

L.A. SHERIFFS' MUSEUM

By Chris Miller and Mike Fratantoni
Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum

THE LAST GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY IN CALIFORNIA

It was November 10, 1929. The Southern Pacific Railroad line West Coast Limited bound for Portland, Oregon, had just passed through Saugus and was in Mint Canyon, about one hour northwest of Los Angeles. Suddenly, without warning, the train's engine lurched forward, stopped for a split second, lurched again, then flipped onto its side. Scalding steam poured from the boiler while blazing oil burned the sides of the canyon as it shot from the firebox. Fireman George Simms rushed to the cab and worked frantically to free engineer R.C. Ball, who was pinned inside.

The shocked moment of dead silence immediately following the shattering crash erupted into pure chaos. People began yelling and screaming as the trainmen vainly attempted to calm everyone down. The train contained nine cars, including two baggage cars and two passenger coaches. People swarmed from the coaches that still stood upright, while others crawled out of the windows and doors from those that had overturned. Mail clerks and baggage men now struggled frantically to escape the twisted metal cages that, moments before, had been their steel-barred work enclosures.

Backlit by the flames from the burning oil, the silhouette of a tall, thin man with a blue bandana covering his face suddenly stepped up and said, "Stick 'em up, everybody! I mean business!" The passengers were terror-stricken. A nickel-plated revolver was pointed directly at them, and the handle of a semiautomatic handgun peeked menacingly from the gunman's left pocket.

Just then, George Simms yelled for assistance as he desperately attempted to remove Ball from the mangled wreck. Defying the gunman, two men stepped out of the crowd. One of them was F.H. Campbell, who said, "We're doctors. For God's sake, let us go up there to the engine, where we are needed." Receiving no reply, Campbell tossed his wallet to the robber. Then the physician, accompanied by Dr. W.P. O'Rourke, ran to the train engine to help.

Focusing once more on his captives, the masked robber ordered, "Shell out, all of you, and be quick about it." After gathering just over \$300 in cash and jewelry from the nearly 100 passengers, the robber turned and fled into the darkness. A voice with an English accent could be heard from the back of the crowd, asking, "Is this the wild and woolly west of which I've read?"



By now, Doctors Campbell and O'Rourke had freed Ball from the engine's cabin and begun administering first aid to the steam burns that covered his body. The engineer was the only one badly injured, with most of the others suffering mainly from shock or bruises.

Several members of the train crew had set off to find the nearest inhabited building from which to call for help. They happened upon Baker's Ranch, the estate of "Snowy" Baker, an internationally known Australian sportsman and one of America's leading polo players. From there, they called the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's substation in Saugus to report the train wreck and robbery.

Within 20 minutes, Sheriff's deputies, doctors, nurses and ambulances were on the scene. Engineer R.C. Ball was taken to a hospital, where, for the next 24 hours, his life hung precariously in the balance.

Forming a posse, the Sheriff's Department began a search throughout the countryside, looking for the daring criminal in every hideout they could find.

THE INVESTIGATION

Investigators had no problem determining what caused the accident. A toolbox had been broken into and a wrench and pinch bar removed. These were used to pry the spikes from the fishplates that bound the rails to the ties. When the train reached

the damaged rails, they came loose, causing the train to derail.

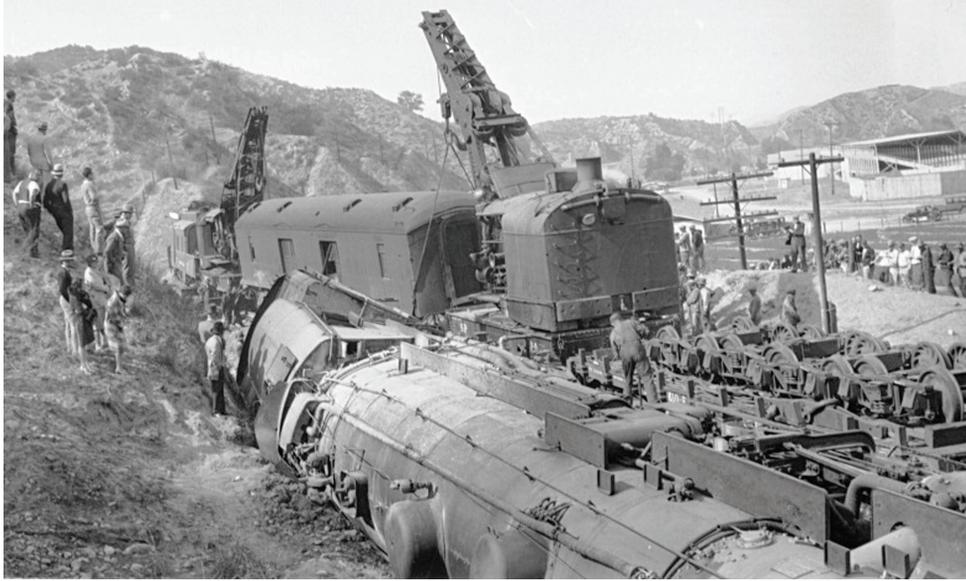
It was clear to investigators that the person who caused the wreck knew railroading and had cleverly sabotaged the track without alerting the engineer. The spikes had been pulled out, but the electrical connections between the rails had remained intact. If these connections had been broken, the elaborate semaphore system would have set up blocks stopping the oncoming train, while warning about the danger ahead.

The investigation — involving deputy sheriffs, railroad detectives and officers from half a dozen nearby towns — was still in progress when a relief train arrived to transport the train crew and passengers, many suffering from shock and hysteria, back to Los Angeles.

It wasn't until the first light of dawn that the investigators found their first clue: a light-colored coat with a torn pocket fitting the description given by victims. Since the suspect had been wearing a blue bandana, there were very few other details except that his face was thin. One victim said it appeared that the robber had freckles. Los Angeles County Sheriff William Traeger and his deputies checked out hundreds of leads on the case without success.

A SUSPECT LOCATED

The day after the train wreck, Lester F. Mead was hired as a ranch hand at a farm in Riverside



Deputies Higgins (second from left) and Jones (far right) teaming up to search attendees at a trial in 1928

County. He bragged to the other workers that he had wrecked the train and robbed the passengers. When interviewed by Sheriff Traeger and Captain Howard Brooks, chief of the Robbery Squad, he said that he was walking along a highway when two men approached him. They asked if he wanted to participate in a train robbery with them. He said that he stole the tools and pulled the spikes, then they gave him \$250 and told him to beat it. He said he wasn't in on the robbery and gave a very poor description of the two men.

Sheriff Traeger — head of the largest sheriff's department in the United States — and 926 of his deputies were convinced that they had the robber, but the two investigators on the case, Deputies Tom Higgins and Casey Jones, thought otherwise. They had a hunch that Mead was mentally ill and confessing to a crime he didn't commit. Higgins said that Mead could never fit into the coat that was found at the scene. Jones whispered that he agreed with Higgins.

DEPUTY CASEY JONES

Deputy Jones had spoken in a whisper since he was shot in the throat by an inmate during an escape attempt at the Hall of Justice just 10 months earlier. On January 21, 1929, Deputies Higgins and Jones had been on the jail elevator escorting Jack Hawkins and Robert Hayes from the grand jury room on the sixth floor back to the upper jail floors. The pair of inmates, nationally known gangsters, were being pressured to testify on corruption in the Los Angeles Police Department and the District Attorney's Office. In order to keep from giving their testimony, they had arranged to have a gun smuggled in so that they could escape. Once they were on the jail elevator, Hawkins pulled a .32 automatic from his waist and began shooting, one of his rounds striking Jones in the neck. Both deputies immediately pulled their guns and fired. Jones' rounds struck Hawkins in the chest, killing him. Since surviving that shooting, Higgins and Jones continued on as partners, working together through the rest of their careers.

During that time, Higgins did most of the talking.

FALSE CONFESSION

After signing a confession, Mead was interviewed by Deputies Higgins and Jones. Five hours later, they received a telegram from the superintendent of the Medical Lake Asylum in Spokane, Washington, stating that Mead had escaped from the institution and on several previous occasions had confessed to crimes he could not have committed because he was locked up at the time. After admitting that he had lied to Sheriff Traeger and Captain Brooks so his name

would appear in newspapers, Mead was returned to the psychiatric hospital.

A NEW LEAD

In order to obtain new leads, newspapers reprinted the story about the train crash and robbery, including a description of the suspect, saying that his face was thin and possibly freckled.

Helene and Evelyn Frith, two sisters who lived a few miles northwest of Los Angeles in Burbank, read the story intently as they recalled a car ride with their parents the day of the train wreck. A man without a hat or coat was walking along the road and flagged them down, said he had been involved in a train wreck and asked if they would take him to the Hollywood hospital. The father sat him in the back seat with the girls, and during the 20-minute drive the stranger explained that he had been aboard the train when it derailed, but never mentioned anything about a robbery. The daughters noticed that the man's face was thin and had liver spots, which, in the darkness, might be mistaken for freckles. They dropped the man off at the hospital and drove away without seeing if he went inside. After reading the story in the newspaper, the two girls told their father about their suspicions and he encouraged them to call the Sheriff's office. They recounted their story to Deputies Higgins and Jones, with Helene adding that the man had a drooping left eyelid.

SUSPECT REMEMBERED

For a full day, Higgins could not get the drooping eyelid out of his mind. He knew he had run across a suspect in the past who had a drooping left eyelid — he just couldn't remember who it was. The next day he was sitting in his office when it came to him. He yelled out, "I've got it, I've got it!" and rushed into Captain Brooks' office. Other deputies in the office thought he'd lost his mind. Higgins told Brooks that he knew who was



The major players in the LASD's train wreck investigation, at a retirement dinner three years earlier

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responsible for the train wreck and robbery in Los Angeles, as well as a later train wreck and robbery in Wyoming.

WYOMING DERAILMENT AND ROBBERY

Higgins was referencing the “Wyoming job.” On November 25, 15 days after the Los Angeles incident, the Union Pacific System’s Portland Flyer was derailed and the passengers robbed near Cheyenne, Wyoming. Although the execution of both crimes was the same, with the signal system wires untouched while the spikes were removed from the fish plates, investigators didn’t think the incidents were related because the traumatized passengers gave different descriptions of the suspect.

SUSPECT IDENTIFIED

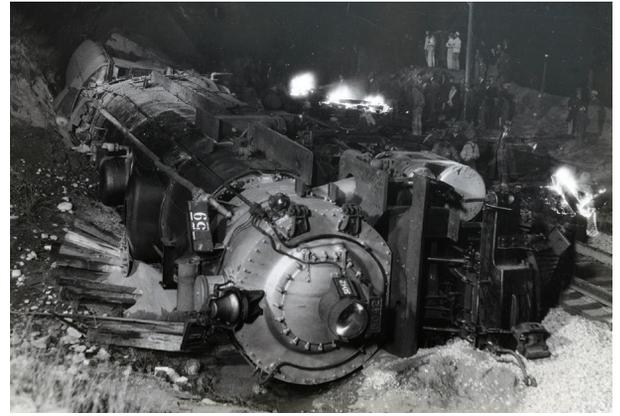
Captain Brooks was not convinced that they had their man, so Higgins and Jones located a photograph of the suspect in the Sheriff’s gallery of mug shots. They took the photo and showed it to the Frith girls, who identified him as the man they picked up the day of the train wreck, specifically pointing out his droopy eyelid. Higgins and Jones rushed back to L.A. and told Brooks that the suspect was Tom Vernon, an ex-con who did time in Pennsylvania and Ohio for robbery. They surmised that he learned about railroads while he was operating a donkey engine within the prison walls of Folsom. That’s how he knew not to cut the tie wires to the semaphore system that would alert the engineer to problems ahead.

PRIOR SUSPECT CONTACTS

Higgins realized that Vernon had come into his office in October the previous year, saying that

he was going straight and talking about his rough childhood. His father, Tom Avirell, was a cattle rancher in the Dakotas, and his mother was known throughout the county as “Cattle Kate.” Vernon was known for telling wild stories like the one he told about his parents’ death — that they were attacked by a band of Indians who came to their cabin, stole their cattle, and hanged his father and mother. Tom said he was hanged and left to die, but was rescued by another tribe of friendly Indians. He was raised by the Indian tribe until he was 16 or 17 years old, then ran away and began working for a man whose last name was Vernon, which he adopted for himself. After riding through the Dakotas, Wyoming and Arizona, he traveled to Pennsylvania, where he committed a robbery and spent a short time in the Western Penitentiary at Pittsburgh. Moving on to Ohio, he committed another burglary and spent time in prison there. As he continued west, his ability to ride horses helped him obtain jobs in Hollywood, working with film actor Harry Carey in his popular western movies.

Higgins had arrested Vernon for burglary 10 years earlier. After spending time in prison, Vernon was released and then committed another burglary; this time he was sent to Folsom. When he was freed in October, Tom came by the office and met with Higgins. A short while later, he came by again and said that he had applied for a job as a fireman with the Southern Pacific Railroad, but was turned down after they learned of his criminal record. Even though he was bitter, he said that he was going to continue on the straight and narrow.



could go to Denver to interview Vernon. Brooks gave his approval, but Higgins’ hopes were dashed when he discovered there was no money to go to another state to gather evidence. Funding was only available to travel to another state or country to pick up a prisoner who was already in custody. Higgins was underpaid and didn’t have the cash to pay his own way. Jones listened to Higgins plead for money, then dashed out of the room. He contacted other deputies and collected \$200 to send Higgins to Denver. He also received pledges for another \$200 that would be sent to Higgins in the future.

SHERIFF’S DEPARTMENTS COMPETE FOR A SUSPECT

Two days later, Higgins was at the Denver Police Department seeking the assistance of Acting Captain of Detectives James Maxwell, who was one of the cleverest manhunters in the West. Higgins and Maxwell checked all of the rooming houses and hotels, showing Vernon’s photograph at each one. They finally got the break they were looking for when a hotel clerk recognized Vernon. Unfortunately, he had left for Cheyenne a week before. Higgins was on the next train to Wyoming — where, just like before, the hotel clerk recognized Vernon but said he had already left, this time for Denver. Higgins returned to Denver, only this time, Sheriff G.H. Romsa of Laramie County was on the train with him. He wanted Vernon in connection with the Union Pacific train wreck and holdup in Wyoming. The manhunt turned into a race between the sheriff’s departments, each wanting to arrest and try Vernon in its own state. As an added bonus, a \$10,000 reward was offered by the railroad and government, which, at the time, could be collected by law enforcement officers. But more importantly, the railroad wanted the criminal who had caused so much damage to its trains and terrorized its patrons.

THE BIG BREAK

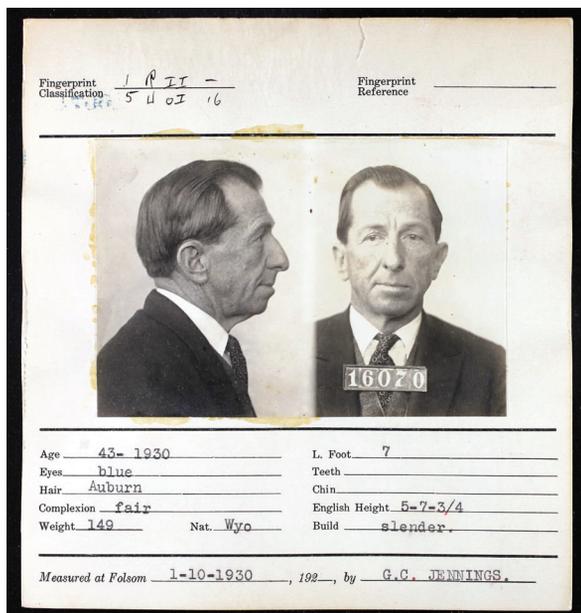
When Higgins arrived in Denver, he was very tired. Being unfamiliar with the city, he started walking up 17th Street from Union Station. Normally he would’ve checked into a nicer hotel, but

AN ALIBI

Vernon wrote to Higgins from Denver; the envelope was postmarked November 14. In the letter, he claimed to have left Los Angeles on the morning of November 10, which was the day of the train wreck. Higgins didn’t realize until later that Vernon was trying to establish an alibi that he was not in L.A. when the crime occurred. Higgins checked out the alibi and discovered that Vernon had, indeed, left on a bus bound for Denver on November 10. But instead of leaving in the morning, he left at midnight, four hours after the train robbery.

HELPING A FELLOW DEPUTY

Higgins asked Captain Brooks if he



Thomas Vernon’s Folsom Prison ID card

he stopped at the first respectable-looking place he could find. Settling into his room, Higgins began studying his notebook and papers to review the facts of the case. He set the photograph of Vernon on the dresser, and it was still sitting there the next morning when the maid arrived to clean the room. He noticed her reaction when she saw Vernon's picture.

"Do you know that man?" he asked.

She said, "Indeed I do. He lived here until two days ago. He left for Oklahoma, where he is going to meet Pawnee Bill so they can write a book together. He told me to forward any mail that came for him to Pawnee, Oklahoma."

TAKING A GAMBLE

Realizing he had found the suspect's exact location, Higgins was shocked speechless. He was finally on the verge of capturing Vernon, but only had enough cash left to get back to L.A. He contacted Captain Brooks, who asked Sheriff Traeger for additional funding. The Sheriff had previously requested money from the Board of Supervisors, who made an exception and granted a travel allowance for Higgins to chase down the suspect. Not wanting to ask for any more, Traeger turned down the second request, telling Brooks to instruct Higgins to come back to L.A. and let the Wyoming sheriff arrest and prosecute Vernon.

Higgins wasn't going to give up. His only hope of capturing this train wrecker was to take a chance. Laying his money down, he gambled on Lady Luck ... and won! Having doubled his cash, he was now ready to travel to Oklahoma, arrest his prime suspect and get back to L.A.

ARREST WARRANT

Dumping all his clothes into a suitcase, Higgins left the hotel and went to the train depot. It would still be several hours before his train left, so he decided to go to police headquarters and thank Acting Captain Maxwell for assisting him. When he stepped into the police station, Sheriff Romsa was standing there. Somehow, he had learned that Higgins was heading to Pawnee, and when Higgins boarded the train, Romsa was on it. Higgins was concerned because the Wyoming sheriff had a warrant for Vernon's arrest. Higgins had nothing to hold Vernon. That night, Higgins got off the train in a little Kansas town and wired Deputy Jones, begging him to wake up a judge, obtain a warrant and then telegraph it to the Pawnee sheriff. He was to ask the sheriff there to find Vernon and arrest him for Higgins.

FIGHTING OVER A SUSPECT

When Higgins arrived in Oklahoma, he was delighted to find that Jones had contacted the sheriff there and Vernon was in jail waiting for him, but

Sheriff Romsa wasn't giving up without a fight. He had a great argument for taking Vernon back with him, pointing out that in Wyoming, train wreckers would be hanged. California had a similar law, but nobody had ever been sentenced under its provisions. Higgins told Romsa that he would demand the death penalty, but in reality he knew the most a train wrecker would receive in Los Angeles was a life sentence. Another concern he discovered was that the governor of Wyoming had just returned home from a hunting trip with the governor of Oklahoma — and now the Wyoming governor was asking for extradition papers from Oklahoma.

EXTRADITION PAPERS

Higgins rushed to the phone and called L.A. County District Attorney Buron Fitts. Fitts told him that he did a great job and to stay put, that he'd see him tomorrow. Higgins couldn't figure out how the DA was going to obtain extradition papers and travel to Oklahoma in just one day.

Fitts grabbed a suitcase that he always kept packed, and ran from his office to the Sheriff's office on the second floor of the Hall of Justice. He asked the Sheriff to send a man by airplane to the State Capitol in Sacramento with a demand for Governor C.C. Young to provide extradition papers requesting the return of Tom Vernon to California.

Chief Criminal Deputy Frank Dewar was given the assignment from the Sheriff, and within five hours he had the extradition papers on their way to Oklahoma City.

Sirens were blaring as Fitts was rushed to the terminal of Western Air Express to charter a plane. His pilot was Jimmy Doles, one of the nation's most famous flyers.

THE CONFESSION

By the time Fitts arrived in Oklahoma, Vernon had made a full confession, admitting to the California train wreck and robbery. This helped California receive the extradition instead of Wyoming. During the hours of questioning, Vernon denied any involvement in the Wyoming train crash, most likely because he knew Wyoming would hang him if he was convicted. The Oklahoma governor explained that he awarded the extradition of Vernon to California because, since the first of the two train wrecks occurred there, he should be returned to that state. In exchange, Fitts assured Wyoming authorities that if he failed to obtain a conviction, Vernon would be sent back to Wyoming for trial.

On December 10, exactly one month after derailling the train in Saugus, Vernon was transferred to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Hall of Justice Jail. Two days later, after giving a more detailed confession, he was taken to the scene of the crime, where he re-enacted exactly what he did

| CALIFORNIA STATE PRISON AT FOLSOM | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Name | VERNON, Thomas |
| Register No. | 16070 |
| Alias | BRINKLER, Walter; TANNER, Bert |
| Race | White |
| County | Los Angeles |
| Crime | Train Wrecking & Rob 1st Deg & Habitual Criminal |
| Received | 1-10-1930 |
| Sentence | Life & Life C.C. |
| Occupation | Stockman |
| Term Begins | 1-10-1930 |
| Criminal Record | B-2681 Eastern State Pen (Pa.) 43865-OHIO S. PR. 25238-San Quentin; -11440 & 12751 Folsom Prison. |
| Num. Order | MARKS, SCARS AND MOLES |
| | 2 yac. upper left; - |
| | Hairy mole center neck back; - |

The back of Thomas Vernon's 1930 Folsom Prison ID card noted his life sentence for train wrecking and robbery.

the day of the train derailment. He said that at first he just wanted revenge against the railroad for not hiring him and had no intention of staging a robbery, but after seeing all the confusion, he realized it would be easy to hold up the passengers, so that's what he did.

LIFE IN PRISON

On Friday, December 13, Vernon pled guilty in front of Superior Court Judge William Tell Aggeler. Fitz made a passionate plea for the death penalty, telling the judge that Vernon was worse than a murderer; he intended to kill not one person, but scores of innocent people he had never seen before and did not know. Judge Aggeler refused to pass sentence until a commission of doctors examined Vernon for his sanity. On December 18, Tom Vernon was sentenced to life behind bars at Folsom Prison. Since he was being held as a habitual criminal, California statutes prevented him from receiving either probation or parole.

A JOB WELL DONE

After Vernon was sentenced, fellow deputies congratulated Higgins on tracking down and arresting this criminal. Sheriff Traeger complimented Higgins on what a great job he had done. Higgins' partner, Casey Jones, congratulated him and shook his hand vigorously. Captain Brooks patted him on the back. Higgins smiled as he thanked everyone and said, "But there's no credit coming to me. Save the bouquets for the greatest detective in the world — Lady Luck. From the hour I got this case that old girl has been right by my side, working every minute, just as she is nine times out of 10 when a peace officer is hot on a trail. And, all fiction stuff to the contrary, I'd rather have her for a partner than anybody I know — even Jones."

Edited by Jan Jenkins (ret. LASD). ☆