

## RENO BROTHERS

*Frogs croaked dismally in the swamp as the night train from Jeffersonville clanked to a stop at the water tank at Marshfield, a few miles south of Crothersville. The air was balmy with the feel of spring, but that May night in 1868 was dark as engineer George Fletcher swung down from the locomotive cab to oil the bearings. Suddenly from the darkness a voice commanded, "We are going to run this train." The Marshfield robbery, America's first big train holdup, was under way.*

At Seymour on the night of May 22, 1868, the southbound train from Indianapolis to Jeffersonville waited at the depot while passengers fretted at the delay. The train had been waiting in the sidetrack an hour for the northbound train to pass. The missing train had left Jeffersonville on time, but no more had been heard of it. Then suddenly the telegrapher sounder started a staccato message as the Crothersville operator with trembling fingers ticked out the incredible story.

Desperadoes had overpowered the engine crew at Marshfield, uncoupled the Adams Express car containing nearly \$100,000 in cash and Government bonds, and boarding the locomotive had whisked the express car away, leaving the rest of the train and passengers stranded. The conductor had been wounded in an exchange of shots as the bandits made off, and the express messenger had been tossed from the speeding train when he refused to open the safe. The locomotive and car, with the safe blown open, were found abandoned near Crothersville.

The Marshfield robbery was probably the biggest ever staged in the United States up to that time. But it was only the climax to a series of sinister events which had plagued the area around Seymour ever since the close of the Civil War. Murder and robbery were common, and late in 1866 a train had been held up east of Seymour, the first train robbery in the United States, and an example which the notorious Jesse James and his brothers were to follow in a few years.

Everybody in Jackson County knew who was responsible for the lawless deeds, but no one seemed able to stop them. Anyone who testified in court was likely to have his farm buildings burned, or even lose his own life.

So matters stood when the train was robbed at Marshfield. But the Adams Express Company was not going to stand idly by in this situation. Soon Alan Pinkerton, the most famous private detective of the day was in Jackson County, hired by the express company to get air-tight evidence against the Reno Brothers, ring leaders of the band of outlaws.

There were six Reno children, five boys and a girl. Four of the boys, John, Frank, Simeon and William, and the girl, Laura, were of the same hard, reckless type. Laura could shoot and ride as well as her brothers. The fifth boy, Clint, was known as "Honest" Reno, because he was so different from his brothers.

Shortly after Pinkerton started his investigation one of the missing Government bonds turned up in Syracuse, N.Y. With this clue, Pinkerton was able to track the Renos to their hiding place in Canada across from Detroit. Frank Reno and Charles Anderson, a member of the gang, were arrested there but authorities decided they shouldn't be jailed in Jackson County. A Vigilance Committee had been formed to rid the county of the outlaws and rumors were that plans had been made to lynch Reno and Anderson. So the two were

brought to New Albany and placed in jail here for safekeeping – the same jail which still stands at Spring and State Streets.

Simeon and William Reno had left Canada before their accomplices were arrested and had come back to Jackson County to plan another train robbery. This time their plans were discovered and a trap was laid. The two Renos escaped but six other gang members were caught a short time later and the Vigilance Committee had soon strung up all six from a handy tree – “Hangman’s Tree”, as it soon became known. Simeon and William Reno, deciding that Jackson County was becoming a little too risky, started back for Canada but were recognized and arrested in Indianapolis by an alert police officer who had seen the posters offering \$25,000 reward. These two Renos also were brought to New Albany for safety.

Even though they were behind bars, the Renos continued to act sarcastic and confident. They boasted openly of their exploits and tried to bribe newly-elected Sheriff Thomas Fullenlove into permitting them to escape in return for information on the hiding places of their loot. They apparently were confident that even if they went to trial they would not be convicted.

The Jackson County Vigilance Committee seemed to think the same thing, and so the stage was set for one of the most lurid episodes in New Albany history.

It started on the night of December 11, 1868 at the Seymour depot. As the southbound night train – the same one which had waited in vain seven months earlier for the northbound train – as that southbound train left Seymour it carried many more passengers than usual, perhaps as many as 60 more. When the train arrived at Jeffersonville, the last Dinky train for New Albany was waiting for it, and on the rear was an unlighted empty coach. The coach remained unlighted but it soon was full of men – men who began unlimbering four coils of

rope, each with a noose at the end. The little train arrived at New Albany about 2:30 in the morning, and the passengers in the rear coach emerged and filed silently up Pearl Street, each man's face covered with a red flannel mask. They converged noiselessly on the jail and rapped on the door. Jailer Luther Whitten, thinking the police were bringing in another drunk ambled over and opened the door, only to find himself surrounded by masked armed men who demanded the cell keys. Whitten said the Sheriff had them, and a number of the vigilantes burst in the sheriff's bedroom, shook him awake and demanded the keys. Fullenlove knew instantly they were the Vigilantes and dashed to a window to sound the alarm, but a bullet through his shoulder and several pair of rough arms halted him. His frightened wife handed over the keys, and the mob surged into the cell block.

In 20 minutes it was all over. Four lifeless bodies hung from the jail catwalk while the other prisoners cowered for fear of their lives. The Renos had struggled violently against the mob, but they were no match for the crowd of Vigilantes.

Then, as silently as they had come, the masked men disappeared. The waiting train took them back as far as the old Prison South, now the Colgate-Palmolive Plant. There, with their masks removed, the Vigilantes climbed off and strolled over to the Jeffersonville Depot on Court Avenue and casually boarded the morning train. The conductor that morning was Americus Whedon, who had been the conductor of the train which was robbed at Marshfield.

Whedon later testified he noticed nothing unusual about the passengers on his train that morning. It was true, he said, that he stopped his train south of Seymour, but that was because of mechanical trouble. If any passengers left the train at the unscheduled stop he didn't see them because he was busy repairing the difficulty.

All attempts to identify the Vigilantes failed. Not only Whedon, but all the other trainmen, developed lapses of memory. They couldn't seem to recall anything that happened on December 11 and 12. The lynchings attracted nationwide attention. Even Horace Greely commented in the New York Tribune and said it wouldn't have occurred if people had trusted the courts.

So ended the story of the Renos. But among the many yet unanswered questions, one has interested many treasure-seekers. Is the Reno loot still hidden somewhere in the Southern Indiana hills, and if so, where?

[Vol. II, Historical Series No. 19]