

# Monon line railwaymen caught napping by robber

In 1885 it was no secret that the Monon Railroad's Midnight Express sometimes carried large sums of money from Louisville to Chicago. If the line's officials and banking authorities became a trifle careless over time, it was probably because who would have thought of a train robbery in Southern Indiana?

The truth of the matter was that Peter Webber, baggage master, and George Davis, express messenger, had fallen into the habit of taking a nap between stops at Bedford and Bloomington. April 29 was no exception.

In his book, *Relive It*, C. Earl East, wrote that both men were snoozing when rudely awakened by a heavily built man with a club in his hand. Continued East, "Webber started to arise, but was bludgeoned down. He



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

saw Davis reaching for his gun in the pigeonhole above them. The intruder noticed it too and fired a bullet into the messenger's brain. With threat of any Davis interference disposed of, the man turned his attention back to Webber, bleeding profusely as he lay on the floor."

What the robber wanted was an open safe, but it was locked. The baggage man protested that he didn't have a key, and he was ordered told to find it in Davis' pocket. After rifling the old-fashioned trunk-like safe, the frustrated rob-

ber demanded, "Where is that package of thirty thousand dollars?"

Webber may not have known what the robber was talking about. There is no indication that he did. As he was pleading for his life, the intruder fired a shot that grazed Webber's cheek and pulled the signal rope to stop the train.

As the train nearly came to a stop, the would-be robber yanked the rope twice — a signal to the engineer to resume speed — and jumped off the train. His abrupt exit from the Monon car was in the vicinity of the water tower at Harrodsburg.

Staggering to the next car, Webber gave the alarm, and the train was stopped. A quick, rather superficial search followed. East wrote that the unarmed trainmen were

probably relieved that the robber wasn't hanging around the tracks with his gun.

The train resumed its trip to Bloomington, where the two injured crew were removed for medical care at the Orchard House. Davis was still alive, but unconscious. He and Webber were transported back to Louisville.

A search party was dispatched to the Harrodsburg area to begin an investigation. What they found were four bloodstained packages of money, a pistol, two spent cartridges and the footprints of a pigeon-toed man.

Enter Chesley Chambers, a stock buyer who lived at the home of his father six miles southeast of Bloomington. East wrote that had the young man not gone out of his way

to do a good deed for a neighbor, Chambers would not have been part of the nightmare fate had conjured up for him.

Chap May needed help with planting, and Chambers obliged, later falling asleep in the May house while waiting for supper.

May later heard of the attempted robbery and a progress report on the investigation. At the same time, he recalled two things about Chambers: He was pigeon-toed and on the day he was helping with the planting there were scratches on his face.

May took his suspicions to Ren Smith, the Bloomington town marshal. After a quick conference with the Monon's lawyer, Smith set a trap for Chambers.

**Next week: Chambers' arrest.**