Gangsters in the Ozarks – Hideouts and Shootouts

by Terry Primas

The hills of the Ozarks have been a good place to hide from the keepers of law and order for quite some time. Bushwhackers hid in caves and remote hollows from the patrolling Union forces during the Civil War. Moonshiners escaped into the hills running from county sheriffs bent on enforcing the Volstead Act from 1919 to 1933.

Names associated with the gangster era, particularly in the early 1930s, have been linked with locations in the Ozarks as hideaways. If you have lived in Pulaski or Phelps counties long, you have heard the lore of Al Capone hiding out, or maybe vacationing, at certain resorts. Tourists to the Branson area have been apprised on some tours of the possibility of Al Capone frequenting nearby Rockaway Beach.

While Capone's presence in the Ozarks may be fanciful, there are well documented cases of gangsters on the lam in the hills. Probably the most well-known and dramatic is a shootout in Joplin between the Barrow-Parker gang and local police (see sidebar).

Jake Fleagle

Almost as dramatic as Bonnie and Clyde's story is the saga of Jake Fleagle, whose demise was the result of a gutshot received in a Branson train depot.

On May 23, 1928, four armed men entered the First National Bank in Lamar, Colorado. They ordered customers and employees in the bank to raise their hands. While the robbers stuffed their plunder into pillow cases, the bank's president, A. M. Parrish, pulled a gun from a desk drawer and fired at one of the robbers, hitting him in the face. The assailants returned fire and Parrish fell dead. Jaddo F. Parrish, cashier and son of the fallen banker, rushed to his father and a second hail of bullets felled him. The bandits fled with $238,000 of cash, bonds, and commercial paper. They also took two bank tellers as hostages.

The gang was led by Jake Fleagle. His accomplices were Jake's brother Ralph, George Abshier, and Howard Royston.

The "Wolf Pack," as the gang was dubbed by a California newspaper, grabbed two hostages and fled in a 1927 Buick Master Six. The local sheriff, L. B. Alderman, and his deputy pursued but their car was disabled by rifle fire from the gangsters. During the car chase, the gang released one of the hostages, a one-armed bank teller named Eskel Lundgren but retained the other hostage, also one of the bank tellers and named Everett Kesinger.

Ralph Fleagle headed the car east toward the Fleagle family's rather unproductive farm northeast of Garden City in western Kansas. Royston desperately needed medical attention for his facial wound.

After arriving at the farm, George Abshier went about 50 miles northeast to Dighton, Kansas, to get a doctor. He persuaded Dr. W. W. Weininger to follow him to the Fleagle farm, under the pretense of treating an injured farmhand.

After the wound treatment, the doctor was of no more

Probably the most infamous gangster couple, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow set up housekeeping at an apartment hideout in Joplin, Missouri, after Clyde's brother Buck and wife Blanche joined the pair and W. D. Jones in March of 1933. On April 13, five Joplin policemen approached the house thinking it was occupied by bootleggers. The Barrow brothers and Jones met the lawmen with a hail of bullets, killing one and fatally wounding another. The criminals fled in an automobile, scooping up Blanche on a sidewalk while walking her dog, and leaving behind weapons and several rolls of undeveloped film.

use and was a witness. The gang took the doctor and his car to an isolated canyon 20 miles north of Scott City, Kansas. Jake Fleagle shot Dr. Weininger in the back of the head with a shotgun and shoved his body and car over a cliff. The hostage bank teller was also a liability and was shot by Jake Fleagle.

The Wolf Pack then split up, going in different directions. Ralph Fleagle went to Illinois, George Abshier to Grand Junction, Colorado, and Howard Royston to northeastern California. Jake Fleagle first located near Stockton, California.

Meanwhile, Sheriff Alderman continued his search for the perpetrators. He was in an airplane flying low over western Kansas and spotted Dr. Weininger's body and automobile. Although it appeared that the auto had been wiped down, a single print was found on the rear window by a fingerprint expert from the Garden City police department.

Eleven months later, a mail train was robbed near Pittsburg, Calfornia, west of Stockton. A man giving his name as William Holden was arrested as a suspect but released. However, he was fingerprinted and his prints were forwarded to the FBI. The prints matched those of a convicted robber who served time in an Oklahoma prison in 1916. That man was Jake Fleagle. The FBI linked the right index fingerprint to that found on Dr. Weininger's car. Law enforcement now knew who killed the Kansas doctor, robbed the Colorado bank, and murdered three other men. What turned out to be nearly a two-and-a-half year manhunt intensified

Lawmen descended on the Fleagle farm in Kansas. Jake's parents, along with another brother Fred, had large amounts of cash and also had made several large deposits in a local bank. They averred that Jake had made good investments in the stock market and had sent some money home. Fred was questioned at length and offered that they received mail at a post office box in Garden City from Ralph Fleagle. Postal inspectors were brought into the case and kept an eye on the P.O. box. A letter arrived bearing a P.O. box return address in Kankakee, Illinois. Postal inspectors surveilled that box and subsequently quietly arrested Ralph Fleagle.

Ralph was taken to a jail in Colorado Springs, denying any knowledge of the holdup or murders. After weeks of interrogation and in an effort to escape the death penalty, Ralph gave up the names of his criminal partners. Abshier was arrested in Grand Junction, Colorado, and Royston in San Andreas, California. The three were tried, found guilty of murder, and incarcerated in the state penitentiary at Cañon City, Colorado, where they swung from the gallows in July of 1930. They gave up no information about Jake Fleagle or his whereabouts.

Jake Fleagle had been living the rural life near Ridgedale, Missouri, a small unincorporated area ten miles south of Branson and three miles north of the Arkansas state line since about December of 1929. Locals knew Jake as Walter Cook, who lived with his "brother" Lee in what was described as a shabby little frame cottage, raised white leghorn chickens and sold eggs. The two were not particularly reclusive. They shopped at the local general store and sometimes hosted a card game. However, several neighbors remarked that they changed their looks periodically. The "Cook brothers" also brewed some good moonshine occasionally.

According to neighbors, Walter and Lee were friendly enough, dressed rough, didn't talk much, didn't flash around a lot of money, but always seemed to pay for things with twenty dollar bills.

Meanwhile, on September 8, 1930,

while Jake Fleagle, alias Walter Cook, was tending his chickens, another criminal was arrested in Texas County. Harry Lee Watson, alias Harry G. Getchie, was also a bank robber, among other things. Newspapers described Watson as "a pal of the hunted Jake Fleagle" and intimated that while being detained in Springfield, Missouri, Watson provided clues as to Fleagle's general location and activities. Watson remarked that Jake might be mailing letters on the Missouri Pacific Line between Carthage, Missouri, and Newport, Arkansas. (More about Watson in the last section.)

Handwriting samples obtained from the Fleagle farm showed that Jake wrote using a distinctive capital "D." The score or so lawmen working on the manhunt were now joined by postal inspectors. A handwriting sample was sent to postal employees in southern Missouri. A letter was spotted on the Carthage to Newport mail train. There are two versions as to the addressee of Fleagle's letter. One has it addressed to an old friend in California and arranging a meeting in Yellville, Arkansas. The other version has the letter going to a female friend to arrange an assignation in Hollister, Missouri. Whichever, the postal inspectors were on hand when it was received and coerced the recipient into cooperating with the capture of Fleagle.

At least 25 lawmen and postal inspectors from Missouri, Arkansas, Colorado, and California fanned out along the White River Line, covering railroad stations from Aurora, Missouri, to Cotter, Arkansas. Detectives would also be on the train as it passed through Branson.

The culmination of the Fleagle manhunt is best described in the October 15, 1930, issue of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* by the two Los Angeles policemen, Harry Wilde and Chester A. Lloyd, who subdued Fleagle.

"We looked out of the train window," Lloyd said, "and there we saw the man we thought we recognized as Fleagle. We were going to get off the train to make sure, when we saw he was going to get on our car, so we just let him come on. When he got right alongside us and was about to sit down, this Wilde man here jumped on him."

When Wilde jumped Fleagle, with Lloyd behind, they both thought to protect the passengers in the coach. "We're used to gunplay," they said, "but there was a woman and family of children in the next seat and there were a lot of other women and children around."

Wilde tried to force Fleagle down into a seat, so that if he did shoot the bullet would go through the top of the car.

As I jumped on him," Wilde said, "I said 'put up your hands, Fleagle,' but he replied 'I won't do it.' We struggled in the seat and it was just a question of who would shoot first."

"Fleagle grasped his gun in a holster on his hip and jammed the muzzle against my body, but before he could pull the trigger, Lloyd reached over, grabbed the barrel of his gun, and I fired. That ended Fleagle."

Jake Fleagle died from a stomach wound on October 15, 1930. Thus ended the more than two-and-a-half year manhunt that began in California and ended in the Ozark hills.

Hiding in Plain Sight

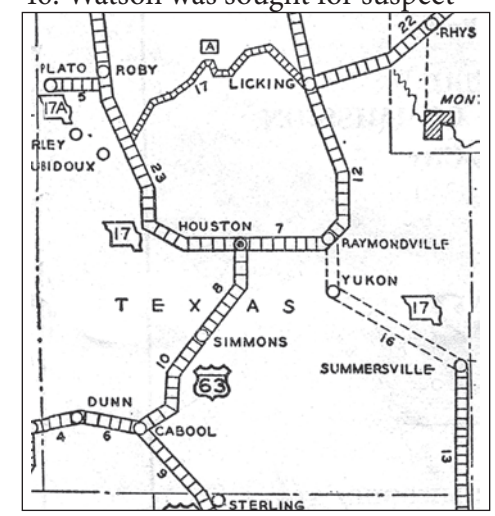
Texas County is the largest Missouri county in total area with 1,179 square miles. In 1930, the population was only 18,580. (It is still sparsely populated with 24,287 inhabitants in 2020 compared to Pulaski's 53,955.) If you wanted to hide from the law, Texas County, Missouri, was a good place. We stumbled on this story in a 1930 *Houston Herald* newspaper while doing research for a *2022 Old Settlers Gazette* article about moonshiners. It gave us the idea for this feature about Ozark hideouts.

In the spring of 1930, a man calling himself Harry G. Getchie appeared in rural Texas County. He bought 264 secluded acres about a half-mile south of Yukon and State Highway 17. Getchie said he was a showman, looking to retire in the country. He pitched a tent on the site and began building a large house.

Getchie hired local craftsmen to construct a ten-room, two-story house, "up-to-date and modern conveniences" that at first was to cost $15,000 but later estimated at $25,000, which locals began calling a mansion. He paid top wages to the workers, often breaking open packages of new bills. He frequented two Houston banks, sometimes changing large quantities of coins into paper currency, explaining the coinage came from his entertainment enterprises.

Neighbors remarked that he drove a fine car, had a smaller one, and also bought a truck. Other high-powered automobiles were seen visiting the job site. When asked what he and his wife needed such a mansion for, Getchie said that he intended to operate it as a hotel and resort.

Meanwhile, law enforcement, including postal inspectors, were in search of a notorious bank robber by the name of Harry Lee Watson, age 46. Watson was sought for suspect-



Texas County hideout area from 1930 Missouri road map.

ed robberies in Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Indiana, and other unspecified states. Rewards for his arrest totaled $20,000. He was particularly linked to bank robberies in Troy Grove, Illinois, and Citizens National Bank in Maplewood, Missouri. Also sought was associate Sam Bottoms.

For two years, lawmen were always a step behind Watson and his crew as they robbed more than a dozen small banks in the midwest. During a bank robbery in Indianopolis, Indiana, in 1929, Jack F. Landry, one of the robbers, was fatally wounded. Before he died, Landry named Watson as an accomplice in the Indianoplis robbery, as well as the Maplewood heist. Postal inspectors began monitoring the mail of Watson's brother who lived in Iowa. As with the capture of Jake Fleagle, the postal inspectors determined the locale of the object of their manhunt.

Following are the particulars of the arrest of Harry Lee Watson that appeared in the September 11, 1930, issue of the *Houston Herald.*

> Great excitement prevailed here Monday morning when Post Office Inspectors C. H. Baker and T. E. Schuts and Sheriff Kelly [Harry Kelly, Sheriff of Texas County] arrested and brought to Houston a man who was known at Raymondville and Yukon as Harry G. Getchie...By close watch on the mails they had become convinced that Watson was located somewhere near Yukon. They came here Saturday with a picture of Watson, which they exhibited to Postmaster Jesse Smallwood at Raymondville, who at once recognized the picture as that of Getchie. Getchie had paid bills with $100 currency and also with nickels and dimes.
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> The officers went to Raymondville Monday morning and made the arrest when Getchie or Watson called for his mail. Watson, in the act of mailing a letter, surrendered as the sheriff shoved a revolver muzzle against his ribs and notified him he was under arrest.
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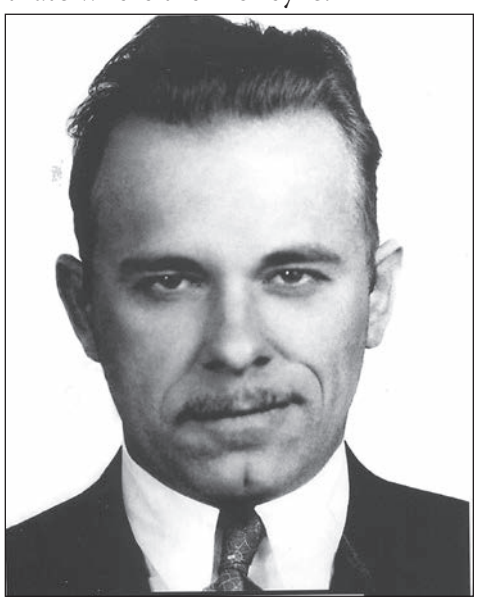
> After landing him in jail here for safekeeping, the officers visited the new home near Yukon and searched the house, finding $4,100 in Liberty bonds from the Pomona, Kansas bank, some money and a regular arsenal of firearms including revolvers, guns and sawed-off shotguns, the kind that hold-ups use in bank robberies. The officers stated it was being outfitted as a hideout. These evidences of Watson's guilty career were brought to town and together with the prisoner were loaded in cars and taken to Springfield.

A rather poor news photo of Harry Lee Watson, alias Harry G. Getchie. Watson was a career bank robber who located in rural Texas County and began construction of a 10-room hideout for his criminal cronies.

The depressed 1930s had more than its share of bank robbers. Probably the most famous was John Dillinger, Chicago area gangster. His career was rather short, 1933-1934, before he was gunned down in an alley outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago by three FBI agents on July 22, 1934. He and his gang had robbed 12 midwestern banks in that two year period. Dillinger was flamboyant and made good newspaper copy.

An almost equally famous bank robber was Willie Sutton, who robbed his first bank in Manhattan in 1930. It was estimated that

he stole at least two million dollars from banks during his career, often using disguises, before being caught for the final time in 1952. Much of his fame came from an oft-quoted line. When asked why he robbed banks, Sutton answered, "Because that's where the money is."



Notorious but short-lived Chicago bank robber John Dillinger.

Harry Lee Watson's criminal career spanned thirty years, much longer than Dillinger's but not nearly as lucrative as Sutton's. While being detained in Springfield, Watson said he would plead guilty to the robbery of the bank and postoffice at Troy Grove, Illinois, and accept a 10-year sentence. That might have put him ahead of the game. While incarcerated in Chicago, he also confessed to more than a dozen robberies during the past two years. Nine of those were in Illinois since April 12, 1929. Those confessions prompted a statement from M. A. Gratesinger, executive vice-president of the Illinois Bankers Association, that Watson's capture was considered "one of the most important in bank robbery history."

Willie Sutton, aka Slick Willie, had a two decade career as a bank robber. Not violent like Fleagle or Dillinger, he was known for his craftiness.

Harry claimed his wife, Edna Fay, had no part in any of the illegal activities. His partner in the last five robberies, Sam L. Bottoms, who fled Texas County just before Watson's arrest, was apprehended two days later in Birmingham, Alabama.

On October 17, 1930, Harry Lee Watson did indeed plead guilty to robbing the Troy Grove State Bank of $5,000, including $188 in postal money order receipts. It was also disclosed during the brief trial that Edward Gravis, the bank's cashier, was kidnapped by the bandits. The resulting sentence of ten years for Watson and eight years for Bottom, to be served in the federal penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, seems rather light. For Harry, it would be a homecoming of sorts. He had served eight years at Leavenworth, 1920-1928, before starting his final robbery spree.