

BOTTLE HOUSE MUSEUM

14551 Wuoksi Kaleva, MI 49645

Open hours: Noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday from Memorial Day to Labor Day; noon to 4 p.m. through end of October

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East Lansing.”

The pursuit of the thieves recruited an impressive force of 42 police cars, 95 officers and 493 individual dispatches to a thousand or more armed men in the field. All were able to communicate their locations through the Michigan State Police Radio House in East Lansing.

The robbers made the chase difficult, switching to a new car in Baldwin and later moving on foot. Unseasonably warm weather and rain made their footprints impossible to track, and residents across Michigan were on high alert as these men were considered armed and dangerous.

Just south of Baldwin, the thieves encountered a car heading their way. It held the captain and corporal of the State Police, who had rushed from their district almost 200 miles away to join the search. The two got out of the car to attempt to stop the suspicious vehicle, but had to jump into a ditch to avoid being

hit as the car roared directly at them.

Gunfire was exchanged on both sides, but the thieves disappeared into the night unharmed.

Their luck ran out on Jan. 7 after reaching Walkerville. The four men approached a farmhouse on foot to try and seek shelter for the night. Unfortunately for them, the homeowner was armed with a rifle, and one of the thieves was shot as he continued to pursue the farmer despite threats of gunfire. The remaining bandits fled, and the wounded robber was captured.

They failed to evade arrest for very long. A ring of 2,000 officers and volunteers surrounded Colfax Swamp, near Hart and Pentwater. The three remaining men were quickly apprehended and would face trial the next day.

As the wounded thief was transported to receive medical attention, their identities were revealed. Elmer Zellers was the

leader, and Wayne Robinson was the man shot by the farmer. Henry Shelton also took part in the robbery, with Robert Venema being charged as the bandit who shot the cashier.

All four men had criminal records in Indiana where they lived prior to the crime, and Venema had previously served three years on a charge for armed robbery. He had been pardoned by the governor less than six months before his crimes in Kaleva.

In a quick turn of events, the criminals pled guilty and were arraigned and sentenced at the Manistee County Court House. Circuit Judge Hal L. Cutler sentenced them to life in prison in Marquette, set to begin Jan. 11.

The time from robbery to incarceration was only six days. Beyond the incredible speed of the process, there were many

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17

Kaleva Banker



(Courtesy of Grand Rapids Press)

A recent snapshot of Ellsworth Billman, Kaleva banker who was the victim of a bandit bullet in his bank Thursday morning. Mr. Billman will be buried tomorrow, on his birthday. Had he not been shot down in cold blood by the leader of the bandit gang, he would have been 52 years old tomorrow. The body will lie in state at the Finnish Lutheran church, Kaleva, tomorrow between 12 and 2 p. m.

Courtesy photo

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The Kaleva State Bank was robbed at 10:30 a.m. on Jan. 5, 1933, sparking what many consider to be Michigan's greatest manhunt. (Courtesy photo)