

Draft residents recall .

Great Bank Robbery of '39

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For the residents of Stuarts Draft especially, the fall of 1939 was a worrisome time to be alive. By the middle of October, Adolf Hitler had massed his army along the German border to begin the invasion of Western Europe. The Luftwaffe had begun firing on British ships in the North Sea. Then, on Halloween, two armed men strode into the town's only bank and took every cent it had.

At 2:45 p.m., Nell Irvine had just entered the Peoples Bank of Stuarts Draft, clutching the Finley Memorial Presbyterian Church's Sunday offering, when the hold-up began. As she approached the teller's window, two men in large overcoats, with hats pulled down low over their eyes, drew identical revolvers and presented bank employees W.A. Bussey and Heber Shelton with an ultimatum: Their money or their lives. Without a word, the two employees complied.

While Bussey and Shelton scurried around the bank with the gunmen at their heels, Nell Irvine stood by, as she later told a reporter, "much too surprised and confused to make an outcry." Then, when all the money had been collected, the three were ordered to "the back of the banking compartment. Mr. Bussey at the same time was being covered, and in but a brief time all three of us were pushed into the vault and the door slammed shut. The men told us they would let us out in a few minutes, but of course they could not open the door."

The two thieves then took off in a hurry. They crossed the street, hopped into their getaway car, and headed for Route 12 (modern day 340) before anyone outside the bank realized what had happened. Meanwhile, the stunned victims stood locked in pitch darkness, won-

dering what, if anything, to do next.

As luck would have it, Jason Weaver entered the bank before the trio had time to realize the seriousness of their plight. With no one behind the counter and the room in disarray, the local businessman knew right away that something gone terribly wrong. When the captives began to call for help from inside the vault, Weaver heard the muffled cries and rushed to help them. Finally, with the two employees shouting the vault combination through the heavy steel door,

Weaver managed to open it in about 15 minutes.

By the time the police arrived, Main Street was filled with people. Nothing even close to this had happened in the history of Stuarts Draft. State troopers entered the building in force, and residents clumped together in small groups, grilling each other for information.

Inside the bank, though red-faced and shaken, the former captives had come through their ordeal more or less unscathed. So too,

apparently, had the criminals. After robbing the bank of some \$4,200 (the equivalent of about \$40,000 in modern currency), they had vanished almost without a trace.

Despite the fact that the police had very little to go on, the few clues that they did gather over the next few days would prove significant. Tire tracks and torn money wrappers found in woods nearby, along with a good description of the car, finally led police to the robbers' apartment in Baltimore. Exactly two weeks after the crime was commit-