

OKABENA

A BANK ROBBERY REVISITED

BRAD CHISHOLM

ON MAY 19, 1933, the First State Bank of Okabena, Minnesota, was robbed. Now, nearly 80 years later, there remain two prevailing and conflicting views on the identity of the robbers. The popular belief is that Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker robbed the Jackson County bank. The sober explanation is that Tony, Mildred, and Floyd Strain were responsible—after all, the Strains were arrested, tried, and convicted of the robbery.

So who really did it? And why does it matter? It certainly matters to the reputation of the Strains. They are

no longer living, but during their lives they consistently maintained that they had nothing to do with the robbery in this small southwestern Minnesota town. They spent years in prison for the crime and remain the perpetrators of record.

On the other hand, Bonnie and Clyde, known then as the leaders of the Barrow Gang, were the Jackson County sheriff's chief suspects immediately after the robbery, only to fade from consideration when evidence pointed to the Strains. A year later, on May 23, 1934, Bonnie and



Assistant cashier Ralph Jones safely assisting R. G. Milbrath, First State Bank of Okabena, 1939

Clyde were killed in a bloody roadside ambush. Shortly thereafter, two newly published accounts of their lives named Okabena as one of their crimes, but these biographies were soon discredited. Then, in the late 1990s, historians began attributing the Okabena robbery to the Barrow Gang once again. Two recent books, Jeff Guinn's *Go Down Together* and Paul Schneider's *Bonnie and Clyde: The Lives Behind the Legend*, present Okabena as an uncontested Barrows crime. Guinn devotes only one sentence to the Strains, and Schneider makes no mention of them whatsoever.¹ Indeed, no one has ever told the story of the Strains, yet their story is essential to answering the question: "Who robbed the bank at Okabena?"

Okabena citizens who remember the robbery, as well as descendants of witnesses and other guardians of the local history, are reluctant to accept that Bonnie and Clyde (and Buck and Blanche Barrow) were the culprits. Their skepticism is understandable. They point out that while it is tempting to believe that the local bank was robbed by history's most famous outlaw couple, reason dictates otherwise. Local eyewitnesses identified the Strains, and local juries found them guilty. Yet for the past several years, former Okabena resident John "Doc" Sievert has been staging good-natured reenactments of the bank robbery, replete with actors dressed as Bonnie

and Clyde, as part of the town's Independence Day festivities.² The reenactments stir up old debates over who did it and, like this historical investigation, sometimes touch a nerve.

THE ROBBERY ITSELF was more complex than any public performance can readily convey. At approximately 1 A.M. on Friday, May 19, 1933, two men broke into the Okabena bank through a rear window. When the bank's two employees came to work at 8 A.M., the intruders apprehended them at gunpoint. Over the next few minutes, six people entered the building, including two children, and all were made to lie down on the floor.³

The gunmen stuffed their loot into a bag and herded their captives into the basement.

The gunmen forced assistant cashier Ralph Jones to open the safe, from which they took nearly \$1,400. Chief cashier Sam Frederickson, from his prone position on the floor, activated a "silent" alarm that was heard in the hardware store next door. Unaware of this, the gunmen stuffed their loot into a bag and herded their captives into the basement. Outside, two young women in a black Ford V8 sedan pulled up to the rear of the bank and honked the horn. The bandits exited through a back door and climbed into the car. Just then, three shots rang out.⁴

August Atz, proprietor of the adjacent hardware store, had fired a .32 pistol at the getaway car through a narrowly opened sliding door near the back of his building. He missed. The woman in the front passenger seat,

Brad Chisholm is a professor of film history at St. Cloud State University, the recipient of two awards for teaching excellence, and the author of numerous scholarly articles on the moving-image arts. Dr. Chisholm's current work on depression-era bank robbery grew out of the research for his "History on Film" course and from a life-long fascination with the history of his native Minnesota. This article is an excerpt from his longer work on the topic. Text copyright 2010 by Brad Chisholm.



who witnesses described as having exceptionally bright red hair, fired a machine-gun burst in Atz's direction, but he ducked behind a heavy iron hardware cabinet and was spared injury. The car sped off and drove in a six-block arc through town, with the gun-wielding woman and the two men spraying the town with machine-gun fire the whole way. Schoolchildren ducked behind trees. Bullets sliced through walls and shattered windows. Frederickson dialed the local telephone exchange (the 1930s equivalent of 911) just as a parting shot pierced the front of the bank and slammed into the ceiling above his head. The bandits zoomed south out of town toward the Iowa border less than 20 miles away. It was all over by 8:15 A.M. and, remarkably, no one had been hurt.

Schoolchildren ducked behind trees. Bullets sliced through walls and shattered windows.

Sheriff Chris Magnussen was in Jackson, 15 miles southeast of Okabena, when he got the call. He drove south into Iowa and found a few people who had seen the black Ford speed by, but the trail was lost in the vicinity of Spirit Lake. Nevertheless, his pursuit calls into question those cinematic depictions of depression-era lawmen who stop chasing bandits at the state line.⁵

By the time Magnussen got to Okabena, detectives from the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) were already examining the crime scene and taking statements. Agent William Conley, from the BCA's Worthington office, had taken charge of the case. Magnussen drove back to his office in Jackson to review recent alerts for any bandit gangs with female members—as rare then as they are now. He found one. Five weeks earlier, a gang that included two women had killed two police officers in a hellacious shootout in Joplin, Missouri. They escaped capture but were identified as the Barrow Gang from personal effects they left behind, including cameras holding rolls of unprocessed film and the handwritten poetry that would make Bonnie and Clyde objects of public fascination.⁶

BACK IN OKABENA, Agent Conley was encouraged by eyewitness descriptions of the two male bandits that seemed to correspond to the height, hair color, and complexions of two petty criminals, brothers Tony and Floyd Strain. The Strains were believed to be members of a

brazen Sioux Falls-based gang that since January had ravaged area banks: Canova, Huron, Kaylor, and Vermillion, South Dakota, as well as Chandler, Ihlen, Madison, Russell, and Westbrook, Minnesota. Minnesota would experience 32 bank robberies in 1933, the most in its history until the modern proliferation of bank branches in suburbs and supermarkets helped push robbery numbers past depression-era levels. Bank robberies had been on the rise nationally since 1920, spurred by the new prevalence of automobiles and paved highways that made fast getaways possible, then compounded by economic hard times. In the early 1930s, county sheriffs and state criminal-investigation agencies such as Minnesota's BCA were the law enforcement entities charged with solving rural bank crimes. The Federal Bureau of Investigation would not be granted any jurisdiction over bank robberies until January 1934.⁷

Minnesota's BCA and South Dakota's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) conducted a joint effort to catch the Sioux Falls-area bank robbers. By the time of the Okabena heist, agents from both states had for some months been quietly focusing their attention on the Strains. Tony and Floyd had been born in Minnesota's Lac Qui Parle County and grew up across the state line in South Dakota's Grant County. The eldest of ten farm children, they got caught stealing a load of grain from a neighbor in 1924, which earned them each a six-month stretch in the South Dakota State Penitentiary. By 1933 Tony, now 28, was living in Sioux City, Iowa, where he supported himself and his wife Mildred, 24, by transporting liquor—illegally—for area bootleggers. Floyd, 29, was living in Milbank, South Dakota, having recently completed a second prison term, this time for abandoning his wife and children.⁸

On January 3, 1933, a car stolen from Milbank was used in the robbery of the bank at Russell, Minnesota, 70 miles to the southeast. The car was later returned to the Milbank area and abandoned in a field. As one of the town's less reputable citizens, Floyd Strain came under suspicion, but no hard evidence linked him to the stolen car or the Russell robbery. Minnesota and South Dakota authorities began to gather information about Floyd and Tony from this point on.⁹

A further reason to suspect the Strains presented itself on April 13, 1933, when a witness to an attempted bank robbery in Huron, South Dakota, identified Tony Strain from a mug shot. The Sioux City police were asked to detain Tony until the Huron witness could drive down and attempt an identification in person. Tony was picked up and held for the legal limit of three days, but the wit-

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE PENITENTIARY				S M L		SIOUX FALLS, S. D.	
5-54				A. Strain		Born in ID	
Height	1 m.	Head lgth		L. Foot		Arms	Approx. Age
Weight	1 m.	Head width		L. Mid F		Perish	19
Trunk		Chest width		L. LH F		Perish	19
Care		R. Ear lgth		L. Cuff		Perish	19
Remarks relative to Measurements							
Facial	Build	Complexion	Build	Build	Build	Build	Build
21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21
STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA PRISON DEPARTMENT BUREAU OF IDENTIFICATION SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA				Examined 12/22/24 By: A. H. M. / S. B. Ben			

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE PENITENTIARY				S M L		SIOUX FALLS, S. D.	
5-7				A. Strain		Born in ID	
Height	1 m.	Head lgth		L. Foot		Arms	Approx. Age
Weight	1 m.	Head width		L. Mid F		Perish	20
Trunk		Chest width		L. LH F		Perish	20
Care		R. Ear lgth		L. Cuff		Perish	20
Remarks relative to Measurements							
Facial	Build	Complexion	Build	Build	Build	Build	Build
21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21
STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA PRISON DEPARTMENT BUREAU OF IDENTIFICATION SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA				Examined 12/22/24 By: A. H. M. / S. B. Ben			

LEFT: Young Tony Strain's mug shot, 1924, from his time in South Dakota's state penitentiary.

RIGHT: Floyd Strain, 1924, from his first stint in the South Dakota prison.

ness failed to appear. Obligated to release Tony, detectives nonetheless kept him under limited surveillance. Then on May 15, just days before the Okabena robbery, Tony disappeared. Floyd Strain was also missing from his Milbank residence. Later that day, law enforcement agencies issued a warning to bankers in the Sioux Falls area to expect a robbery attempt within the week.¹⁰

Indeed, the very next day the bank at Canova, South Dakota—an hour's drive from Sioux Falls—was robbed. And then, on May 19, Okabena. That afternoon, mere hours after the robbery, Agent Conley and Sheriff Magnusson conferred with the Sioux City chief of detectives, Tom Green, as well as with CID agents in Sioux Falls. It must have appeared to Conley and his colleagues that the Strain brothers had embarked on their latest spree. Nevertheless, Magnusson called Joplin's chief of detectives, Ed Portley, to learn more about the Barrow Gang. By the weekend of May 20–21, however, at least one of the Okabena witnesses had picked Tony's picture out of a selection of mug shots, prompting Magnusson to drop the Barrows from further consideration. On May 23, just four days later, a warrant was made out in Jackson County court charging

Tony and Floyd Strain, along with a woman named "Belle McLain" and another woman, name "as yet unknown," with the robbery of the Okabena bank.¹¹

Within weeks, the three Strains were in custody. When Tony turned up at his home on May 29, the police were waiting for him. They arrested Mildred at the same time, belatedly naming her as the remaining female bandit. She was revealed to have spent time in prison for her involvement in a 1929 bank robbery with a previous boyfriend. Floyd was arrested in Sioux Falls on June 22 in a police raid of a riding academy across the street from the area's most notorious roadhouse. Only Belle McLain, described as Floyd's red-haired female companion, remained at large.¹²

Witnesses to every unsolved bank holdup in the region were escorted to the Sioux City jail to see Tony and to the sheriff's lockup in Sioux Falls to get a look at Floyd. The Strain brothers were soon identified as having participated in the robberies at Okabena, Westbrook, Ihlen, and Russell, Minnesota, as well as Vermillion, Kaylor, Huron, and Canova, South Dakota. No female bandits were observed at any of these, except Okabena, so Mil-

Who Was Mildred Strain?

Mildred Strain went by a variety of names in her lifetime, not all of them legal or accurate.

- She was born **Mildred Cosier** in 1909.
- She helped boyfriend Freddie Dunn conceal the money he stole from a bank in Eden, South Dakota, in November 1929. Arrested the next year, she was imprisoned in South Dakota under the name **Mildred Dunn** and was regarded as Freddie's common-law wife.
- Mildred met Tony Strain when they were both inmates in the South Dakota State Penitentiary; at that time, women were held in a remote area of the men's prison. (Tony was serving a second term, this time for statutory rape). Released within a month of each other, they lived together as common-law spouses, and she began to call herself **Mildred Strain**.
- When she was arrested for the Okabena robbery in 1933, the newspapers referred to her as **Alice Martin**, which reporters briefly thought was her name. She had given it earlier when arrested for juvenile delinquency, not wishing friends and relatives to see her real name on the police blotter. Occasionally, she was also called **Stormy** and signed at least one letter that way.
- A few years into her Okabena prison stretch, she asked her warden not to accept letters from Tony any longer and reclaimed her original name, **Mildred Cosier**.
- Paroled from prison and free of Tony Strain, she moved to Iowa and married a local man, ending her days in 1974 as **Mildred Gertz**.

Sources: Tony's and Mildred's prison files; local newspapers. Capt. John Benting, South Dakota State Prison, e-mail to author, Aug. 29, 2008 (on housing women in the penitentiary).



ALICE MARTIN
Alias "Stormy" Cosier

Okabena Press, June 8, 1933, using several of Mildred's aliases

dred was only presented to witnesses to that crime. When two of them, farmers D. B. Hovenden and Albert Sievert, admitted that Mildred looked like the driver of the getaway car, she was formally charged.¹³

THE STRAINS went before the jury in two sensational trials held at the stately hilltop courthouse in Jackson. Mildred and Tony sat handcuffed together in their September 1933 trial. No physical evidence was presented, but eight local residents testified that these were two of the Okabena bandits. The court-appointed defense attorney made little effort on their behalf. Tony claimed he was delivering illegal shipments of liquor to Rapid City the day of the robbery but had no one to vouch for him. Mildred's and Tony's landlady and a fellow boarder testified that Mildred was home the day of the robbery, but Sioux City police detectives Claude Bledsoe and Everett Smith took the stand and declared that Mildred's alibi witnesses were part of a prostitution ring and therefore not credible. The trial took a day and a half, and the jury needed only an hour to find Tony and Mildred guilty.¹⁴

Floyd's trial for the Okabena robbery did not occur until February 1936, as Hutchinson County, South Dakota, had won the right to try him first for the April 20, 1933, bank robbery at Kaylor, at which a bystander was killed. Five witnesses testified that Floyd was the getaway driver. He was found guilty, but his conviction was overturned on appeal two years later because testimony supportive of his alibi had been improperly excluded. Floyd was released from prison in South Dakota only to be remanded to Minnesota, where he was tried for the Okabena robbery. Like his brother, he claimed to have been on a Rapid City bootlegging run the day the bank was robbed. To no one's surprise, the jury found him guilty.¹⁵ Eyewitnesses had unhesitatingly identified Tony, Mildred, and Floyd as three of the four people they saw rob the Okabena bank. The fourth bandit, the elusive Belle McLain, was never caught.

Tony and Floyd were sentenced to 10-to-80 years in the state prison at Stillwater. Mildred got 5-to-40 years in the women's prison at Shakopee, a lighter sentence because, as the driver, she did not enter the bank or wield a weapon. All three maintained their innocence and, over the years, engaged a number of attorneys to continue investigating the case, but to no avail. Mildred was paroled nine years later, in 1942. Tony and Floyd were released in 1946.¹⁶ In retrospect, the case against the brothers appears to have been strong, but a close examination of the case

against Mildred (and the problem of the vanished Belle McLain) calls into question whether the Strains could ever have been responsible for the Okabena robbery.

TRIAL TRANSCRIPTS reveal that Mildred testified that she could not drive a car. Her landlady confirmed this on the witness stand, citing a shopping-trip incident that was exacerbated by Mildred's inability to drive the landlady's car. The jury ultimately disregarded this information.¹⁷

Could the authorities have arrested the wrong woman? Yes. Mildred was deliberately framed. She was not named in the initial warrant because detectives on the lookout for Tony were watching her residence the day of the Okabena robbery and were fully aware that Mildred was at home. These were Sioux City officers Bledsoe and Smith, the very pair whose testimony undermined Mildred's alibi witnesses. Sometime between the issuance of the warrant and the arrest of Tony and Mildred, these men were pressured into withholding their knowledge of Mildred's innocence, possibly under threat of exposure for their role in a protection-money scheme. In 1936 Bledsoe and Smith privately admitted their knowledge of Mildred's innocence to one of her friends. They claimed to feel remorseful but helpless. They even visited her at

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the Shakopee prison.¹⁸ However, no surviving evidence indicates that the detectives went on record about the critical information they had withheld.

What about the other woman named in the case—the mysterious redhead, Belle McLain? Curiously, no photograph or biographical information about her was ever published, yet newspaper readers saw plenty of such material on the Strains. Six weeks after the robbery, a prosecuting attorney revealed that Belle McLain was the alias of a woman named Helen Roder. This news appeared in an off-handed mention in the fourth paragraph of a *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader* article on Minnesota's efforts to extradite Floyd Strain from South Dakota.¹⁹ Had reporters followed up on this revelation, the mystery of Belle McLain would have been quickly solved.

Helen Roder was indeed a red-haired woman linked to Floyd Strain. She had married him in 1925, had two



Mildred Dunn, as she was called in the Women's Department of the South Dakota state prison, 1930

children, and then divorced him in 1931. Floyd was a two-timing, abusive husband, and Helen eventually had him arrested for child abandonment. By the time of the Okabena robbery, she was remarried and living with her children and husband, Al Miller, in Minneapolis. The original warrant indicates that investigators believed Belle McLain also went by the aliases Viola Stone and Bessie M. McCoy. Rather than being Helen's aliases, Belle, Viola, and Bessie were likely the names of various Floyd Strain associates hastily gathered during the early days of the investigation. Floyd was known as a man with many girlfriends.²⁰

Helen Roder had numerous relatives in the Milbank area, so BCA agents would have had little trouble locating her. They must soon have realized their error. Yet Conley and his fellow agents allowed the public to believe that Belle McLain was a fugitive whom they had little hope of ever capturing. Had they admitted the truth about either Helen or Mildred, they would have been unable to match the "Strain Gang" to the Okabena bandits. In May 1933, however, there was one active criminal gang consisting precisely of two men and two women: the Barrows.

A YEAR AFTER the Okabena robbery, Bonnie's and Clyde's lives as fugitives came to a bloody conclusion. Graphic newspaper accounts of their deaths were quickly followed by a series of *True Detective* magazine articles



LEFT: Clyde Champion Barrow and his V-8 Ford, photo sent during his lifetime to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. RIGHT: Bonnie Parker, also from the history files of Minnesota's BCA.

and a ghost-written book attributed to Bonnie's mother and Clyde's sister, all claiming Okabena as a Barrow Gang robbery. What these sources describe, however, is not Okabena, but the botched attempt at Lucerne, Indiana, a week earlier. In that incident, Clyde and his brother Buck broke into the bank at night. Buck's wife, Blanche, with Bonnie riding shotgun, drove up to the bank the next morning to pick them up. Two bank cashiers arrived for work, but when Clyde and Buck tried to apprehend them, the men grabbed concealed weapons and thwarted the robbery. The Barrows got no money and were forced to flee. They raked the town with machine-gun fire as they sped away in their black Ford sedan.²¹

Once it was determined that the hastily written book and magazine series were confusing the Lucerne attempt with the Okabena job, most crime historians dismissed the claim that Bonnie and Clyde had robbed the bank at Okabena. That is, they did until John Neal Phillips's biography of little-known Barrow associate Ralph Fults appeared in 1996. Fults told Phillips how on a wintry day in March 1932, he and Clyde Barrow drove through Okabena and cased the bank with the intent to rob it. Icy road conditions made them change their minds, but Clyde would remember this vulnerable rural bank.²²

Then, in 2005, Phillips dazzled the Bonnie-and-Clyde research community with his edited version of Blanche Barrow's previously unpublished, posthumous memoir. In it, Blanche described what we now clearly recognize as the Lucerne robbery attempt of May 12, 1933, pointing

out that, because it failed, the gang had to rob another bank soon—they were short of money.²³ One week later, the Okabena bank was robbed with the identical *modus operandi* and by a quartet that exactly matched the description of the Lucerne bandits.

The description of the gun-toting woman with unnaturally red hair also suggests that the Barrows were the Okabena bandits, not the Strains. News reports of the Okabena robbery used such phrases as "a brilliant hue of red." At Tony and Mildred's trial, witness Gus Seydel described the gunwoman as having "blond, red hair" that was "an awfully odd color." Bonnie Parker, although born blonde, had been periodically dyeing her hair red since January 1933. We know this from the account of a patrolman taken hostage on one of the Barrows' trademark joy rides and from a black-and-white photograph of Bonnie from her fugitive period, in which her hair is clearly *not* blonde. Two news accounts mention the female driver's hair as well: one said it was red, another said it was brunette. Blanche Barrow, who prided herself on her driving ability, had natural dark red hair. Mildred Strain's hair was sandy brown.²⁴

Furthermore, the physical descriptions of the male robbers more closely match up with Clyde and Buck Barrow than Tony and Floyd Strain. All the newspaper reports have the male bandits as thin, dark-haired, and between five-feet-five inches and five-seven. This describes the Barrow brothers and Tony equally well, but Floyd Strain was five-nine.²⁵

What became of Blanche and Buck? On July 24, 1933,



First State Bank of Okabena

they were captured by an Iowa posse. Buck, wounded prior to their capture, died a few days later. Blanche pled guilty to the attempted murder of a Missouri sheriff but admitted little else. If either was ever asked about Okabena, we have no record of it, although Blanche's memoir described a robbery that editor Phillips believes is Okabena. Blanche never named the banks they robbed and was ambiguous about dates, but much of her account of this robbery matches what we know of Okabena. For instance, she described how she and Bonnie, spending the night in their car, endured a hailstorm while Clyde and Buck were holed up inside the bank. The hailstorm coincides perfectly with the weather reported for Okabena and neighboring communities on May 19, 1933.²⁶

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Further evidence comes from an authenticated, unpublished manuscript written by Buck and Clyde's mother, Cumie Barrow. James R. Knight, coauthor of *Bonnie and Clyde: A Twenty-First-Century Update*, is one of the few scholars who has been permitted to see this document, which remains in private hands.

He reports that Cumie describes both the Lucerne and Okabena holdups accurately and by name, just as she remembered her sons describing them to her at a secret family rendezvous in late May 1933.²⁷

Knight also notes that the model of car (Ford V8) and the type of machine gun (Browning Automatic Rifle) used at Okabena were Clyde Barrow's signature vehicle and weapon of choice. Clyde's preference for the powerful, speedy Ford V8 is well documented. In 1933 that was a distinctive, easily recognized car, recalled Calvin Paulson, who was walking to school when he saw the Okabena bandits roar by. And judging by the ease with which shells pierced thick walls and doors in Okabena that day, the robbers were using Brownings. While the lighter, weaker Thompson submachine gun was more commonly used by gangsters of the era, Clyde preferred the Browning for its penetrating force.²⁸

YET EIGHT EYEWITNESSES sat in a courtroom and swore that Tony, Floyd, and Mildred Strain were the Okabena bank robbers. Even though Mildred was framed and Belle McLain was a phantom, were not Tony and Floyd members of the notorious gang that robbed a spate of banks in the Sioux Falls area? As a matter of fact, they were not. The Minnesota State Prison inmate files contain the proof that there never was a Strain Gang. The robberies that occurred near Sioux Falls in 1933 were largely the work of three gangs unknown to the authorities until after the Strains were put in prison.

One of these was led by a St. Cloud hoodlum named Cyril Wooldridge. In January 1933, he and his crew drove from central Minnesota to Milbank, South Dakota. There they stole a car, drove it to Russell, Minnesota, relieved that community's bank of \$4,000, then drove back to Milbank, abandoned the stolen car, and returned to St. Cloud. Wooldridge robbed seven more banks before he was caught in December 1933. He then gave a full accounting of his crimes and co-conspirators, none of whom were the Strains. It was the discovery of the Milbank car, used to divert suspicion from Wooldridge's St. Cloud hideout, that first drew attention to Floyd Strain, the ex-con living in Milbank with no visible means of support. The Strain brothers appear never to have learned of Wooldridge's inadvertent hand in their fate, even though they all did overlapping stretches at Stillwater State Prison.²⁹

A second gang was led by a professional gambler from Omaha, Ralph "Cap" Simpson. This group hit at least six banks in 1933. Then gang member Frank Kroy decided that prison and its three meals a day would be preferable to the hazards of armed robbery.

Kroy confessed and named all the gang members and their robberies. Among these was the Westbrook, Minnesota, bank job that had been attributed to the Strains. Kroy said that he had never heard of the Strains. This information did reach Tony's and Floyd's attorneys and became part of an unsuccessful appeal to the Minnesota Board of Pardons. Board members considered the information irrelevant since the Strains were doing time for Okabena, not for Westbrook.³⁰

A third gang was led by a Rochester, Minnesota, house painter named Clair Ralph Gibson. He was caught in 1937 after a five-year robbery career that involved 21 banks. Among these were the remaining banks to which the Strains had been linked: Vermillion, Huron, Canova, Ihlen, and Kaylor. Gibson named his accomplices in every robbery. He did not know or work with Tony or

The "Strain Gang" Homes and Suspected Haunts



Floyd Strain. These revelations also became part of the Strains' pardon appeals, but were once again dismissed as having nothing to do with the Okabena case.³¹

The eyewitnesses who identified the Strains as robbers of numerous banks—more than 20 people in all—had been utterly mistaken. How could this be? Today's criminologists know that eyewitnesses are wrong a shocking amount of the time; a substantial body of literature bears this out. Yet in the 1930s, eyewitness testimony from one's neighbors was still the most persuasive evidence for any jury, and eyewitnesses can be quite inconsistent. For example, at Floyd Strain's 1933 trial for the Kaylor robbery and murder, one eyewitness maintained that Tony Strain was also one of the gunmen, even after it was pointed out to him that this crime occurred while Tony was sitting in a Sioux City jail cell.³²



Ralph Jones, standing between a customer (at his right) and Sam Frederickson, the bank's president and chief cashier, 1939

The identification process was far from perfect. In the 1930s, police did not always conduct line-ups in which a suspect stood next to others of similar complexion and build. Quite often, they paraded the accused, alone, before a group of witnesses concealed behind a screen. A surviving appeal brief reveals that at least one of Floyd Strain's "show-ups," as they were called, was handled this way.³³

It is worth noting that a few of those who attended these show-ups declined to identify the Strains, including one person from Okabena. Assistant cashier Ralph Jones could not say with confidence that Tony and Floyd were the robbers; however the prosecuting attorney at Floyd's 1936 trial got Jones to admit that neither could he say with certainty that the Strains were *not* the robbers. Even so, eight other people—his coworker, three bank customers, three passersby, and a gas-station attendant—took the witness stand and swore that the Strains were the bandits. Ultimately, the Strains were not helped by the fact that Floyd and Tony roughly resembled Clyde and Buck Barrow and that Mildred Strain and Blanche Barrow looked a bit alike.³⁴

Mildred Strain escaped from prison on three occasions but each time was caught within hours. After nine years, she was paroled. She broke things off with Tony, moved back to her hometown of Cherokee, Iowa, married a local man named Charlie Gertz, and led a quiet life with him until her death in 1974. Floyd and Tony, paroled in 1946, eventually moved to the Rapid City area. For the rest of their days, they told anyone who would listen about how they had done time for a Bonnie and Clyde crime. Floyd died in 1970. Tony lived until 1994.³⁵ None of the trio was ever exonerated.

BONNIE AND CLYDE, along with Buck and Blanche Barrow, robbed the bank at Okabena. The residents of Jackson County who helped convict the Strains no doubt acted in good faith; vital information had been concealed from them. Bank robberies were occurring at an alarming rate in 1933. At Okabena, over-zealous, dishonest investigators placed a higher value on clearing the rash of cases than on getting at the truth, and the Strains paid the price. Only history can clear their names now. □

Notes

Special thanks to Okabena resident Weldon Bayerkohler, crime historians Brian Beerman and Bob Winter, and advisor extraordinaire, writer Susan Susanna Chisholm.

1. Jeff Guinn, *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 185; Paul Schneider, *Bonnie and Clyde: The Lives Behind the Legend* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009).

2. John Sievert, interview by author, July 4, 2009 (all interviews cited below are by the author). For an example of the skepticism encountered by researchers, see Judy A. Nelson, Jackson Co. Historical Museum director, to Marty Bragg, Feb. 22, 2000, Bank Robbery Files, Jackson Co. Historical Society, Lakefield, MN. Debate is complicated by the fact that the bank was robbed 18 months earlier by three men who were never identified; *Okabena Press*, Oct. 22, 1931, p. 1. Local memories sometimes confuse the two robberies.

3. The six were D. B. Hovenden, L. C. Pietz, Arthur Carlson, his children Edith and Loren, and a man who is referred to in trial transcripts but never named. Hovenden, Pietz, and Carlson all testified and identified the Strains as the robbers; whether the unnamed customer concurred may never be known. See *State of Minnesota, County of Jackson v. Anthony Strain, et. al.*, 17th Judicial District, 1933, transcripts, particularly p. 17, 62, in Mildred Strain, inmate file #459, Minnesota State Reformatory for Women, Shakopee, Minnesota State Archives (MSA), Minnesota Historical Society, hereinafter cited as *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*, MSA. Thanks to Marion Venegay (interview, Oct. 11, 2008) for the names of the Carlson children.

4. Here and below, account drawn from *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*; interviews with eyewitness Calvin Paulson, Oct. 10, 2008, and with Jackie Jones Levine, Mar. 16, 2009, Karen Frederickson, Sept. 19, 2008, Neil Frederickson, Oct. 4, 2008, Norman and Marilyn Atz, July 10, 2008 (all descendants of eyewitnesses); and an account written in 2004 by eyewitness Herman Becker, provided by his grandson, James Florey Jr. See also *Okabena Press*, May 25, 1933, p. 1; *Heron Lake News*, May 25, 1933, p. 1; *Lakefield Standard*, May 25, 1933, p. 1. Today, \$1,400 is about \$23,000.

5. *Okabena Press*, May 25, 1933, p. 1. For a memorable state-line scene, see the 1967 motion picture *Bonnie & Clyde*.

6. For Magnussen's investigation of the Barrow Gang, see Julius E. Haycraft to "Board of Parole" [Pardons], Oct. 30, 1936, excerpted in pardon application 16904 (Floyd's Apr. 1946 petition), p. 3, board calendars, Minnesota Board of Pardons,

MSA. For the Barrows in Joplin, see Guinn, *Go Down Together*, 162–76.

7. Bryan Burrough, *Public Enemies: America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI: 1933–1934* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 15–18; *Biennial Reports of the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension*, particularly 1934, p. 14–19, Public Safety Dept., Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, MSA. Minnesota's 1933 robbery record stood until 1978 when 48 banks were robbed; *Minnesota Crime Information*, in Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, Criminal Justice Information Section, MSA.

8. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, June 27, 1933, p. 1 (ongoing investigation of the Strain brothers). For biographical information, see Floyd Strain, #4526, #5892, #7234, Tony Strain, #4527, #5475, and Mildred Dunn, #6037—all South Dakota State Penitentiary inmate files, South Dakota State Archives (SDSA), Pierre; inmate files for Floyd Strain, #13139, Tony Strain, #11862, both Minnesota State Prison, Stillwater, and Mildred Strain, #741, Reformatory for Women—all MSA.

9. *Marshall Daily Messenger*, Jan. 3, 1933, p. 1 (Russell robbery); *Westbrook Sentinel*, Jan. 12, 1933, p. 1 (returned car); *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, June 23, 1933, p. 1 (Floyd as car thief). Floyd's Milbank residency in *State of South Dakota v. Floyd Strain*, Case #7772, 1933, 1st Judicial District, p. 234–38, Hutchinson Co. Court Archives, Olivet, SD (hereinafter *South Dakota v. Floyd Strain*).

10. "State v. Strain," 262 NW 237 (1935) (Tony's detention); *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*, 166 (Tony's disappearance); *South Dakota v. Floyd Strain*, 261–65 (Floyd's disappearance); *Heron Lake News*, May 25, 1933, p. 1 and *Lakefield Standard*, May 25, 1933, p. 1 (warning to bankers).

11. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, May 16, 1933, p. 1; Haycraft to "Board of Parole" [Pardons]; *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*, 28–29; criminal complaint, case #1058, May 23, 1933, Criminal Files, Jackson Co. Court, MSA.

12. *Okabena Press*, June 1, 1933, p. 1; *Marshall County Journal*, Apr. 17, 1930, p. 1; Mildred Dunn, #6037, SDSA; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, June 23, 1933, p. 1.

13. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, June 26, 1933, p. 1; *Evening Huronite*, May 31, 1933, p. 1; *Sioux City Journal*, June 3, 1933, p. 1; *Pipestone County Standard*, June 27, 1933, p. 1; *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*, 86, 107.

14. *Jackson County Pilot*, Sept. 21, 1933, p. 1; *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*, 183–84.

15. "State v. Strain," 262 NW 237 (1935); *South Dakota v. Floyd Strain*; *Jackson County Pilot*, Feb. 27, 1936, p. 1; *Minnesota v. Floyd Strain*, case #1058, trial documents, Jackson Co. Court, MSA.

16. Mildred Strain, #741, Tony Strain, #11862, Floyd Strain, #13139—all MSA.

17. *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*, 160, 169–70. Mildred never learned to drive, according to her brother and his wife; interviews with Jim and Arlene Cosier, July 9, 2008, and Arlene Cosier, Jan. 23, 2010.

18. Jessie Hoover to Tony Strain, June 20, 1936, in Tony Strain, #11862, MSA (detectives' admission and visit); *Sioux City Journal*, Apr. 4, 1935, p. 1 (protection money) and Apr. 8, 1941, p. 1 (Bledsoe's longtime involvement).

19. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, July 1, 1933, p. 1.

20. Interviews with Fay Miller, Sept. 19, 2008, Millie Ericson, July 18, 2008, Arthur and Elsie Roder, July 9, 2008, and Arthur and Verla Strain, July 10, 2008; Irene Miller to the author, Aug. 29, 2008. See also Floyd's various prison files for ample evidence of his numerous girlfriends.

21. *New York Times*, May 23, 1934, p. 1; C. F. Waers, "The Inside Story of Bonnie Parker and the 'Bloody Barrows,'" *True Detective Mysteries*, July 1934, p. 54–57, 73 (the first of five installments); *Fugitives: The Story of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker* (Sept. 1934), reissued as Jan I. Fortune, ed. *The True Story of Bonnie & Clyde* (New York: Signet, 1968); *Logansport Pharos-Tribune*, May 12, 1933, p. 1.

22. John Neal Phillips, *Running With Bonnie and Clyde: The Ten Fast Years of Ralph Fults* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 67, 148.

23. Blanche Caldwell Barrow, *My Life With Bonnie and Clyde*, ed. John Neal Phillips (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 64–71.

24. Fortune, *True Story of Bonnie & Clyde*, 95, 107, 125, 152 (patrolman account and hair color). A photo of Clyde and Bonnie loading guns shows her with dyed hair; Barrow, *My Life*, 127. For local characterizations, see: *Okabena Press*, May 25, 1933, p. 1 ("vivid red hair"); *Sioux City Tribune*, June 26, 1933, p. 6 ("brilliant hue of red"); *Sioux City Journal*, May 20, 1933, p. 1 (two red-haired women); *Lakefield Standard*, May 25, 1933, p. 1 (gunwoman with "bright red hair" and "brunette" driver); *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*, 126, 132 (Seydel). On Blanche's love of driving, see Barrow, *My Life*, 192; on Mildred Strain's hair color, Jim and Arlene Cosier interview.

25. James R. Knight and Jonathan Davis, *Bonnie and Clyde: A Twenty-First-Century Update* (Waco: Eakin Press, 2003), 34, 98; prison files of Tony and Floyd Strain. Young Floyd's 1924 mug shot lists his height as five-seven, but 1936 prison records indicate that he had grown to five-nine.

26. Barrow, *My Life*, 69–70, 134–43, 150–51, 166; *Cottonwood County Citizen*, May 24, 1933, p. 1. In 1933 Blanche got a



Jackson County Courthouse, about 1930, where the Strains would soon be tried and convicted

ten-year sentence for her part in the Platte City shootout in which Sheriff Holt Coffey was wounded. She was released on good behavior in 1939.

27. Interview with James R. Knight, June 11, 2008; Barrow, *My Life*, 251–52.

28. Knight and Paulson interviews. On “The Tommygun in Crime,” see William J. Helmer and Rick Mattix, *The Complete Public Enemy Almanac* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2007), 174–75. Clyde praises the V8 in a letter reproduced on the back cover of John Treherne, *The Strange History of Bonnie and Clyde* (New York: Stein & Day, 1984).

29. Cyril Wooldridge, inmate file #12898,

Minnesota State Prison, MSA; *Evening Huronite*, Dec. 28, 1933, scrapbook clipping, South Dakota Bankers Assn. Archive, Pierre.

30. Frank Kroy, inmate file #12003, Minnesota State Prison, and pardon application 12305 (Tony’s Dec. 1938 petition), board calendars, Minnesota Board of Pardons—both MSA.

31. Clair Ralph Gibson, Bureau of Criminal Apprehension file, Public Safety Dept., MSA; pardon application 12305.

32. Brian R. Clifford and Ray Bull, *The Psychology of Person Identification* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Gary L. Wells and Elizabeth A. Olson, “Eyewitness

Testimony,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (2003): 277–95; *South Dakota v. Floyd Strain*, 169, 204, 282.

33. Charles Lacey, “Brief: In the Matter of the Application of Jesse Clemmens for a Pardon,” submitted to the Minnesota Board of Pardons, Apr. 1936, in Mildred Strain, #459, MSA. Clemmens, a friend of the Strain brothers, was arrested in the same raid as Floyd; Floyd’s show-up is detailed in this brief.

34. *Minnesota v. Anthony Strain*; *Jackson County Pilot*, Feb. 27, 1936, p. 1.

35. Fay Miller, Jim and Arlene Cosier interviews; Mildred Strain, #459, #741, MSA.

The photos on p. 124, 131, and 133 are courtesy the Jackson County Historical Society, Lakefield, MN; those on p. 127 and 129 are from the State Archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society. All others are from MHS collections. Map by Percolator.



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