

The Dollar Jessie James Never Got (Or did he?)

by STEVE SCHROEDER

This innocent looking dollar bill is a reminder of the most famous bank robbery in the history of Minnesota.

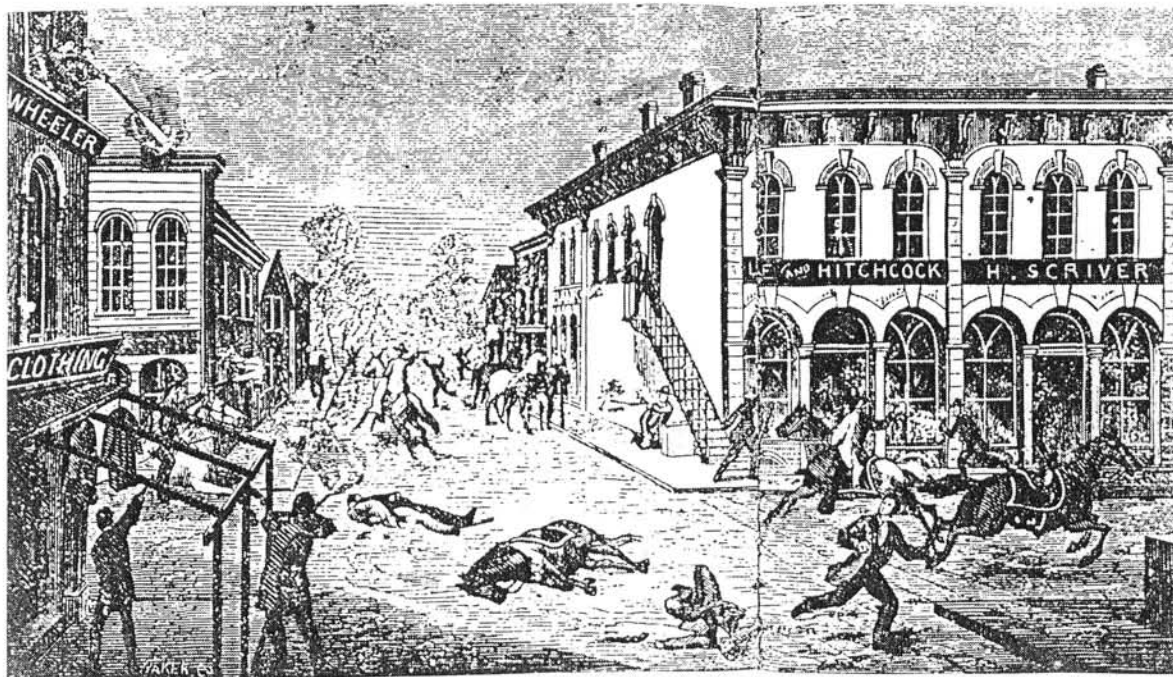
ON September 7, 1876, eight men entered Northfield to rob the First National Bank. They were Bob, Jim and Cole Younger, Clel Miller, Charlie Pitts, Bill Stiles (also called Bill Chadwell) and two men thought to be Frank and Jesse James. Three of the men (Pitts, Bob Younger, Frank James) entered the bank. The assistant cashier, J.L. Heywood, and two tellers, A.E. Bunker and F.J. Wilcox, were working there that day. The robbers demanded that Heywood unlock the safe. He said he couldn't unlock the safe, which was true since it was already unlocked with the door shut. The tellers would not open the safe either, and the robbers were not smart enough to not try opening it themselves. After a few minutes of this cat and mouse business, one of the robbers shot and killed Heywood and the three grabbed a few dollars in the tellers' cages and fled.

While this was going on inside the bank the other five gang members were standing watch at various places outside. J.S. Allen and Henry Wheeler, a medical student home from studies at the University of Michigan, noticed the men entering the bank. Allen tried to enter the bank, but was stopped by Clel Miller. When this happened Allen ran around the corner shouting, "Get your guns boys, they're robbing the bank."

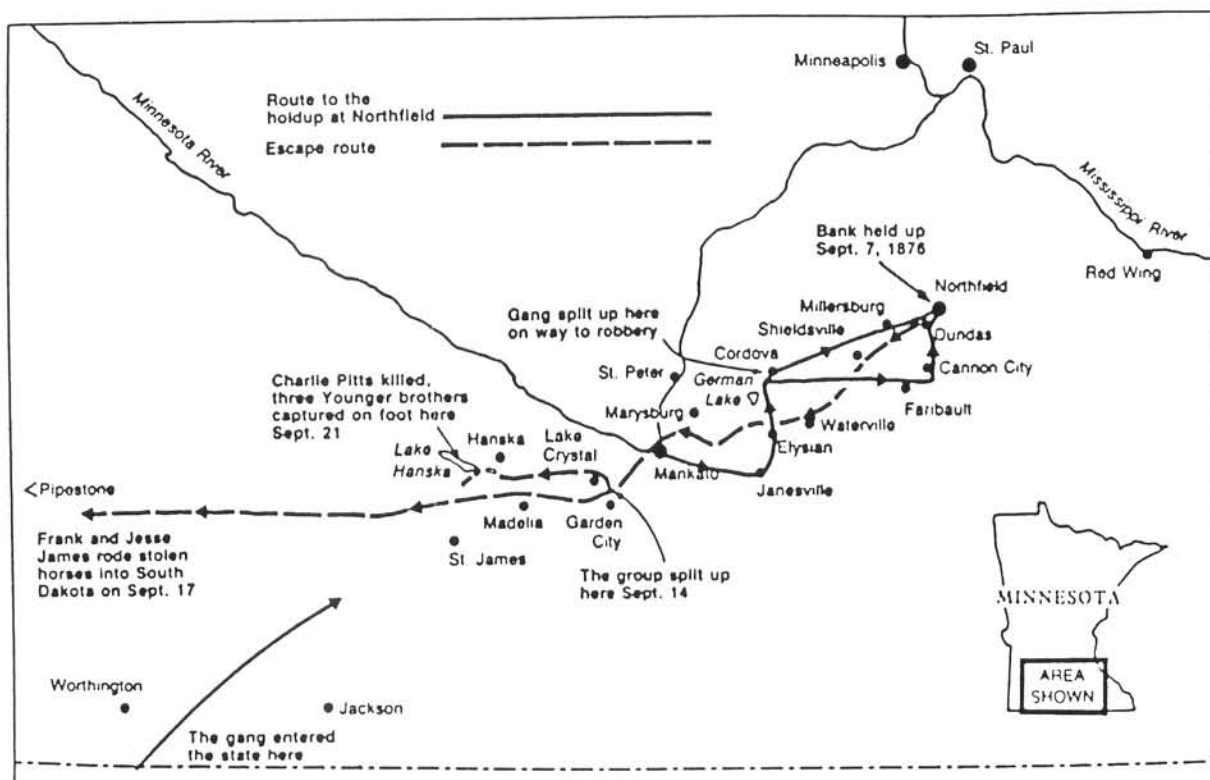
By this time shots had been fired in the bank. Allen owned a hardware store where he passed out shotguns to several townspeople who used them against the robbers. Wheeler found an old army carbine and three shells at the hotel. Anselm Manning, a carpenter, found an old breech-loading rifle and some ammunition. Although the others were armed only with shotguns, Manning and Wheeler did real damage. Manning could not at first get a good shot at any robber, so he shot one of their horses, figuring this would effectively disable the gang. After reloading he shot Cole Younger "in a vulnerable though not vital place" (as the historian Huntington wrote in 1895—which could have many meanings). Reloading again, Manning took careful aim and shot Stiles through the heart. Meanwhile Dr. Wheeler, firing from an upper window, killed Clel Miller with a single shot. Finally, Manning shot Bob Younger in the elbow, shattering the bone.

At this point the robbers fled as best they could. Stiles, who was the guide for the group, was dead. The robbers fled to the southwest and split into two groups. The James brothers escaped to Missouri. The Youngers and Charlie Pitts tried to flee, but got lost in the area. A posse, organized by Jesse Ames, lost their trail on the 14th. On the 21st a young boy, Asle Oscar Sorbel, whose identity was not generally made known until 1929, spotted the group. Over the objections of his doubting parents he went to Madelia and reported what he had seen. Sheriff James Glispin organized a group that captured the Youngers in Hanska Slough. Pitts was killed in this fight.

There is an amusing footnote to this story. Cadavers were in short supply at medical schools in 1876. The Northfield townspeople quickly buried Stiles and Miller, but Wheeler and two



Action in the street. Woodcut from John Jay Lemon, *The Northfield Tragedy* (1876).



Route of the James-Younger gang, from map owned by the Northfield Historical Society.



classmates who lived at Northfield exhumed the bodies illegally and shipped them to the medical school in barrels labelled "fresh paint."

It is said that Wheeler, with the help of a freshman, helped carry the barrels into the medical school. The lower classman asked what was really in the barrels since they were so heavy. Wheeler replied that they contained cadavers for the medical school. The freshman innocently asked, "Where did you get them?" Wheeler said, "I shot them." The freshmen turned white and, after finishing the chore, quickly disappeared.

Dr. Wheeler eventually became dean of the University of North Dakota Medical School at Grand Forks. He is said to have kept the skeleton of Clel Miller and displayed it in his office throughout his long career. The skeleton was lost in a fire early in this century.

Treasury records indicate that the illustrated \$1 bill was printed in 1873 or 1874. It is signed by G.M. Phillips, cashier, and Jesse Ames, vice-president. Mr. Ames organized the first posse. Was it among the few dollars that the robbers gathered up in the bank on September 7, 1876? We will never know. (Two nicer specimens, both number 1 notes, are located at the Higgins Museum and at the Minnesota Historical society.)

REFERENCES

Huntington, George. *Robber and Hero: The Story of the Northfield Bank Raid*. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986.) This reprint is available for \$5.95 from the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN 55101.