

The Nolan Gang Prison Escape by Dan McDavitt

On September 11, 1952, folks in Union County awoke to startling news. The *Lewisburg Journal* reported that the previous morning, September 10th, three desperadoes had escaped from the “Big House.”

Before 6:00 AM, in heavy fog, Joseph Nolan, Ballard Nolan and Elmer Schuer squeezed through the sawed bars of their second floor cell, scaled the 20’ wall and made their way toward Route 15. Near Route 15, the trio broke into a residence terrorizing the three occupants. The wife and daughter were locked in an upstairs bedroom. The husband, in his bedclothes, was forced to drive the trio to Donehower’s Sporting Goods where they intended to procure weapons.

Climbing through a window, the wife notified the prison of the escape. Downtown, the fugitives were entering Donehower’s when their barefooted guide ran across the street yelling for help. Panicked, the gang drove south on 6th Street, and encountered Bucknell employee, Mickey DeWire. Mr. DeWire, less than helpful, was stabbed four times. Wearing a steel support belt, DeWire wasn’t seriously injured. The “Nolan Gang” was last seen in Lewisburg turning south onto Route 15.

A thirteen state alert went out to set up roadblocks.

The Gang re-appeared in Whitemarsh Township, north of Philadelphia, on the 11th. They broke into a home and held the family of seven captive for nineteen hours as they took turns sleeping and eating. Then, in quick succession, they held up a gun shop in West Reading and robbed a diner in Hamburg.

For the next several days, AP stories speculated where the Gang had been, where they were going and described them as “desperate, vicious and gun crazy”. False sightings were reported, one of which resulted in nine railroad cars of PA State Policemen rushing to Wilmington.

Monday the 15th, in the Bronx, NY, the gang robbed a gun shop, on the 16th a bank. Getting away they kidnapped a doctor and had him drive them to Manhattan.

The *New York Daily News* of September 22, 1952, reported that an informant notified New York City Police of his ejection from his girlfriend’s 7th floor, 140th Street apartment. The Police – 31 strong – responded with an early Sunday raid. Squads were placed on the roof, at dumbwaiters, on the first floor, and at the apartment’s two doors. Breaking down the kitchen door, the lead squad proceeded through the apartment. Two naked ladies were cowering behind a shower curtain. The front door was opened for the second squad. A locked bedroom door was discovered. A warning “Come out with your hands up” was given. A second warning (indicating the police had a machine gun and “blowing out brains”) was given. A Kentucky drawl replied, “You need a search warrant.” The door to the 10’ x 15’ room was forcibly opened. Shirtless, Joseph Nolan was standing on a bed, his “left hand extended pleadingly, right arm behind his back yelling, 'don't shoot'.” Joseph Nolan brought his right hand around. Detective LaMonica saw the .45 and leaped between the machine gunner and Joseph, pushing the gun hand aside. The machine gun opened fire, the fugitives began shooting, and soon Joseph Nolan, Ballard Nolan (crouching behind a dresser) and Detective LaMonica were dead. Elmer Schuer, under the bed with a third naked lady, relinquished his weapon and was taken alive. Afterwards, the police found machine guns, shot guns, pistols and revolvers in the apartment.

This story was pieced together from AP articles appearing in various cities during September 1952. Often “Nolan” was “Nolen;” once, “Schuer” was “Smith;” ages varied considerably as did the home of the Nolans, possibly Kentucky. The Lewisburg family was either Heitman or Heilman. The brothers were shot between three and fifty times, and the Gang stole either three, four or five vehicles, although the NYPD indicated they recovered the Pontiac taken during their “first, wild dash for liberty” in Union County, PA.



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