

The Great Maleny Safe Robbery of 1937

In the early hours of 1st December 1937, the night air of the small town of Maleny was shattered by a thunderous explosion. As the smoke cleared, down in the bed of Obi Obi creek, two men rifled through a shattered safe. From the nearby streets the two men could hear shouts and see torches flashing as a crowd ran down towards the creek. Grabbing what they could from the safe the two men sprinted into the darkness.

In 1937, Maleny was a quiet little town in the hills above what would later become the Sunshine Coast. The majority of the area was given over to dairying or timber cutting. The main street, lined with shops, wound uphill from the bridge over Obi Obi Creek. It was not far from this bridge, on the site of the former Maleny butter factory, that Victor Alexander Magee had his shop, a drapery which sold Manchester, clothing and shoes. Victor Magee worked for his family drapery business in Brisbane and would regularly travel to Maleny with samples and wares. It was during these visits he saw an opportunity to open a branch of the family drapery business in the town. Taking over the premises at the lower end of the main street, on 6th December, 1926, he opened Magee & Co. General Drapers.



Source: Maleny Historical Society

At about 2am on Wednesday, 1st December, 1937, Cyril William McKillop, a butcher, noticed a light on in Magee & Co and immediately phoned Victor Magee. Upon hearing the news Magee immediately phoned the Landsborough Police Station, Maleny being too small to have its own, before heading towards his shop. However, before he was able to investigate there was a loud explosion. As Magee and other townspeople rushed to the site they found the safe blown apart beneath the bridge over the creek, some small change scattered around on the ground and the cash draw missing. In the darkness two men were seen running away on the other side of the creek but, despite an extensive search of the area, they were not found. On investigating the scene at Magee's store it was found the thieves had broken a large hole in a fibro wall to gain access. Exiting by the back door, they had used a grocer's barrow to wheel the safe down to the creek.

Despite their efforts, all the thieves managed to make off with were two leather overcoats to the value of about £20, and cash worth about £3. However, despite the meagre haul the spectacular manner in which they had carried out the robbery ensured the two men were the subject of an intensive manhunt. At the time it was thought they had made their getaway in a waiting car and the police in Landsborough stopped and search any cars coming from the direction of Maleny. A search was made of the area around Maleny but no trace of the men was found.

As news of the robbery spread, the police in Brisbane were told to be on the lookout for any suspicious characters. Among other things they were searching all trains heading towards Brisbane. At 3.45am on Thursday, a south bound freight train pulled into Zillmere station. Plainclothes constables Moses Murphy and William Brown from the Criminal Investigation Branch and the stationmaster searched the train as it waited there. As they approached an open truck they spotted a young man crouched in the corner wearing a leather overcoat. As Constable Murphy and the stationmaster approached him, the man hurriedly attempted to push past them. Struggling with the two men, he managed to break free and sprinted away. At that moment, another man wearing a leather overcoat appeared from beneath a tarpaulin covering a nearby carriage. He ran off into the darkness, leaving his hat behind and abandoning the leather overcoat as he went. Constable Murphy pursued the first man out of the station and onto Zillmere Road while Constable Brown took off after the second man. Seeing the first man getting away from him, Constable Murphy drew his revolver and, calling on the man to stop, fired two warning shots. However, the man only ran faster, jumping a fence and fleeing through backyards. Chasing him over several fences and out on to Murphy Road, Constable Murphy again fired a warning shot calling on the man to stop. This time he stopped.

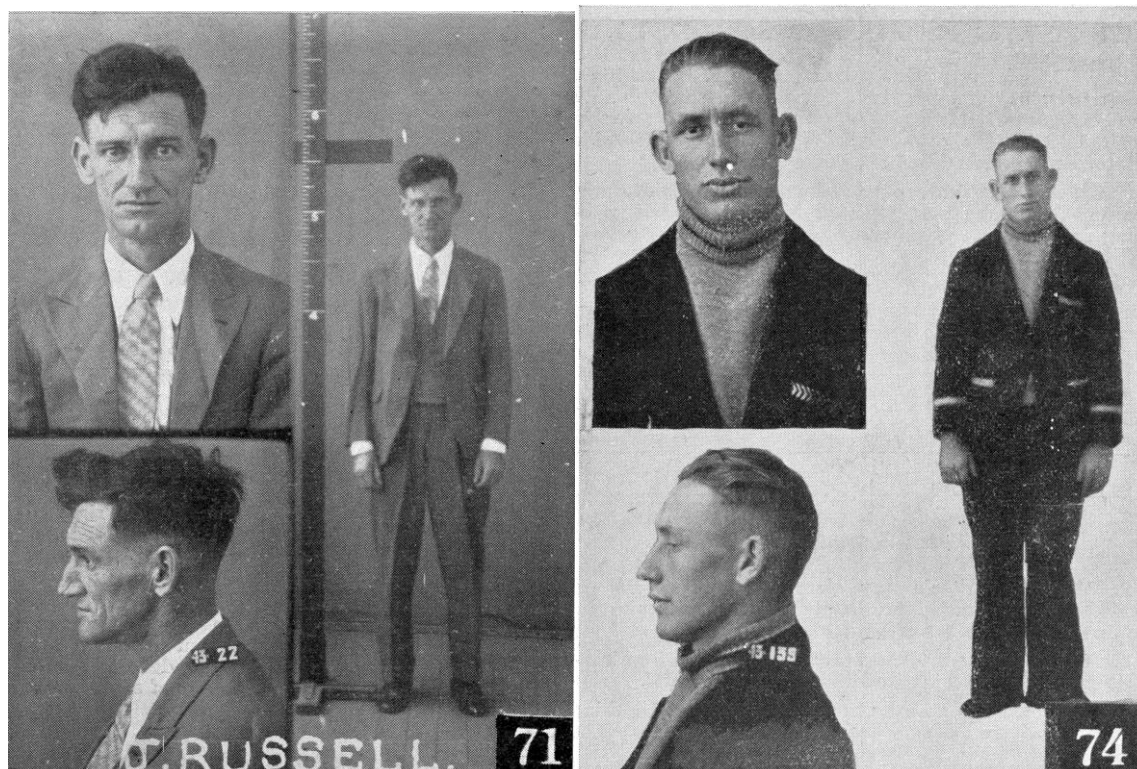
Catching up with him, Constable Murphy asked the man why he had run away, to which he replied, *“It’s pretty rough a man getting pinched for train jumping.”* However, Murphy had a clear idea of who he was dealing with and immediately stated that he believed the man he had just caught was Ronald Stokes and the other man had been Jacob Russell. The young man confirmed that he was indeed Ronald Stokes but refused to say who the other man had been. Later, upon being questioned, having been caught wearing one of the leather overcoats stolen from Magee’s, the man admitted that he and ‘his mate’ had carried out the safe robbery in Maleny, saying, *“I suppose I’d better make a clean breast of it. I suppose I’ll get a good stretch for it...”*

In the meantime an extensive manhunt was mounted for the second man who had fled Zillmere railway station. Despite being pursued for some distance in the direction of Geebung by Constable Brown the man managed to escape by fleeing into dense scrub. The suspect was later spotted on Robinson Road, Geebung, by a milkman doing his early morning deliveries. Around 100 police officers and even police cadets were brought in to search the area but there was no sign of the fugitive. Convinced that the man who had escaped was Jacob Russell, the police issued an arrest warrant in his name. On Saturday, 4th December a man fitting Russell’s description was seen near a picture theatre in Fortitude Valley. Russell was known to frequent the Shamrock Hotel in the Valley as well as the notorious ‘The Hole in the Wall’ cafe on Ann Street in the Valley. However, by the time the police were able to throw a cordon around the area, he was nowhere to be found.

There was no sign of the wanted man until a few days later when police in Toowoomba were made aware that a man fitting the fugitive’s description had been spotted in the town. At about 8am on Tuesday 7th December Detective Sergeant Elford and Detective Constable Nesbitt were driving along Campbell Street when they spotted the man they were looking for. As the police car approached, the man fled into a lane connecting Campbell Street with Norwood Street. The lane was too narrow for the police car so the officers took after the fugitive on foot. In Norwood Street the man jumped a fence and attempted to hide in a hedge. However, closely pursued by Detective Sergeant Elford, the man made a break for Mort Street and was eventually overtaken after running back on to Campbell Street. The police were then able to confirm that the man they had arrested was indeed Jacob Russell. However, when told an arrest warrant had been issued for him because of the safe robbery in Maleny he claimed he had been in Toowoomba on that day and denied all knowledge of the event.

Of the two men arrested for the robbery, Ronald Hubert Stokes was the younger, twenty five years old at the time of his arrest but already possessed of an extensive criminal history. He had a long string of convictions in New South Wales and Queensland for robbery, theft and petty crimes. The previous year, in August 1936, he had been sentenced to a year in prison for bag snatching in Brisbane and would have been out of prison only

about three months before carrying out the robbery in Maleny. Russell was the senior of the two, 32 years old, and with a long criminal history and well known to the police. He was regarded as highly dangerous, “*a daring and desperate criminal; of a violent disposition; is invariably armed when operating and will not hesitate to shoot when cornered*”. Like Stokes, he had a long string of convictions for breaking into shops, warehouses, factories and car theft. He was also known to have considerable experience in using explosives to blow safes, having done so on several previous occasions. Indeed, Russell cannot have been out of prison very long either as, in June 1932, he had been sentenced to five years for breaking into the office of Northgate railway station and blowing open the safe. It is quite likely Stokes and Russell had become acquainted with each other while they were in prison.



Jacob Russell (L) and Ronald Stokes (R)

Source: Queensland Police Gazette

When the case came to trial in mid-December, 1937, Ronald Stokes pleaded guilty. He explained that he and his mate had ‘jumped’ a train at the Bowen Hills railway yards and got off at Landsborough before making their way to Maleny. After picking a store to rob, Stokes said he had first tried to kick in the front door of Magee’s shop but instead had to break through the fibro wall. After moving the safe and blowing it open beneath the bridge, he grabbed the cash draw and they ran as people came to investigate. However, after a short distance he threw the whole cash draw away because it had rattled too much when he ran. After they had fled the scene it had started raining and they were soaked as they hid in bushes by the side of the road while cars searching for them went past. They then walked a fair distance in the rain before encountering a mail truck heading north. Clambering on to the back of it they ended up in Gympie where they managed to get on the south bound freight train, their journey coming to an abrupt end at Zillmere.

Stokes seemingly hoped for leniency due to his early guilty plea and asked the judge to give him a chance. Despite this, due to his previous convictions, he was sentenced to three years in prison. But, when pressed about the identity of the other man Stokes consistently refused to say anything, only that it had not been Russell. As such, Russell pleaded not guilty to the charge, claiming he had nothing to do with it. Regardless, due to his long criminal history, experience in blowing safes and the fact that he had not long since been released from prison,

the police were convinced that Russell had been the second man, even going so far as to demonstrate that the hat discarded at Zillmere fit Russell's head.

However, when the trial commenced in June, 1938, the prosecution case quickly ran into trouble. When the first witness for the prosecution, Constable Murphy, took the stand, he was questioned as to how he could be so sure that Russell had been the second man. With no clear identification of the second man, no evidence found to link Russell to the crime and Stokes' assertion that he had not been involved, the case against Russell quickly collapsed. The prosecution withdrew the case and Russell was released.

The robbery of Magee's had been no well-planned heist but instead was a rather shambolic affair. Despite going to the effort of traveling from Brisbane to Maleny, breaking into Magee's, manhandling the safe to beneath the Obi Obi Bridge and blowing it apart, all they got away with was a small amount of cash which was quickly thrown away and two leather overcoats, one of which was discarded, the other leading to a prison sentence.

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