

Bunchgrass Historian



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Colfax, Washington

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- Colfax Bank Robbery
- Steptoe, Washington Remembered

Whitman County Historical Society

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AUTHORS

Jerry Jones is a Colfax journalist and newspaper editor. He originally researched and wrote the bank robbery story in 1982. The short "sidebar" story on the Johnson Bank Robbery was called to the attention of Bunchgrass Historian by Jean Carol Davis of Kennewick, Washington.

Val Painter is a Steptoe resident whose story was offered to the Bunchgrass Historian recently. Painter is introduced in the story.

COVER

George and Kathryn Kelly

George "Machine Gun" Kelly and the Colfax Bank Robbery by Jerry Jones (1982)

Fifty years ago a green sedan pulled up in the alley between Mill and Main street in Colfax behind the First Savings and Trust bank and four men climbed out. One was toting a machine gun. That was the start of the famed Machine Gun Kelly bank robbery, Colfax's link to big time crime in depression years. Kelly, who was supposed to be able to knock walnuts off a fence with a machine gun at 25 yards, was the gangster who first used the term "G-men."

Did Kelly and his gang rob the Colfax bank, which later became Seattle First National, or is it a "bum rap?" According to the FBI, the chances are very slim that Kelly's shadow, with or without the machine gun, ever fell on the hills of the Palouse country.

"We don't have any records here to show that he was ever on the west coast," Calvin Shishido of the FBI's press office in Washington D.C. reported. However, the FBI wasn't authorized to investigate bank robberies until 1934, 18 months after the Colfax caper, so Shishido said they can't rule out a visit to Colfax by Kelly.

Researchers in the FBI library can't find anything in their records, including books about the FBI, that would put Kelly here at that time.

Local records, however, trace Kelly to the scene. An article in the Gazette of Oct. 27, 1933, a year after the Colfax robbery, said that money found at Kelly's hideout where he was arrested, carried identification numbers which matched bills taken from the Colfax bank. It added that members of the bank staff identified photos.

Prior to that article, coverage by the Gazette and the Commoner had local lawmen on the trail of other bandits who were suspected in a robbery at Bremerton.

Jessy Pierson of Colfax, who was a secretary at the First Savings and



Colfax Commoner identified Ed Bentz as the first suspect named in the Colfax robbery.

Trust where the gang hit before closing time Sept. 21, 1932, told the Gazette she assumed over the years that Kelly was the culprit. The description of the robbers and the machine gun led most to believe it was Kelly.

"I'm sure Colfax hadn't seen anything like them. They were very professional," she commented.

Mrs. Pierson recalls being in "kind of a trance" during the robbery. She worked upstairs on a balcony floor. One of the men who entered the bank climbed up the stairs and ordered her and bank president A.F. McClaine and Charles E. Maynard, who was in McClaine's office, to go downstairs and join other staff members who were on the floor.

"He held his gun on us and said, 'Get down there. Go!' From the stairs we could see that people were lying on the floor. One man stood by the door holding a machine gun. He didn't think I was moving fast enough and waved his gun at me and told me to 'get down on those stairs.'"

Matt Elliott, now retired from banking and living at Moses Lake, also said he's uncertain about how Kelly became linked with the robbery. Elliott, now 32, was one of three bank staffers who worked on opening the safe. He confirmed the machine gun part of the tale.

"He had it right in my belly. It didn't look like a pop gun to me," he

commented.

Elliott said he normally didn't open the safe at First Savings and hadn't "done it in years" when ordered to do so at gunpoint. Newspaper accounts of the robbery credit Charlie Zeimantz with opening the safe.

Elliott remembers the robbers were "all over the place."

"We were wherever they said for us to be."

Jessie said she propped her head up by leaning on her elbow.

"The one with the machine gun moved up to keep his gun on the workers. He pointed his gun on me and told me to turn my head away; they didn't want us to look at them too closely," she said.

After the robbers left through the back door, McClaine raised the shade, which the robbers had drawn over the front door, and threw a spittoon through the glass. Jessie said people began to show up.

Jessie was never questioned by police about the robbery. In those days, she believes, the men were questioned, but the women weren't expected to be very observant.

"It amazes me that no one noticed anything was wrong. The bank was locked and the shades pulled down and it wasn't closing time," she said.

The robbers made their way out of Colfax via the Palouse highway and cut north up the Glenwood road. Howard Abbott of Colfax was bringing in firewood from Glenwood with his brother and father, and they spotted the robbers' northbound car.

"We didn't know then, of course, where they had been. They honked and waved and we waved back," Abbott, now county clerk, recalls.

Patty Zeimantz Weipert, now of Spokane, remembers her father, Charlie, arriving at their Mill street home and telling about the robbery.

"It was a big day, I know that much," she commented. She can't recall her father's account of how he opened the safe but agrees he could have been the one to do it. Zeimantz later worked for the RFC in Spokane and then moved to California where he died in 1947.

Eugene Eastep is another Colfax resident who can remember the robbery because he and Elmore Bush were young tellers at what was then Farmers National, now ONB across the street from the scene of the crime.

Eastep and Bush both recalled that strangers came into their bank earlier in the day and began to survey the scene. Both remember getting a brisk "nope" response after they offered to help the strangers.

"I can't remember how many came in, but I can remember they came in the bank. After the robbery we knew who they were," Eastep recalled.



Columns from First Savings and Trust Bank survive as the gate to a cemetery on Colfax's East Side

Now retired in Colfax, Eastep worked in the Colfax bank for 14 years before he began farming in Thornton.

Elliott continued in the banking business and also was in a bank at Rosalia with Bush when it was robbed later in the depression. He retired in 1965 at Sunnyside after 17 years with Old National Bank there.

Kelly was arrested Sept. 26, 1933 in Memphis, Tenn., and convicted to a life sentence for a kidnapping at Oklahoma City. It was during his arrest that he muttered "Don't Shoot G-men."

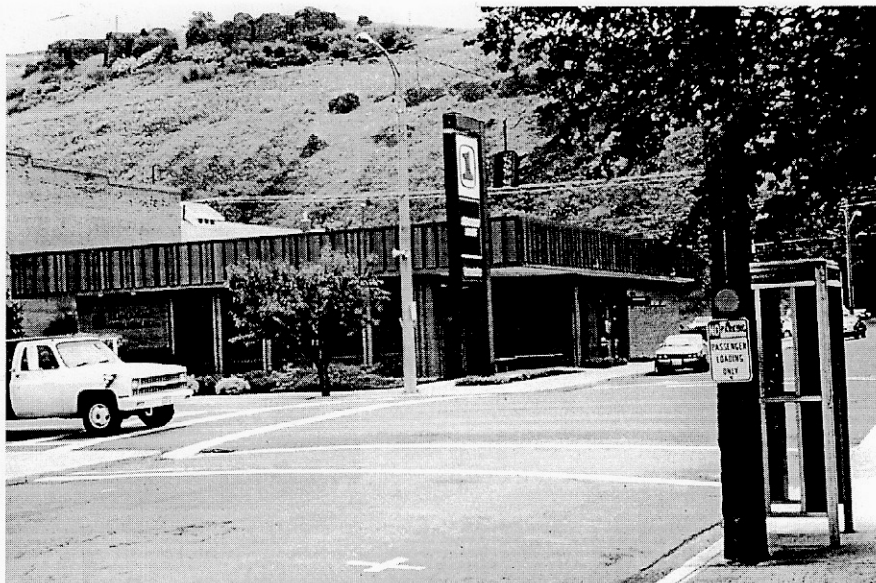
His wife, Kathryn, who was also sentenced to a life term was said to have looked at her husband in disdain and muttered "You Rat."

The "G-men" handle was applied to FBI agents through their gangster fighting days of the depression and was really the high point of Kelly's career. FBI researchers, Shishido said, refer to John Toland's "Dillinger Days" as one of the best sources of information.

Kelly, whose real name was George Kelly Barnes, started his crime career as a bootlegger in Memphis and really didn't get into the bank robbing business until his wife bragged about his shooting talents to gangsters in Texas. Toland explains Kelly was eventually allowed to join the local criminals on bank robberies in Texas and Mississippi.

He died July 17, 1954, at Leavenworth prison and is buried in Cottdale, Texas.

According to the "Commoner" Sheriff W. I. Dailey and Deputy L. M. (Pet) Parnell, tracked the gang through Washtucna to the coast where



Successor to First Saving and Trust Bank, Colfax Branch,
Seafirst Bank

the Colfax investigation crossed paths with the investigation of a robbery in Bremerton.

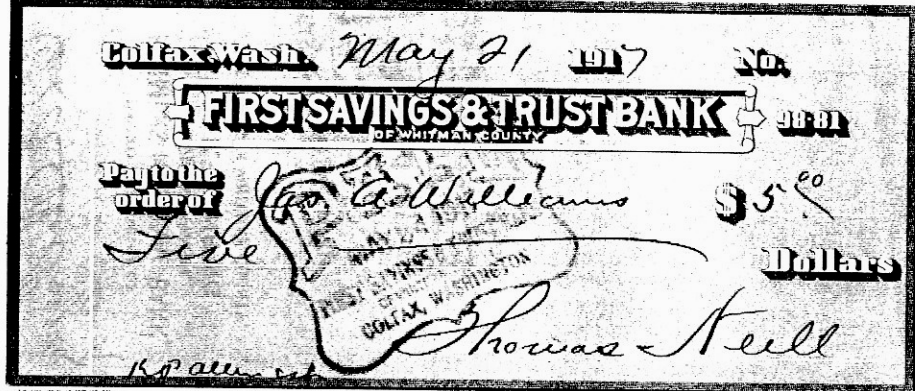
Two identified suspects in the case were Ed Bentz of Tacoma and Ernest Johnstone, said to be driver of the green Chevrolet or Hudson getaway car. Johnstone was arrested in Reno and Bentz was arrested in McKinney, Texas. Texas officers declined to extradite Bentz back to Colfax because he was wanted for an Aug. 14, 1932 robbery in Blue Ridge, Texas.

Bentz later escaped in Texas, according to an issue of the Gazette at the end of the year.

A third suspect, Albert Bates, was arrested in Fort Worth for the Colfax robbery and attempts were made to extradite him. Charges against Bates were later dropped toward the end of the year for lack of identification.

Bates, however, again linked the Colfax robbery to Machine Gun Kelly. According to F.B.I. records, Bates and Kelly had been sidekicks for some time. Bates was arrested in Denver in 1933 and convicted for the same Oklahoma City kidnapping case which led to life sentences against the Kellys.

Kathryn and George Kelly Bates, and other members of their gang kidnapped a wealthy Oklahoma city oil man, Charles Urschel, and kept him prisoner at a farm near Fort Worth. The farm belonged to Kelly's mother-in-law and her second husband, Robert Shannon. After



Check of Colfax First Saving and Trust, 1917.

–As with all personal checks from before 1960, the most prominent feature is the name of the bank, not the name of the account holder.

Kelly's arrest, the Colfax bank currency was found in a strongbox at the Shannon farm.

When the currency was traced back to the Colfax bank, bank employees were shown pictures of Bates and Kelly. They identified Bates as the man holding the machine gun by the front door and Kelly as the robber who "scooped up all the money in sight and ordered the vault opened," according to the October 1933 Gazette-Commoner. The original suspect, Bentz, was identified as the "man wo stood on the inside stairway with a machine gun."

Bentz, however, spoke to Deputy Parnell when he was in Texas and denied that he had been involved in the robbery in Colfax. He said he had been instrumental in the return of \$60,000 in securities to a Seattle insurance company, a negotiation which was reported soon after the crime.

The question of who robbed the Colfax bank is still fogged. First, a number of big-time and small-time gangsters in the depression years hung out in Oklahoma and Texas. Bates was not identified as one of the robbers when he was first arrested in connection with the Colfax bank robbery. Kelly was identified later from photographs. However, an F.B.I. picture of Kelly looks very much like a picture of Bentz published in the Colfax Commoner.

One other piece of the puzzle was the absence of Kathryn Kelly on the investigation trail. According to Toland's book, Kelly was more or less a bumbler and Kathryn never let him get far out of her sight. If the gang came all the way to the northwest, did she come along?

Description of Kelly also suggest the billing for the Colfax bank robbery incorrect. He was more likely to have been attached to the local

scene with some other gangster calling the shots.

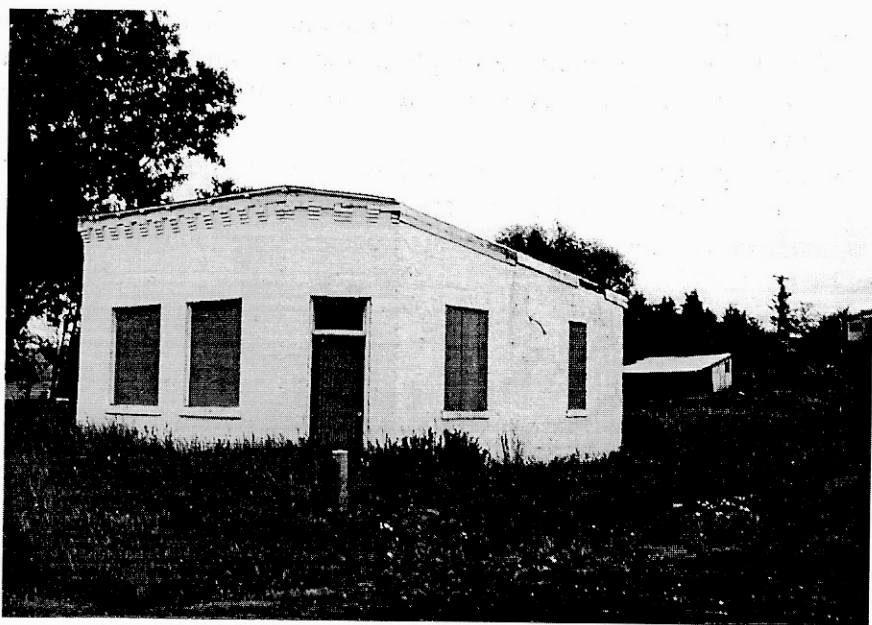
First Savings and Trust Bank lost \$10,621 in cash and about \$60,000 in securities in the robbery. The securities were later recovered in Seattle through negotiations conducted by Sheriff Dailey.

Jessie Pierson believes the robbery added to the declines of the bank which was facing tough times as it was at the start of the depression. Then Jessie Fisher, she had recently moved up the street to First Trust after it consolidated with Colfax National.

"People didn't line up or anything like that, but we knew what was happening," she said. In the lean depression days, account holders feared the bank might not be able to make good on the deposits after the robbery.

The bank went into receivership in December. It was launched again as Seattle First National in August of 1934, according to Sam Randall who started his career with the bank at about that time;

At the time of the robbery, Randall was one of the last customers to leave the bank. He remembers holding open the door while two strangers entered. One of the two men was holding what appeared to be a violin case, Randall recalled.



Bank Building at Johnson, 1995

From THE PULLMAN HERALD, (Friday) November
16, 1923, p. 1, col. 5

ROBBERS MAKE HAUL AT JOHNSON BANK

**Early Morning Safe Cracking Nets Robbers \$1400
Bank Furniture Demolished**

Robbers blew the safe in the Farmers State Bank at Johnson, eight miles southeast of here, about 4 o'clock Friday morning and made away with \$1400 in currency and silver. Four charges of nitro glycerine demolished the safe, as well as two plate glass windows and the bank furniture. The door to the vault was "soaped," ready to blow, the robbers evidently intending to blow the vault in case the safe, which

was on the outside of the vault, did not contain the bank money. The explosion awakened several residents of Johnson and Jake Steiner is said to have emptied his gun in the direction of the bank, the robbers returning the fire.

The entire process required only a few minutes and before a posse could be organized the robbers were speeding on their way with the bank money. The telephone wires had been severed and it was some time before the sheriff's office could be notified. The bank loss in cash is fully protected by burglar insurance, but the damage to the furniture and fixings will be considerable.

Some time during that night the Standard Oil station in this city was burglarized and 15 gallons of gasoline, together with several buckets and a funnel, were taken. It is believed that the bank robbers passed through Pullman on their way to Johnson and supplied themselves with gasoline to aid in their get-away. Tracks left at the oil station are said to be the only clew (sic) which might assist in the capture of the robbers.

B. F. Druffel is president of the Johnson bank and L. R. Maxwell is vice president. W. O. Druffel is cashier.

A night or two previously the bank at Thornton was entered by burglars and Friday night an effort was made to rob a Rosalia bank. The attempt was frustrated, however, and one of the robbers was believed to have been wounded in a gun battle when the safe crackers were forced to make a quick get-away.

Memories of Steptoe, Washington 1920-1929
As told to Heidi L. Dowling
By Val F. Painter

Val Painter lived in Steptoe with his parents during the 1920's. Following are some of Val's memories of the people and their lives that made up what Steptoe was and is today.

I was born in Naches, WA in 1915. I had one brother and two sisters. My father was born in 1883 on a ranch his father Benjamin Bell Painter had bought in 1882. He was the last of five boys. The ranch is between Cheney and Plaza and was formerly owned by Bonney for whom Bonney Lake is named. My Grandfather, Benjamin Bell Painter's fourth son, Parlan stayed on the ranch. They had two daughters Janice and Julie Jean Pittmann and the girls married brothers.

Charley Helmer had a Hardware in Pine City and he wrote to my Dad and wanted him to run the store. It closed in 1920 and we moved to Steptoe (my folks were movers, the house I now live in is about the 25th in my life) my Dad ran the Hardware and was buying it from Helmer. When we first moved to Steptoe the house we were to rent was not ready and we stayed in a hotel for a couple of weeks. We then moved into the Tom Hall house, then the Euler house, and then the Robins house.

Some of the people I remember was Tom Sharp he ran a wheat warehouse. In the wintertime Mr. Sharp also sold wood and coal.

Skip Boehm was a janitor (now called custodian) at the school. He limped quite badly and got quite incensed when people referred to him as "Skip". Caney Littleton a tall old man who came from



Steptoe about 1915

Tennessee in 1915. At outings in the gymnasium where all events were held if someone would fiddle he would dance a jig. Mr. Foster a very nice old man who was completely bald but had beautiful long white whiskers. Before he sat down to eat he would wash and then use a comb to comb his whiskers.

Frank Wetzel had a little notions store across the street from the Hardware. In about 1928 when the Whippet car was introduced he became a salesman and was the first person to drive to the top of Steptoe Butte.

Mr. Eastep was the blacksmith. Don Euler's mother had the grocery store. The Eulers' lived in back of the store. Don later became a Boeing Engineer. Earl Winn then bought the store and ran it 4 or 5 years and went to work for J.C. Penney's in Colfax where he was manager. Hugh McDearnott worked for my father. Hugh was a bachelor and had his meals at our house. When the depression came he went back to his home in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Maford Sharp was my friend. They had a silo along side their barn. He and I were 10 and 11 years old and would pick up old tobacco tins all summer and fill them with Indian tobacco. We would hide them under the silo so we would have something to smoke all winter.



Steptoe 1995

Listenber's lived on a farm out near Virgil McCroskey's. Clayton was a little younger than I was. Clayton became a Seattle Police Officer in about 1947 and served for 25 years. He died of a heart attack several years ago.

Del Mitchell opened a garage in about 1924. Max Spromberg had a garage a little bit North of Euler's store. Vic Jones was a part time Minister and farmer. Roy Davidson lived across the road and a little North of McMeekin's. Andy McMeekin's parents were farmers. A place we called the "Timber Culture" out near Litzenger's as I remember it was comprised of about 5 acres and was supposed to contain every tree that would grow in the area. We would find Yellow Bells there in the Spring which I think are the prettiest wild flowers.

I don't think I mentioned Shahan. He was a farmer and also a barber and charged \$.50 for a haircut. There was a flag pole in the center of the intersection when we first moved to Steptoe but through the years it got rotten and had to be removed. I don't know what year the hotel on the butte burned. My Aunt, her maiden name was Nora Mayfair had gone there in about 1897 to dances. In 1929 the Depression really hit and the next year my Dad had to close the store and we left Steptoe.

EPILOGUE

After Steptoe we moved to Rosalia for a while. My parents bought a dairy farm about 7 miles from Sunnyside, WA. My dad was really easy going. He did not care what time I got in as long as I got up at 4:00 a.m. to start doing chores. I did this without enthusiasm all through high school. I was done there in June 1935 when my folks moved to Seattle. I got a job with Diamond Parking Stations where I worked till 1941 when I joined the Seattle Police Department.

On August 10, 1938, I met Ann Odne and married her on August 12, 1939. We had two sons David Bruce born on October 22, 1942 and Richard Allen born December 21, 1945 on Ann's birthday. Ann was killed in a tragic accident on January 28, 1978. She was my love and my life. My loving sons were my salvation at that time.

On April 1, 1979 I married Pauline Ritchey who is 6 years my Junior. She has one son Brent who lives nearby and is a C.P.A. for a large corporation and is married to Kathy.

Both my sons and their wives are teachers in Oregon. David in Newport and Dick in Salem. I only have two grandchildren Alison 18 years old and Megan 14 years old. They are Dick's and both are adopted. We love them dearly.

