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The fingerprint that doomed the Fleagle Gang

Pioneering CSI work solved deadly Lamar bank robbery

by MATT MASICH



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum (far left, middle) Courtesy of FBI (left, above)

Ralph Fleagle, Jake Fleagle, Howard "Heavy" Royston and George Abshier, left to right, were the members of the notorious Fleagle Gang.

The ruthless Fleagle Gang robbed the First National Bank of Lamar in 1928, making off with \$238,000 and murdering four people in the hold-up and getaway. A Lamar lawman's tireless pursuit and a novel feat of crime scene investigation brought them to justice.

MAIN STREET IN Lamar was quieting down after the lunch hour bustle on the afternoon of May 23, 1928. At the First National Bank of Lamar on the corner of Main and Olive streets, the bank's 77-year-old president Amos Newton "Newt" Parrish leaned on a railing beside his office door, chatting leisurely with his 40-year-old son, John Festus "Jaddo" Parrish, a cashier at the bank, who sat next to him at a roll-top desk. At 1:10 p.m., the bank's double doors swung open.

Four men, strangers to town, filed into the lobby. The oldest of the group approached the counter, smiled at the teller in the nearest window and calmly said, "Stick 'em up."

The teller returned the stranger's smile but didn't obey his command. This had to be a joke, he thought.

"Stick 'em up," the man repeated more forcefully. The pistol in his hand made it clear this was no joke.

The other three men, all armed, fanned out across the bank's lobby. Newt Parrish immediately ducked into his office. He emerged seconds later with "Old Betsey," his single-action Colt .45 revolver, and fired a shot through the jaw of the nearest bandit. He cocked his pistol and pulled the trigger again; the gun misfired.

The wounded robber fired back but missed. Before the banker could attempt a third shot, another robber shot him through the head. In the commotion, Jaddo Parrish got up from his desk and headed toward a closet where the bank kept more weapons. The gang's leader fired into his back, and the younger Parrish fell with a bullet lodged in his heart.

The bankers and bandits exchanged a total of 11 shots in the span of just a few seconds. When the gunfire ended, the two Parrish men lay dead or dying on the floor.

The remaining bank employees did not resist. In short order, the gang members – including the badly bleeding wounded robber – stuffed several pillowcases with \$238,000 in cash, municipal bonds and gold-redeemable Liberty Bonds, then hopped into their blue Buick sedan and sped off, taking two employees with them as hostages.

Prowers County Sheriff Lloyd E. Alderman was at home eating lunch when he got a phone call: "They want you at the First National. There seems to be trouble down there."

Alderman dashed into his car and pulled up to the bank just moments after the robbers had driven away around the corner. The sheriff ushered a bank customer into his car to help him identify the culprits and headed out on their trail.

Alderman raced along the dusty backroads outside of Lamar and soon caught up with the bandits' Buick. He saw the getaway car stop and one man exit the vehicle. He cautiously approached and discovered it was one of the hostages. Quickly instructing the man to find a phone and call for help, Alderman continued his pursuit to a crossing of Big Sandy Creek.

The robbers stopped on the creek's far bank and began firing with rifles at long range. The sheriff, armed with only a pistol, couldn't match their firepower at this distance. He and his civilian companion dove into a ditch as bullets tore into their car.

With the sheriff's vehicle crippled, the bandits disappeared into prairie. Alderman had chased the outlaws for 17 miles. In the year and a half to come, he would travel another 150,000 miles by car, train and airplane trying to bring them to justice.

THE 8,000 RESIDENTS of Lamar were left in shock. The elder Parrish was a former state senator, and both father and son were among the most prominent men in Lamar. The day after the robbery, Thursday, May 24, was the 42nd anniversary of the founding of the town, but there were no parades or revelry. "The slaying in cold blood of two pioneering residents of the community has left the citizenry in no humor for a celebration," the *Lamar Daily News* reported.

May Parrish, wife of Newt and mother of Jaddo, was disconsolate. "This wipes out our little family," the *News* quoted her. "There are now just my two little grandsons." Bank teller E.A. Kesinger, whom the robbers had taken

as a hostage, was still missing. As his wife, Ruby, and 3-year-old daughter, Betty Ann, awaited word of his fate, citizens and law enforcement formed armed posses and set up roadblocks for many miles in every direction.

Sheriff Alderman took to the skies, scanning the country roads from above in a plane that the Colorado National Guard dispatched to Lamar from Denver. Alderman, a farmer until being elected county sheriff a few years earlier, had no law enforcement training, but he quickly emerged as the lead investigator



Banker Newt Parrish emerged from his office with "Old Betsey," his single-action Colt .45 revolver, and fired a shot through the jaw of the nearest bandit.

– the Bureau of Investigation, or BOI, as the FBI was then known, wasn't involved in the manhunt because bank robbery wasn't yet a federal crime.

On Thursday night, about 33 hours after the robbery, Alderman got a call from the police department in Garden City, Kansas, 100 miles due east of Lamar. A local physician, Dr. William Wineinger, had been reported missing, last seen driving off with some men who arrived at his door the previous night claiming to need his help treating a young boy whose foot had been crushed by a tractor. The Garden City police suspected, and Alderman agreed, that the story about the injured boy was likely a ruse the fleeing bandits had concocted to kidnap the doctor and coerce him into treating their wounded comrade.

Alderman caught a night train to Kansas, sending the Colorado National Guard planes to meet him there to search the countryside as soon as the sun rose on Friday. At 10:30 a.m., one of the Colorado planes spotted a suspicious car at the bottom of a ravine. The National Guard pilots landed and discovered the body of the missing doctor lying next to his vehicle. Alderman and Garden City Police Chief Lee Richardson were soon on the scene, where they saw that the doctor had been shot at close range with a shotgun blast to the back of the head. The Lamar lawman was incensed.

"I'm going to send those fellows to gallows," Alderman said, according to a later interview with Richardson.

"There was something in the tone of his voice and the glint of his eye that told me that embodied in this man, serving his first term as an officer of the law, were the characteristics of a true manhunter," Richardson recalled.

"I'm with you until you do it," Richardson told Alderman as the men shook hands.



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum



"I made up my mind I was going to find those murderers if it took me the rest of my life to do it." – Sheriff Lloyd Alderman (above)

long. Months dragged into a year as Alderman and colleagues in Colorado and Kansas continued the manhunt, fielding tips and rounding up the usual suspects who had been involved in other bank hold-ups. Alderman investigated 157 men, arrested 54 and got eyewitnesses to identify four of them as the culprits. There was one problem: None of their fingerprints matched the one from the doctor's car.

Local investigators sent copies of the fingerprint to agencies around the country, including the Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C. The BOI had tens of thousands of fingerprints

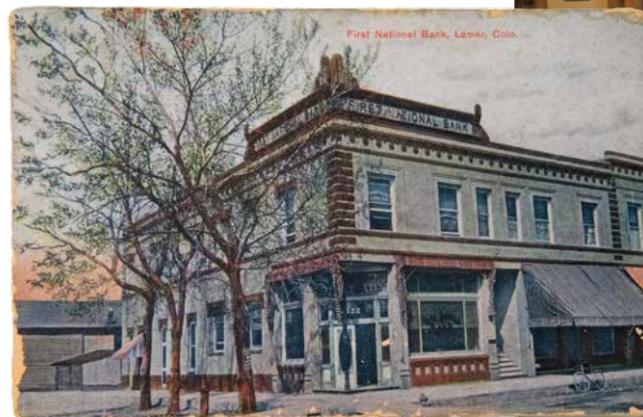
For the time being, the outlaws were gone without a trace – almost. Alderman turned over the doctor's car to Garden City police officer Rollin "Twig" Terwilliger, a self-taught fingerprint expert. The criminals were experienced enough to wipe their fingerprints off all the car's surfaces, but Terwilliger's painstaking search revealed a single remaining fingerprint on one of the rear windows. After confirming the print didn't belong to any law-abiding citizens who may have ridden with the doctor, investigators at last had evidence that could lead to the killers' capture.

MORE THAN TWO WEEKS after the Lamar tragedy, a Kansas family on a picnic discovered the dead body of the bandits' fourth victim, the kidnapped bank teller Kesinger, hidden in an abandoned shack near the Oklahoma border.

"I made up my mind I was going to find those murderers if it took me the rest of my life to do it," Alderman remembered thinking.

It began to look like it might take that long. Months dragged into a year as Alderman and colleagues in Colorado and Kansas continued the manhunt, fielding tips and rounding up the usual suspects who had been involved in other bank hold-ups. Alderman investigated 157 men, arrested 54 and got eyewitnesses to identify four of them as the culprits. There was one problem: None of their fingerprints matched the one from the doctor's car.

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Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum

The First National Bank was the scene of the deadly robbery in 1928. Jaddo Parrish's desk from the bank is now displayed at Lamar's Big Timbers Museum.



Joshua Hardin

on file, but those were only useful if they already had a suspect and simply needed to confirm that his prints matched those from a crime scene; it would be another 70 years before the agency had computers sophisticated enough to search the database to match an unidentified print. Further complicating matters, the BOI's standard procedure was to match all 10 prints, never just one.

Al Ground, a specialist in the BOI's Identification Division in Washington, D.C., took a special interest in the print from the doctor's car. He memorized the fingerprint's loops and whorls, vowing to find out who it belonged to. It was one of several fingerprints in the back of his mind in early 1929 as he processed a new fingerprint card from a man calling himself William Harrison Holden, who had been arrested and released on a minor charge in California. Ground readily discovered that Holden's 10 fingerprints matched those of a man named Jake Fleagle, who had received a one-year robbery sentence in Oklahoma in 1916.

Ground put Fleagle's identification card aside, but something nagged at him – the right index finger looked familiar. He went back to the file seven times to check Fleagle against various unidentified

prints before he remembered the single print from the Colorado and Kansas murders. It was a perfect match. On July 7, 1929, BOI Director J. Edgar Hoover sent letters to Alderman and the other manhunters: They had a suspect.

RICHARDSON, LEADING THE hunt in Kansas, felt like whooping for joy when he got the news. He knew all about "Little Jake" Fleagle and his ne'er-do-well Kansas family, which he called "a bad lot that had engaged in devilry of one kind or another ever since I could remember." He called in Alderman from Colorado to stake out the Fleagle ranch north of Garden City, where father "Big Jake" Fleagle lived with his four adult sons, including suspect "Little Jake," and arrest any family members on the premises.

The lawmen nabbed the elderly father and two of the brothers, but the younger Jake and brother Ralph Fleagle were nowhere to be seen.



Breaking news

★ The murder of bank president Newt Parrish and his son, Jaddo, shocked the city of Lamar, where they were among the leaders of the community.

★ Lawmen and armed posses scoured the prairie looking for the bandits, and Colorado National Guard planes searched from the skies.



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum (all)



★ A huge number of tips came in about the killers' whereabouts, and nearly all of them were erroneous. The outlaws were in Kansas, but many of the false leads pointed to Oklahoma.



★ The Denver Post and other newspapers campaigned for death sentences for the Fleagle Gang and celebrated when the criminals were hanged.

Investigators did, however, find a cache of guns and letters from the absent brothers indicating they were engaged in crime elsewhere in the country. They also learned that one of the apprehended brothers had used an assumed name to get a Garden City post office box, which Alderman and Richardson began monitoring for letters from Jake or Ralph. A couple of days later they got one.

The letter, though unsigned, was clearly from one of the wanted brothers. The letter writer said he would be getting his mail at the post office in Kankakee, Illinois, for the next three weeks, and that he would be using the same alias he had used “out west.”

ALDERMAN QUICKLY caught a plane to Illinois, filled in the Kankakee post office about the case and gave officials a list of aliases to look out for. Shortly after Alderman left the post office, a man came in asking for any letters for Art Coons – one of the Fleagle aliases. Local police tailed the man to a nearby bank and arrested him. Art Coons turned out to be Ralph Fleagle.

The investigators tracked down Ralph’s car, where they found revolvers and sawed-off shotguns, as well as letters with the name of the hotel where he was hiding out. Alderman rushed to the hotel to see if Ralph got any phone calls for Art Coons. A call came in within an hour; the landlord took a message with the caller’s name and address in nearby Peoria, Illinois. It must be Jake, Alderman thought.

Taking no chance that Jake might be tipped off, Alderman phoned ahead to the police in Peoria to arrest the man at the address. Alderman arrived in Peoria to be informed that the police had got their man. “Bring him out,” Alderman said. “I’ve been waiting a long time to get a look at that fellow.” But when the officers brought out their suspect, it was the wrong man. Jake had spotted the police car approach and calmly walked away before they arrived at the house.

Despite Alderman’s disappointment at Jake’s escape, he still had four Fleagles in custody. Ralph was flown to Lamar, then driven to Colorado Springs, where Police Chief Hugh Harper led the interrogation. Authorities thought the Fleagles arrested on the Kansas ranch – Big Jake and sons Fred and Walter – were involved somehow, but they were confident Ralph had actually been in the bank. Ralph, however, revealed nothing during two weeks of intense questioning.

When it became clear prosecutors were going to charge his entire family for the crime, Ralph finally cracked. He offered to confess to everything



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum (all)



The Parrishes had been one of the most prosperous families in Lamar. After the deaths of Newt and Jaddo (above), the family suffered emotionally and financially.

if prosecutors promised not to seek the death penalty for him and dropped all charges against Big Jake, Fred and Walter, whom he claimed were completely innocent.

ON AUG. 13, 1929, Ralph Fleagle gave a 13-hour confession. Ralph had robbed the bank, he said, with his brother Jake and criminal associates Howard “Heavy” Royston and George Abshier. Although Jake’s whereabouts were still unknown, police soon captured Royston in San Andreas, California, and Abshier in Grand Junction. They each confessed, finally revealing the details investigators had waited more than a year to hear.

Ralph was the brains of the outfit. He and Jake had robbed a dozen or so banks in the West, sometimes hiring Royston and Abshier to help. After scouting out the bank in Lamar, the gang drove there from Kansas for their big job armed with four rifles, six pistols, a shotgun and 1,500 rounds of ammunition.

The gang arrived in Lamar at 11 a.m., about two hours before the robbery. After the lunch hour bustle subsided, they entered the bank, and each man began carrying out his assigned task. Their careful plans immediately fell apart when

Newt Parrish shot Royston through the jaw. Royston didn’t recall much after that and didn’t know who shot the Parrishes; Ralph said he didn’t see who did it; Abshier said it was Jake.

They drove their getaway car due east into Kansas before the poses could set up roadblocks, and they admitted to luring the doctor to the Fleagle ranch. There wasn’t much he could do for Royston’s broken jaw and badly damaged teeth, so he administered morphine to ease his pain.

After two nights at the ranch, the two Fleagles and Abshier took the doctor for a ride, driving the doctor’s car and one of their own. They stopped at a ravine. The Fleagles had a short conversation and decided their captive knew too much. Jake led the doctor, unaware of his fate, out of the car, shot him, pushed him into the ravine and rolled his car in after him, Abshier said. Up to that point, Abshier said he thought they would let the doctor live.

The gang returned to the ranch, fetched kidnapped bank teller Kesinger and drove a few hours south. After stopping at a shack and throwing Kesinger in, Jake tried to pressure Abshier into killing him. Abshier refused, and the two began arguing. Exasperated, Ralph walked into the shack and fired a shot into Kesinger’s head, Abshier later said. Ralph denied this and claimed one of his comrades – he didn’t know which – pulled the trigger.

Ralph, Royston and Abshier went on trial in Lamar for murder and armed robbery in October 1929. *The Denver Post* and other newspapers clamored for death sentences for the “Lamar wolves,” as they called the criminals. Each was convicted and sentenced to hang at the state penitentiary in Cañon City, despite prosecutors’

deal with Ralph not to seek the death penalty. Their executions were carried out on separate nights in July 1930.

Meanwhile, Alderman hadn’t given up his search for Jake Fleagle, traveling to 11 states as well as Mexico following his trail. Finally, agents with the U.S. Postal Service used handwriting analysis to trace him to Branson, Missouri. On Oct. 14, 1930, 23 law officers converged on a train station in Branson where they suspected Jake might be. Jake drew his pistol when officers tried to arrest him, but the lawmen fired first, fatally shooting him in the stomach. The last of the Lamar wolves had been hunted down.

THE DEMISE OF the Fleagle Gang brought closure to Lamar and the victims’ survivors. It also fascinated the rest of the country. Country singer Bud Billings released a song called “The Fate of the Fleagle Gang” in 1930, which begins, “Now listen my friends and I’ll tell you a story of bandits so bold/Way out in Lamar, Colorado, they robbed the town’s bank of its gold.”

The fingerprint story became a proud chapter in FBI lore. “The Fleagle case was the first time that FBI fingerprint examiners were able to connect a single latent print left on a piece of evidence with an actual person, thus showing that person’s involvement in the crime,” the FBI’s historian John F. Fox Jr. told *Colorado Life*. J. Edgar Hoover wrote an article about the case, “The Trigger-Finger Clue,” for *Reader’s Digest* in 1947. That same year, the FBI obtained from Lamar the car window with Jake Fleagle’s fingerprint still on it to display in the lobby of its headquarters.

The window was still on display in 1964, when Fred M. Betz, the editor of the *Lamar Daily News* who covered the Fleagle case when it happened, took his young grandson, Tom, to visit the FBI building on a trip to Washington, D.C. As a boy in Lamar, Tom

Betz dug through old volumes of his family’s newspaper to read about the case. He continued his research as an adult, writing the book *The Fleagle Gang: Betrayed by a Fingerprint*, a thorough retelling that provided much of the information for this article.

The Big Timbers Museum keeps the story alive in Lamar, displaying many artifacts from that episode, including Ralph and Jake Fleagle’s pistols and Jaddo Parrish’s roll-top desk from the bank. However, for Lamar resident Jim Larrick, the events of that terrible day are more than just history. Larrick’s father, Newton Parrish Larrick, was 9 years old when the Fleagles killed his namesake grandfather Newt Parrish and uncle Jaddo Parrish. The boy and his brother went on to be raised by their grandmother, May Parrish, widow and mother of the slain men.

The family had been one of the most prosperous in Lamar, building a system of irrigation ditches and homesteading a ranch east of town. After the murders, the family suffered emotionally and financially. They managed to hold on to the ranch until the 1980s but were forced to sell it in bad economic times.

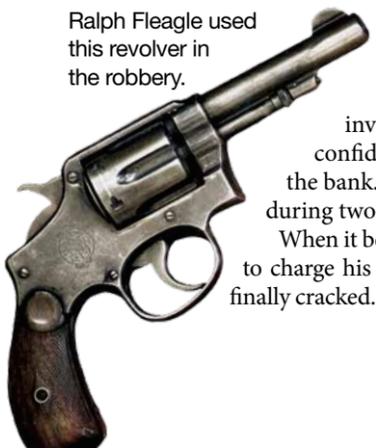
When Jim Larrick was growing up, people who knew the Parrishes would express their sorrow to him. “But the further we get along, the less people talk about it,” he said.

Still, people took notice 12 years ago when Larrick started working at the same bank for which his murdered family members had worked, though the bank had since relocated across the street from the original location at Olive and Main streets. The old bank building is now Vendors Gallery consignment shop, where there are still bullet holes, though not visible to the public, inside a closet.

“From the new building, I could look out of my office right across the street at the old bank building, in wonderment or amazement, thinking that that really happened,” Larrick said. 🌿

Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum

The double funeral for banker Amos Newton “Newt” Parrish and his son, John Festus “Jaddo” Parrish, at Fairmount Cemetery in Lamar was a sad occasion for the whole community. The capture of the Parrishes’ killers brought some degree of closure.



Ralph Fleagle used this revolver in the robbery.