

ROBBERS LAID PLANS CAREFULLY

Disguises, Radios and Phony IDs All Aided Bank Heists

By Robert Ruth, Dispatch Staff Reporter
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Des Moines, Iowa-- A U.S. District Court jury last week heard a step-by-step description of the meticulous planning that went into each of the Midwestern Bank Bandits' robberies.

According to testimony from Kevin McCarthy, a 19-year-old former member of the gang, it was no accident that the bank robbers eluded capture for two years while they pulled off 22 heists in Ohio and six other states.

The first step in the gang's panning was to create fake identities for each member, Phony identification was important in buying and driving getaway cars, McCarthy testified.

The gang applied for Social Security numbers by using the names of dead people and by filling out bogus birth certificates. They also obtained phony business cards and employment statements.

Using these documents, they applied for drivers' licenses from various state motor vehicle bureaus. Armed with these licenses, they bought cars, usually in Iowa where restrictions on insurance and auto titles are less stringent than in other states.

Sometimes a vehicle was bought in the name of a bogus company, rather than an individual. This allowed any gang member-- not just the one who bought the car-- to drive it without having to worry about questions of ownership is stopped.

Police check car registrations when they stop a motorist for a violation. In such a situation, a gang member could explain that he worked for the company in whose name the car was registered.

The gang always used two getaway cars, allowing them to abandon the vehicle that was used in the robbery.

The gang methodically cased banks, surveying a wide range of institutions for up to a week before picking one.

A targeted bank would be near a major highway and within a few blocks of an area where the gang could switch cars without being readily seen.

One gang member visited the bank before a heist, noting the locations of doors, teller counters, offices, windows and hallways. Banks with guards were avoided.

Sometimes, a gang member casing a bank recorded his thoughts on a tape recorder. Such a recording, allegedly made by gang member Scott A. Stedeford, of potential targets in Minneapolis, was played for the six-woman, six man jury in Des Moines.

Stedeford, the first suspected gang member to stand trial, is accused of participating in the March 29, 1995, robbery of the Boatman's Bank in West Des Moines. The jury is expected to begin its deliberations today.

Peter "Commander Pedro" Langan, 38, one of the gang's alleged leaders, is scheduled to go on trial Jan. 8 in U.S. District Court in Columbus. He is charged with robbing banks in Columbus and Springdale, Ohio, in 1994.

On the day of a robbery, each gang member was issued a walkie-talkie and a semiautomatic handgun. One gang member drove the getaway car, while the others entered the bank.

At least one robber carried a portable police scanner to keep tabs on law enforcement activity in the area.

The robbers usually wore masks or other disguises. During one robbery around Christmas, Langan wore a Santa Clause suit, McCarthy testified. In other cases, gang members wore shirts and caps with law enforcement insignia on them.

One gang member usually stood by a bank's front door or in the lobby while the other bandits scooped money from tellers' drawers. The gang usually left a fake pipe bomb or grenade in the bank-- and sometimes in the abandoned getaway car-- to distract police pursuers.

Even though the bombs were not attached to detonators, some of them contained gunpowder.

The gang rented two "safe houses" that were used as headquarters. The first was in Pittsburg, Kansas, the second one at 585 Reinhard Avenue on Columbus' South Side. Langan was arrested Jan. 18 after a brief shootout with authorities behind the Reinhard Avenue residence.

The gang also rented storage lockers to keep weapons, explosives, phony IDs, disguises and other gear.