

On a hot summer afternoon in 1959 four bandits robbed the *Union Planters National Bank* on Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee.



Three bandits dressed in black, carrying automatic pistols, wearing masks and cowboy hats entered the bank on a Friday just after one o'clock in the afternoon. It was the end of a month and at a time when deposits were heavy and the bank was busy. A fourth robber remained outside the bank in their getaway car – a stolen black 1957 Ford with Tennessee license plates. The car had been stolen the previous evening, and was specifically chosen for its year, make and model.



The robbery was a complete success. No shots were fired, no customers or employees were harmed and the crooks walked out of the bank with over \$900,000 dollars in large bills and non-traceable currency.

The rest of their plan, the getaway, was also a success and went without problems – at least for a little while.

An alert bank clerk had activated a silent alarm during the heist, and police arrived on the robbery scene eight minutes after being alerted. But, that was five minutes after the robbers left the bank and triggered a fire alarm with their exit. This was just as the bandits had planned.

In the areas around the bank police activity and response from the fire department created a massive traffic nightmare for both citizens and the police – all this while the bandits sped across the Mississippi River Bridge and into Arkansas. And by the time the police figured out what actually happened, the robbers, the stolen car and the stolen money were traveling the backroads of rural Arkansas. They were following a pre-planned route through the thousands of rice, corn and bean fields that stretched across the flatlands of southeastern Arkansas. The fields were endless and extended almost to the horizon...then continued on forever. Chasing bank robbers through this territory was not only impractical but unrealistic.

Also, the difficult task for the police in pursuing the robbers became almost impossible when the robbers left Tennessee and traveled into Arkansas. Communication between the law enforcement agencies was cumbersome, obstructed and even inhibited in some cases. Eventually the FBI got involved and alerted the Arkansas State Police. But by that time, the bandits had already entered into phase two of their elaborate getaway plan.

Two days prior to the robbery a clean car, not stolen and carrying legitimate Arkansas license plates had been left in a small rural Arkansas town – Newport. It was parked, to hopefully remain unnoticed, at a popular nightclub in that town – *The Silver Moon*.

A nightly crowd was always abundant at the club. Regulars and visitors packed the place most every night - with or without live entertainment being offered. And the weekend (Friday night with live entertainment) assured a large gathering with a parking area full of cars.



Waiting until after dark and when the nightclub's parking lot was full and busy, the bandits left the stolen getaway car in a dark corner and picked up the clean car - a white 1957 Ford. It was a vehicle very similar to the robbery car, only different in color.

That is when phase three of their getaway plan began.

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Dressed with wigs and wearing women's clothing, they drove slowly back toward Tennessee using the more well-traveled roads without a problem. Their white 57 Ford traveling east on the

main highways went almost unnoticed as they passed through numerous roadblocks and checkpoints.

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and the accompanying everywhere. But as the bandits enforcement was not moving back to the scene of looking in the other direction men. In fact, bulletins about bandits and getaway car's distributed over a five state FBI believed the robbers were back to Memphis.

Phase four of them all. They checked themselves into the *Holiday Inn* in West Memphis, waited for things to quieten down and the search for them to be widened. Once that happened, they would divide the loot and go their separate ways.

But...something went wrong.



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A customer at the *Silver Moon* nightclub was in the parking area when the robbers made the car switch. They were probably outside relieving themselves, or perhaps suffering from too much alcohol. Regardless the reason, the person witnessed four individuals make the switch and thought it unusual. They noted the car type and tag number, and reported the strange activity to local police.

It took a while, but eventually the FBI and state police examined the abandoned black 57 Ford, put two and two together and went searching for a white 57 Ford with Arkansas tags. That search ended when an alert patrolman located the vehicle parked at the West Memphis *Holiday Inn*.

Over two dozen FBI agents and sheriff deputies swarmed the hotel, located the bandits and a fierce gun battle began. It ended with two wounded FBI agents and three dead bank robbers.

Alvin Pierpoint, Bruno Lang and Steve Lazier were shot dead by the police. However, the fourth bandit was not found and apparently was not at the hotel. Neither was the stolen money – the nine hundred thousand dollars!

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An extensive search for the fourth robber continued for months – without success. Associates of the dead robbers were questioned at length, as well as family members, friends and anyone who

might know the identity of the missing bandit. Fingerprints were taken from both cars and the hotel room where they had been staying – all without success. It was almost as if the fourth person didn't exist – but that person did exist! Four people had robbed that bank and four people arrived at the *Holiday Inn* and checked into a hotel room.

The clerk who checked the bandits into the hotel claimed that two men and two women – not four men registered for and were staying in that room. But, after finding the wigs and women's disguises in the robber's room and car, the police dismissed the clerk's claim, and believed this was just another ploy by the bandits to masquerade their activities.

The hotel clerk was asked to analyze thousands of mug shots – both men and women. However, no identification could be made of the fourth robber.

Several possible suspects were identified – mostly family members and associates of the dead robbers. Even if they didn't participate in the bank robbery, the FBI was certain these suspects knew something about the fourth bandit...but none would talk, and none could be tied to the robbery or the stolen money. For months these suspects were followed, hoping they would eventually lead the investigators to the money or the fourth bank robber – it didn't happen.

Without any new information and nowhere else to look, the FBI finally ran out of options, and eventually ran out of interest.

As it always happens the case went cold. It wasn't closed and wouldn't be closed until solved. But, other business began to take priority and the robbery of the *Union Planters National Bank* in Memphis was pushed to the bottom of the pile.

Our story begins in September of 1962 – over three years after the above events.

