pointing his own pistol at Oney's head, one of the gunmen demanded that he open the safe. Oney said it was already open. The two robbers said they wanted the inside compartment opened. Oney said he didn't have the key. Searching the desk, the robbers found the key.

Outside, the other two gunmen started firing pistols up and down the street, sending the few people around scurrying for cover. Inside, the two robbers told Oney to take the key and open the safe. He refused.

"If you don't, we will kill you," one said.

"If you kill me, you won't get the money," Oney replied. But the standoff was a brief one. Staring down the barrel of a gun, Oney decided to open the safe. The robbers scooped up the money, said to be \$20,000. One gunman asked Oney if any of the money belonged to him. He said he had a \$1 checking account. The robber threw him a dollar bill before he and his companion exited the bank.



Jesse James shortly before he was killed in 1882
Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-3854



John Hooe Russel, president of the Bank of Huntington
Photo courtesy of the *Herald-Dispatch*

A Speedy Getaway

Mounting up, the four bandits first trotted down the dirt street at a leisurely pace, then sped up and rode out of town at a full gallop, waving their hats in the air.

Returning from lunch, Russel saw the two men exiting the bank and immediately realized what had happened. As they rode away, he rushed into the bank, grabbed a shotgun, and quickly headed for his horse.

Within 10 minutes of the robbery, Russel, Cabell County Sheriff D. J. Smith, and 20 armed men were in hot pursuit of the culprits. At the same time, George F. Miller, the bank's executive vice president, was alerted by telegraph and quickly set out from nearby Barboursville with a second posse.

The gunmen rode hard out 8th Street Road toward Wayne, then crossed the Big Sandy River into Kentucky. The first posse gave up and returned to Huntington empty-handed the next day. In later years, Sheriff Smith liked to tell how, when his posse got close to the robbers, he ordered an immediate charge, only to have some of his men insist they had to dismount and tighten their saddle girths. Miller's posse kept up the chase for three more days but also failed to catch up with the four.

The robbers made a clean getaway from West Virginia, but one was later fatally wounded in a shootout with lawmen in Kentucky and another was captured in Tennessee. In both instances, cashier Oney went to the scene and identified each man as one of the Huntington bandits. The dying man refused to give his name and the captured bandit gave an obvious alias. The latter admitted his role in the Huntington robbery but refused to identify his criminal companions. He was convicted of the robbery and sentenced to 14 years in the West Virginia Penitentiary at Moundsville. Paroled in 1883, he quietly disappeared.

Detective Delos T. "Yankee" Bligh of Louisville long waged a campaign to bring the famed outlaws to justice. Learning of the Huntington bank robbery, he immediately wrote Russel, providing their photographs and descriptions. Russel replied, "Your description answers to all the parties who were here in the bank and were on the outside during the robbery."

From that time forward, the Bank of Huntington robbery would forever be linked with the "James Gang" and the "Younger Brothers." ❖

*Retired Huntington newspaper editor James E. Casto is the author of a number of books on local and regional history. His latest is *Legendary Locals of Huntington, West Virginia* (Arcadia Publishing, \$21.99).*



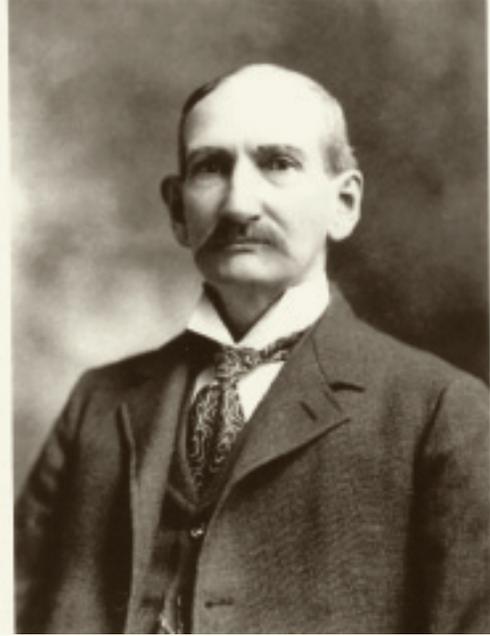
The former Bank of Huntington today. Photo © Erin Murphy

Footnote: In 1975, exactly 100 years after it was robbed, the Bank of Huntington building was jacked up from its foundation, put on wheels, and moved from its original location on 3rd Avenue to the nearby Heritage Station historical center. Over the years the old building has been home to a variety of businesses. It currently houses a beer and cheese shop.

COLE YOUNGER, FRANK JAMES VISIT HUNTINGTON



Cole Younger in his later years
Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress,
LC-DIG-ggbain-21306



A 55-year-old Frank James in 1898
Photo courtesy of the National Archives

On Sunday, August 9, 1903, notorious bank robbers Frank James and Cole Younger walked down the street in Huntington and politely asked passersby to direct them to a good restaurant.

“When one was pointed out they quickly entered the place and procured a modest lunch which they put away with apparent relish,” a local newspaper reporter later wrote. “They were dressed very plainly and quietly went about their business, paying no attention to the hundreds of people who gazed wonderingly at them.”

The two men paid no attention to the curious crowd because they hadn’t come to Huntington to rob a bank but rather to stage a show.

Frank James surrendered to authorities in 1882, shortly after his brother Jesse was killed. He was put on trial but never convicted on any of the several charges against him. Cole Younger was paroled in 1901 after serving 25 years of a life sentence for robbery and murder. In 1903, the two decided to cash in on their notoriety. Teaming up with a Chicago showman, they formed “The Great Cole Younger & Frank James Historical Wild West Show” and set out on tour.

Wild West Shows were tremendously popular at the time. “Buffalo Bill” Cody took his spectacular show not only to

cities across the United States but to Europe as well. The show James and Younger put together was a pale imitation of Cody’s but nevertheless did well for a couple of seasons.

The show’s special 33-car railroad train pulled into Huntington early that Sunday morning. The next morning there was a street parade with cowboys and Indians and other performers. But the main attractions were James and Younger themselves. Crowds followed them wherever they went. And, of course, people wanted to know about the 1875 robbery of the Bank of Huntington, long rumored to be the handiwork of the James-Younger Gang.

“I am as innocent of complicity in the robbery of the Huntington bank as a little babe,” James piously vowed when questioned by a reporter for the *Huntington Advertiser*. “Not only have I been unjustly accused of robbing the Huntington bank but many others as well.”

James said he had been warned not to visit Huntington lest he be called to account on the old robbery charge. But no attempt was made to arrest him or Younger. The well-attended afternoon and evening performances of the Wild West Show went on as scheduled and the former outlaws and other performers then boarded the train for the show’s next stop in Ashland, Kentucky.