

# Uncle Sam's War on the "Yeggs."

## Walter De Ford, Characterized as the Smoothest Thief in the United States, the Guiding Spirit in Nearly Every Bank and Post Office Robbery in the South in a Decade.

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WITH a record of upward of a hundred post office robberies and as many banks, the safes of which yielded in the neighborhood of \$500,000, "Walter," sometimes known as Gus De Ford, stands pre-eminent in the ranks of those yeggmens who have led in his many raids on strong boxes in the United States and Canada. Ever handy with his gun, he has shot his way to freedom a score of times, and such trifles as shooting down or binding and gagging those watchmen who surprised him while at work are so numerous as to have long since palled on this arch-criminal. Resourceful, unscrupulous, cruel to a degree and as fearless as he is cunning, he stands out as possessing every attribute necessary to a successful yeggmans. He has frequently served time, but in proportion to the crimes committed he has sacrificed but a very small percentage of his liberty.

Scanning "Walter's" description and record as they appear on file in the office of the Chief Post Office Inspector at Washington, we find the following:

"Walter," Gus De Ford, aliases C. M. De Ford, Gus B. Ford, W. P. Horton, W. P. Thornton, C. C. Carter, Lawrence Cockerell, Walter Bailey, William R. Smith, Gus Teck and Bugsey.

### His Description.

"Thirty-five years, five feet seven inches in stockings, weight 135 pounds, hair chestnut, eyes hazel, good teeth, one or two solid gold teeth upper right side, also gold fillings; long nose; build medium, rather erect, except shoulders and head slightly stooped. Cut scar on forehead, right of center, extending from hair downward, showing a deep indentation at lower end of forehead. Cut scar, about one inch long, at lower edge of left jaw, near chin; flesh colored mole or wart at centre of right cheek; three large acid burn scars of left forearm. Usually dresses well, often wears diamond ring, sometimes a diamond scarfpin and usually carries a gold watch.

"The more important post office robberies he has been concerned in include: Rowesville, S. C.; Kings Mountain and Brevard, N. C.; Prosperity, S. C.; Fort Mills, S. C.; Enoree, S. C.; Waverly, Va.; Columbia, Va.; Apex and Youngsville, N. C.; office near Norfolk, Va.; Christiansburg, Va.; West Point, Va.; two offices near Boston, Mass.; Canton Junction and Hopdale, Mass.; Marshfield, Vt.

"Some of his other robberies include Branscom, Canada, bank; Enoree, S. C., cotton mill office; Port Norfolk, Va., car barn; Spring Hope, N. C., bank; McColl, S. C., bank; Forest City, N. C., bank; Denmark, S. C., bank; Brunson, S. C., bank; Boydton and Wakefield (or Waverly), Va., bank; Amherst, Va., bank; Bowling Green, Va., County Treasurer's office; Cleveland, Tenn., cotton mill office; Rocky Mount, Va., bank; Slatersville, R. I., and Amherst, Mass., banks; Quincy, Mass., ice company's office, and Middleboro, Mass., flour mill and laundry."

From the foregoing it can be surmised that "Walter" has led a fairly active life, and judging from the amount of plunder he procured, first, last and all the time, it is surprising that he is so modest in his sartorial effects as to confine his personal adornment to two gold teeth and a diamond ring and stickpin and a single watch.

### His Closest Call.

It was at Port Norfolk, Va., that Walter had his narrowest escape. Had he been captured in the general fight that followed, chances are the infuriated posse would have swung him to a nearby lamp post, that his staring eyes could rest upon the prostrate forms of those who lay wounded unto death by bullets from the yeggmens' pistols. Walter, like many of his ilk, had been skulking in one of the many yeggmens' dives with which Norfolk is infested. The owners of these dens always welcomed with open arms these rural burglars, for they realized that men

of this type spend their ill-gotten gains with a lavish hand, and Walter was looked upon as a "prince of spenders." Then, too, when the yeggmens came to town after one of their raiding expeditions they invariably brought a satchel full of stolen postage stamps, which these dive keepers disposed of for them at a 25 per cent discount.

But on this occasion Walter and his cronies, "Kentucky Billy" and "District of Columbia Slim," had stretched their credit at the bars of the dens they frequented until the breaking point loomed perilously near. They needed funds desperately, and it must be a "quick job," for a "getaway" was imperative. One of the "gay cats" working for this job had been ordered to "locate" a job in a hurry. He decided the car barn office at Port Norfolk was a likely point, inasmuch as its office safe always held a big sum of currency, and, furthermore, chances for interruption during the safe opening were comparatively small.

A dense fog enveloped the little town when the trio of yeggmens and their "stickups" stole into it and made their way to the car barn. It was an easy matter to jimmy a rear window, and Walter was the first to climb through to the interior. "Kentucky Billy" followed him, while "Slim" remained on the outside to see that the "stickups," or sentinels maintained proper vigilance against a surprise. As Walter made his way through the rambling structure the needle-like rays from his flashlight pointed to the forms of three men—the night watchman and two negroes who evidently had joined him to keep him company through the long vigils of the night.

It was but the work of a second to pounce upon the sleeping men, tie their arms and legs and slip gags into their mouths. Under threats of murdering them as they lay, Walter and Billy proceeded to the office and went to work on the safe. One blast of "soup," or nitroglycerine, failed to dislodge the door and others in quick succession followed. As the door flew from its hinges and fell with a crash to the floor, Walter forced an inner door and was rapidly transferring the golden hoard that lay before him when one of the captive negroes slipped his gag and, leaping to a window, cried out an alarm. As he clambered up to the sill preparatory to leaping to the street below a bullet cut short his flight and he rolled down to the sidewalk, shot through the chest.

Emboldened by the general melee that ensued, the other captives wrenched their arms free and each drew his pistol and sent a volley in the direction of Billy and Walter, the brief outline of whose crouching forms was barely discernible through the gloom of the barn.

The shots aroused the neighborhood. Before "Slim" and his "stickups" could sound a note of warning a mob had gathered and a fusillade of shots was fired. First, Walter and Billy emptied their pistols at the two men who were firing at them from within the barn. After disarming them they crouched beneath the window ledge and sent shot after shot into the crowd that had gathered in the street. These shots were returned with a vim, and a hundred bullets crashed through the window beneath which Walter and Billy crouched. While Walter stuck to his post and emptied his pistol at the posse "Billy" reconnoitred, and finding a window on the opposite side of the building which afforded an easy drop to an area or courtyard he paved the way for flight.

### Their Escape.

Returning to Walter's side, the two fired a parting volley into the crowd, dropping eight or ten men in their tracks, and then adjusting rags soaked in mustard oil to the heels of their shoes, a precaution against pursuit of bloodhounds, they sped to the open window and leaped to the courtyard.

Their last round of cartridges had been slipped into the chambers of their revolvers, and these they determined to hold in reserve and not use unless actually trapped by the now infuriated posse.

As the burglars crept from the al-

leyway to the open street and plunged away in the darkness a cry of "There they go!" arose. Like a pack of bloodhounds in full cry the mob started in pursuit, firing as they ran. But Billy and Walter were too hard pressed to halt long enough in their flight to take pop shots at their pursuers. On to the outskirts of the little town they sped, the money abstracted from the strong box safe in Walter's "kick" (pocket), and under cover of darkness and fog they reached the railroad tracks and the hand car "Slim" and his "stickups" had in readiness. A quick run brought them to the outskirts of Norfolk, and once within the city's limits they were soon lost in the maze of narrow and lily lighted streets which led them to a "crib" along the waterfront, where like hunted wild beasts they lay concealed until they deemed it safe to emerge and leave Norfolk far behind them. That night's work, although accomplished at tremendous risk, netted the yeggs upward of \$1,000 each. Once more Walter was in funds and ready to "crack" any bank his "stickups" might have found for him.

The little town of McColl, S. C., also has reason to remember the brief presence of Walter within its corporate limits. This time Walter had as his associates "Conn. Shorty" and "Chicken Bill." The latter was later shot to death by a posse which overtook him as he was fleeing with his share of plunder stolen from a North Carolina bank, in which burglary "Portland Ned" was the presiding genius.

behind the ear with the butt of his revolver which sent him reeling from his high stool to the floor, where he lay crumpled and insensible. A clothesline, stolen on the trip through the little town, was used to tie up the unconscious operator, and his handkerchief was employed as a gag. Then "Bill" leisurely rejoined his companions, told them of his enterprising and precautionary methods, and lent a hand at the safe door.

Two blasts forced the door, and in the outer vault \$600 in gold was found. The inner barrier of the vault was a screw door affair, and three blasts of "soup" failed to dislodge it.

The roar of the explosion aroused several dogs in a nearby stable, and their yelps brought half a dozen men armed with rifles and pistols to the street.

As the trio of burglars leaped from the bank window several shots rang out, but none took effect, and they sped away, halting at each street corner to return the fire. The leader of the little posse rolled over with a bullet in his groin, but the fugitives made good their escape and three days later found Walter, "Chicken Bill" and "Shorty" reinforced by the presence of "Portland Ned," all primed for a raid on the bank at Forest City, N. C.

This job netted the burglars \$3,500, and "Chicken Bill," after receiving his share of the loot, volunteered to buy, at a liberal discount, the dimes and nickles stolen. He then started across country, leaving

times the "soup" was applied and touched off before the stubborn vault door sprung from its hinges and went hurtling across the room. Before the greedy looters, stacked in neatly assorted piles, lay \$5,000 in silver, a load none calculated burdening himself with.

### Hide Money in Belfry.

Opposite the bank stood a negro church. Its belfry could only be reached by a tortuous and perpendicular ladder, and the bell that hung within was rung by means of a long stout rope which led to the vestibule of the modest little frame structure. This belfry, it was decided, should serve as a hiding place for the plunder. The removal of the silver from the outer compartments of the vault to the belfry consumed so much time that none was left in which to blow the inner casing of the vault.

The burglars then melted away into the night, determining to secrete themselves in a nearby forest until it was safe to return and raise the plunder from its sacred hiding place.

One week after the safe was blown three of the yeggmens returned to Rovy Mount and procured the loot. Just where they went for a division of the spoils is not clear, but among those participating in the "raising" of the silver was "Boston Johnny," substituted for "Boston Jimmy," "De Sota Ned" and "Boston Johnny" were captured at Roanoke, Va., and their portion of the loot recovered. They were tried, convicted and sentenced to from five to ten years each in the penitentiary. Walter and Billy made tracks for their old hid-

relating this exploit, "that it was a shame to take the money."

Apparently Walter's unnamed confederates were just as "easy" as the bank, for, he said, he slipped out of Canada without keeping an engagement he made with them, at which time he was to have given them their share of the spoils. His pay for his half hour's work was \$15,000; not a shot was fired, nor did a soul suspect that a robbery had been committed until the janitor the next morning set about cleaning up the bank preparatory to its day's business.

Lee Crump, now dead, of Alexandria, Va., was of immense value to Walter as a "gay cat." He had wonderful powers of divination when sent out to "locate" a job, and whereas in some cases the men at work on the safe he had selected for blowing were surprised at their task and compelled to battle their way to freedom, yet in every case they escaped unscathed.

### A Crucial Moment.

This held true in the looting of the offices of a laundry and a flour mill at Middleboro, Mass., where Walter, "Johnny" McCarthy (West Philadelphia Johnny) and "Bellefontaine, Slim" escaped after twice staring death in the face. The safe of the flour mill readily yielded to the explosive's blast and about \$60 was procured. The laundry was next visited, and while the "cracksmen" were at work on the safe the night watchman peered in at the door. A shot from Walter's pistol caused him to beat a hasty retreat.

He ran only far enough to take refuge behind a protecting angle in the wall, when his pistol began to bark out its alarm as he sent bullet after bullet in the direction of the burglars.

Before Walter and his associates could make their way to the street the air was so smoke laden that even the rays from their pocket flashlights could not penetrate it. Several persons gathered outside the laundry and as the burglars sped across the street they opened fire on them. At this juncture of the chase "Johnny" dropped the rubber pouch containing enough nitroglycerine to blow a dozen safes.

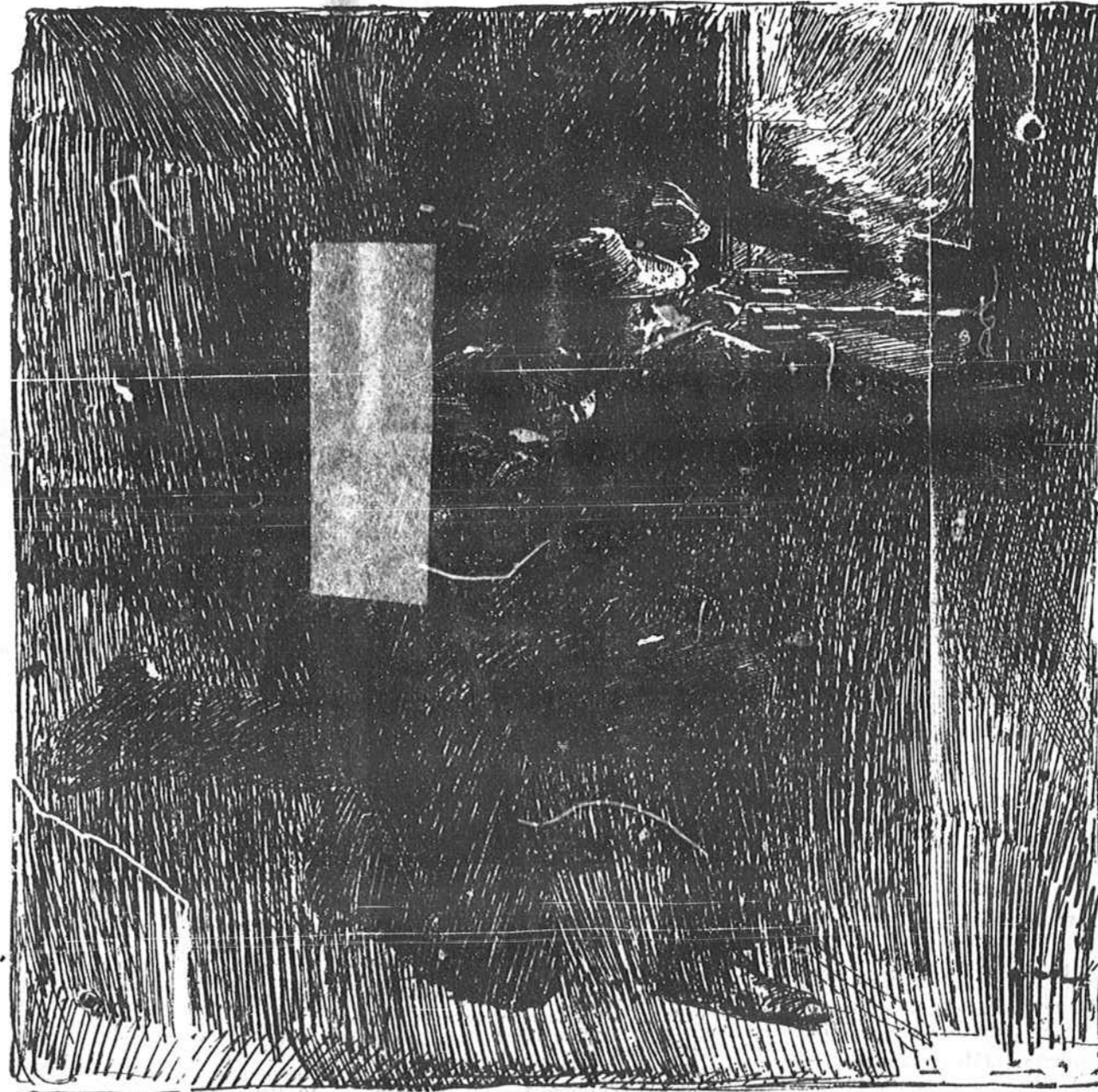
In telling of his experience afterward "Johnny" said both he and Walter confidently expected to be blown into eternity, and to this day neither can explain why the "soup" did not explode. All got away scot free and Walter arrived at the conclusion that the Sunny South held inducements of far greater promise than the "Frozen North," where watchmen and nearby citizens always sleep with one eye open, could offer.

Accordingly Walter made tracks for the South, and after visiting cronies in New York city, Baltimore, Washington and Norfolk he made his way to Charleston, S. C., where he spent a week in wild revelry at the dives conducted by Rudolph Rabens, a notorious "fence" and ally to bank and post office burglars. Whenever such finished workmen as Walter, "Portland Ned," "West Philadelphia Johnny," "Kentucky Billy" and "Connecticut Shorty" banded for a killing something far out of the ordinary might be expected. Soon after Walter's flight from the North, and at a time when his last dollar had been spent in one of Rabens's dance halls, he and his four companions in crime decided to loot the bank at Brunson, S. C. The job looked easy from every angle.

The safe, although of an ancient pattern, was so well built and of such good material that it resisted the several blasts that were applied. Outdone by the stubborn resistance of the strong box, Walter volunteered to procure a drill with which to make a larger opening near the combination disk.

### A Colored Guide.

In scouting around he entered a carriage house near the bank. There he found a strapping young negro sound asleep. Walter awakened the sleeper by pressing the muzzle of his pistol to his cheek. The negro was too frightened to cry out or to offer resistance. Then in a few well chosen and terse sentences Walter commanded his captive to conduct him to the nearest blacksmith shop. This done he found the tools he wanted, and, with the negro slightly in advance of him and urged on by the pistol in Walter's hand, they returned to the bank, and with the newly acquired tools the safe was forced. About \$2,000 was procured. When the bank was left far behind the yeggmens made the negro help them to place a hand-car belonging to the roadmaster of that division of the railroad on the tracks, and this done they leisurely pumped themselves along the rails after tossing the negro a dollar, with the injunction, "Go



Walter and "Billy" Sent Shot After Shot into the Crowd That Had Gathered in the Street.

The bank at McColl loomed as an easy possibility. If there was a watchman employed to guard it by night the "gay cats" had been unable to gain a clue to his hiding place. In the same building that housed the bank the telephone exchange was located, and only one operator, a man, remained on duty at night. It had been arranged that a confederate stationed in a nearby town was to call McColl at a designated hour and thus engage the operator in conversation while Walter and his confederates effected an entrance into the bank, and, if need be, take steps to silence the operator should he become too inquisitive.

Walter and "Shorty" elected to do the actual safe blowing. "Chicken Bill" was to secrete himself at a point near the telephone exchange so that in the event of the operator attempting to notify police headquarters he could be struck down or shot.

While the operator was engaging in an animated conversation with the yeggmens' confederate who was at the other end of the long distance wire "Bill" came to the conclusion that "an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure" and that it would be better to "tie up the operator" before the exploding nitroglycerine echoed through the building.

Creeping up behind the unsuspecting operator, "Bill" dealt him a blow

his companions to escape by the freight train. A posse took up his trail, followed him, mortally wounded him and then carried him to a nearby hospital, where he died.

For the next six months a succession of bank burglaries followed, and in each case Walter's was the guiding hand, although he frequently changed partners. At this stage of his career Walter deemed it wiser to confine his operations to banks rather than to post offices, for he found the police and private detectives employed to protect banks easier to elude than postal inspectors.

The bank at Rocky Mount, Va., possessed possibilities which had long attracted Walter. He had looked the job over carefully and in person. He had scrutinized every possible avenue of escape and contended that should he find an idle night on his hands when in that vicinity he would improve the shining hour. It so happened that after ripping several safes in the vicinity he, "Kentucky Billy," "De Sota Ned" and "Boston Jimmy" found themselves within easy access of Rocky Mount. No "locator," or "gay cat" was necessary for this attack, for Walter had himself done the necessary work.

Entrance into the bank was effected without incident. The "soup" was distilled from dynamite stolen from a nearby stone quarry. Three

ing places in Norfolk and there remained secreted until it was safe for them to make tracks for New York. Here they stayed until their cash was all gone and it was again necessary to take to the "soup bag" and Jimmy.

### Looting the Bank at Branscom.

The bank robbery that Walter is proudest of and the one he often boasted of to "West Philadelphia Johnny" and other noted crooks was the looting of the safe at Branscom, Canada, where \$15,000 in bills of small denomination was obtained. Walter, apparently, concealed the names of his confederates in this operation, for in the exhaustive confession made by "West Philadelphia Johnny," in which he implicated every thief he ever operated with, to say nothing of the confidences he violated that he might escape a long term in a Vermont prison, he gave no clue to Walter's associates.

Walter had no trouble, he said, in entering the bank or in blowing the safe. One shot was sufficient to expose the steel guarded cash, and in less time than it takes to tell it he had transferred the bank notes to his ample pockets, abandoned his kit of burglar's tools, and slipping from the bank, returned to the hotel in which he was quartered, and there remained a day or two before crossing the border to the "States." "It was so damned easy," he said while

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