

aspects of the crime that stand out almost 85 years later.

Perhaps the most important piece of this story was the impression it left on Kaleva. The Kaleva Historical Society asked local residents for their recollections on the event.

Mary Alice Grossnickle said she was at school in Bear Lake when the robbery took place.

"Though I'm not comparing the two events, it was much like the Kennedy assassination in that most everyone remembered where they were and what they were doing when they heard about the Kaleva Bank Robbery," she said.

The death of Ellsworth Billman was a tragedy in the community. His family had moved from Cedar, Mich., and Billman had built the reputation among the Finnish folks of Kaleva that he was honest, fair and dependable.

Billman was a beloved citizen, and left behind five children and his wife, Anna. Only two of his children were living at home at the time of the fatal shooting, his 18 year old daughter Velma and son Owen, who was 16. They were attending school only three blocks away from the bank.

Evert Makinen said he was in study hall at Kaleva High School, and the feelings of shock regarding the tragedy were memorable.

"The Superintendent of Schools stepped into the room and took Owen Billman out of the class to tell him what had happened to his father," he said. "A moment later, the superintendent re-entered the room and told the rest of us what had happened."

Billman's granddaughter Ann Gustafson Beach said that his funeral overflowed the Finnish Lutheran church in



Pictured is an illustration of "the chase" from the Sept. 29, 1934 issue of *Detective Fiction Weekly* (Courtesy art)

Kaleva. He was buried on what would have been his 52nd birthday.

It's true with any story that where memory fails, folklore begins. When 85 years pass by and first-hand accounts are far and few between, the tale can quickly become enhanced or distorted.

Some stories say that Einar Hagelberg, manager of the Union Store, shot a hole in the gas tank as the criminals attempted escape, causing their vehicle to quickly run out of gas.

Paul Hagelberg, his son, recalled in an interview with the Kaleva Historical Society that this was not the case, though his father did manage to shoot out the back window of the car. Hagelberg said that his father was slow to the scene because his rifle was not in the usual spot in the storage room.

"I've always believed it was a blessing my father didn't find the gun any faster than he did, because the two look-out men outside the bank had Tommy Guns, automatic weap-

ons," he explained. "If my father had run out and confronted them with the gun before they got in the car to flee, I believe a lot more people would have been killed."

The story of the bank robbery is not one remembered only by tragedy. On the contrary, it is credited for saving the Michigan State Police.

In the 1930s, the financial strain of towns and cities threatened the local posts, in addition to negative opinions from the public due to their involvement in policing strikes at industrial plants.

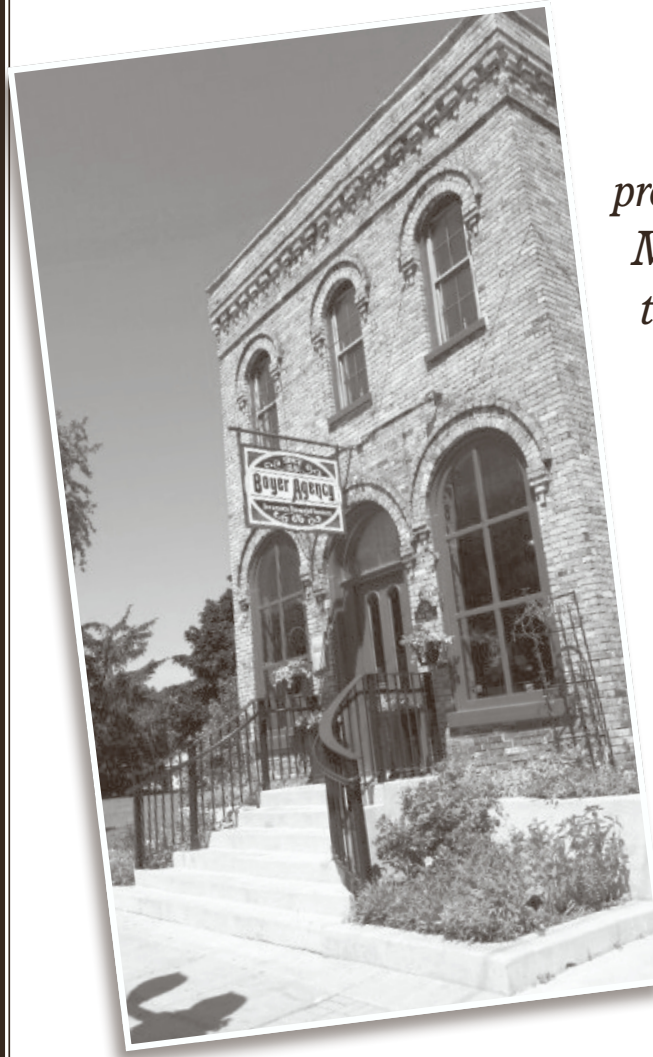
William A. Comstock was elected governor on Jan. 1, 1933, with the campaign promise of abolishing the State Police. However, following the manhunt through which the Michigan State Police posts were instrumental in catching the thieves, popular opinion swung the other way and the department was expanded that year.

The Kaleva Bank robbery was a story that intrigued people across the nation, with large crowds tuning into the radio as the events unfolded. Depictions of the crime appeared in numerous magazines throughout America and even became a movie, a Paramount Pictures film called "Car 99."

The factual accounts of the Kaleva Bank robbery continue to intermingle with folklore and media depictions.

When these legends are unravelled to reveal the real story, it is clear that some of the greatest tales can be found in the true events unfolding throughout history.

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