



ARIZONA'S FLYING PESOS

State Historian **Marshall Trimble** tells the story of two of Old Arizona's train robbers, Joe George and Grant Wheeler.

ONE OF ARIZONA'S zaniest train robberies took place five miles west of Willcox on Jan. 30, 1895, when two cowboys named Joe George and Grant Wheeler decided to raise their station in life by robbing the Southern Pacific Railroad. Since neither had ever heisted a railroad before, there was going to be a degree of "on-the-job training." The wannabe train robbers purchased a box of dynamite at a local business in Willcox under the pretense of going prospecting. They cached their blasting powder and hobbled their horses some seven miles west of town, then walked a couple of miles back

to meet the train.

West of Willcox was a long grade that slowed the train enough for the two cowpunchers to jump on board with ease. It didn't take much enticement of the engineer to make him stop the train, especially when he was looking into the muzzle of a Colt .45 revolver.

One of the desperadoes jumped down and uncoupled the passenger cars and then signaled the obliging engineer to pull forward with the mail and baggage cars to where the dynamite was stashed. They broke into the express car and found that the Wells Fargo messenger had slipped out the door and hightailed it back to the passenger cars. Inside the express car were two safes, one a small, fragile-looking lockbox and the other a large, sturdy-looking Wells Fargo safe. Lying nearby on the floor were several sacks

full of Mexican silver dollars, also known as "dobe dollars." At the time, they were about the same value as U.S. dollars.

Wheeler and George placed a few sticks of dynamite around the two safes, lit the fuses, jumped out the door, and sprawled on the ground, arms covering their heads. The first blast destroyed the door on the small safe, but the prize, the large Wells Fargo safe, remained intact. So they tried again. This time, they added a couple of extra sticks for good measure. Once again, they jumped out of the car and hit the dirt. When the smoke cleared, the big safe reappeared, unblemished.

Finally, the frustrated train robbers piled the rest of their blasting sticks around the safe, and for ballast, packed eight bags of Mexican silver dollars on top. They struck a match to the fuse and lit out for the nearest cover. The resounding blast shook the ground from the Dragoons to Dos Cabezas. The entire express car was blown to splinters. Small pieces

of lumber and a thousand silver pesos were flung far and wide. It was something of a miracle that the two outlaws managed to survive the blast. The flying silver missiles that spewed from the exploding express car impregnated everything they hit, including the telegraph poles alongside the track.

When the smoke cleared, the two amateurs entered the car and found the durable safe door blown off but only a few dollars tucked inside. The real treasure in the car was the Mexican silver, and it was now scattered all over the countryside. The discouraged pair stuffed a few battered coins in their pockets and rode off into the night.

When the train backed into town and gave the alarm, rather than form a posse to go after the outlaws, most of the citizens rushed out to the scene of the crime to search for silver. It was said that for several years afterward, folks were still raking the ground and finding silver dollars.

That parcel of land was probably the best manicured piece of desert land this side of Paradise Valley. **NV**