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GANGSTER JOHN ASHLEY LOST EYE IN BANK ROBBERY

By HAMPTON DUNN

STUART --- On a side street in this placid East Coast community sits the building once occupied by the Bank of Stuart, where violence exploded early one morning in 1915. The Ashley Gang was active again!

Around the turn of the century, Papa Joe Ashley and his family of five sons, John, Bill, Ed, Frank and Bob, had settled near here, attracted to the area to seek work on Henry Flagler's railroad construction. All the men in the family were expert marksmen and hunters, a skill which later was used in their criminal gang activities.

The first incident involving "The Ashley Gang" happened in 1911 when the body of Seminole Indian DeSoto Tiger was churned up by a dredge near Fort Lauderdale. John Ashley was accused of having rubbed the Indian out after stealing $1200 worth of otter skins from him. The heat was so great John went out west. He returned in 1914, was jailed, but escaped. The next big job for the Ashleys, John, his brother Bob and another young man called Kid Lowe netted $4500 in that heist In a shooting exchange that took place outside the bank, John was struck in the jaw by a bullet and lost his eye. He later in life had an artificial eye.

From then on, the Ashleys were involved in sensational robberies, banks, railroads and other businesses were their targets There were escapes and shootouts. Usually one of the Ashley gang was killed as well as a law enforcement officer. The gang expanded its operation during the period of Prohibition, engaging in moonshining, rum-running and high-jacking. They were blamed, sometimes correctly so, for about every major crime that took place in South Florida for a decade or more. (Photo shows old Seminole Bank, which also robbed by the Ashleys).

The end came on the night of Nov. 1, 1924, when a posse headed by St. Lucie County Sheriff J. R. Merritt, set up a road block at the Sebastian River bridge. The officers wiped out the remaining key figures of the gang--John Ashley, Hanford Mobley, Ray Lynn and Bob Middleton. And closed out a boisterous chapter in the wild days of the Florida frontier.