

From

Missoula the Way It Was
"A Portrait of an Early Western Town"

by Lenora Koelbel
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Her information is taken from the Missoulian accounts of the incident.

The first of three spectacular train robberies at Bearmouth about thirty miles east of Missoula occurred October 25, 1902. When engineer Dan O'Neal stopped his train at Bearmouth for water late that night, a masked man slipped aboard. The mask, made from a grain sack, covered the top half of the robber's body. He carried two leather bags slung over each shoulder, a 30-30 rifle across his back and a 45 caliber colt strapped to each wrist. He made his way to the engine by coming over the coal tender where he leveled the guns at engineer O'Neal and the fireman, Burrill and commanded that the engine be stopped. The train was now three miles east of Bearmouth. He ordered Burrill to put out the headlight and told O'Neal to smoke a cigar he handed him. When Burrill was returning to the engine after he had put out the headlight, he heard a shot. Being unarmed he jumped into the bushes where he stayed until the robbery was over. The shot had been fired at O'Neal as he attempted to overpower the robber. O'Neal rolled from the engine to the ground where he died. The bullet had gone through the lower left side of his abdomen, gone through the intestines and then had passed out of his body. The robber then went to the express car and ordered the men inside to open the door or he'd blow it open. The men inside did as ordered. The robber then told the two men to uncouple the engine and express car from the rest of the train. He wanted to take the engine and express car up the tracks to avoid interference from the passengers but since neither of the two men could run the engine, they remained with the rest of the train. To discourage any of the passengers from trying to get off and interfere with his plans, the robber shot along the side of the coaches. After returning to the express car from the engine, the robber tried unsuccessfully to blow open the safe with first three and then fifteen sticks of dynamite. Two cars were damaged by the blasts. With the second blast the steel cap of the safe was forced against the inner compartment door in such a way that a third charge would not dislodge it. When the robber realized this, he took his two hostages to the mail car. It was here the robber secured his only loot, a small sum of money and a few watches, which he stuffed into sacks he had with him. Since he no longer needed the leather bags, he discarded them. During this time he told his hostages that he was responsible for a train robbery in Oregon. When he was ready to leave he told the mail clerk that he didn't get much this time and would be back later when he would make up for it. He told the express messenger, Thomas Wade, to keep the lights out for ten minutes. He then took another hostage, the electrician, and headed east toward Drummond. The two men walked about two miles before the robber released his prisoner. During their time together the robber told the electrician that he regretted shooting O'Neal but said that couldn't be helped. Before he let the man go, he told him that he had a horse



This picture shows the damage done to one railroad car during the 1902 train robbery near Bearmouth. Engineer Dan O'Neal was fatally shot during this robbery. (Courtesy of the Northern Pacific Railroad)

and as no one could capture him, it would be dangerous to try. The train had been stopped about 12:35 and began moving again about 2 a.m. When the train reached Drummond news of the robbery was sent to Missoula where Sheriff Prescott rounded up a posse and was at the scene of the crime by 6 a.m. The Posse used hounds to help in the search but they kept circling back to the train. Because of this action Prescott believed that the robber had circled back and had ridden to freedom either beneath or on top of the train. The Northern Pacific Railroad offered a \$5,000 reward for the capture of the robber — dead or alive. Many suspects were rounded up but they were all released for lack of evidence. The body of forty-eight year old Dan O'Neal was taken to his home in Missoula and later buried in the city cemetery. He left a wife, a daughter and two sons.

The second train robbery happened on the same train at the same spot. This robbery occurred at 11 p.m. on June 16, 1904. This time there were two heavily armed masked men who boarded the train while the train was getting water at Bearmouth. As before, they came over the coal tender and ordered the engineer, Wade, to stop. With engineer Wade and fireman Reed, the two robbers made their way to the express car where they ordered the express messenger to open the door. When he refused, the robbers took the cigar they had given Wade to smoke and lit a number of dynamite sticks which blew the door open. Inside, the robbers placed five sticks of dynamite on top of the safe and lit them, but to their chagrin the blast did not open the safe. The next blast was so much larger that it blew out the side of the car and threw the safe forty feet. The rear brakeman, in the meantime, had slipped off the back of the train and run back to Bearmouth where he telegraphed Missoula that the robbery was taking place. A posse was summoned at once. An engine, a car of horses and the railroad superintendent's car with the posse aboard reached the scene of the crime about 2 a.m. Bloodhounds were brought in from the state prison in Deer Lodge but again the robbers got away. This time a reward of \$2,300 was offered — \$2,000 from the railroad and \$300 from the governor of Montana. A railroad detective named Joel S. Hindman, who was still working on the first robbery, began piecing bits of evidence together from the two robberies. His evidence led him to Spokane, Washington where he and city detectives Robert Briley and Martin Burns arrested George Hammond on July 13, 1904. Hindman had been tipped off by a Northern Pacific brakeman named Robert Pritchard who had come in contact with Hammond in Spokane. Hammond confessed his crime to Sheriff Doust of Spokane and led the sheriff and others to a spot near Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where he had buried \$250 and 350 small diamonds. He said the total booty was \$3,500 and 400 diamonds adding that his split was \$1,500 and the diamonds. Hammond's partner, John Christie, was arrested on August 3rd in his home town of Hope, North Dakota. Christie turned state's evidence and told not only about the robbery he was involved in but also the first one which was done by Hammond. Christie told the officers about Hammond's scuffle with O'Neal. Hammond had reportedly asked O'Neal if he wasn't sorry he had taken chances to which O'Neal replied that he was. Hammond then said, "A feather in your coffin this time old boy, instead of your hat." As it turned out, the reason the bloodhounds were ineffective in the second robbery was because the two men had escaped in a rowboat they had hidden on the Clark Fork River. They had rowed down the river ten to fifteen miles and then gotten out and gone into the hills. Soon after they had climbed a short distance from the river, they buried \$50,000 in securities, drafts, diamonds, cash and a gold watch. Christie later led authorities to this cache where 105 small diamonds worth \$2,000 were also found scattered in the sand and gravel. Christie said these diamonds had dropped out of a package when they tore it open but they didn't want to take the time to pick them up. After burying the loot, the two robbers walked six days through the mountains around Missoula. When they reached Frenchtown they quarreled over the division of their booty. Hammond threatened to shoot Christie but when Christie defied him to do it he backed down. After dividing the plunder, they split up. Both of them eventually wound up in Spokane where Christie's free spending and bragging caused Hammond to become concerned. He told Christie that if he didn't keep quiet he'd shoot him. Christie then left for Hope, North Dakota where he had a wife and baby. After his arrest Christie told the authorities that he had wanted to back out of the robbery but Hammond wouldn't let him. Christie said that he was drunk at the time of the robbery and didn't know what he was doing. He added that he was glad he was arrested because he had haunting dreams that he was being followed by detectives. Since the robberies took place in Granite County, the men were tried in Philipsburg. At first Christie was kept in the Missoula County jail because authorities feared that if they were jailed together the two men would concoct a story which would "defeat justice." When officials became confident that this wouldn't happen, Christie was taken to the Philipsburg jail. Hammond received a fifteen year sentence for burglary and grand larceny. Christie received a seven year sentence.

After the imprisonment of the two train robbers, Northern Pacific officials breathed easier but to their dismay, another train robbery took place on May 27, 1905 a short distance from where Christie and Hammond had held up the train a year before. This time a lone man had stepped onto the tracks and waved for the engineer to stop. Since stops like these were made often, engineer George Wilson obliged. What a surprise it must have been when the man boarded with a six shooter and a 38 caliber pistol aimed at the crew! He ordered the engine, express car and baggage car to be cut loose from the rest of the train and moved up the track. When these cars were cut loose it caused the lights to go out in the coaches which brought a scene of pandemonium. Some people panicked and rushed to the doors while others were busy hiding their valuables under cushions. Their fear was unfounded for the only thing the robber was interested in was the express car. The robber first tried to blow the safe open with four sticks of dynamite. When this didn't work he tried six sticks but this too was unsuccessful. A third attempt was made with sixteen sticks which succeeded in blowing the safe to bits. As the robber was bending over the remains of the safe George Laub, the express messenger, signaled to engineer Wilson to blow out the lighted match. Laub grabbed a piece of wood which had been torn loose from a door by the force of the explosion and hit the robber on the back of the neck and then on the forehead knocking him out cold. Before the robber had been knocked out, one of the conductors, Seirs, left the train and went back to Bearmouth to telegraph for help. Immediately a posse was rounded up in Missoula and boarded a train for

Page 89 is just photos of a later robbery. Didn't include it here.

Bearmouth. Engineer Wardwell was told to make haste. According to a report from *The Missoulian*, the caboose "fairly jumped into air as it went around curves." Horses in the car behind the engine became panicky as the car swayed and it was quite a task keeping them calm. Before he was hit by Laub the robber had tried to persuade Wilson and Laub that there was more than one robber involved in the hold-up but when the bloodhounds failed to pick up a scent, it became doubtful that there was more than one. The unconscious thief was taken to Drummond for emergency treatment and then on to Philipsburg where doctors said he wouldn't recover. However, the man did regain consciousness and slowly improved. When he did regain consciousness he admitted that he was alone in the robbery. At first the robber would not give his name and since he carried no identification it remained a mystery as to who he was. But finally it was revealed that his name was Clarence P. Young. He received a fifty-year sentence in the state penitentiary; the sentence was later changed to life imprisonment when he helped in a jail break in which a guard was killed. It seems odd that Young would have received a fifty-year sentence for his one attempt when Hammond received only a fifteen-year sentence for his two robberies and the murder of engineer O'Neal. The two heroes of the last train robbery, express messenger Laub and engineer Wilson, were given \$1,000 a piece by the Northern Pacific Railroad for their part in thwarting the holdup.

I don't have references in my data base to the 1901 robbery. I recall reading about it in the newspaper (*Missoulian*), but have no materials at home. Following are references to the 1901 killing of O'Neil in the 1904 coverage.

I would advise relatives contact the Missoula Public Library for information from the Polk City Directory of the day. That might give added information as well. And they could copy the newspaper accounts for 1901 as well.

None of my seniority information goes back that far, but there are early NP employee records on microfilm at the University of Montana which might----I emphasize might----list O'Neil with a listing of his employment positions.

Jan Taylor

May be Hiding.

In the opinion of many people the robbers are still in the mountains immediately surrounding Bearmouth and not far from the scene of the holdup. In that section, it is stated, there are a large number of caves located in the thickly timbered localities, and practically inaccessible unless a man is thoroughly familiar with the country. Here the men could remain hidden for weeks if they wanted to do so, and they could only be discovered by the merest chance.

The suggestion is made that every avenue of escape should be guarded and at once, and kept guarded for weeks if necessary. Then, if it is definitely determined that the men are still in the section, to send posses in after them. It is a foregone conclusion that the men were well equipped to carry out their plans; that they had carefully considered every detail before the train was stopped, and that they are able to cope with any emergency which might arise during their attempt to escape.

In the pursuit of Friday and Saturday it was developed that a man could ride all day long through the mountains south of Bearmouth and not be seen. Deep snow covers all of the higher mountains, but this is disappearing among the ridges and in nearly every place these ridges can be followed by a man on horseback and his movements will be so well hidden that he cannot be seen a quarter of a mile away. Occasionally it would be necessary to ride down off the top of the ridge into the timber which clothes the mountain sides, but this would be only occasionally, and with a little precaution the pursued men would not need fear being seen by their pursuers. By keeping men in the mountains guarding the outlets to the country there is a prospect of locating them at some time, as they are bound to leave a trail in the soft ground in the timber when the snow is going off.

Another Posse Returns.

Deputy Sheriff "Whitey" Watson and his posse, consisting of George Murray, Dan Breen, Frank Albee and Martin Rowan, returned last evening from their trip through the upper Blackfoot, where they had been to intercept the train robbers had they come that way. The deputies made the hardest kind of a ride, covering seventy-three miles in the time which elapsed after they left Missoula until the early forenoon, which found them in the section they had been sent to watch. They made a careful examination of all trails in that section, but they had not been used this spring. Thursday it had rained and this would have obliterated all of the old trails, leaving only fresh ones, had there been any.

Masks Are Found.

Advices from Bearmouth yesterday afternoon stated that the masks worn by the robbers had been found. They had been wrapped in a gunnysack, which also contained two empty cartridge boxes, the bundle being fastened with rubber bands and an effort apparently made to throw it into the river. The bundle fell short, however, and landed at the water's edge, where it was picked up yesterday. The masks are made from a piece of black shirt and are made tapering so that they could slip only a short distance over the face. The stitching shows that it was done by a man and the masks are almost identically the same as the one used at the time Engineer

weak and tired all the time. My druggist advised me to try Peruna and the relief I experienced after taking one bottle was truly wonderful.

"I continued its use for five weeks, and am glad to say that my complete restoration to health was a happy surprise to myself as well as to my friends."—Anna Prescott.

O'Neill was killed. The cartridge boxes had bust cost and selling marks, which are taken to indicate that they were purchased at some country store.

Old One at Business.

It is generally supposed that the short man is an old hand at the business and it is all but conceded that he is the man who killed O'Neill in the former holdup. There are a number of things which lead to this belief. His mask was made in the same manner as the ones picked up yesterday; his voice was the same as were also his actions. Fireman Reed, who was in the holdup, was in Missoula yesterday, and he stated that the little man was especially cool about his work and had every appearance of being an old hand at the business. He was not excited at any time and did not hurry, joshing with the trainmen during all of the time the holdup was in progress.

Chief Detective Here.

Chief Detective Fredericks arrived last night on No. 1 from St. Paul and was immediately closeted with Superintendent Palmer at Bearmouth. Sheriff Thompson was also called in conference and it is understood that a determined still hunt will be begun. Already two posses have been sent out into the hills between Hamilton and the Bearmouth section and the mountains will be thoroughly scoured.

Last evening the two boys who were on the blind baggage at the time of the holdup were brought to town and at present they are the guests of the Kennedy hotel.

CELEBRATED DACOTAH FLOUR AT HATHEWAY-BUFORD CO.

Montana Mine Workers Bitter.

Butte, June 18.—The United Mine Workers of America for the state of Montana in session here have adopted resolutions bitterly arraigning Governor Peabody for his attitude in the present strike of miners in Colorado. The various other Colorado officials also come under the fire of the mine workers. A message was sent to President Roosevelt asking him to intervene in behalf of the striking Colorado miners.

Smoke the Irene,
Donovan & Burnes.

Pittsburg Millionaire Is Dead.

Pittsburg, June 18.—Edmund Morewood Ferguson, for many years prominent in the business and financial affairs of Pittsburg, and who was reputed to be worth \$25,000,000, died today, aged 70 years.

CELEBRATED DACOTAH FLOUR AT HATHEWAY-BUFORD CO.

Hazelwood Cream

Used at our Fountain.

SMITH'S DRUG STORE

Orders taken for cream, for receptions, dinners, etc.

Missoulian
June 19, 1904

Missoulian
August 7, 1904

It was the original intention to bring Christie to Missoula for safe-keeping and the "bridal chamber" of the jail was prepared for his coming. However, the plans were changed and after the cache had been raised it was decided to take him to Phillipsburg.

Hammond Killed O'Neal.

That the coils of evidence which will yet convict Train Robber George Hammond of the murder of Engineer O'Neal are tightening as the Northern Pacific detectives work on the case is shown by developments which have come to light since the capture of Christie and his confession. To Christie, it is asserted, Hammond told all about the first holdup at Bearmouth. He described how the trick was done. In all probability the story was told to compel Christie to stick closer to him and to be bluffed into not following a desire to bolt. In his confession Hammond is alleged to have said that O'Neal had him down in the cab and had the better of the encounter. Then, after O'Neal had allowed him to rise to his feet, apparently conquered, he took advantage of the fact that his revolvers were still strapped to his wrists, and he shot without mercy.

Hammond, it is asserted, has told the officers and others who have been in touch with him since his arrest that he would kill himself rather than serve a long sentence, and, with the prospect of standing trial for his life on the charge of killing O'Neal staring him in the face, it is thought that he will some day attempt to commit suicide.