

Overstreet's Christmas Farewell

A decade before John Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd, Clyde Barrow, and Bonnie Parker, Shawnee spawned its own bank robber with as much flash and flare as his more famous counterparts. James Overstreet, known by a number of colorful aliases including the "Jelly Bean Bandit," "the Prince of Bandits," "the Swell Kid," and "Dapper Jimmie" started his life of crime in Shawnee as a juvenile delinquent but soon graduated to robbery, assault, car theft, jewel thief, bank robber, and possible murderer.

On December 10, 1924, four armed men entered the Federal National Bank, forced employees and customers into the bank's vault, and made off with \$18,000 in cash. The bandits, described as using "Robin Hood" tactics, did not steal of individual customers and even allowed one customer to keep a bag of deposit checks that were not insured. A frantic manhunt followed the robbery and for a few days, another notorious gangster, "Blackie" Thompson, and his gang were suspected. Headlines about the bank robbery dominated the *Shawnee Morning News* and *The Daily Oklahoman's* front pages for most of the month.

The first break in the case came when police arrested two young women, Bobbie Livingston, an 18-year-old fireball, and a more demure 17-year-old Helen Caldwell in Oklahoma City for their part in a kidnapping of a gas station attendant and a motorcycle policemen a few days earlier in Shawnee. The two flamboyant girls quickly received the label, the "Flapper Bandits." *The Daily Oklahoma* reported in the December 12, 1924 paper, "During their brief sojourn and confession at Oklahoma City police headquarters, the flapper bandits were at the two extremes of feminism. The black-haired Bobbie 'kidded' the officers while in turn Helen of the short bob sobbed out feminine tears." Bobbie Livingston boasted they were part of a gang from East St. Louis coming west to show how things were done. At first, there did not appear to be a connection, but soon the two girls would be jailed in Shawnee as witnesses to the bank robbery.

The next day, newspapers reported that a dead man found near a Bristow cemetery had been identified by Frank Buck, the president of the Federal National Bank, as one of the robbers. The man was not part of "Blackie" Thompson's gang, as first thought, but instead an East St. Louis gunman named Joe Marshall, who was married to the 17-year-old Helen Caldwell.

December 14, 1924 newspaper identified James Overstreet, a local Shawnee boy, as one of the bank robbing gang. Overstreet, sentenced to the Granite Reformatory in March of 1923 for his part in six dynamite explosions during the Shawnee railroad strikes, had previously been in trouble for stealing cars and for a

jewelry store robbery in Tupelo, Mississippi. Overstreet escaped from the Granite Reformatory on August 10, 1923, only a day before he was pardoned by the governor. Overstreet fled to Illinois where his gang committed a rash of bank robberies before his return to his hometown. Overstreet was 20-years-old at the time of the Federal National Bank robbery.

Private detectives apprehended the ostentatious Overstreet in Fort Worth, Texas on December 16, 1924 while he claimed to be the son of a Chicago millionaire staying in the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth. Overstreet drew attention to himself by handing out lavish tips to the waitresses in the hotel. *The Daily Oklahoman* reported the arrest on the front page of the paper the next day. "Attired in golf togs and with an expensive bag of clubs over one shoulder, James P. Overstreet, alias Jess Ripley, alias James P. Simpson, alias 'The Swell Kid' and other monikers, was arrested by local detectives and a Burns operative in the fashionable Texas hotel here Tuesday in connection with the robbery of the Federal National bank at Shawnee, Okla., last Wednesday."

Back in Shawnee, authorities pieced together that Overstreet was the husband of the spunky Bobbie Livingston, who was jailed in his hometown. The next few days, local papers talked about the prison romance of "Dapper Jimmie" and his "Flapper Bandit" wife. On Christmas Eve 1924, James Overstreet admitted to robbing the Federal National Bank. In exchange for his confession he was given a 25 year prison sentence instead of death, Bobbie would be given a light sentence. He would get to spend Christmas with his wife before going to the state penitentiary in McAlester.

The *Shawnee Morning News* reported the Christmas reunion this way. "In the women's department of the city bastille, Bobbie is humming and singing and preparing to make Jimmy's farewell party a happy one. The spirit of Christmas prevails in their dismal cell. There, Bobbie and Mrs. Joe Marshall (AKA Helen Caldwell), wife of the slain bandit whose body was found near Bristow, are decorating, stringing Christmas bells and other suggestions throughout their place of confinement. And it is there amid the tinsel and scarlet that Jimmy will possibly say goodbye forever to his pal, his sweetheart and wife."

Overstreet's sentence to prison came Saturday, December 27, 1924—seventeen days after the crime. The papers stated that "for a twenty-five minute robber, 'the Swell Kid' would spend the next 25 years of his life in prison." Overstreet, however, had different ideas. He escaped from McAlester in 1931 to commit at least three more bank robberies before being caught again in Michigan. After another daring escape involving dynamite failed, he was sentenced to an additional 35 years.

In all, Overstreet was credited with 15 bank robberies and possibly three murders. His Christmas farewell to his teen wife Bobbie seems to be the last time he would see her or his hometown again.

To learn more about James Overstreet's bank robbery, read "The Great Railroad Strike of 1922: A City in Crisis, Shawnee, Oklahoma," available through the Pottawatomie County Historical Society.