

The Flossmoor State Bank

Heist of 1931

Written for the Flossmoor Public Library
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The 1928 Flossmoor State Bank Building, photographed by the author in 2024.

PREFACE

It would be difficult to pinpoint exactly when or why the American psyche developed an obsession with crime and criminals. Today's proliferation of "true crime" podcasts, television shows, and books was preceded by films like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*, lurid newspaper accounts of 1920s gangsters, and folk tales about the bandits of the Wild West like Jesse James. In the early 1930s, the criminals that most resonated with the people was, without a doubt, bank robbers. The Great Depression had created lean economic times for most people and criminals like Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger and Babyface Nelson were seen almost as heroes for "punishing" the systems that had caused the nation's economic turmoil.

One might think that Flossmoor, a quiet and peaceful suburb of just over 800 people in 1930, would be immune from the rash of bank robberies occurring across the country. However, that proved not to be the case on September 12, 1931.

THE STORY OF FLOSSMOOR STATE BANK

After Flossmoor incorporated as a village in 1924, commercial activity increased rapidly throughout the rest of the decade. In 1927, Hyde Park resident John A. Carroll secured a state charter to establish the Flossmoor State Bank. Carroll was an experienced banker, being a lead executive of three banks in Chicago. He was also a real estate developer, and at the time he was subdividing the neighborhood known as Flossmoor Park. After securing the bank charter and a plot of land at Sterling Avenue and Central Drive, Carroll and his associates began construction on a small but attractive bank building, built in the English style with a prominent clock tower. The architect was John Hocke and in addition to the bank, the building was to hold four other storefronts on the first floor and apartments above.



Architectural rendering of the proposed Flossmoor State Bank. This early rendition lacked the iconic clock tower that has become a symbol of downtown Flossmoor.

The Flossmoor State Bank officially opened its doors on October 27, 1928. Carroll served as Chairman of the Board and former Flossmoor village president D.J. Brumley served as the bank's president. The bank hired Albert W. Tatge to serve as cashier and manage the daily operations. The bank never grew into a large operation. For one thing, it did not attract enough deposits. In a 1987 interview with *The Chicago Tribune*, D.J.

Brumley's son Joe said, "the problem with the bank was that most of the fathers who lived in town worked in Chicago, and they kept their big accounts in the city. The only ones who put money in the [Flossmoor] State Bank were the wives and children, and that was peanuts." Also negatively affecting growth was the fact almost exactly one year after the opening came Black Monday—October 28, 1929—the stock market crash that precipitated the Great Depression.



In 1932, as banks began to fail in the Depression, Carroll decided to remove himself as an executive at Flossmoor State Bank, in the hopes that the smaller bank would not be affected if his Chicago banks went under. This proved to be prescient, as all three of his city banks did in fact fail. It is said that Carroll personally lost many millions of dollars in the Depression. The remaining executives attempted to keep Flossmoor State Bank afloat but with a lack of resources it finally closed on April 21, 1934. Unlike many other bank failures, all customers of the Flossmoor State Bank were paid out 100% of their deposits.

THE HEIST

On Saturday, September 12, 1931, the Chicago region was in the fifth day of a late-season heat wave. The temperature hovered around 90 degrees outside as Flossmoor State Bank cashier Charles Willis (who had replaced Albert Tatge in the role at some point between 1928 and 1931), his assistant Lael Rogers, and the bank's investment officer A.R. Johnson worked on their tasks for the day. Also in the bank building to conduct business was C.A. Jansen, a Flossmoor real estate agent. None of the four people present were expecting the turmoil they were about to go through.

Around 11 AM, a car with three armed bandits pulled up in front of the bank. Two of the robbers rushed in immediately, causing a panic among the four people in the bank. The third stayed in the car, apparently to be the getaway driver. However, the two robbers in the bank were taking too long to get into the cashier's cage, which was protected by a locked glass door. The getaway driver then rushed into the bank and used the butt of a shotgun to shatter the glass door. Lael Rogers received several cuts from the broken glass.

Once inside the cage, the robbers forced cashier Charles Willis to empty the vault. According to some reports, they fired the shotgun into the air to get Willis to move faster. Once it was emptied of all cash, the robbers were disappointed to find a relatively modest amount of \$2600 (about \$54,000 in 2024 dollars) in the vault. Angered and hostile, they grabbed Willis and forced him into their car as a hostage. Their bad luck continued as—unbeknownst to them—Flossmoor Police Chief Edward Dugdale happened to live in an apartment above the bank. Upon hearing the commotion, he quickly arrived at



Flossmoor Police Chief Edward Dugdale in a 1932 Chicago Tribune photo.

the scene with his service revolver. As the robbers raced down Sterling Avenue, Chief Dugdale unloaded six shots from his pistol, which failed to stop the fleeing car.

With Willis in tow as prisoner, the getaway car headed west on Flossmoor Road hoping to escape town. Dugdale pursued in his vehicle, and former Flossmoor Fire Chief John Smith grabbed his shotgun and joined the pursuit in his car. The interior of the getaway car was lined with steel plates, rendering it impene-trable to most bullets. The car sped south on Governors' Highway with Flossmoor officials and, eventually, county highway patrol cars in pursuit. The bandits' outran their pursuers and escaped. Their hostage Charles Willis—terrified but physically unharmed—was unceremoniously dumped out of the car near Richton Park and had to find a phone to alert authorities to his well-being and whereabouts. With the bandits escaping pursuit, law enforcement officials began an investigation to attempt to identify them and bring them into custody.

The Flossmoor robbery and kidnapping made headlines across the country. As one can see here, sometimes the "out-of-town" papers were loose with the facts, as they would report the value of the theft at \$15,000 instead of the more modest \$2600.

FLOSSMOOR STATE BANK OF CHICAGO ROBBED

CHICAGO, Sept. 12, (INS)—Staging a daring raid on the Flossmoor State bank, three heavily armed bandits Saturday kidnaped the cashier and escaped with loot estimated at \$15,000.

The Bee News of Omaha, NE

KIDNAP BANK CASHIER; GET \$15,000

Chicago, Sept. 12—Staging a daring raid on the Flossmoor State Bank three heavily armed bandits today kidnaped the cashier and escaped with loot estimated at \$15,000.

The Sunday Courier of Harrisburg, PA

Bandits Kidnap Cashier Of Bank

CHICAGO, Sept. 12. —(LP)— Bandits smashed their way into the cashiers cage of the State Bank of Flossmoor, a suburb, today, kidnaped the cashier and escaped through gunfire. The cashier, Charles Willis, 35, was thrown out at Richton Park, five miles away. The loot was \$2,000.

The Enterprise Record of Enterprise, CA.

Three other men, angered by the small amount of cash, \$2600, they found in the vaults of the State Bank of Flossmoor, forced Cashier Charles Willis to accompany them, after firing a shotgun through the glass cage to emphasize their demands for the money. They later released Willis unharmed.

The Globe Democrat of St. Louis, MO

THE INVESTIGATION

No “true crime” story is complete without discussing what comes after—the investigation and (hopefully) punishment. In this case, a very interesting, if convoluted, story about the criminal underworld surrounding the small town of Flossmoor began to unfold.

Prior to 1934, bank robberies were not a federal crime subject to the jurisdiction of the FBI. Therefore, Flossmoor’s 1931 robbery was handled by local police and investigators from the Cook County District Attorney’s office. They began by interviewing the four eyewitnesses that were present for the holdup. Investigators operated under the theory that the three bandits were possibly experienced bank robbers who may have had run-ins with the law before. The four eyewitnesses were shown mug shots from criminals who had been arrested at bank robberies in Chicago, Wisconsin, and Indiana, but they could make no positive identifications. Even Charles Willis — who had spent the most time with the bandits on account of his kidnapping--told investigators he could not remember anything about how they looked. The investigation limped along for three months without much success.

Law enforcement finally caught a break in the case through a seemingly unrelated bank robbery 200 miles away in Dunkirk, IN on December 24, 1931. That group of bandits was immediately trapped by civilian vigilantes. One of the bandits was shot to death and the other three arrested. C.A. Jansen, who had been the customer during the Flossmoor robbery, was able to identify two of the surviving Dunkirk robbers as being involved in the Flossmoor robbery. Their names were Frank Valentino and Lorenz Capelli, and they were both residents of Chicago Heights, IL. Once presented with this accusation, Capelli and Valentino confessed that they were involved in the Flossmoor robbery, but refused to give the name of their third accomplice. They also implicated themselves in three unsolved bank robberies in the Dunkirk area. In fact, their openness with investigators led to the arrest of nineteen people affiliated with their “Chicago Heights Gang.” After standing trial for the four bank robberies in Indiana, they each were sentenced to twenty years of prison time. They never stood trial for the Flossmoor robbery—presumably because authorities felt it was a moot point based on their long prison sentence for their crimes in Indiana.

Whereas Capelli and Valentino had gone 200 miles east into Indiana after the heist in Flossmoor, their alleged third accomplice had headed north and was found in Burlington, WI. Reinhold Fleuker, a native of Racine, was associated with Capelli and Valentino’s “Chicago Heights Gang.” By the time investigators caught up with him, he was on trial for the robbery of the Meinhardt State Bank in Burlington. The Meinhardt Bank robbery ended with a shootout between the four bank robbers and Burlington Police officer Hubert Schenning—more on him later—that ended with one bandit seriously wounded. Fleuker and the wounded man, which was his brother-in-law, were found later that day in a nearby cottage. Fleuker denied being a part of the robbery and said he had been at his home in Racine when he heard his brother-in-law was hurt, and was merely coming to check up on him.



Reinhold Fleuker

Fleuker's trial for the Meinhardt Bank robbery began in April of 1932. At this point, eyewitness Lael Rogers identified him as the third man at the Flossmoor robbery. Fleuker's trial in Wisconsin ended with the jury convicting him. However, the jury's verdict was set aside by Judge E.B. Belden due to a lack of sufficient evidence. After the trial ended, Fleuker's freedom was short-lived as he was immediately put in handcuffs and brought to Illinois to stand trial for the Flossmoor robbery.

At the trial for the Flossmoor robbery, Lael Rogers testified that she had gotten a clear look at Fleuker and absolutely recognized him as one of the bandits. However, none of the other eyewitnesses could positively identify him, and Fleuker's defense team had his sister and his mother testify that he was with them, in Racine, at the time of the Flossmoor robbery. Fleuker's attorneys also offered the theory that he looked like and was often mistaken for Tony Spiro (aka Pasqual Enerco), the bandit who had been killed at the Dunkirk, IN robbery where Capelli and Valentino were nabbed. Their resemblance was so strong that some local Indiana papers even reported the dead man's name as "Reinhold Fleuker," prompting the *real* Reinhold Fleuker to issue a statement to the press that he was actually still alive and well in Wisconsin. Thus, attorneys argued, it was probably Spiro, not Fleuker, who had been at Flossmoor. This defense worked, and the jury returned with a not guilty verdict for Fleuker. However, he was again immediately put into handcuffs and taken to Indiana to stand trial for a robbery at Hartford City, whose bank had been robbed by the "Chicago Heights Gang" two months before the Dunkirk robbery.

Fleuker's third trial, this time in Indiana, began June 2, 1933. In pretrial motions, the defense made a motion that previous allegations against Fleuker in Flossmoor and Wisconsin could not be introduced into the current trial, as they would be prejudicial to the jury. The presiding judge granted this motion. After this ruling was made, the prosecution decided to drop the charges against Fleuker for the robbery at Hartford City, apparently feeling that there just wasn't enough evidence to secure a conviction. He was again free to go.

One might think that having three felony cases in three different states within the span of 14 months might be enough to scare someone away from a life of crime. This proved not to be the case for Fleuker. After winning his freedom three times he still settled back into his old ways. Indeed, it seems like nothing short of death would stop him. On February 8, 1935 Fleuker and an accomplice robbed a small roadside store in Burlington of \$55 and murdered the shop's owner. Upon fleeing, Fleuker's car was soon followed by the squad car of Burlington officer Hubert Schenning and his partner. Ironically, Schenning was the same officer who had been in the shootout after the robbery of the Meinhardt Bank back in 1931. This time, the chase again ended in gunfire between the four men. Both Fleuker and Officer Schenning died as a result of the gun battle.

The tragic death of Officer Schenning was mourned heavily in Burlington. The coroners' inquest determined it was Fleuker's accomplice Leonard Fischer, not Fleuker, who fired the shot that killed Officer Schenning. Fischer pled guilty to second degree murder and was sentenced to 14—25 years in prison. He was also convicted of first degree murder in the death of the shop owner, but that conviction was overturned on appeal for errors during the trial.



Burlington, WI police officer Hubert Schenning, murdered by an accomplice of Fleuker in 1935.

POSTSCRIPT

Although nobody was convicted for the heist in Flossmoor, the case was closed with Lorenz Capelli and Frank Valentino both serving long prison sentences for their crimes in Indiana, and Reinhold Fleuker and his apparent doppelganger Tony Spiro both dead. Whether or not that qualifies as “justice served” is up for each reader to determine for themselves.

After the bank failed in 1934, the space was mostly empty for the rest of the Great Depression (see image at right). By 1940, brothers Alex and Paul Pradin had opened the Flossmoor Pharmacy in the building. The pharmacy is fondly remembered by long-time residents for its soda fountain. It remained in operation, under different names, at 1030 Sterling Avenue until the late 1980s. Currently, the bank’s former space is home to Eyes on Sterling, an optometrist office. The bank building’s iconic clocktower, which had been inoperable for several decades, was refurbished through charitable donations in 2017 to once again be a symbol of the village.

Police Chief Edward Dugdale, who chased the bank robbers out of town on that morning in 1931, left the force about a year later. He built and operated a service station at Dixie Highway and Ridge Road in downtown Homewood that still exists today.

John A. Carroll, after developing Flossmoor Park, moved from Hyde Park to the street there that is named in his honor. The Great Depression ruined Carroll financially but he continued to work in real estate and banking. He eventually moved out of Flossmoor Park to a home on Reigel Road. He died in 1944 at the age of 69.

D.J. Brumley retired as chief engineer for the Illinois Central Railroad in 1935. He died in December of 1959 at the age of 94. Brumley Avenue is named in his honor. The home on Bruce Avenue that he had lived in since 1915 stayed in the Brumley family for decades afterwards.



A picture of the 4th of July Parade in 1937 shows the Flossmoor State Bank in the background with a “For Rent” sign in the window. The bank had been closed over three years at this point.



The refurbished clock tower photographed by the author in 2024

Works Used

The two books below both discuss the general history of the bank but give only a very brief mention of the 1931 robbery.

Adair, Anna B., and Sandberg, Adele. *Indian Trails to Tollways: The Story of the Homewood-Flossmoor Area*. Fremouw Press, 1968

Wagner, Susan F. *A History of the Village of Flossmoor 1851—1974*. Flossmoor Historical Committee, 1974.

Details about the robbery were fleshed out through use of contemporary newspaper articles. The most important ones are listed below; many more were consulted for the sake of corroborating information.

Journalistic practices in the 1930s were that most newspaper articles did not have identified authors, thus most of the articles here are listed only under their titles.

“15 Men, 4 Women Bank Robbers Are in Custody; Eight to be Tried at Hartford City.” *Garrett Clipper (IN)*. April 25, 1932.

“\$2600 Loot Irks Bandits; Take Banker.” *Alton Evening Telegraph*. September 12, 1931.

“Bandits Linked Illinois Robbery.” *The Call-Leader of Elwood, IN*. March 19, 1932.

“Bank Robbers Say Sheriff Agreed to Clear Their Way.” *Alton Evening Telegraph*. December 29, 1931.

Chase, Al. “Flossmoor Now Having a Mild Case of ‘Niles’.” *Chicago Tribune*. May 11, 1924.

“Chief Engineer I.C. to Retire March 31.” *Journal Gazette of Mattoon, IL*. March 20, 1935.

“D.J. Brumley, 94, Flossmoor Leader, Dies.” *Chicago Tribune*. December 7, 1959.

“Drops Charge in Holdup Case; Fleuker Trial Ends Suddenly at Hartford City.” *The Star Press of Muncie, IN*. June 4, 1933.

“Fleuker, Free on One Charge, Faces Another.” *The Sheboygan Press*. July 14, 1932.

“Fleuker, Freed in Bank Theft Trial, Faces New Charge.” *The La Crosse Tribune (WI)*. July 14, 1932.

“Gun Gangs Rob Two Banks; Get \$20,856 In Loot.” *Chicago Tribune*. September 13, 1931.

Hayes, Jack. “Flossmoor Has Golf In Its Roots.” *Chicago Tribune*. October 14, 1987.

“Identifies Fleuker as Flossmoor Bandit.” *The Journal Times of Racine, WI*. July 13, 1932.

“John A. Carroll, Realty Dealer, Banker, Is Dead.” *Chicago Tribune*. October 7, 1944.

“Officer H. W. Schenning Dies, From Wound Received in Gun Battle Friday Night.” *The Standard Democrat of Burlington, WI*.
February 15, 1935

Stanley, Austine. “A Story of Flossmoor: Flossmoor Bank Characterized by Dignity and Honor.” *Chicago Heights Star*. July 30, 1954.

“Starts Work on Service Station.” *Chicago Tribune*. October 15, 1933.

“To Receive Motions in Two Cases.” *Muncie Evening Press*. March 21, 1932.

“Two Dead as a Result of Gun Battle Near Here on Friday Evening, Feb 8.” *Burlington Free Press*. February 14, 1935.

“Will Erect New Bank Building at Flossmoor—Is to be Located Across From I.C. Station.” *Chicago Tribune*. April 22, 1928.

Should the reader note any errors, please e-mail flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org and they may be corrected in a future edition.