

# 1899 Attempted Bank Robbery in Sevierville

*By Carroll McMahan*

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Even for a little town like Sevierville, the dusty, unpaved streets were exceptionally quiet on Friday morning, October 13, 1899. There were no horses, buggies or pedestrians traversing Main Street. The stillness was not peaceful, a surreal silence prevailed.

As a matter of fact, the setting resembled a scene from a western movie more than a friendly foothills county seat. Gun barrels were pointing out the windows of the Masonic Temple Building. Men were crouched behind blinds, trigger fingers ready and waiting.

Deputy John Keener and John Chandler were stationed on the public square. Students from nearby Nancy Academy had been dismissed and advised to “take cover.”

The previous evening, three young men from Sevier County had been observed drinking heavily at the bar in the Imperial Hotel located on Gay Street in Knoxville. They were William “Will” Derrick, 26, his younger brother Calvin “Cal” Derrick, 22, and James Pearl Thurman, 18. Will Derrick was overheard boasting about a bank robbery they planned to carry out the following day at the Bank of Sevierville.

An alarmed bystander happened to be a good friend of Dr. Guilford E. Sharp and immediately got on his horse rode to Dr. Sharp’s residence at Trundle’s Crossroads. Arriving there about 10 p.m., he told Dr. Sharp what he had learned.

Dr. Sharp then went to the home of Deputy John Kenner and they went to Sevierville together to inform officials.

The Derrick brothers and Thurman left Knoxville on Thursday night in a hack owned by Cal Derrick who was a State street liveryman in Knoxville. The hack was driven by Mark Cruze.

The would-be bank robbers rode into Sevierville before daylight and cut the telephone lines in two places. They then returned to their hide-out on a small

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island in the east prong of the Little Pigeon River opposite the mouth of Middle Creek.

Will Derrick had tried to hire horses from R. P. Clark's livery stable but Clark was sold out. Not knowing the intentions of Derrick, Clark sent him to talk to Dave Webb, another livery stable owner. Derrick did not want to visit Webb, who was a deputy, because he knew that Webb had some warrants out for him.

Therefore, Derrick sent Mark Cruze to inquire about getting the horses. Cruze told Webb he needed three horses for himself and two friends to go up into the mountains. The bandits then bought black calico material to make masks and returned to their hideout.

The would-be- robbers planned the robbery for 1 p.m., but while they cooked breakfast a group of children began playing across the river. The outlaws were afraid the children might report seeing them, so they got an earlier start arriving in town around 9 a.m.

Tension mounted as a light cloud of dust appeared at the east entrance of Main Street, heralding the sound of approaching hoof beats. All the robbers were heavily armed. Cal Derrick had a Winchester, a shot gun and a pistol. Thurman had five pistols and Will Derrick had both a pistol and a Winchester.

Soon the bandits came into sight, halting in front of the Bank of Sevierville. As they dismounted, Will Derrick fired into the bank striking the wire netting on Amos T. Marshall's cashier window.

Suddenly a deafening barrage of shots exploded from the Masonic Temple Building. The stunned, unsuccessful robbers tried in vain to mount their horses and Pearl Thurman fell severely wounded on spot.

They were all wounded at the first fire and two of their horses were killed. Will Derrick immediately jumped on his horse and started to flee. He did get about a

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mile away, when his horse dropped dead in front of the home of Milton Rush Rawlings.

Although severely wounded, Will Derrick commandeered a ride with William P. McMahan who happened along in his buggy. When Derrick asked McMahan to allow him to hide in his home, McMahan insisted that Derrick go out to the McMahan barn. This Derrick did. By the time Derrick arrived at the barn he was so weak from the eight bullet holes in his back that McMahan had to assist him.

Later on a crowd led by Deputy David Webb came and surrounded the barn. When he was called upon to surrender, Derrick pulled out his gun and shot himself in the temple, taking his own life.

While the entire episode was a tragedy for the three outlaws, the nearest thing to causality in the bank was Jesse Tyson's coattail being perforated with a bullet as he dodged behind the counter yelling "What's going on?"

In the meantime, Dr. Zachary Massey emptied his revolver at Cal Derrick, who then ran down the street and entered the Central Hotel. Before entering the hotel, he removed his mask, and acting innocent, managed to hide his rifle and revolver and enter the hotel.

The posse quickly surrounded the hotel, and realizing escape was unlikely, Cal Derrick surrendered and was placed in jail. Accomplice Mark Cruze was also arrested and charged with talking young Pearl Thurman into the bank robbery.

Pearl Thurman, who was erroneously reported to be dead on the spot, was carried across the street to the Masonic Temple Building. He was later moved to Central Hotel where he lingered until Thursday October 26<sup>th</sup>, when he succumbed from the wounds.

A preliminary hearing for Cal Derrick occurred on Saturday October 14<sup>th</sup> at the Sevier County Court House, before Justice C.W. Fox, chairman of the county court.

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At the hearing, Jr. Penland and M.B. McMahan represented the state while the defendant was represented by Elmer E. Houk of Knoxville.

Derrick was charged with attempted bank robbery and, under the ku-klux law, for assault with a deadly weapon while wearing a disguise. At the conclusion of the hearing, Squire Fox held the defendant without bail on both counts.

The hearing occurred on the same day that Will Derrick was laid to rest in the Derrick family cemetery in the Flat Creek Community. Pearl Thurman was buried in the Eden Cemetery following a funeral service in Eden Methodist Church, which was over-flowing with friends and family.

On May 19, 1900 Cal Derrick was sentenced to twelve years' hard labor in the state penitentiary for first degree felonious assault. On January 7, 1901, he and Cruze were acquitted on the other charges.

At the same time, charges were dismissed against a relative of the Derrick brothers, Sarah E. "Aunt Sallie" Derrick who was charged with using slanderous language.

While serving his sentence in prison, Cal Derrick learned the shoe repair trade. After his parole, he moved to another state where he married, raised a family and became a successful shoe repairman.

Although the sensational story was covered by Knoxville and Maryville newspapers, only one article ever appeared in either of Sevierville's two newspapers. According to oral tradition, pressure from local prominent families forced the newspapers not to run a second article.

The last paragraph of the story in the *Vindicator* reads as follows: "The families of the bandits are among the best in the county and no one believes for a moment that their home training led in that direction. Bad company is the cause of the downfall. No young man can remain much better than the company he keeps."

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Interestingly, the attempted bank robbery occurred only three months after Pleas Wynn and J. Catlett Tipton, who were members of the vigilante group known as the Whites Caps, were executed by hanging for the notorious cold blood murders of William and Laura Whaley.