Alberta's Only Armed Train Robbery

Background – Crowsnest Pass in the 1920s

The mining camps of western Canada were wild and sometimes violent exceptions to Canada's law-and-order reputation, and in Alberta the most exceptional were the settlements within the Crowsnest Pass. After the completion of the CPR's Crow's Nest Line in 1898, a dozen coal mines and their attendant towns and villages provided an ongoing challenge to law enforcement.

Perhaps it was the chaotic mix of ethnicities, as immigrants from around the globe (principally single young men) enjoyed new freedom away from family, culture and crowded cities. Perhaps it was the landscape; a wild, unpopulated expanse of mountains and forests. Or perhaps it was a reaction to the incredible series of disasters in this valley – the Frank Slide of 1903, the Bellevue Mine Explosion of 1910, and the Hillcrest Mine Disaster of 1914 are the three greatest losses of life in Alberta history. What a place to live, back then!

A lot of evil things happened here: gambling, drunken brawls, knifings and shootings, and not a few murders. The first policeman killed on duty in the new Province of Alberta was on the night of April 12, 1908, when RNWMP constable George Willmott was shot in the face and shoulder with a shotgun while investigating suspicious characters. After 1916, Crowsnest Pass became a hotbed of Prohibition rumrunning, climaxing with the 1922 shooting of Alberta Provincial Police constable Stephen Lawson during a heated argument with rumrunner Emilio "The Emperor" Picariello and his associate Florence Lossandro, both of whom were hanged for his murder. In fact, between 1917 and 1932, more Alberta Provincial Police on-duty fatalities happened within Crowsnest Pass than anywhere else.

The Train Robbery

The most tragic episode of criminal violence in the Crowsnest Pass occurred exactly one hundred years ago, and involved that rarest yet most dramatic of crimes – a train robbery. On August 2, 1920 Alberta's only armed train robbery occurred just west of Coleman, at a little place called Sentry Siding. There are several theories about why three Russian immigrants chose to rob that train, on that date. They may have thought that "The Emperor" was on the train, with a wad of cash.

The three Russians – George Arkoff, Alex Auloff and Tom Bassoff – boarded CPR #63 at Lethbridge but waited until the train was in the Crowsnest Pass and clear of Coleman before making their move. They moved into the baggage car and accosted conductor Sam Jones, firing a warning shot to get his attention. After robbing the passengers of about

$400 in cash and a collection of other valuable items (including the conductor's pocket watch), the three bandits hopped off the train at Sentinel and headed for the woods. Police were alerted at the train's next stop, the station at Crow's Nest, and the manhunt began.

The Deadly Shootout

Alex Auloff quickly headed for the United States but, curiously, George Arkoff and Tom Bassoff remained in the area, and were even spotted a couple of times. On August 7 the pair was seen entering the Bellevue Café, and police were called. A team consisting of Alberta Provincial Police constables Frewin and Bailey and RCMP corporal Usher planned an arrest within the café. First Frewin, in civilian clothes, walked through the café to confirm which booth the two robbers were seated in. Then Bailey came in through the back door, while Usher and Frewin came through the front door with guns drawn. What should have been an uneventful arrest, turned wrong - Arkoff reached into a pocket for his gun and was shot by constable Frewin, and Bassoff grabbed corporal Usher's gun hand and was shot in the leg. But both wounded robbers still had plenty of life left in them. In a confused series of movements, constable Frewin left the building; corporal Usher was shot while attempting to leave; and constable Bailey tripped over Usher's body while backing through the door and was shot where he lay. The mortally wounded Arkoff fell in the street while Bassoff limped away down Front Street and out of town.

Of the five shootout participants, three were now dead. The chain of events within the Bellevue Café are fairly accurately known, but there are conflicting accounts of the actual shootings. The generally-accepted version is that Frewin shot Arkoff, Usher shot Bassoff (but not fatally), Arkoff shot Usher, then Bassoff shot both Bailey and Usher. Conflicting witness accounts leave room for dissention, however.

The Manhunt, and Another Shooting

After the shootout, many local citizens were deputized as Special Constables, joining the APP, RCMP and CPR police in the search for the wounded Bassoff. The prime search area was the extensive rubble field of the Frank Slide, and Bassoff later recounted how a searcher stepped right in front of his hiding place. Bassoff then made his way past the village of Frank and stopped at the Holloway ranch house in search of assistance. Mrs. Holloway, a nurse, was at home with her young son and their dog (who didn't even bark); she bandaged his leg and gave him some food, and promised not to call the police as Bassoff limped away. She then smothered the phone's bells and called the police, but despite searching extensively with several men and three bloodhounds, Bassoff slipped away again.

On the evening of August 8, a mixup between APP constable Hidson and his partner Special Constable Nick Kislyk resulted in Hidson fatally shooting Kislyk in a case of mistaken identity. Bassoff eluded capture until August 11 when, exhausted and in pain, he was apprehended by CPR detectives at the eastern end of Crowsnest Pass. That same day there was a double funeral for APP constable Bailey and RCMP corporal Usher, in nearby Fort Macleod.

The Trial

Despite the lack of ballistics evidence, Bassoff's trial in October resulted in a guilty verdict, and he was hanged in Lethbridge on December 22, 1920.

A Three-year Search, a Vital Clue, and a Final Arrest

And what of Alex Auloff, the third train robber who had fled to the United States? Over a three year period, APP Assistant Superintendent Nicholson searched throughout the northwestern United States without success. Then, a break – a pawn shop in Portland, Oregon reported a Canadian Pacific pocket watch with conductor Sam Jones' name inscribed on it. APP detective Schrappe was sent to investigate, and after following this lead back to Butte, Montana, a surprised Auloff was arrested without incident. Sentenced to seven years for his part in the train robbery, Auloff died of sickness in the Prince Albert penitentiary.

Postscript – Crowsnest Pass, a Century Later

There is still a CPR siding at Sentinel (scene of the train robbery), beside a modern industrial building and yard. The Bellevue Café (scene of the deadly shootout) still exists in a closed and partially-restored state. The CPR pocket watch (the vital clue which led to the arrest of the third bandit) is in the Crowsnest Museum collection.