

NEWTON BOYS

We never killed anybody and we never wanted to. All we wanted was the money.

Willis Newton, 1976

The Newton Boys are America's most successful bank robbers. The four brothers from Uvalde, Texas, Dock, Jess, Joe, and Willis Newton, robbed over eighty banks and six trains from Texas to Canada between 1919 to 1924. The most notable thing about the Newton Boys was the fact they never killed anyone or robbed women or children. They decided that it was okay to rob banks because they weren't taking the people's money. The banks were insured, and the insurance companies and banks, in the minds of the Newton Boys, were the biggest criminals of all.

Their career ended with America's largest train robbery, a three million dollar mail train heist outside of Chicago, Illinois. It happened on the morning of June 14, 1924, when the four brothers from Texas and some Chicago gangsters robbed a Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul mail train that held three million dollars in cash, negotiable securities, and jewelry at Rondout, Illinois. Below are excerpts from an interview with Joe Newton, conducted by Jack Maguire, explaining how the largest train robbery in American history came to life...

Looking back, Joe said there was no way the Newton Boys could have planned and then pulled off the mail train robbery alone. "We didn't need no brains for that job," Joe would point out decades later. "All we needed to do was to show up with our guns and our fast cars and follow orders. You can't lose when you've got a real-life cop bossin' the job. It had to be the work of an 'insider'—somebody smarter even than Willis," Joe said. "We didn't even know anybody like that."



However, such an "anybody" did know of the Newton Boys. His name was William J. Fahy, a Chicago postal inspector rated as one of the best detectives in the business by his superiors. He had started his career with the Postal Service as a railway mail clerk, worked his way up to inspector, and had achieved an impeccable record of catching criminals.

Fahy spread word around the underworld that he knew when every big money rail shipment moved out of Chicago. This impressed J. Mahoney, a one-time beer baron and Chicago politician, Brent Glasscock, a nitroglycerin expert, and Herbert S. Holliday, another gangster with some experience in robbing the mails.

Fahy told Glasscock that he could provide a complete list of all the mail sacks stuffed with cash, jewelry, and negotiable securities on any mail train moving out of Chicago. When Glasscock heard, he didn't hesitate to act upon the news. He rushed to Kansas City where Willis Newton was operating at the time, and persuaded him to come to Chicago.

Once Willis and his brothers were in Chicago, Fahy was ready. He took Glasscock and the Newton Boys to the Union Station and pointed out to them how shipments were handled. He told them that all registered mail would be in the third car of the train and that only three of the guards aboard would be armed. Joe said that Fahy told Willis not to worry about the guards, "Fahy said, 'They won't shoot. They don't know how!'"

Willis and Glasscock were old hands at robberies and knew from experience that the actions of those involved cannot always be predicted. Guns were useful, but they decided extra protection was necessary, so they equipped themselves and their companions with their own version of a poison gas. "This was formaldehyde, the same stuff they used to embalm the dead," Joe said. "It's kind of like a home-made tear gas bomb. Willis and Brent thought it would smother the mail clerks and send 'em chokin' to the doors and we could just walk in and pick up the mail sacks."

Joe remembered the details of that robbery as if it had happened only yesterday... "Willis and Holliday went to Union Station wearing overalls," Joe recounted. "They wanted to look like railroad workers.

When the engine and tender had been coupled to the train, they leaped onto the back of the tender. It was 30-odd miles to Rondout where the heist had been planned. When the train got close, they climbed over the tender and pulled their guns on the engineer and fireman.

"The rest of us had driven to Rondout. When they saw our flashlights, Willis and Holliday forced the train to stop. From then on, it was easy goin'. We jumped on the mail cars and yelled at the clerks to open the doors. Another gang member pulled one of the Cadillacs alongside car No. 2105 where Fahy said the loot was located."

It wasn't as easy as Fahy had said it would be, however. The clerks refused orders to open the car and those who were armed fired some shots. "That's when we tossed our home-made bombs through the windows," Joe said. "The windows had bars but the stuff got inside anyway, and you can bet your boots them clerks piled out of there coughin' and tryin' to breathe. We all had on gas masks and somebody thought to put one on the chief mail clerk so he could see to open the car and toss out the mail sacks."

To that point, Fahy's careful planning had worked perfectly. However, there was one slip-up that almost proved fatal for Dock Newton. The brakeman, following railroad rules, asked, and was given permission to go to the rear of the train with a red lantern to warn any oncoming traffic. Dock was ordered to move to the right rear to stand guard and keep an eye on the brakeman. Dock, however, started back on the left side, discovered his error and, gun in hand, crossed the tracks between the cars. Glasscock, who hadn't worked with the Newton Boys before, thought that Dock was a member of the train crew or a mail clerk and fired five shots. "Every shot hit Dock," Joe said. "Two went into one side and one each into his jaw, right hand and shoulder. As you can guess, we was pretty mad. No Newton had ever hurt anybody and no Newton had ever been hurt."

Joe and Jess Newton placed their brother in the back seat of one of the gang's Studebakers and headed for Chicago. Dock was near death, but the brothers drove around the city for two days before they could find a physician with underworld connections. They finally found one, but to protect himself, however, the doctor made the required report to police that he had treated a patient for gunshot wounds. That broke the case.

Within days, Dock, Willis and Joe Newton had been arrested. Jess, the youngest brother, managed to get out of Chicago and to San Antonio with part of the loot. "Jess had about \$35,000," Joe remembered. "Then he got drunk one evening and decided to bury it. He hired a cab to take him into the country and he hid most of it. When he sobered up the next day he decided to dig up the money and head for Mexico. The problem was that he couldn't remember where he buried it." Jess still had a little bit of money that he had not buried, so he went on to Mexico where he spent most of his time drinking with friends in Via Acuna, across the border from Del Rio. A Federal agent located him there, but couldn't extradite him under Mexican law at that time. Eventually the Federal agent tricked Jess into coming back to the United States and Jess was arrested, ending the bank robbing days of the Newton Boys.

Except for about \$100,000, their loot in the Rondout robbery was returned to the government. Joe insisted that except for the cash that Jess had buried, the brothers got nothing from their \$3 million haul. He said they traded their share of the theft for lighter sentences.

William J. Fahy, the postal official who had master minded the robbery, was sent to Federal Prison at Leavenworth, Kansas, for 25 years. Willis and Dock Newton were given 12-year sentences. Joe Newton got a three sentence and Jess Newton got 1 year and a day in jail. The reason Jess received such a light sentence was reported to have been because the engineer of the robbed train gave such sympathetic testimony at the trial. He said that when Jess had approached him with demands to stop the train, Jess smiled and said, **"Isn't this a hell of a way to make a living?"**

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