

'Case of the missing victims' still 'unsolved' after 50 years

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
WESTFORD — "Gunmen strip 20 firemen to undies, flee with \$200" — That was the headline on a news story 50 years ago that still brings a chuckle to many old timers in town.

It was the coldest night of the new season back in 1930 when the usual gang of card players lighted the wood stove on the upper floor of the Center fire station for their regular Friday night poker game.

The stove, with its long smoke stack, soon heated the large, open upper floor of the building which for nearly a century housed students of Westford Academy. This evening session, however, was not to be devoted to Latin, Greek and logic, but to the more mundane skills of card playing — and its risks and opportunities.

THE DATE WAS December 8 and the function offered an opportunity to fatten the family pocketbook for the upcoming Christmas season.

The affair turned out to be a dead loss to some 20 townspeople as you shall read from the story below, which appeared on the front page of a Boston newspaper the next day. The headline read as above, the details follow:

"Stripped to their underwear shorts by six gunmen after they had been held up and robbed of \$200 while participating in their weekly social and card games, 20 members of the Westford Volunteer Fire Department were left stranded on the second floor of their clubroom shortly after midnight this morning.

"**HARDLY DARING** to venture into the chilly morning air, the gallant men, who had stood in readiness all through the early part of the night for any emergency, waited several minutes before a 'volunteer' finally came forth to spread the alarm.

"Police Chief John F. Sullivan was eventually reached and, after given details of the holdup, made

Westford memories

preparations for the removal of the men to their homes.

"Flourishing pistols and with handkerchiefs over their faces, six young men entered the hall with orders for everyone to stand still and obey orders.

"Off with your clothes, all of you," was the first demand.

"One by one, the victims shed their apparel until all were standing in their shorts.

"**WHILE TWO OF** the holdup men gathered up the discarded clothing, the remaining four kept them with their hands raised.

"All of the clothing was taken to the holdup men's machine and taken away in their flight.

"State and local police were notified and joined in the search for the sextet who were reported to have fled in the direction of Lowell and Boston. Wallets taken from the men were found strewn

along the highway by pursuing police."

IF THE NEWSPAPER considered this a "juicy" story, good enough for their front page, the townspeople found it even more spicy. Immediate checking into "who was where" on that bitter cold night produced more alibis than Westford had collected for generations.

To this date, no Westford man has admitted to being within three miles of the fire station that Friday night. If the police had been able to catch any or all of the holdup men, it was doubtful the officers could have produced any witnesses.

A heart-breaking scene occurred toward the end of the evening, it was reliably reported long after the incident. After the holdup men issued a stern warning, as they left, that no one move, one brave firemen finally located his pants and the keys to his car.

Rushing out into the frigid night, he headed for his Model A to spread the alarm or, courageous man as he was, to chase the culprits. Turning the ignition key and stepping on the starter, he found that his battery was dead.

And so was his bank account!