Robbery of Thibodaux Bank in 1842 ‘Exciting La. Episode’

$31,000 Taken Under President’s Nose

By CLAIRE PUNEKY

THIBODAUX, La. — In the spring of 1842 there occurred here an episode as exciting as any piece of popular fiction. It all began on a spring morning 125 years ago, when the president of a bank, a branch of the Citizens’ Bank of New Orleans, was anonymously warned that there would be an attempt to rob the vault.

To forestall such a calamity, the president slept in the bank that night, putting the vault keys under his pillow. A friend volunteered to keep watch in an adjoining room. Both men were heavily armed.

The next morning the vault door was intact, but when it was opened the cash contents of the bank, $37,000, were missing. Entry had been made through the floor, and a hole had been made in a brick wall to get to it.

Under the building were found tools and candles that had been reported stolen several days earlier. Bank officials decided that the previous day the robber had remained under the building.

August Roger, investigating the robbery, took the fastest means of travel then available, a horse, to apprehend the robber. Thibodaux had no telegraph or railroad. His destination was Donaldsonville.

Stopping in Paincourtville, 25 miles up Bayou Lafourche, he learned that a man who two weeks earlier had left Thibodaux saying he was going to Texas had actually been staying in Paincourtville and had now vanished. Roger was certain that was his man.

He learned in Donaldsonville that the man he sought had just taken a steamboat to New Orleans, and for proof Roger found a horse stolen the night before in Thibodaux grazing on the Mississippi River levee near the ferry. Roger was on the next boat for the Crescent City.

With the help of New Orleans police he found the man he sought and a friend buying clothes and later exchanging Union Bank bills for gold, and as the authorities watched a third person came on the scene with a trunk containing the gold.

The three were apprehended as they attempted to board a train of the Ponchartrain Railroad and on the person of the man had pursued, identified as Rambler, Roger found $15,000. The other men went free when they turned on Rambler, who was jailed.

Roger learned that there were four confederates in the robbery and supplied with their names he headed back for Thibodaux. Meanwhile, back at the scene of the crime, there was a new development. A 10-year-old boy, Joachim Lagarde, went fishing in a pond, and when his hook caught a bite he took his catch to the authorities when it turned out to be a bottle full of bank notes.

District Attorney John C. Beatty was alerted and that night a watch was set. Two men came to the spot and searched for the bottle. Later they were arrested and brought before the judge. One was released on bond. The other was ordered to prison.

As he was being placed in the wooden jail reached by a 23-foot high stairway, he leaped from that height, escaped under cover of darkness and hid under a house, where he concealed $1,500 under the floor. Later he was rearrested beside the canal.

Rambler was brought back from New Orleans to stand trial. He was convicted and drew a seven-year penitentiary term.

All of this is related in an old Thibodaux Sentinel, a local newspaper of that time, and it is noted that the man pursued by Roger, identified in that publication as Henry W. Rambler, was defended by attorney Wellman Nicholls of Donaldsonville at his trial.