

Modern train-robbers caught and await trial

By Jeffrey Gold
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEWARK, N.J. — Instead of six-shooters and horses, these modern-day train robbers used two-way radios, night-vision goggles and bolt cutters. Instead of bandannas, they had ski caps monogrammed "CRB," for Conrail Boyz.

And while alleged ringleader Edward Mongon is unlikely to become legend, authorities say his gang lasted longer and stole far more than Jesse James or Butch Cassidy ever did.

Train robbery, a quintessentially 19th-century crime, is rolling on into the 21st century.

Along with the technology, the targets have changed: The old gangs preyed mostly on passenger trains, snatching gold and cash from riders and the baggage-car safe. Today, freight trains loaded with such merchandise as electronics, cigarettes and tires are the lure.

"If you can sell it on the street easy, they'll get it," said James Beach, a captain for the Union Pacific railroad police in Fort Worth, Texas.

Law enforcement authorities have responded with advanced technology of their own. Just as Pinkerton men used the newfangled telegraph to track Cassidy, today's railroad police use computers to pinpoint where cargo disappeared, and infrared scopes that reveal people hiding in rail yards.

Most freight bandits are hit-and-run artists whose strikes have little planning, such as those conducted by street gangs in Chicago and Los Angeles, or by Mexican gangs that dash across the border in Texas and New Mexico.

Many such gangs do not measure up in sophistication to the Conrail Boyz, a ring centered in northern New Jersey.

Steven Hanes, director of Norfolk Southern's police force, pronounced the Conrail Boyz the "largest single gang ever to attack North American railroads."

Conrail police had made dozens of arrests of Conrail Boyz since 1992, but mostly on relatively light charges, and they were back on the streets quickly. Over the summer, though, 24 alleged members were charged in a racketeering indictment and all but one of them were rounded up.

The Conrail Boyz helped make Newark — which has the East Coast's busiest container port and is served by hundreds of trains — a hotbed of train robbery.

Other lucrative areas for theft include Chicago, Dallas, East St. Louis, Ill., and Memphis, Tenn., because the freight lines run through poor and usually rough parts of town.

"These young gang bangers will jump on moving trains, grab stuff, throw it off, and run away."

— James Beach
Union Pacific railroad police

"Our trains have to move slowly through some areas, and these young gang bangers will jump on moving trains, grab stuff, throw it off, and run away," Beach said. Engineers often cannot see the thieves, because freight trains can be 150 cars long.

In the case of the Conrail Boyz, train jumpers would find out which container cars had valuable cargo, then radio the information to cohorts. The cohorts would then pose as rail workers and ask dispatchers which siding the train was headed for. Once the train had stopped, the thieves would toss the merchandise into trucks.

The gang went for designer clothes and other merchandise. In one brazen heist, members drove

a container with 17,496 PlayStation units worth \$5 million out of the Jersey City yard in 2001, according to Norfolk Southern police. The gang then fenced the goods.

Train robberies are rare, considering the billions of dollars of cargo rolling on 173,000 miles of rail in North America. Freight losses to theft and pilferage have been conservatively estimated at \$9.5 million to \$14.6 million a year over the past six years, totaling \$11.4 million in 2002, according to the Association of American Railroads. That is a fraction of a percent of industry's 2002 revenue of \$42.9 billion.

Beach said he believes theft is more common now in the post-Civil War era of the James Gang, if only because the country has grown in population and there is so much more to steal.

Violence is sporadic, far from the Wild West days. Speaking, much of the railroading thievery these days is burglary and not robbery. The Conrail Boyz did not carry guns in order to avoid long prison sentences, investigators said.

One alleged member of the Conrail Boyz is charged with crashing a getaway car into a vehicle driven by a Conrail agent, and Mongon, 28, accused of putting out a \$100,000 contract to have someone assassinate a Conrail lieutenant.

Mongon is awaiting trial. Lawyer, Arthur J. Abramson, declined to comment.

A day before authorities indicted the Conrail Boyz, 12 Mexican men were sentenced to two years in prison for their roles in a robbery with two FBI agents during a foiled train robbery along the border. The agents were pummeled with rocks and beaten last year.

Law enforcement agencies launched the sting operation along the border after Union Pacific suffered 122 robberies, burglaries and 19 rock-throwing incidents in nine months in an area west of El Paso, Texas.

By Gei... THE ASSO

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French President Chirac and Gerhard Schröder that Washington United Nations Iraq's political stance threaten barely healed over their Iraq war.

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Judge dismisses citizen's plea

By Bob Johnson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — A federal judge on Thursday dismissed a lawsuit by three residents seeking to return a 5,300-pound Ten Commandments monument to the lobby of the Alabama Judicial building.

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson said removal of the monument did not unconstitutionally establish a religion of nontheistic beliefs, as the residents claimed.

"The empty space or 'nothingness' in the rotunda of the Judicial Building is neither an endorsement of 'nontheistic belief' nor a sign of disrespect for Christianity or any other religion," Thompson said. He said the empty space demonstrates government neutrality toward religion.

The ruling comes after a lengthy legal battle in a separate lawsuit that led to the granite monument's removal last week. In that case, Thompson ruled the monument an unconstitutional promotion of religion by government.

Suspended Chief Justice Roy Moore had the monument moved into the judicial building in the middle of the night on July 31, 2001, saying it represents the moral foundation of American law. The monument soon became a symbol of

the fight over the separation of church and state drawing hundreds of protesters to Montgomery who decried its removal.

Patrick Mahoney of the Christian Defense Coalition, said the ruling "shows the courts now defining neutrality as the removal of acknowledgment of God from the public square."

Ayesha Khan, an attorney for one of the groups that filed the original suit seeking removal of the monument, applauded the ruling. "Judge Thompson recognized that Justice Moore's monument shoves religion down people's throats," Khan said.

Jim Zeigler, a lawyer for the plaintiffs, said he has not decided whether to appeal Thompson's ruling.

Thompson's dismissal came a day after spokeswoman for Mississippi Gov. Ronnie Musgrove said Moore had turned down Musgrove's offer to publicly display the monument for a week at the Mississippi Capitol.

Also Thursday, about 150 supporters of Moore marched to the Alabama Capitol and presented a wooden plaque of the Ten Commandments to Gov. Bob Riley's chief of staff. The chief of staff said the governor would consult with lawyers before displaying the plaque.

The Ten commandments block was removed

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