

Hadley Township Historical Society-Summer-2017
Hadley Mill Museum

The Great Hadley Bank Robbery

Wednesday, January 13, 1926, 2:30 p.m.

Back in April of 2017 we received a pleasant note from Vivian Hartwig TenBrink, whose brothers were Ralph, Robert and Gene Hartwig. She is the last surviving member of that Hartwig generation and is now 90 years old. She is also the last surviving Hadley person who remembers the robbery of The Citizens Bank. She was asking why we had never written anything about the Great Hadley Bank Robbery as she had vivid memories of it. We responded with the thought that it would make a good newsletter and would she send me her memories.

"On this particular day I went with my mother to her meeting of the Philatheans, a church group that met on this particular day in the Baptist Church [located just west of The Baptist Church of Hadley]. Allie June's grocery store was located between the church and the four corners; the intersection of Pratt and Hadley Roads. The woman's meeting conducted by Mable Theimkey had gone on a short time when we heard popping noises, like gunshots, coming from close to us. I got up and went to the west window where I saw two men, standing at the back of Allie June's grocery store, with guns. They seem to be aiming to the north and looking in that direction, I saw two men come running, but stopping just long enough to fire back at their procurers. I ran back to my mother and told her that there were some men out there were shooting at each other. The lady beside my mother said, "Oh, they're just shooting at the mark". A few minutes later, Ellis ("Bucky") Buckingham came through the door yelling, "the bank has been robbed". Needless to say, the meeting adjourned abruptly and there was a mad scramble to collect belongings, etc. Some left for Home and others choose to remain in the building, fearing stray bullets, stray robbers or such. Area newspapers the next day carried the account of how some brave Hadley men captured the robbers and retrieved the stolen money."

Much of what follows is taken from the Oakland Press, The Lapeer County Press and The Clarion and The Flint Journal.

Benjamin F. Hadley, manager, and Edna Ann Hadley, operator, Hadley Telephone Company, who had bought the business a few years earlier for \$1,600 were awarded the Theodore N. Vail gold and bronze medals for 1926. They were awarded for performing "outstanding acts of noteworthy public service performed in the line of duty by employees of the Michigan Bell Telephone Company". The Theodore N. Vail Memorial Fund was established in 1920 at the time

of the death of Mr. Vail, former head of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company. Bronze, silver and gold medals were awarded annually to telephone people for acts of service which illustrated Mr. Vail's ideals of public service.

Over 300 friends, townspeople and officials of the Michigan Bell Telephone company assembled in the Hadley town hall to witness the presentation of a bronze medal to Mrs. Benjamin F. Hadley and a silver medal and check for \$250 to Mr. Hadley "for good judgment and resourceful and courageous action in an emergency." A bronze plaque measuring 19 x 24 inches, commemorating the deed for was also presented by representatives of the national committee who made the reward. Also presented was a gold label button for Mr. Hadley and a beautiful pin for Mrs. Hadley.

"One of the boldest bank robberies in the history of Michigan was perpetrated January 13, 1926, at Hadley. Whirling into the main street of the little town in a powerful car, a bandit gang stopping near the Citizens Bank of Hadley raided the establishment, seizing \$3,331. The hoodlums learned that cold, but sunny afternoon that it didn't pay to fool around with a bunch of farmers who were taught to shoot a rifle before they learned the three "R's. The residents of Hadley were not too far removed from the woodsmen-farmers who harvested crops as well as wild turkeys, deer and squirrel from the surrounding hilly woodlands. In the era of President Calvin Coolidge or "Silent Cal" who some say slept through most of his administration, a dollar bill bought a lot of goods. Taxes were low. There were no rumors of war and you could buy a Buick, Pontiac Six, Paige or a number of long-gone cars, for about \$800. Steak was about 15 cents a pound.

Plans for The Great Hadley Robbery began casually enough five years earlier. William Willard from Toledo, Ohio, was visiting relatives on a farm four miles outside Hadley. Willard's relatives were the bachelor brothers. Thomas and James Hayden were 51 and 49 years old at the time. The pair were well liked by the neighbors and Thomas had been selected the school district treasurer.

It was while hunting in the nearby hills that Thomas Hayden suggested a devious plan. The Haydens had told the bandits that there was between \$100,000 and \$150,000 in the bank and that a widow in the community was known to keep at least \$50,000 in the bank. It was worth robbing the bank for such loot. Later, Willard told Hayden it was a bad idea. Another of the Hadley robbers, Benton Ford had met Willard who was hired to do some work on Ford's car. At some point during the car repair, the robbery plans were brought up and Willard formed a partnership with Ford and two of Ford's friends, Andrew Berry and Franklin Todd. When the "roads-are-clear" letter arrived from Hadley the four Toledo residents and their wives made low down payments on two sedans and set out to make an easy fortune. They drove to the Hadley bank where they got change for a \$20 dollar bill and determined the location of the vault. They decided "it would be like taking candy from a baby". The Hayden's supplied the robbers with old clothes, cement sacks to hold the loot, insulated wire to bind anyone who got in their way and a pair of pliers to clip the only telephone line connecting Hadley to Lapeer, 11 miles to the north. Young Francis Hayden was sent to stand atop a sand hill outside town and wait for the

crooks return. He was to have taken the money-filled cement sacks and bury them in his uncles' manure pile. Willard parked the black Paige sedan in front of the telephone company's office. Willard's three partners walked casually to the building. There were a few horses and buggies in the town. Farmers were in the Leslie Bartenfelder's Ford agency and garage next to the bank looking at the new Ford Runabout on sale. At the bank cashier's window stood Edwin H. Potter. Once inside the small bank, Berry pulled his gun on Potter, Ford rushed back of the counter, while Todd pulled down the window shades and drapes across the large front window. Potter refused to cooperate and Berry quickly drew a long knife and laid it against his throat. He was tied, gagged and prodded with the knife. His clothes almost cut from his body.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hadley's curiosity became overpowering when the bank shades were drawn so early before closing time.

"Mrs. Hadley was a real busybody," says Willis Van Alstine. If there was a little fire, anything Mrs. Ben would see it and alert everyone with long ring on the party lines. She could watch everything from her seat near the window of the phone switchboard. And her eyesight was sharp."

Mrs. Hadley called Leslie Bartenfelder's garage and talked to Owen Earhart, a deputy who worked there. Deputy Earhart saw Willard fidgeting behind the wheel of the idling sedan. He walked up to it, knocked some ice off the license plate and note the Ohio license plates--- "Foreign!" He gruffly ordered the now nervous and pale wheelman "to get that car movin' and outta town --- and quick." At this point, Mrs. Hadley discovered the line the bandits had cut and told her husband "something's wrong. I can't get through to Lapeer."

Outside the bank, people finally realize what was happening. Charles Morton, the hardware man, grabbed a rifle off his shelf and met farmer Ira Jones. Jones tried to get into the bank's front door but it was locked. He went to the side door surprising the bandits, who greeted him with a hail of bullets. Jones caught two bullets. One creased his chest, and the second hit his hip and exited at the kneecap. A surgeon from Flint removed the bullets and Jones was ill all winter. After that, Jones became a local hero. The insurance company refused to pay his hospital bills. His neighbors, however, gathered together for "a working bee" and buzzed up a winter's supply of wood for the family. Jones lived another 27 years and never really recovered from his wounds. For the rest of his life he walked with a limp. The Bandits grabbed a bag of money and with guns blazing ran out into the street firing at anything that moved. Their getaway car was gone and they started yelling and cursing Willard.

They carried a bagful of the bank's cash with them and were running back of the buildings toward Hadley Road to the east. The three bandits had no way of knowing what had happened to Willard and tried to shoot their way clear so they could meet him down the road or pick up another car they had in reserve.

"I heard the shots," recalls Sid Greene, "and looked out of the storehouse of my dad's grocery store that was on the north-east corner of Hadley and Pratt. I saw two men running and shooting. One guy had two guns. I ducked inside quick".

All the while, Mrs. Hadley had been alerting nearby farmers to rush into town with their guns. The Hadley's also remembered that an unused line going south toward Goodrich could be reconnected and she could reach the Allens on Brigham Road who had Goodrich phone service. The Goodrich operator called the State Police and the sheriffs from Flint, Pontiac and Sheriff John Conley at Lapeer. A posse of farmers was converging from the south on Hadley. The bandits ducked down a back street hoping to reach their second car. "People were yelling for us to find shelter," recalls Mrs. Van Alstine, "guns were popping and we ducked." When a bandit swung into view a rifle was aimed at him and he fell. Within thirty minutes all three bandits were down and writhing in pain, yet none was mortally wounded. The riflemen could have killed them all but aimed instead at their legs or non-vital parts.

On a country road north of Hadley, Willard had wrecked the getaway car by running over a log submerged in snow. He appealed for help at a farm house. Ironically, it was the home of Ira Jones, the man lying wounded in town. Mrs. Jones ordered Willard away as she smelled whisky on his breath. As soon as the posse heard about his appearance at the Jones house, Willard was encircled. He meekly surrendered.

Police received the call for help and raced to the scene. Their work, however, had been done by the posse.

Potter asked about the \$400 reward the insurer offered for the capture of bank bandits (it would be divided among a group to be selected by a town committee). He also thought the insurance company should pay for Jones' hospital bills as well as replace a side glass window and the front plate glass window that had been shot up in the fray. The insurance almost scoffed at the suggestion it was in any way obliged to pay Jones' bills or replace the plate glass window because it had been damaged by the farmers' shotgun fire and not the bandits. It did agree to pay the reward money, but suggested to Potter that the town use the reward money to pay for Jones' bills. Potter, now disillusioned, replied: "The next time I will hand them the money and tell them God Speed."

As an epilogue of sorts it was noted that Benton Ford, Andrew Berry and Franklin Todd were all nursing their wounds in a guarded area of the Lapeer Hospital. William Willard was already in the Lapeer County Jail. That night, the wives of the bandits were still waiting in Pontiac for their husbands. The shots fired from the rifle of Owen Earhart, deputy sheriff not only brought down the three bandits but apparently also punctured the happiness of three youthful wives.

On April 8, 1926, Judge Harry E. Dingeman sentenced seven of the eight men involved in The Great Hadley Bank Robbery. Would Hadley residents again rally to save a bank's cash It would be difficult as telephone operator Mrs. Hadley has been replaced by an unknowing, unseeing, uncaring electronic switchboard owned by a Louisiana conglomerate called Century Telephone

Enterprises. A few farmers still working the fields might be spending a winter vacation in Florida and a license plate from Bangladesh today probably wouldn't raise an eyebrow.