

Northfield—Town That Licked Jesse James

Minnesotans Still Talk of Historic Gun Battle

By JOHN A. MENAUGH

SEVEN crowded minutes, packed with melodramatic gunplay, sudden death, and the thrills of a hundred lifetimes, made unforgettable history in the town of Northfield, Rice county, Minn., nearly sixty-two years ago.

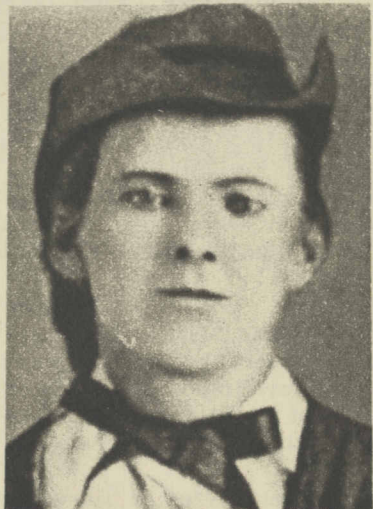
The people of Northfield, now a prosperous and progressive city of 4,500 inhabitants, still talk with traces of pride about how their town, of all towns in the country, was THE town that licked notorious Jesse James and his Missouri outlaw band. No day passes even now in Northfield that does not hear mention of the robber raid and the historic battle fought in the business section of the town between the home folks and the invading outlaws on Thursday, Sept. 7, 1876.

Although actual participants in that desperate fight no longer are among the living, there still remain plenty of citizens who remember all about it from hearing the tale first hand over and over again. If there is any boredom up in Northfield about the battle that has been refought so many times the people there today are skilful at concealing it. After all, it was the two James brothers, the three Younger brothers, and three lesser wild and woolly desperadoes who really first centered wide attention upon Northfield, which today has come to be celebrated in a totally different manner as the site of two institutions of learning, Carleton and St. Olaf colleges.

The general layout of Northfield's downtown is as it was on the fateful September day. It is true that there are many new business buildings. The old wooden and iron bridge that once spanned the Cannon river, which bisects the city, has been supplanted by a modern stone structure. Concrete pavements have replaced the dust and mud of other days. But Bridge square, the public plaza just east of the aforementioned bridge, still is there. Division street, in which the citizenry outfought the bandits, still is Division street, running north and south along the eastern edge of Bridge square. And the bullet-scarred old Scriver block, on the west side of Division street and facing on Bridge square, the stone building in which the First National bank had its headquarters during the time of the outlaw raid, still stands.

Sept. 7, 1876, gave every promise of being another sleepy day in Northfield. Most of the business was restricted to Saturday afternoons and nights, and Saturday still was two days away. Merchants sat about their stores; a loafer here and there idly whittled to pass the time. Some one remarked about the presence of several strangers in the town during the morning, and some one else recalled a

them was Charlie Pitts. Another was Bob Younger. The third is believed to this day, and for good reason, to have been Jesse James himself. Coolly they tossed their reins over hitching posts and coolly they sauntered to some goods boxes that were standing on the walk in front of the Lee & Hitchcock store, which occupied quarters in the northeast corner of the Scriver block, just north of and in the same building with the bank. In imitation of harmless folk



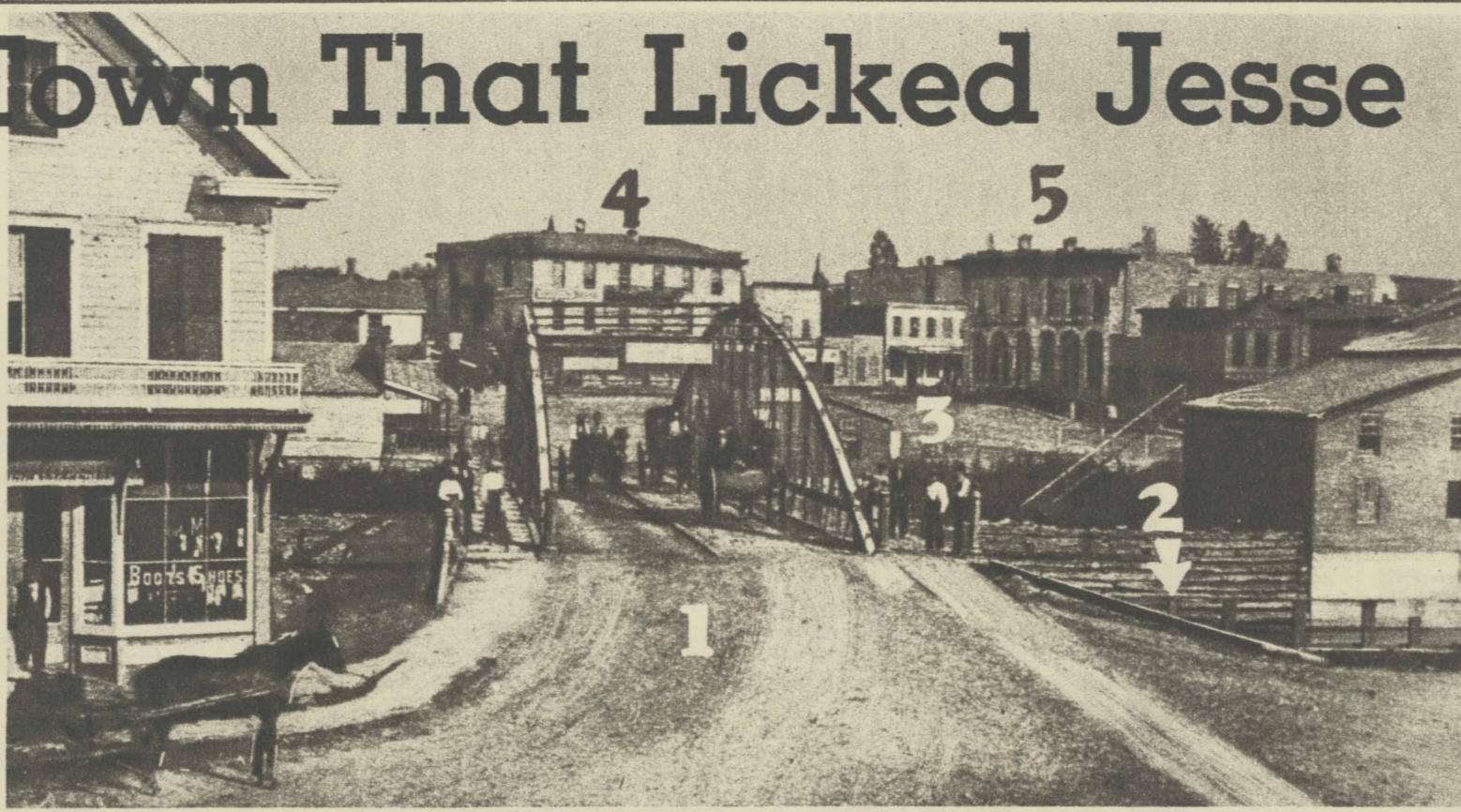
(James brothers photos from N. H. Rose.)
Jesse James at age of 17.

the country over, they started whittling on the boxes.

A few moments later two more of the band, Cole Younger and Clel Miller, rode up Division street from the south, and about the same time the three other members of the band, Jim Younger, William Stiles (a former Minnesotan), and Frank James, clattered into the town from the west and brought their horses to a halt in the vicinity of the bridge, to guard and keep open the way of retreat. The band had planned, when it met early that morning in a woods five miles west of the town, that it would make its getaway by riding west over the bridge and out of town.

When Cole Younger and Miller, both garbed in dusters, appeared in the street the trio of first arrivals arose from their perches on the goods boxes, walked a few steps south, and disappeared into the bank. Miller and Cole Younger then dismounted, the first marching to the door of the bank, which he closed, and the second pretending to tighten the girth of his saddle.

Perhaps the strangers appeared too indifferent. Perhaps Cole Younger overplayed his part in his saddle girth act. There was something, anyway, that aroused the suspicions of several citizens. J. S. Allen, a hardware merchant whose store was located around the Lee & Hitchcock corner and west of the Scriver block, walked to the bank door and was about to enter when he was seized by Miller, who roughly ordered him to stay on the outside. Allen tore loose from the bandit's



Bridge square, Northfield, Minn., taken at about the time of the James raid. Prominent are (1) the road by which six of the outlaws approached the bank, object of the raid; (2) the Cannon river; (3) the square; (4) the Dampier hotel, and (5) the Scriver block, housing the bank.

(All photos, unless otherwise credited, courtesy Northfield News.)

the street. He arose and walked along the sidewalk across the street from the bank, and when he saw Miller seize Merchant Allen he set up a cry of: "Robbery! Robbery!"

Miller and Cole Younger sprang to their horses. To their aid galloped the three who had been left near the bridge. Out came their long-barreled revolvers, and the calm of the lazy afternoon was shattered by sharp explosions. It was the

and tried to close the vault door behind him. The other two bandits prevented the trapping of their companion, thrust their weapons in the bookkeeper's face, and warned him that if he did not open the safe immediately he would be slain.

"There is a time lock on it," Heywood told them. "It cannot be opened now."

One of the robbers then crashed the butt of his revolver down on Heywood's head. The man sank to the floor dazed. Unfortunately for him, he was not completely out. Had he remained on the floor he most likely would have saved his life.

The bandits tried to make Brunker and Wilcox open the

out, boys; they're killing all our men."

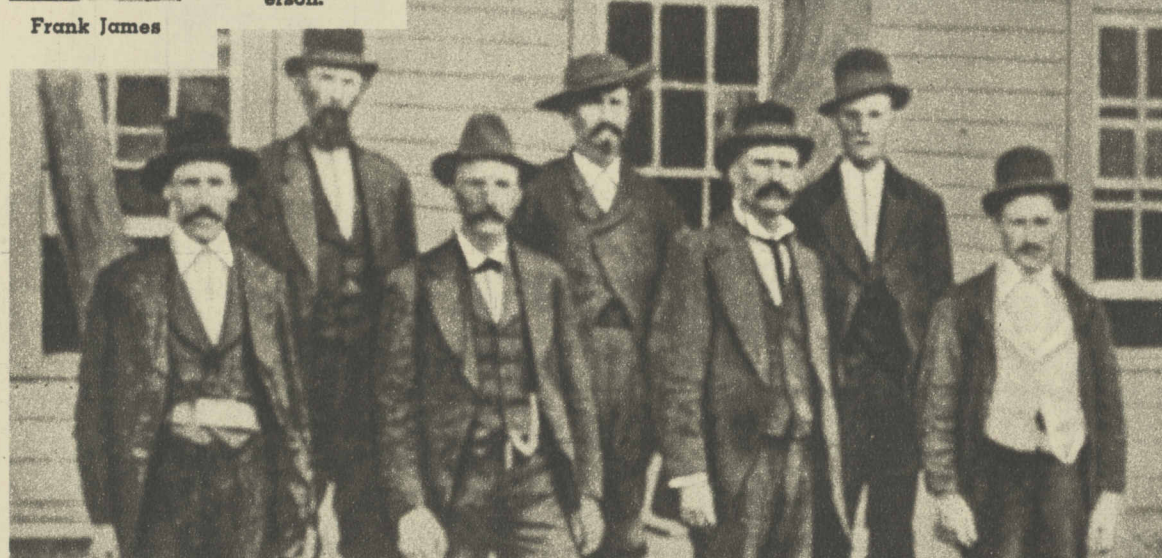
The three robbers retreated by the way of the teller's window and the front door. As they were leaving Heywood struggled to his feet and staggered in the direction of his desk. The last of the bandits to leave the building hesitated, took deliberate aim, and shot the heroic bookkeeper through the head. Heywood, it is believed, died instantly. The slayer is thought by most authorities to have been Jesse James, although there are some who contend that Pitts fired the fatal shot.

Let us now return to the movements of the first heroes of the day, Allen and Wheeler.



Frank James

Below: The posse that caught the Younger brothers. Left to right, Sheriff Glispin, Murphy, Bradford, Rice, Vought, Pomeroy, Severson.



purpose of the five desperadoes to drive every one off the street; to terrorize the whole town so that their three comrades within the bank could work without molestation. Although their first fusillade dropped an innocent bystander, poor Nicholas Gustavson, in his tracks, mortally wounded, the Missouri bad men failed to achieve their purpose. Instead of intimidating the townsfolk with gunfire, they found they had stirred up a hornets' nest.

The three robbers within the bank and behind its closed door at this time had no intimation of what was transpiring on the outside. They had entered, drawn their revolvers, climbed over the counter, and ordered the bank employes—Joseph Lee Heywood, bookkeeper; A. E. Brunker, teller, and F. J. Wilcox, assistant bookkeeper—to throw up their hands.

"We're going to rob this bank," said one of the desperadoes. "Don't any of you holler. We got forty men outside."

Heywood, besides being bookkeeper of the bank and treasurer of Carleton college, which had been founded ten years before, was acting cashier at the time in the absence of G. M. Phillips, who had gone to Philadelphia to attend the centennial celebration. It was he upon whom the robbers first centered their attention.

"Are you the cashier?" one of them asked.

When Heywood replied in the negative the other two employes were similarly questioned. Their denials enraged the robbers, who then attempted to force Heywood to open the safe, which stood near by in an open vault. Pitts, one of the robbers, ran to the vault door and stepped inside. Heywood sprang after him

safe, but the two said that they could not unlock it. As a matter of fact, it was not actually locked at all, although the door was closed and the bolts were shot into place. The combination dial, however, had not been turned. Trying to frighten Heywood into arising and opening the safe, Pitts leaned over and fired his revolver beside the bookkeeper's head. Bob Younger finally forced Brunker and Wilcox to crawl under the counter. Brunker tried to edge toward a shelf under the teller's window on which lay a little pistol, but Pitts pocketed the weapon.

Brunker arose. To him Bob Younger said:

"There's money here somewhere outside of the safe. Where is it? Where's the cash till?"

The teller pointed to the currency box lying on top of the counter. Younger opened this and from it poured into a wheat sack that he had taken from beneath his linen duster a handful or two of currency. Right beneath this box was a money drawer containing \$3,000 in bills, the presence of which the robbers that day never were aware. Their only loot was that little yield of the currency box.

When Younger had emptied the box he turned to Brunker and ordered him to get down under the counter again. Brunker, however, made a dash for liberty. He was nearly to the rear door of a nearby building when Pitts, standing outside the bank's rear door, let fly a shot. This took Brunker in the right shoulder. He kept right on going and did not stop until he reached a physician's office on the other side of the block.

Pitts returned to his companions in the front part of the bank just in time to hear one of the robbers on the outside of the building shout:

"The game is up! Better get

Allen, after his alarming encounter with the brusque outlaw Miller, raced toward his place of business, shouting at the top of his lungs. When he reached his store he began passing out shotguns and rifles from his stock, loading these weapons as he handed them to citizens who were eager for a chance to shoot the robbers. Elias Stacy accepted a shotgun, and it was he who drew the first blood of the outlaws. He peppered Miller in the face with a charge of birdshot. The bandit fell from his horse, but remounted immediately. Among other citizens armed with fowling pieces were James

fired at Jim Younger, but it was a clean miss. His second shot drilled Miller in a vital spot. The bandit tumbled from his horse and died a few moments later as he lay on the ground.

The story is told in Northfield that young Wheeler had his victim's body shipped to Ann Arbor, where he used it in his laboratory work in anatomy, and that he later preserved the skeleton. He is not available, however, to verify or deny the story, as he died in Grand Forks, S. D., eight years ago, after many years' practice of medicine.

The third cartridge that the young student had carried to the window with him fell to the floor and spilled its contents of powder. As he started downstairs for more ammunition he met a hotel employe coming up with a few more cartridges.

In the meantime Allen's outcries had attracted the attention of Anselm B. Manning, a business rival who operated a hardware store in the same block with Allen.

"Get your gun, Manning! They're robbing the bank!" Allen shouted.

Manning stepped into his own store, reached into his display window for a repeating rifle, obtained a box of cartridges from his desk, and rushed into the street to take part in the fray. On coming within sight of the outlaws he was fired upon. Unperturbed, Manning, perhaps the coolest man in Northfield that day, drew bead on the head of one of the robbers. Just as he was ready to press the trigger the target vanished behind a horse. Manning shifted his aim slightly and shot the horse. The animal reared and fell dead.

Manning ducked back behind the corner to reload, but the hand lever of the rifle stuck and he rushed back to his store for a ramrod, with which he ejected the empty shell from the breech of the weapon. Returning to the scene of action, he fired again, wounding Cole Younger. His next shot, fired at a distance of eighty yards, killed Stiles.

By this time the three robbers

rying a double burden, galloped down the street toward the south. The four other robbers also took to flight. The battle was over. Two of the desperadoes lay dead in the street. Their horses had bolted from the scene.

The vanquished robbers, six men on five horses, swept out of the town, riding toward the village of Dundas, three miles to the southwest, instead of westerly across the bridge at Bridge square, which had been the original intention. It had been a part of their plan to stop at the railroad station west of the river to cut the telegraph wires and thus isolate the community, but, since they were forced to flee by another route, the wires were left intact. Soon over these wires the story of the raid was ticking out to the outside world.

Virtually the whole southern part of Minnesota was roused into action for a great man hunt. Citizens of numerous towns were on the lookout for the six outlaws, and it was said that more than a thousand at one time or another were doing duty in the lines set to prevent the desperadoes from fleeing the state.

Two weeks to a day after the raid in Northfield the three Younger brothers and Pitts were surrounded in a thicket along the banks of the Watonwan

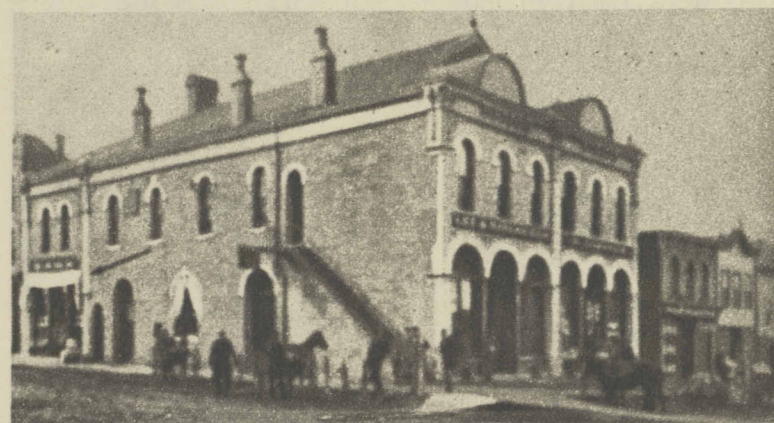


Joseph L. Heywood, slain hero of the bank raid.

river near the town of Madelia, Minn., about sixty-five miles southwest of Northfield. Seven volunteers from the posse that surrounded them—Col. T. L. Vought, Sheriff James Glispin of Watonwan county, Capt. W. W. Murphy, Ben M. Rice, George A. Bradford, C. A. Pomeroy, and S. J. Severson—rushed the robbers. When the shooting was over all of the bandits except Bob Younger were down. Pitts had been killed and the Younger brothers all were badly wounded.

But where were the other two bandits, who, according to every bit of evidence, were the James brothers, Jesse and Frank? They had stolen through the lines set by the posses and escaped to Nashville, Tenn., there, to go into hiding.

The Younger brothers were sent to the Minnesota state prison at Stillwater. Bob died there in 1889. Jim and Cole were released on parole in 1901. Jim committed suicide in a St. Paul hotel the next year. Cole died in his old home at Lee's Summit, Mo., in 1916. Jesse James was



The Scriver block, a later picture taken after the roof had been remodeled. The bank location is indicated by the arrow.

little later that five horsemen from other parts had partaken of a noontime meal in a restaurant on the west side. The whole place was wrapped in its customary midweek midday somnolence when at 2 o'clock in the afternoon fate cantered into Division street, from the west through Bridge square, in the form of a trio of horsemen.

These three, riding splendid animals and attired in long linen dusters, as was the fashion of overland travelers of that day, were nonchalant indeed. One of

grasp and lit out for his store, shouting:

"Get your guns, boys! They're robbing the bank!"

It was from this moment that clocks began ticking off the crowded seven minutes which gave Northfield undying fame. In the meantime Henry M. Wheeler, a 22-year-old medical student of the University of Michigan, home for vacation, had been observing the movements of the robbers from a chair in front of his father's drug store on the east side of



Jim Younger

Bob Younger

Cole Younger

Charlie Pitts

William Stiles

Clel Miller

Gregg, Ross Phillips, and J. B. Hyde. Postmaster H. S. French, Justice Streater, and Elias Hobbs, being without weapons, threw rocks at the robbers.

Wheeler, upon learning the purpose of the mysterious horsemen, dashed into his father's pharmacy on the east side of Division street to get his shotgun. Not finding the gun there, he ran back through the store and across an open space to the Dampier hotel, which stood diagonally across the street from the bank. In the hotel the young medical student found an old Civil war carbine and three paper cartridges.

Racing up the stairs of the hotel, Wheeler took a place at a window on the second floor and went into action with his war relik. His first shot was

who had failed to loot the bank were on the outside. Bob Younger, whose horse had been killed by Manning, was afoot. He and Manning were maneuvering for a shot at each other, when the robber jumped behind an open stairway at the side of the building in which the bank was located. Wheeler, at his window in the hotel, saw this. Only the right arm of the robber was visible. But Wheeler took careful aim and fired, shattering Younger's arm at the elbow. The bandit shifted his pistol to his left hand and kept on trying to get a shot at Manning. The latter, however, disappeared for the moment.

Jesse James' outlaws had had enough by this time. Bob Younger sprang up behind his brother Cole, and the horse, car-

killed in 1882 in St. Joseph, Mo., by Bob Ford, a young hoodlum whom he had befriended. Frank James, who had been acquitted after surrendering, died in 1915 on his Missouri boyhood farm.

There are citizens today in Northfield who can point out the spots where Miller and Stiles fell. They can tell all about the famous fight, as the writer learned on a recent visit there, from the stories handed down by their fathers and mothers.

The Northfield News, of which Carl L. Weicht is editor, has published in booklet form what is accepted as an accurate account of the seven crowded minutes in Northfield nearly sixty-two years ago.