

WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Outlaws Behind Bars

By Brent Peterson

132 years ago this month, the great Northfield Bank raid occurred in Northfield, Minnesota. On that day, the notorious James-Younger gang rode into town determined to rob the First National Bank. Little did they know, the citizens of Northfield would put up quite a fight. This article, courtesy of the Washington County Historical Society, tells the story of the infamous outlaw brothers - Cole, Jim, and Bob Younger - and their connection to Washington County.

The life of the 19th century outlaw was uncertain at best. Usually on the run from authorities, many outlaws would be hunted down and killed on the spot, with no trial or opportunity for fast talk to avoid a deadly conclusion.

Often they were just a step ahead of bounty hunters who would kill them just for the price on their heads. Some were more fortunate, like the infamous Frank James who tested the judicial system and served no time behind bars.

But thankfully, many outlaws spent the rest of their lives in jail or prison. Such was the case of the notorious Younger Brothers, best known for their robberies after the Civil War.

The three Youngers – Cole, Jim and Bob – were part of the foiled bank robbery in Northfield, Minnesota on September 7, 1876. During the robbery, the bank's head cashier and a townsman were shot and killed. Several of the robbers were eventually killed, but two got away. It is believed that the elusive pair was Frank and Jesse James. But the Youngers were captured after a robust shoot-out with the law in a swampy area near Madelia, Minnesota.

The Youngers were charged with first-degree murder; they pled guilty and received a life sentences at the Minnesota State Prison in Stillwater.

The Youngers arrived at the prison on November 22, 1876. They were addressed by Warden John Abbott Reed who assigned them numbers: Cole was inmate 699, Jim was number 700, and Bob was number 701. They were then processed like every other new convict and introduced to their new home.

Prison Life

The Youngers, like all inmates, were identified in part according to the *Bertillion System*, a method of identification that relied upon twelve body measurements. Supposedly, no two inmates had the same twelve measurements. This proved false, eventually, clearing the way for fingerprinting to become the main system of identification circa 1915.

Within the prison system, each new convict was assigned a work duty. The inmate was turned over to the guard of a particular prison shop, instructed in his duties and given "sound advice as to how to best get along with the least possible trouble." During the lunch hour, convicts removed their aprons, washed their hands in a bucket of water and formed a line ready to march to the dining hall. Once the guard stamped his cane twice on the floor, the men proceeded to the hall.

The rules in the dining hall were very strict – no talking allowed. If a convict wanted something, they had to use silent hand signals to communicate what he wanted. More bread, raise the right hand; more meat, raise his fork; more soup, his spoon; more vegetables, his table knife; more coffee, his cup; and for more water, he held up his cup inverted. The new prisoner would learn these silent signals or go hungry.

Convicts enjoyed three meals a day. Breakfast often included corned beef hash, syrup, bread, and coffee. For lunch, typical fare might include boiled ham, cabbage, potatoes, gravy, bread, and bread pudding. Supper typically included applesauce, white and graham bread, and tea. The menu would change periodically as seasonal food items were added to the menu.

The convicts were required to bathe once a week in the summer, once every two weeks in the winter, and more often if the prison physician deemed it necessary. Each convict was encouraged to attend religious services to cleanse the soul. The administration believed the moral benefit of religious instruction was necessary for all.

The convicts of the old state prison did receive some privileges while locked up behind the stone walls. New prisoners received three tickets entitling them to certain privileges, as long as they obeyed prison rules. They received one ration of tobacco per week, permission to write one letter a week, and permission to see friends once every four weeks. The prisoner could receive a weekly newspaper, if the Warden approved it, and extra letters could be written with the Warden's or Deputy Warden's permission.

Privileges could be taken away if the convict committed an infraction. Common violations included the alteration of clothing, improperly made bed, hands in pockets, hair uncombed, communicating improperly, spitting on the floor, staring at visitors, talking in the chapel or other areas where talking was forbidden. The convicts could also be reported for laughing or "fooling," staying in bed too long, being out of place in shop or in line, and improper dress. The list of infractions went on and on.

Prison life offered a dulling sameness with the prisoner working six days a week with Sunday's off. Once an inmate had served his sentence, he was notified of his release in the morning of that day, and then escorted to the tailor shop for a new suit of clothes. His personal belongings were returned. In the prison's Administration Building the deputy warden would give the inmate his discharge papers and twenty-five dollars in cash, a sum stipulated by law. Just before being released, the convict was taken to see the Warden who would give the departing prisoner a "few words of helpful advice."

The Youngers behind bars

The Younger brothers were considered model prisoners, but over the course of their confinement, they did break the rules occasionally. Jim once entered the dining room wearing his cap. Cole was reported three times during his stay at Stillwater. In December 1892, Cole was punished for "laughing in [the] dining room at Keeper." The next month, Cole was reported twice on the same day, for "making signs to Visitors and throwing kisses to ladies going up the Street." Cole's other offense that day? He was "staring at visitors." These are no longer offenses held against modern day Minnesota convicts.

The cultural side of prison life

The convicts also had access to a prison library, which Cole Younger oversaw. The library had about 6,000 volumes at the convict's disposal. Each inmate was given a library catalogue and was permitted to withdraw two books a week. However, if an inmate mutilated a book he was denied further library privileges.

Music was a part of prison life as the lockup had a band and orchestra. The inmate band was led by a citizen music teacher from outside the walls, and the instruments were paid for out of fees received from visitors, each of whom paid twenty-five cents to tour the prison. The band would play during drill time and on Sundays.

The Minnesota State Prison at Stillwater also had an institutional newspaper launched with funds raised - incredibly enough - by the inmates themselves. *The Prison Mirror* began publication in August 1887 with \$200 of seed money, \$50 of it donated by the Youngers. In the first edition, Cole was given the "honorary" title of "Printer's Devil." By the second edition, he was Assistant Editor. By edition three, the editor had been paroled and Cole toiled on in anonymity, no longer receiving any editorial credit in the future editions.

Cole would occasionally submit items to be published in the *Mirror*, and he was mentioned in the paper periodically for his prison shenanigans.

The *Prison Mirror* is still published, and remains the oldest continuously published prison newspaper in the United States.

Warden Henry Wolfer took over command of the Stillwater Prison in 1892, and brought a radical new approach to prison management. Rather than punishing hardened criminals, Wolfer instead instituted ways to reform the convicts and try to mold them into useful citizens upon release. He did this by instituting educational classes so convicts could learn to read and write. He also allowed more "drill time," or time outside in the yard. With these and other innovations, Wolfer quickly became known as the country's leading prison expert.

Wolfer also saw that the old prison needed to be replaced. The limestone walls were crumbling, and the swamps were taking over the prison yard. Through Wolfer's efforts, money was set aside for a new prison by the state legislature in 1905 and 1907. It was Henry Wolfer that helped design the state prison that is now in operation in Bayport.

It was during the construction of the new prison that W.C. Heilbron wrote his book, *Convict Life*. In 1910, a former Stillwater prison convict named John Carter wrote an article for Century Magazine entitled, *Prison Life as I found it*. This article seemed to be a response to Heilbron's book. Carter didn't portray the "modern prison" as rosy as Heilbron, but did give the warden credit for reforms. In his lengthy article, Carter suggested several things to make prison life more bearable for the inmates, such as allowing inmates to talk to each other and having a baseball field available for the inmates.

A few months later, Wolfer responded to the article through an open letter in the magazine. Wolfer said he found Carter's suggestions credible, and "with the completion of our new prison, we shall be able to correct most, if not all, of the defects mentioned by Mr. Carter."

In 1914, the last of the convicts were moved out of the old prison in Stillwater and moved to the new quarters in Bayport. The Bayport prison is now 82 years old, and to Wolfer's credit, the institution is still being used as a "modern prison."

It was Warden Henry Wolfer who started the national reform movement in America's prisons. It is not known whether Wolfer would have allowed the weight rooms and cable television found in prisons today.

William Heilbron's *Convict Life*, written nearly ninety years ago, does give us a peek into what it was like to be behind the limestone walls of Stillwater Prison. The book is being re-published by Stillwater publishing company, Valley History Press. The new issue tells the whole, interesting story in 190 pages. It's filled with photographs and information that will truly put the reader in the cellblock of the old state prison. The book also includes a chapter written by one of the most notorious outlaws to ever spend time behind the Stillwater walls – Cole Younger.

To receive information about the book, you can visit www.wchsmn.org/store or call 651-439-5956. Brent Peterson is the Executive Director of the Washington County Historical Society.

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