

Citizens Confront James-Younger Gang: The Northfield Raid of 1876¹

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This presentation is intended to familiarize the forensic community with the historic attempted bank robbery and the types of firearms used during the raid in Northfield, Minnesota. It will examine how the citizens, who used rifles and a shotgun, defeated the James-Younger Gang, who were armed with revolvers, in the attempted bank robbery that became known as the Northfield Raid of 1876.

Were the citizens of Northfield at the time skilled marksmen or were the gang members unprepared for the firearms that the citizens used against them? In this incident the locals fought back with rifles and a shotgun against the infamous James –Younger Gang who were brandishing revolvers. The citizens' heroic actions resulted in the demise of the gang.

The plan to rob the Minnesota bank is believed to have originated somewhere on the Osage River in Missouri. One of the robbers, Bill Stiles, had lived in Minnesota and was familiar with some of the towns and roads. He convinced Jesse James that Minnesota had substantial amounts of money in its banks. James was initially against the robbery because Minnesota was an unfamiliar territory but Stiles convinced him he had complete knowledge of the area and friends throughout the state who would provide assistance if needed. After their meeting, James visited Bob Younger in a Kansas hotel and convinced him to join the gang in the Minnesota robbery. In late August, Jesse and Frank James; Cole, Jim and Bob Younger; along with Clell Miller; Charlie Pitts and William Stiles traveled to Minnesota by train from their Clay County home in Missouri.

After arriving in Minnesota, the gang divided into groups in search of some possible towns to carry out a robbery. Subsequent to visiting several towns, the gang traveled toward Northfield, a mill town of approximately 2000 people located on the Cannon River in Rice County. The First National Bank of Northfield was located downtown south of the Cannon River in the Scriver building on Division St. On September 7, 1876, the gang set out on horseback for Northfield. They dressed in linen dusters, a type of outfit generally worn by cattlemen, to conceal their revolvers.

As soon as they rode into town, the town's people were suspicious of the strangers. The gang split into three groups: the robbers, a group to guard the bank entrance and a group to provide an escape route. Frank James, Bob Younger and Charlie Pitts entered the bank and confronted Alonzo Bunker, bank teller; Joseph Lee Heywood, bookkeeper; and Frank J. Wilcox, assistant bookkeeper. With pistols drawn, they went behind the counter and demanded that the safe be opened. The safe was located in the vault and the vault door was open. Unknown to the robbers the safe was unlocked but its doors were closed giving the appearance of being locked. Although there were numerous threats and even a blow to Heywood's head with the barrel of a revolver, the bank employees resisted giving any money to the robbers.

During the attempted robbery, Alonzo Bunker escaped by running out the backdoor. Pitts chased him and fired a shot which struck Bunker in the shoulder but Bunker got away. The robbers found a cashier's till on the counter and put its contents

into a grain bag. It was less than \$100 in nickels, pennies and some silver; yet, when the robbers fled the bank they left the sack behind on the floor. On exiting the bank, it is believed that Frank James looked back aiming his revolver at Heywood's head and fired. Heywood fell to the floor mortally wounded.

After Dr. H.M Wheeler saw three strangers enter the bank and two others remain out front, he walked down to the bank while the attempted robbery was in progress. As he approached the bank, he saw Clell Miller grab a local hardware dealer, J.S. Allen, by his coat collar. Miller drew his revolver and began firing in the air. Allen broke free, ran around the corner and yelled that the bank was being robbed and for people to get their guns. Gunfire erupted.

Clell Miller was mounting his horse when Elias Stacy approached him and shot him in the face with a shotgun. The blast of birdshot knocked him off the horse but he remounted. Dr. Wheeler ran to the Dampier Hotel where he borrowed Dr. Dampier's single shot .50 caliber Smith carbine that hung on the wall. Positioned on the 2nd floor of the Dampier Hotel, Wheeler mortally wounded Miller.

The remaining robbers rode up and down Division St. and warned the citizens to stay inside. They fired their pistols in the air and at store front windows when they observed spectators looking out. A Swedish immigrant, Nicolaus Gustavson, who did not understand warnings shouted in English, was shot and killed. Another round from Wheeler's carbine struck Bob Younger's right elbow. A.R. Manning took a single shot Winchester to the corner of the street and fired at the robbers. One shot hit Cole Younger in the hip. Manning then took careful aim at William Stiles who was about 80 feet away and mortally wounded him.

After the attempted robbery, the James brothers, Young brothers and Charlie Pitts fled the town. The James brothers escaped but the Younger brothers and Charlie Pitts faced a posse at Madelia, Minnesota. In this confrontation, Pitts was shot five times and killed. During both the attempted bank robbery and the shootout in Madelia, Cole Younger received eleven wounds. One ball lodged in his right eye. Jim Younger received five wounds, one of which was in his mouth.

The attempted Northfield bank robbery led to the demise of the infamous James-Younger Gang. The bank robbers armed with revolvers were no match for the citizens armed with rifles and a shotgun.

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