

Chasing Bandits

by Lauren Biron

AS I WRITE THIS, I wonder if you know the one I seek. Are you a friend or, even better, a relative? Did you hear of the infamous deeds while sitting upon your grandmother's knee? Is the story of rebellion retold jubilantly at Christmas celebrations, once your great-uncle has been plied with eggnog? Or perhaps no one speaks of it, the family embarrassment becoming a hushed secret that the older generation tries to forget and the new generation never knows - though all the clues lie in dust-covered cardboard boxes stacked on an attic shelf. Worst of all, are the clues destroyed, hurled into a fireplace or abandoned in a county dump, left to slowly decompose by someone who did not know their worth? Does anyone survive who knows the truth?

Los Angeles, 1929

Inside a stone-faced building without windows or ventilation, at an old-fashioned roll-top desk covered with papers, sat Joseph Taylor, Chief of Detectives. Burglary reports arrived every 24 hours, while officers teletyped or phoned in felonies as soon as a victim notified them. A few rooms away, a flying squadron of blue uniformed policemen awaited calls. With pistol-grip shotguns, pump shotguns, and murderous Thompson machine guns, they prepared to stop robbers who, judging by the number of reports Taylor read, were all too prevalent. He ordered the stations to increase their search for the past weekend's criminals.

A young man had boarded a Los Angeles Railway street car at the corner of Eleventh and Georgia streets. He drew a revolver, aimed it at the conductor, took \$40, and leapt from the car, speeding away in a waiting automobile. That same hour, Randolph Cooke and a woman sat in a car parked on Mulholland Drive. Suddenly, a pair of men appeared. One cocked a pistol; the woman handed over her jewelry while Cooke relinquished \$38. Late on Saturday night, as Marguarito Santa Ana walked along the Los Angeles River, a man demanded money. After Marguarito surrendered \$5, the thief shot him in the right hip and fled into the river bottoms.

That same weekend, a man robbed three different service stations on Sunset Boulevard. As he pulled into a J.R. Hardy's station on Beverly Boulevard with \$32.50 in loot, Lieutenants F.L James and Arthur Bergeron leapt onto the running boards of his car as their partner Jack Leslie covered him from behind. Lieutenant James made to draw his .45 pistol when the car lurched into gear and swerved from side to side, gathering speed. The officers fired shots even as they fell towards the pavement. The bandit escaped, leaving the men without so much as a license plate number. One week later, two men jumped on the running boards of a car as it slowed at Vermont Avenue. They forced the driver out of the car, robbed him of \$1.50, and drove off, leaving him stranded for hours. Another bandit pair robbed Earle Rost and Catherine

Orphan as they sat in their car on Question Mark Hill; while Rost and Orphan were reporting their stolen \$50, the same bandits held up another couple a few streets away. In Highland Park one man held James T. Lullewellyn immobile while another beat him across the face. They rummaged through his pockets and disappeared with \$1.80.

Then, Monday morning at 4 am, a tall, unshaven man in a dark overcoat waited with his thirty-year-old companion near a large black sedan. As a watchman made his rounds, the two men slipped into the empty lobby of the Hotel Huntington. One man walked down the hotel corridor to the clerk's desk, pulled out a .45 caliber automatic pistol, and pointed it at Robert Gleason's head.

“Reach, and reach fast!”

After Gleason was bound and gagged with strips of towels and sheets, the men attempted to crack the safe in the back room. While they struggled, Gleason inched towards the telephone switchboard twenty feet away, managing to dial the operator before passing out from an unfortunate combination of the gag and a stuffed nose. The operator, sensing something was wrong, alerted the police – who arrived after the robbers had escaped with \$800 from a cash drawer.

Los Angeles was in an uproar. Cars taken, jewelry stolen, money demanded at every turn, rum-runners high-jacking cargos, and on top of all that, a huge drop on Wall Street just a few months before. Something had to be done. Chief Taylor launched sweeping drives against underworld characters, instituting 24-hour motor patrols. The police proudly reported the drop of robberies over the next weekend, December 21 and 22. Cops caught two suspects within ten minutes of stealing a taxi-cab. The force was no longer full of easily-bribed officers who ignored the speakeasies and focused more on their own embezzling than on catching criminals. The Los Angeles Times printed a series of reports: “What the Police are Doing.” In full view of public scrutiny, the police detailed their arrests and plans to put criminals away. The number of patrols crept up.

On December 23, 1929, a slender, fair-skinned girl from San Pedro sat with two men and a blonde with curls. She sipped her booze and watched as the men grew increasingly drunk. Eventually, she persuaded them to do her a favor. She stole a gun and a flashlight, and the four drove to the city of Venice, California. There, the two men held up a service station. It was her first robbery.

The next day, she opened a black diary to the first page. Grasping a white pencil, she wrote:

May the star of good fortune, strong and clean, pilot me happily through the next year.

Would you like to know what turned me into a bandit? Well, I have tried to play the game on the square all my life. I have worked hard whenever I have had a job. I have always played square with my friends – especially with the one I love... but he dropped me like a live coal. So I am resolved in the future to play the game as crooked as in the past I have played it square.

She listed “Job No. 1” and the details of the night before. Alice Le Fevre, the Diary Bandit, dedicated the remainder of her life to breaking the law. With her confident, curly-haired friend, 19-year-old Dorothy V. Trone, she didn’t wait long to fulfill her promise.

In 1929, there were 23,120,897 automobiles registered in the United States. On Christmas Eve, Alice and Dorothy decided to take one. From Long Beach they sped south towards San Diego, following the curvy road beside the crashing waves of the Pacific Ocean. Job No. 2, as Alice would write, was the hold-up of a San Diego service station. They cashed a worthless check to buy gasoline for the return trip. In Job No. 4, they forced another young man to rob the service station at the corner of South Main and Camille streets in Santa Ana. In her diary, Alice attached a newspaper clipping of the robbery that had earned her \$27.43.

On Christmas day, a bandit robbed a tobacco shop, carrying off \$1600 in a cigar box – enough to buy three new Ford Sport Coupes. A thief stole lights from Christmas trees in the business district. Police arrested five men for intoxication, and returned a stolen nineteen-pound turkey, now fully dressed, to schoolboy Miles Snyder. That same night, C.C. Tenkhoff was working in his Long Beach store, at the corner of Temple Avenue and Tenth Street. Alice entered alone, except for her .32 caliber revolver. Tenkhoff surrendered the \$10 in the cash drawer, and Alice jumped into her getaway car, the stolen automobile driven, of course, by Dorothy. Job No. 5 was complete.

The Christmas holidays passed in a fit of celebration, though presumably not for Mr. Tenkhoff. In Redondo Beach, police discovered 300 gallons of liquor and a mixing plant, then arrested the three culprits – one of them a woman with a one-year-old child. Chef Giuseppe Carboni overindulged in Christmas cheer and promptly died from alcohol poisoning. So much for prohibition.

More than crimes made headlines in the end of the year newspapers. Buster Keaton parachuted into a scene of his first talkie, *On the Set*. The Black and White Cab Company released a new fleet of 102 taxicabs with ultra-low fares. A committee dropped Communist flyers over Roosevelt High School. Scientist A.H. Miller completed measurements that proved the earth was an ellipsoid, not a sphere. Daredevil aviatrix Jean LaVock crash-landed her plane, crawled from the wreckage, powdered her nose, and asked for a glass of ice water.

New Year’s Eve came around, and the world prepared to usher out the 1920s. In New York, Guy Lombardo played *Auld Lang Syne* for the first time. In Los Angeles, hundreds of witches, ghosts, and carnival characters danced along the Venice Pier. Thousands planned to attend the 41st Tournament of Roses Parade the next morning. Chief ‘Two Guns’ Davis, promising to keep New Year’s Eve rowdiness to a minimum, deployed a fleet of plain-clothes policemen. Two of them apprehended a man on charges of possessing liquor, and questioned him at the Long Beach police station. He needed to give them *something*, so he gave a room number and a name: The Brooks Hotel.

Not knowing what they would find, the police headed to the hotel. They entered the room mentioned by their informant and, finding it empty, looked for clues. One officer leafed through the pages of a small black diary with white handwriting. The others gathered around to read, their curiosity strangely intrigued by this memento – much more interesting than the .32 caliber revolver or an empty cigar box. They looked up to watch the door open. Alice and Dorothy walked in.

The officers placed the girls in handcuffs and took them to headquarters. With the diary thrust in front of her, Alice admitted to the jobs catalogued on its black pages. But with entries ending on Christmas Day, she defiantly refused any connection with the tobacco shop robbery. After all, why would she admit to a job she never recorded? The star of good fortune abandoned Alice before 1930 ever began.

Los Angeles, 2007

Much like the cops 77 years before, I stumbled across Alice by pure chance. On October 15, I found myself online, browsing through the Historical *Los Angeles Times* database. The past seemed lonely, so I thought I'd join it. I looked at the advanced search bar. It looked blankly back. Instead of search criteria, I entered a date range. The 1930s sounded good. With thousands of results, I began at the beginning. January 1, 1930.

Some titles automatically caught my interest more than others. "ALIEN LAWYER BAN DEFEATED," one of them read. I was initially very excited – a lawyer that was from outer space? "BABY DESERTED IN HOTEL ROOM; But Mother Leaves Note Explaining." "CHEF WYMAN'S RECIPES; STEAMED CRANBERRY PUDDING." "CHILD PRATTLES TALE OF KILLING; Mother Shot State Trooper, He Tells Police." "FARMERS' CUPBOARDS GOING BARE." "GIRL SEIZED AS 'DIARY BANDIT'; List of Crimes Revealed in Daily Entries Sweetheart Dropped Her, She Says in Preface." A jilted young lady turning to a life of crime? Sold.

I clicked the link and found Alice. A slender column detailing her story ran next to a piece about the ex-actress Mary Miles Minter secluding herself in an eastern sanatorium. I read the piece through at least three times. I was in love. She had her own jazzy title. She got men drunk and robbed service stations. She stole cars. She dedicated her life to creating a little chaos, to taking what she wanted, to fighting the world when she lost what she loved.

I am a bookworm who never misses an assignment, never drinks, never smokes, never steals. Alice was quickly becoming, in my mind, the quintessential flapper who stayed out late, swilled bathtub gin, and, to take it to a whole new level, robbed drugstores. We were the same age. Could I have been like Alice, living a life of crime, adrenaline racing through my veins as I hotwired the new Ford Model A or shoved my .32 revolver into someone's spine, demanding their change so I could knock on an inconspicuous back door and slide into a speakeasy for a Scotch on the rocks?

I wanted to know everything about her. What was her childhood like? Who was this lover that abandoned her, and why? What was Job No. 3, conspicuously absent from the *L.A. Times* article? Did she go to jail? Did she continue her life of crime or settle down and get married? Did she have any children? Where was the diary now? Where was *she*?

Within minutes of reading the article, I turned to an indispensable resource: Google. "Alice Le Fevre," I typed. "Le Fevre, Alice." No one born around 1910 showed up. Disappointed but far from discouraged, I searched for her accomplice. I found Dorothy.

In The *Los Angeles Times* on July 4, 1930, a headline read: "REFORMATORY BOB' DRIVES TWO GIRLS INTO TRUANCY." On May 10, Dorothy Trone and Betty Evans "quit the Ventura School for Girls. Clad only in their night attire, they slid down a sheet to the ground, two floors below, and, still scantily clad, managed to make their way to Los Angeles, where they borrowed suitable street clothes." Deputies found her working as a waitress in Wilmington. I read on. "Dorothy, charged with having been an accomplice of Alice La Fevre, 22, asserted 'bandit queen' of San Pedro, was sentenced to two years at the Ventura school after having been found in possession of a stolen automobile." Surely, if Dorothy had been taken to the Ventura School for Girls, so had Alice.

I googled the Ventura School for Girls to learn everything I could about the place where Alice might have been. The school opened in 1913. By the time Alice arrived, there were seven cottages that the matrons could have assigned her to: Miramar, El Mirasol, La Jolla, El Toyon, Alta Vista, La Casita (the parole cottage), or Ris Vista (the lost privilege cottage). All came with shingle roofs, wooden floors, radiators, and no fire escapes. Situated amongst the hills overlooking oil fields, the Ventura School for Girls also had a cannery, laundry, school, stables, hospital, auditorium, gymnasium, and slaughterhouse. Authorities drove the girls to local fields where they tended the vegetables they would later prepare in the kitchens.

Rules and monotony were the norm. Some women swallowed safety pins the night before the government transferred them to the school, preferring an extended yet painful stay in a hospital to the pseudo-prison. Others, like Dorothy, tearfully stated that they would prefer to be housed in San Quentin. The California Youth Authority ran the school. It also posted lists of the inmates online, if a judge had sentenced them between 1907 and 1931.

I clicked the letter "L" and scrolled down the page, looking for Le Fevre. Layman, Layton, Le Van, Jr., Lea. She wasn't there. I moved back up to the top. Perhaps she was under La Fevre. La Bonte, La Grange, La Loge. Surely I was just missing it. Many frustrated attempts and a few days later, there she was: Alice LaFevre, inmate 1458, Ventura, 1930. Dorothy also proved tricky – she was listed as Dorothy Trane, inmate 1470.

I searched the U.S. records online, but found no perfect match. I called the Long Beach Historical Society to see if I could access their archives. With over 30,000 pictures and documents of Long Beach, undoubtedly they could fill in the gaps. Surely they could show me what the Brooks Hotel looked like or exactly where on the map Temple Avenue and Tenth Street met. Maybe they could even tell me where to find Alice and Dorothy.

Except, as I found when I called, all the potential research materials were boxed up from a recent move, unavailable to the public for months. I returned to my other avenue, contacting the California State Archives where the California Youth Authority kept their inmate records – everything from details on admission dates, crimes committed, and interactions with other prisoners. I asked for inmate registries, scrapbooks, superintendent's correspondence, the discharge register, and anything else an archivist could find. The archivist replied that most results required seven days of research.

While I waited, I spent days trying to find court records. I called the Long Beach courthouse, but learned that records more than thirty years old were no longer there. I tried the Public Records Ombudsman at the Department of Justice. *I just want the records from a 1930's arrest, please.* She informed me that after the records come to the Department of Justice they enter the criminal database, which can only be accessed by legal authorities or the individual. The files were no longer public record, she told me. Thank God, I thought, for the archives.

I was now devoting almost every spare minute to combing through Google and Yahoo searches for LeFevre, LaFevre, La Fevre, and Le Fevre. I read newspaper articles, followed family trees on genealogical websites, read announcements, everything I could find. I could tell you from memory that there was an Alice Le Fevre, 69 years old, living in Peoria, Illinois, a 95-year-old one in San Rafael, California, a 52-year-old in Newton Falls, Ohio, a 44-year-old in Ridgecrest, California, and a 72-year-old in Madison, Wisconsin. There was a 38-year-old Alice Le Fevre, 5'8, medium complexion, brown hair, blue eyes, born in Dukla, Austria, that arrived in Ellis Island on board the Bermudian in 1912. In 1888, a Miss Alice Le Fevre carried a bouquet of white lilies as she married Dr. Henry Arnold Fairbairn. On February 27, 1860, an Alice Lefevre was born in Ulster County, New York, the culmination of four generations (on both sides) that had lived there before her. There were Alice Le Fevres in Pennsylvania, Cambridgeshire, Wisconsin, and Kentucky. There was an Alice Lefevre who wrote about library trends in the 1950s, and an Alice Le Fevre who was a bilingual Parisian journalist. Occasionally, I wished I had been actually researching one of them.

While I was searching for Alice, I also checked out every book that even remotely related to the Ventura School for Girls. I read *Guidelines for the Development of Policies and Procedures: Juvenile Training Schools*, a 1987 book that never mentioned the school directly; *Ventura Vocational Project: A Vocational Study Made in the California Youth Authority Ventura School for Girls*, a 1953 study that reported that two-thirds of the girls came from families with only one parent, were educated to the level of a 13-year-old, and preferred to read *Life* and *Ladies' Home Journal*; and *L.A. Despair: a landscape of crime & bad times*, which mentioned the Ventura School for Girls on only one page. I

discovered the section of the library devoted to lesbian literature, because in *Early Embraces III* one of the women had her first lesbian encounter in the Ventura School for Girls, though it was in the 1960's. I even picked up an original copy of an oil report conducted on the land under the school, complete with yellowed maps threatening to tear at every crease. Alice had been there. She had taken IQ tests before entering, she had been assigned to one of the cottages, she had worn that drab gray uniform.

I had stacks of books on my floor and in my closet. They were toppling over, brimming with events of the 1920s that would have surrounded Alice. So, though I could never know all the facts, I imagined her life. Her father went off to fight in the First World War. Her mother stayed behind – Alice watched her vote for the first time in 1920. In 1923 she flounced down the street, singing the most popular song, “Yes, we have no bananas! We have no bananas, today. We’ve string beans, and onions, Cabashes, and scallions, And all sorts of fruits, and say!” She watched as skirts rose from the ankle to above the knee. She grew up and started rolling her stockings down. She wore makeup in public, favored Maybelline because it promised “Eyes that Charm.” She smoked Virginia Slims. She left dance marathons with blistered feet after doing the Charleston for hours. Though she knew they were just passing fads, she loved playing mahjong and completing crossword puzzles. She listened to Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Ted Lewis. She swooned over Rudolph Valentino. She heard a line from Mae West’s play *Sex* in 1926 – “When women go wrong, men go right after them.” She lived in the Chicago of the Pacific, read F. Scott Fitzgerald novels, and carried a garter flask.

Then, by December of 1929, Alice was in love. She’d been dating him for years; they were practically engaged. She had already bought and wrapped his Christmas presents – a stylish oak-brown Stetson hat and a deluxe set of Rolls Razor (which promised one-blade safety). She planned a special Christmas celebration, a fancy dinner featuring her in new heels, a dress belted low and carelessly across the hips, her hair freshly permed, him tall and handsome in his custom-tailored woolen suit and new Stetson. After a night of dancing they would return home, listen to their new Bosch radio, kiss. But no, it didn’t happen that way. Instead, he left her for a dame with longer legs and a flatter chest.

So, dressed in crinkled silk hidden under raccoon fur coats, Alice robbed service stations. She roared off with Dorothy in a new black Chrysler Roadster. She bobbed her hair short and tucked it under a colorful, close-fitting hat. She slipped through unmarked doors into the wild party atmosphere of speakeasies. When she and Dorothy sauntered into her hotel room to find policemen, she didn’t cry – she grinned.

Alice would have started her prison sentence right around the time Al Capone finished one of his. The matrons placed her in Cottage Number 2, El Mirasol. She craved her Blue Moon Girl full-fashioned silk stockings, available for two dollars at only the finest stores. She was one of the older girls at the cottage, so she commanded respect. She passed matches through cracks in the walls to girls in neighboring rooms, so they could

indulge in cigarettes and carefully blow the smoke out of the windows. She resented every dirty uniform she washed at the laundry. She missed the feel of a gun in her hand.

I spent hours lying awake in the darkness, thinking of Alice when I should have been sleeping. Already an accomplished procrastinator, I waited longer than usual to run errands, complete assignments, or even take showers. I signed on to read fifty samples of writing for a new literary journal, but I found myself searching maps for the intersection of Locust and Broadway instead, trying to figure out where Alice might have been before she was arrested. Some days I would take a break from searching through books or the Internet, look into the mirror, and notice my bloodshot eyes.

One morning I realized with a jolt that I was about to be late for an appointment – I had been looking through advertisements in the 1920s and had lost track of time. As I sped along the 73 South, I turned up my radio and laughed as I heard lyrics from a U2 song: *But I still haven't found / What I'm looking for*. I doodled along the columns of my notebooks, looking down to notice I had scribbled "A.L.F." a dozen times. I stared at my wall for hours, immobile, thinking of other places to search for Alice or imagining the crimes. C.C. Tenkhoff, I saw, had a large moustache. Now Alice was wearing a blue silk dress, matching one from the cover of Vogue. One night, when I finally fell asleep, I dreamt of her, walking down a bustling Broadway Street, losing me in the crowd.

I woke on November 9 to find an email about Alice and Dorothy from the archivist at the California Archives. "Unfortunately," it began, "I didn't find a lot of information on them in these records." She listed the entries from the Inmate History Registers. The only new information the archivist found was that the girls were sentenced by Walter J. Desmond in Superior Court, and their sentences lasted until March of 1932. No specifics on the girls – no descriptions of their appearance, no new details on the crimes. But now at least I had a judge.

I called back the Public Records Ombudsman at the Department of Justice. I knew the laws concerning freedom of information meant court records had to be relinquished. I explained that I had a judge's name, and presumed that the court case would have been *The State v. Alice Le Fevre*. The ombudsman asked that I make my request by e-mail, promising to check the records right away. I started dancing in my kitchen, and sprinted up stairs three at a time to send the message.

The next day I received a response: "We have searched the legal indexes and databases available and were not able to locate any case records regarding Alice La Fevre or Dorothy V. Trone." Also: "In response to your request for court records, the Attorney General's Office/DOJ generally does not maintain California superior court records unless they are part of a case. Therefore, these records are not available from the DOJ." The email recommended that I contact the California Superior Court instead.

I replied, explaining that I had already tried the Court House. *If the court and the Department of Justice don't have the records, where are they?*

On November 16, the Friday of a long week, I received a response. “Given that these records are 77 years-old, it is reasonable to conclude that they have been destroyed...”

I didn't finish reading the e-mail. Instead I closed the Internet, shut my laptop, and hurled a half-empty water bottle at my wall. It was time to give Alice up. As much as I wanted to slip through secret back-alley doors, steal cars and hold up service stations with her, she had eluded me. It had been fun to live in the 1920s for a while, but I had to return to 2007.

That night, a friend and I were heading to see Live Nude People, an improvisational comedy show that encouraged crowd participation. Those who came in costume would get to enter the theater first, and we wanted good seats. I threw the necessary gear in the back of my car and hurried to the show. There were roughly thirty people milling around when we arrived. Some of them were in plain college attire, jeans and sweatshirts. Others wore black-and-white striped shirts. But the majority had tied bandanas across their faces. I looked at my friend in her trench coat, and smiled as we cocked our Nerf Guns. The theme for the night was Cops and Robbers.

