

# Bungling burglars blast Bank of Vacaville vault

By Jerry Bowen

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1990 in Vacaville started off with a bang ... literally. An explosion on Jan. 1 at 1:09 in the morning at the Security Pacific Bank on the corner of Alamo and Albacete, blew chunks of the building onto Alamo Drive and the surrounding area. The blast and ensuing fire completely destroyed the building leaving only the vault standing among the ruins. As far as I know, the reason for the blast has never been resolved.

Going further into the past, we find that Vacaville experienced a bank blast on the night of Feb. 12, 1913, at the Bank of Vacaville that was located on Main Street next to the IOOF building. Some elements of it also remain in a shroud of mystery to this day.

Al Wilson and Peter Miller had just returned from a late night automobile ride. They stopped at Bentley's cafe where Wilson was employed, so he could gather the day's receipts from the cash register before retiring for the night.

While Wilson retrieved the money, Miller spotted a man he thought he knew outside the building and stepped out to talk to him. To his surprise he was confronted by a masked man who stuck a pistol in his face and ordered him back into the cafe. Once inside, he quickly told Wilson what had just happened. Wilson immediately started toward the telephone near the front window. As he reached for it, the mysterious stranger fired at him, barely missing his head. Ducking below the counter, he grabbed the telephone, only to find that the line was dead. Wilson and Miller then tried to leave by the back door, but were stopped by another man and ordered back.

In the meantime, the noise of the gunshot woke up Wells Fargo agent, R. F. Rammers, who had been sleeping in back of an office near the cafe. No sooner had Rammers stepped out than he too was confronted with the business end of a gun and told to get back inside.

Without warning, a loud, jarring blast shattered the night, followed by another, and then another, until four or five heavy reports were heard. The first explosion occurred at 25 minutes to three and the last five minutes to three in the morning.

The sound of the explosions had by this time awakened most of the town's people. P. Carragher, who had a room near the bank, dashed to the fire bell and sounded the alarm.

By this time, the bungling bank burglars evidently decided it was time to make tracks. They barely made their escape when the fire department and many others arrived at the bank to investigate the explosions.

When they entered the bank, they found the double doors to the vault had been blown into the middle of the room, and the coin safe within was flat on the floor. The burglars had succeeded in blowing off both the outer and inner doors to the safe, but the final explosion caused it to topple from the raised foundation and fall on its face. Its weight (about 3,000 pounds) had prevented the burglars from getting at the \$30,000 in coins inside. In addition, the robbers overlooked about \$4,000 worth of United States postage stamps.

At first, it was not known how the robbers managed to get out of town, but it was later explained when W. H. Buck reported his automobile and a can of gasoline were missing from his garage.

After the boisterous blunder at the bank, it was discovered the bungling brigands attempted to sever all outside communication by cutting the Western Union wires and the telephone cable. However, the Postal Telegraph Company wires were working and the telephone cable they had cut contained only the wires for the local service. All the long distance wires were untouched. News of the attempted robbery was immediately sent out to all the surrounding towns.

The following evening, reports were received that Mr. Buck's automobile was recovered near Woodland, and the bandits had probably taken the electric train to Sacramento.

Suspects were arrested by the Sacramento police on the following Saturday. An entourage of witnesses accompanied by Sheriff McDonald, District Attorney Raines, Deputy Sheriff Frank Clark, Constable Stadtfeldt, and John Owen made the trip to Sacramento, but were unable to identify any of the suspects.

Meanwhile, repairs had begun on the bank. By the 21st of February a new safe arrived and a vault door on the 28th. In addition, the bank directors announced "a number of improvements in the interior furnishings and arrangements of the bank, and when completed will have one of the most commodious banking houses in this part of the state."

Nothing more was heard about the attempted robbery until April 11, when The Reporter reported a similar robbery attempt had been made on a bank at Alverado in Alameda County. This time they set off seven charges of dynamite. Once again they succeeded in getting into the vault, but in the process of blowing the door off the coin safe, the

inner door was jammed. Still safely tucked away in the safe was \$22,000 in gold and currency. In spite of all their efforts, they only managed to obtain about \$15 but eluded capture once again.

I could not find any more news that might be related to these nefarious characters. Perhaps the attempt on the Alverado bank job was the bungling burglars' grand finale. Maybe they decided they just weren't cut out for this type of enterprise and sought out a less challenging, more lucrative line of skullduggery.

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