

An expert safe-blower would, of course, "case the joint" before attempting to pull a job. He would want to know, for instance, if the agent slept on the premises, which was often the case with unmarried men. He would want to make sure there was no bank in town and no town cop on duty at night.

An ideal way of checking things out without arousing suspicion was to join the many unemployed who rode the rods in search of jobs. Freight trains stopped in each town and hamlet long enough to allow time for a bit of reconnoitering.

The job would generally be pulled on Saturday night, allowing ample time for a getaway before the break-in was discovered Monday morning. The safe-blower had to take the calculated risk of having his car stopped by a police patrol and being found with explosives and burglary tools in his possession while on the way to the job. On the return trip to the city he ran the risk of being caught with the loot. Once in the city, he could feel comparatively safe, all set with an alibi for his whereabouts over the weekend.

Safe-blowing was a highly skilled trade and its practitioners took pride in their skill. An experienced safe-blower knew just how much "soup" (nitroglycerine) to use and how to apply it. Too much of the volatile fluid could blow the door of the safe right through the wall of the building. It would also destroy the potential loot. Too little or the right amount improperly applied could abort the job and force the bungler to try finishing it with a crowbar or sledge-hammer — this at the critical moment after the explosion when he should be on his way.

To cope with the safe-blowing problem the Force organized specially trained groups of men that became known as safe-blowing squads. The squads worked in close cooperation

with city police forces to keep track of the movements of known, travelling criminals. They became adept at connecting old-timers in the safe-blowing fraternity with a job by the *modus operandi*. Sometimes the very expertise of a safe-blower could give him away. It was his trademark.

Steve was one of the experts. He stayed with the trade for decades and spent most of his time behind bars. One night he was nabbed by a police patrol in a province-wide weekend safe-blowing alert participated in by all Saskatchewan detachments. Vulnerable premises had been pinpointed and kept under surveillance. I remember spending the night in complete darkness in a grain elevator office somewhere near the U.S. border, waiting and hoping for some action. It never came.

The alert fell short of expectations but netting a slippery eel like Steve made it, in the opinion of the boys on the safe-blowing squad, a worthwhile effort. He was caught with explosives and safe-blowing tools in his possession and faced another rap in the cooler. I had a chat with him in his cell. Asked why he and other old-timers seldom carried firearms, he said he had in his younger days but not for long. "Too risky," he said. "If cornered I might use it and end up at the end of a rope. Only fools and greenhorns pack rods," he added scornfully.

Fear of the death penalty evidently dissuaded some from carrying guns. But the "fools and greenhorns" who did carry guns often found them an invitation to trouble, just as Steve said they would. I remember one case in particular that turned into a senseless bloodbath. It began on an early October morning in 1935 when John Kollenchuk, a farmer of the Arran district in the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border area, was driving along Highway 49 on his way to town to do some shop-