

# BANDIT TRAIL IN WILDS OF CHOKOLOSKEE

## Determined Men in Search for Remaining Members of the Gang

## PROBABLY SURROUNDED

## Further Details of What Seems the Last Stand of Home- stead Robbers

A special to The Herald last night from Fort Myers giving further details of the shooting of the Rice brothers, two of the Homestead bandits, says:

"Leland Rice was killed Wednesday afternoon upon landing at Chokoloskee island for provisions. Rice remained on the island two hours and told residents the location of the balance of the gang was on a small island two miles below Chokoloskee. "On leaving, he was ordered to stop by Rollie Wiggins."

"Rice attempted to draw a gun, and Wiggins fired at close range, hitting the bandit in the neck with three buckshot.

"Death was instantaneous. "Frank Rice left the gang Thursday morning and attempted to board a boat, anchored in shallow water of the bay. He was shot in the side by Capt. Fred Hirsch, and it is believed to be a mortal wound. He was brought to Ft. Myers and is now in jail.

"One posse from Chokoloskee is watching the chain of islands to the mainland, and another headed by Sheriff Frank Tippins is scouring the district. Nothing has been heard from either since last night.

"Over \$1,000 in cash was found on Leland Rice.

"Frank Rice had no money. He

claims Tucker and Alderman robbed him."

### Dade County Prisoners

As the robbery of the Homestead bank and the murder of three of Sheriff Hardie's posse occurred in Dade county, any of the bandits who may be captured without being killed will be brought to the Miami jail and held here for trial on the robbery and murder charges. There is said to be a bare chance that Frank Rice may not die from the wound in his side.

### Telegram to Hardie

Any possible doubt as to the identity of the two Rice brothers who were shot off Chokoloskee on Wednesday was removed yesterday when Sheriff Hardie received a telegram from Sheriff Frank Tippen, of Lee county, confirming the news as was stated in the Herald yesterday morning, and announcing that the other two bandits were completely surrounded by the Lee county posse and a posse and it was absolutely impossible for them to escape.

No other particulars were contained in the telegram except that Leland Rice, who was considered the most desperate one of the quartette, was killed instantly and his brother Frank Rice, was probably fatally wounded. The latter is locked up in the Fort Myers jail.

Frank Rice was conscious and made a statement to the sheriff to the effect that he took no part in the robbery of the Homestead bank nor did he do any of the shooting at Everglade tank on the Saturday night following the robbery.

Asked if he would go over to the west coast for any of the bandits who might be taken alive, Sheriff Hardie said that he was uncertain as yet, although he would have to go and bring the prisoners back to Miami in the event that any of them survive.

Sheriff Hardie felt relieved to hear of the shooting of the two Rice brothers without any of the posse being killed or injured, and is confident now that the other two bandits, Tucker and Alderman, will be apprehended by Sheriff Tippen's posse who are in pursuit.

### Henderson not There

Some disappointment was expressed yesterday when it was learned that the Henderson brothers took no part in the shooting of the two bandits, as these men are believed to be in that vicinity in search of the desperadoes but have evidently had no time to get so far around the west coast. The friends of the Hendersons hoped that they would be successful in their determined efforts to overtake the fleeing men.

The fact that the bandits were on their way toward Sarasota bears out the story told by State Sheriff Fish Commissioned last week, that the bandits were probably on their way to capture the gunboat Roamer, which belongs to the shell fish commission. Commissioner Hodges, when in the city a few days ago, told Sheriff Hardie that he had received a letter from a party at Lake Okechobee stating that prior to the bank robbery several young men were there making inquiries as to the location of the armored fish boat and also as to the number of men employed to guard her at night. The men also inquired as to whether the boat was for sale. Since that time these men have been seen in that section, and it was suspected that they might be the same party of men who robbed the Homestead bank. Commissioner Hodges wired back to strengthen the guard on the boat and at once notified Sheriff Hardie, thinking that it might lead to the whereabouts of the bandits. Sheriff Hardie communicated the matter to the Henderson brothers, it was said, and since then these men have not been seen in the vicinity of Key Largo, and are believed to have started on their journey to the west coast, where they themselves suspected that the bandits were headed.

### Crimes of the Bandits

When the four bandits, believed to have been Frank and Leland Rice, John Tucker and Hugh Alderman, robbed the state bank of Homestead the afternoon of Friday, September 15th, and exchanged shots with H. R. Pridgen, the cashier, and then made their escape in an automobile they had hired in Miami, there began one of the most interesting man hunts in the annals of Dade county, and at the same time one of the most difficult pursuits any of the participants ever experienced.

No doubt the bandits had taken into consideration the nature of the country in the vicinity of Homestead when making their plans for the robbery, and knew it would be practically impossible for any body of men, no matter how well versed in woodcraft they might be, to follow their trail with any degree of certainty for the Everglades and swamps of south Florida are interspersed with blind channels, and cross currents are so numerous it is impossible to ascertain the direction the various streams are flowing, and the pursuers would be extremely likely to become lost in the maze of channels running through the 'Glades and swamps.

Then, too, the great expanses of sawgrass with the sharp serrated teeth that rip through clothing and flesh like the blades of a hand saw, the mud and thick growth, would all be in favor of those evading capture, and once they could get a few miles lead, it would be extremely difficult for pursuers to overtake and capture the men they hunted. The bandits were said to be thoroughly familiar with the unexplored regions of South Florida, by reason of years of experience on both the east and west coasts.

### Record of Daring

Tales have been brought from Okechobee by officers of the law and others aiding in the hunt for the bandits, relative to their prowess with gun and pistol, their nerve and daring, and various exploits, as well as the life they lead in the wilds of the Everglades.

"Poky Bill" Collins, marshal of Okechobee, told a reporter for the Herald of various escapades in which

Frank or Leland Rice had been the principal participants, and in which they always managed to elude the officers who sought to capture them. There were exceptions, however, when they, particularly Leland Rice, was wanted for some misdemeanor. "I have had Leland Rice in jail a hundred times," Collins said. When asked the nature of the offenses for which Rice was arrested, Collins said "almost always for fighting. He was a sort of bully and was always in a row with some one."

Dan (Bud) Henderson, a deputy sheriff in DeSoto county, said he had chased the Rice boys to the county line a short time ago. He had warrants for their arrest and they knew it, but they got "the jump" on the officers and despite all his woodcraft and knowledge of their haunts they succeeded in eluding him. They usually went barefoot and only wore shoes when in town, the officers said. By traveling through the swamps barefoot they were enabled to travel faster than their pursuers.

So, according to the officers, the four men, for the others were almost, if not quite as well versed in knowledge of the swamps and 'Glades of south Florida, intended to take advantage of the difficult nature of the country, when planning the robbery of the bank at Homestead.

### Plan of Escape

Immediately after carrying out their plans of robbing the bank, they drove in the hired automobile several miles from Homestead and left the car, and struck off through the almost impassable swamps, evidently with the intention of making as rapid progress as possible toward the plantation boat Job B, which they had stolen at Okechobee and outfitted in Miami.

The boat had been well stocked with food and ammunition. It was left one and three quarter miles south of Everglade water tank, near the railway embankment. It was hidden in the mangroves about forty five miles south of Miami, and no doubt would have afforded an easy means of escape to the Ten Thousand islands where it was believed they intended going.

But the bandits did not take into consideration the fact that there are others in south Florida who know the swamps and 'Glades, and in addition are experienced detectives and knew what the bandits would do and where they would likely go in attempting to make their escape.

### Hardie's Posse

Several men of this type were summoned to the assistance of Sheriff Hardie as soon as he was notified that the bank had been robbed, and these men accompanied the sheriff through some of the most difficult country a white man has ever traveled. During the first day of the chase, Sheriff Hardie remarked to "Hobo" Stephens, one of the most experienced Everglade hunters of his posse: "Those fellows know they are being chased, Steve." Well, maybe they do," drawled Stephens, "but you got to admit they have shown us a lot of new country."

Before the bandits had been able to reach their boat, Harry Morris, a fearless officer and experienced detective with a knowledge of every foot of country from Miami to the southernmost tip of the state, found the bandits' boat and removed the batteries and spark coils. The boat was left where the bandits placed it, to serve as a decoy, as Deputy Morris and Sheriff Hardie knew the bandits would sooner or later attempt to reach their boat and make their escape.

### Driven by Skeeters

Had it been possible for the posse led by the sheriff in charge of the boat to have endured the mosquitoes,

it is possible the bandits would have been killed or captured when they attempted to reach the boat, but the posse left before midnight of Saturday, September 16th, and went to Everglade water tank where others were waiting in the belief that the bandits might come down the railway embankment in the effort to reach their boat by the easiest possible means, instead of wading for miles through the sawgrass and mangroves.

Lights were out and the men had taken the posts assigned to them. Not a sound was made, and all was in readiness for the approach of the bandits, when the second posse came up from the south and declared they were unable because of the mosquitoes to remain at their post.

Then followed much conversation and the men walked up and down the tracks, and paid no heed to remonstrances from their more experienced fellows. Some struck matches and smoked cigarettes, and others went out to investigate the trains passing.

### The Triple Murder

When the bandits approached they were seen by several persons who had been posted in one of the houses north of the section house, but this posse explained afterward that they were not certain whether the men they saw were bandits or members of the posse at the station house, and were afraid to fire for fear of shooting innocent men.

When at half past eleven o'clock Saturday night one of the bandits, said to be John Tucker, approached a member of the posse at the section house who stood on the track with several others, he asked for a cigarette in a perfectly unconcerned and casual manner. After a short conversation between the two, in which the bandit replying to questions declared he lived and worked at Everglade, the bandit retired in the direction of the water tank, a distance of a hundred and fifty feet north of the section house.

Sheriff Hardie, Allen and Will Henderson, Will Anderson, Charles R. Williams and "Hobo" Stephens started toward the water tank on the east side of the railway tracks to investigate. Other members of the posse were some distance behind them. They were within fifty to sixty feet of the water tank when a voice called out from behind it: "Back up, back up!"

The sheriff was between Williams and Will Henderson, and Allen Henderson was a little to one side, and Anderson was by his side. Stephens was on the east side of the embankment. As the voice rang out, Stephens quickly rolled down the embankment and so escaped injury.

A volley of shots followed immedi-

ately, and Allen Henderson fell with nine buckshot in his body. Within a few seconds, Williams and Will Henderson pitched forward, fatally wounded, and Will Anderson received a bullet in his leg. Sheriff Hardie turned the bandits' fire, and apparently was the only member of his posse who fired immediately. The others were taken by surprise.

As the bandit called out "back up!" both of the Henderson brothers turned and crouched, this position accounting for the fact that they were shot in the back.

### Bandits in the Dark

Others of the posse ran to cover and began firing in the direction of the water tank, but were unable to see the bandits. Within three minutes the shooting ended and within five minutes the bandits were gone. They sneaked up the track and went into the swamp at one side of the railway.

Then began a man hunt that is without a parallel in the history of south Florida of the hardships the posse underwent in the swamps south of Florida City, and later among the keys along the lower coast of the state.

The bandits reached their boat some time the next day, but as its batteries and coil had been removed were forced to propel it with a pole. Their progress was slow, but they had many hours start on this posse before it was learned that they had secured their boat and made their escape.

A telephone message over the railway company's private wire from Everglade tank soon after the shooting was the first intimation anyone in Miami had of the tragedy. The operator at Everglade held the switch open and the dispatcher in Miami heard the shots.

### Reporters on the Scene

As soon as the Herald's forms were locked a reporter for the Herald left for Homestead, where the bodies of Allen and Will Henderson were brought, and where Charles Williams, mortally wounded had been brought on a special train from Cross Key for surgical treatment. He died a day or two later. The reporter returned Sunday at noon.

Sunday afternoon another reporter for the Herald went to Florida City. He was accompanied by a third representative of the Herald who remained with the sheriff's posse for over a week. The second reporter returned Sunday night with his story of the events following the shooting.

Every phase of the situation was covered by the Herald with its characteristic thoroughness and accuracy, its representatives keeping in touch with the paper by telephone and telegraph, and occasionally whenever the

opportunity was presented sending letters relative to the developments in the man hunt.

Search Most Thorough

For several days the sheriff and his posse followed every clue and searched every small boat in the vicinity. The bandits meanwhile had been forced to leave their boat and take refuge on Key Largo, where they stole a skiff with a small sail in it.

Through the dense jungles of Key Largo and the mangrove swamps at the water's edge, the posse pursued the bandits. The mosquitoes were almost unbearable, but the determined men stuck to their task. At times they had no food or water. At other times in the thick brush they were

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stung by wasps and scorpions and bitten by spiders. The heat in the thick growth was prostrating, and seven men were brought out one day overcome by the heat.

Thursday night, September 21st, the bandits went to the W. N. Hull plantation number one and secured food and ammunition. They kept the negro caretaker prisoner during their stay, and finally left Friday morn-

ing September 22nd in their skiff, sailing out to deep water out of sight of land.

### Driven From the Keys

Whether the bandits turned to the north and remained in the vicinity of Angel Fish and Old Rhodes keys for a day or so, as was believed for several days, or went southward when they left Hull's plantation, has not yet been determined. They have had ample time since it was last supposed they were seen near Elliott's key to have gone to the west coast in their skiff, particularly if they had a favorable wind.

Sunday night the posses which had been searching along the keys for the bandits returned to Miami for rest and supplies. They were almost exhausted by the hardships they had endured, and probably would not have been able to keep up the hunt much longer. They were all hardened and experienced men, but the strain under which they had been hunting, with little sleep, and exposed to the almost continuous rain, had been trying to their powers of endurance.

The hunt had not been abandoned, however, and there are still men from the east coast in pursuit of the bandits. Apparently, however, they have not come in contact with them, for the telegrams from the west coast declare both Frank and Leland Rice were shot by men living in the vicinity of Chokoloskee.