

THEY'RE ROBBIN' THE BANK!

Southwest City, Missouri was an old and prosperous community in 1895. Barely within the southwest corner of the state, in McDonald County, it bordered on the west with Indian Territory, soon to become Delaware County, Oklahoma. The area had been settled in the early 1800s by pioneers from the southeast, many from Tennessee. Although a fire in January of 1892 had burned several businesses, the town had rebounded and again was providing goods to local farmers and westbound travelers. For years, Southwest City had been a gateway to the west for those passing through Missouri and northern Arkansas.

Bill Doolin was aware of the town's prosperity and, although the community was a center of local commerce, it was also fairly isolated. Less than two years before, Doolin had ridden with the Dalton gang when they robbed the Katy trains at Leliaetta, north of Wagoner and at Adair. The Daltons had lived near Vinita at one time and were familiar with most of the towns in the region. But instead of taking on one bank like Southwest City, Bob the ringleader, had decided to try two at Coffeyville, Kansas in October of 1892 and that had been a disaster, four gang members were killed and only Emmet had barely survived. Doolin had not participated because he thought it was crazy to try and rob two banks, and being the only one left, he had started his own gang, later dubbed "The Wild Bunch." Although, members came and went, the regulars usually included, "Little Bill" Raidler, George "Red Buck" Weightman, Dan "Dynamite Dick" Clifton, and "Arkansas Tom" Daugherty.

Now, May 20, 1895, Doolin's Wild Bunch, intent on robbing the bank, had ridden in from the west and approached the town from the south. Southwest City lay in a valley beside Honey Creek and, as the seven gang members reached their vantage on the hill above Main Street, they could see unsuspecting citizens going about the business of the day. As they rode down the hill and on to Main Street, their well executed plan was put into action. Four members, two on each side of the street, would maintain a continuous fire with their Winchesters to pin down the spectators, while three would go into the bank. As the trio entered, two crawled through the cashier's window, while the other trained two pistols on the bank owner, Mr. Ault and an employee, Mr. Snyder. After emptying the vault and the cashier's drawer then stuffing the money into a sack, they headed for their horses. While they were in the bank, the other four outside maintained a steady barrage, but when the gunmen left the bank, that was the signal to mount up.

By now, townsmen had recovered and, obtaining guns, began returning fire. Several shots hit three of the horses forcing the robbers to stop and steal new mounts before escaping. Citizens, interviewed later, who saw them change horses, said that two of the men had been hit, one near the eye and the other in the hip. Although a posse was soon formed, the late afternoon sun and ensuing darkness made tracking difficult and allowed the gang to escape. The next day, a posse followed their trail for 10 to 12 miles across Beattie's Prairie and determined that they had stopped at a farm house for supper and to dress their wounds. The family, like many poor farmers who disliked banks or the government, or who simply feared for their own safety, offered temporary refuge to the outlaws. Later, when the posse arrived, the woman of the house indicated that six of the

seven had wounds of one kind or another. According to later reports, it was Bill Doolin who had been shot in the head. Continuing on, the trackers lost the trail when the gang crossed the Grand River somewhere southwest of Grove Springs.

Surveying the aftermath of the robbery it was estimated that over 100 shots had been fired and the gang had made away with \$3,700. Although there were no immediate fatalities, one man, J. C. Seaborn, died of a wound to the stomach three days later. Witnesses claimed the shot was fired by Bill Raidler, a gang member. Seaborn's brother, Oscar, was injured in the hip by the same bullet, but survived. Another victim was struck in the ankle by a stray bullet and had to have his foot amputated. Seaborn was one of Southwest City's most distinguished citizens, a former sheriff and state senator, he and his parents had migrated from Tennessee and the family was highly respected. The outrage related to his death resulted in the Missouri State Senate enacting a bill to "appropriate \$300.00 to Heck Thomas for the apprehension, capture and conviction of each person participating in the robbery..."

The Wild Bunch broke up that summer after engaging in a shoot out with lawmen at their camp near Dover in Kingfisher County. Doolin escaped and found refuge with a friend in New Mexico. But the next year, on August 24, 1896, he returned to his father in-laws farm near Lawton to pick up his wife and son. An informant made Heck Thomas aware of Doolin's plan and he was waiting with a posse. Ordered to surrender, the gunman chose to shoot it out and was killed. This time there was no escape, and as was the custom those days, Doolin's body, riddled with 20 shotgun pellets, was put on display in Guthrie for all to see. History doesn't record whether Thomas collected his reward from the Missouri legislature, but J.C. Seaborn's death at Southwest City had been avenged.

