



Pictured are three of the four men who robbed Kaleva State Bank after they led police on a chase for two days. (Courtesy photo)

Kaleva Bank robbery a local true crime story

By JANE BOND

MANISTEE NEWS ADVOCATE

A small town bank robbery is something that might be long forgotten these days.

While it is easy to gloss over and glamorize the past, such events were not uncommon throughout history. This was especially true in the era of the Great Depression, where financial crisis caused widespread feelings of desperation making robbery almost commonplace.

The crime that many consider to be Michigan's greatest manhunt began at 10:30 a.m. on Jan. 5, 1933, at Kaleva State Bank.

Four men with guns intruded upon the quiet

village of Kaleva and held up the local bank. Ellsworth Billman, cashier and part owner of the bank, was the only employee in the bank that day besides the assistant cashier Frank H. Wilson.

After a brief interaction with the robbers, Billman was fatally shot at the cashier's window, and the four bandits got away with \$3,000 in gold, currency and bonds.

Shortly before jumping into their southbound getaway car, the robbers cut the phone lines to buy some time to flee the crime scene without pursuit. However, that did not eliminate all means of communication.

A bystander ran to

Kaleva Railroad Depot to report the crime, and the Station Master was able to relay the information to the Michigan State Police Manistee post via telegraph. This telegraph began the first manhunt in history that was directed solely by radio.

As the normal means of communication through phone had been halted, quick-thinking was necessary. The State Police radio operator quickly improvised a loud bell sound by banging a pencil on a glass lamp shade and announced, "Bank call! All stations stand by! WRDS, Michigan State Police,

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