

Banking on Hartland – Part II

By Beatrice Knowles

The Merger

Another six years went by, and the Branch continued to steadily grow but changed very little. In 1970 a BIG change occurred! The First National Bank of Pittsfield and its now two branches were purchased and merged into Maine National Bank of Portland. By this time our branch had two tellers and a spare besides the Manager. The team from the Portland office came to help us change over our system to fit into theirs.

At that time they had computers at the Main Office, and to utilize them we were provided with lightweight cardboard four by six cards with patterns of holes cut in them to be sent with accompanying figures for deposits and paid out cash figures. Strangely enough, I don't remember our staff having any problems with adjusting to this new system. Our tellers were very adaptable and excelled in their work.

For us, the merger was a plus; we met new people, learned new things and best of all our salaries were increased. It was the beginning of a whole new environment in the bank. Maine National Bank strongly believed in educating its staff, and from time to time different members of our staff would spend a day in training with members of other branches on a particular product or technique. There was security training, customer relations, new products etc. Not only was it helpful in making one a better worker, but formed relationships all over the banking system that gave us all an incentive to both ask for help from talented people in other areas and to be eager to help other members ourselves. It became apparent that a loyalty to the bank was forming that came from that process of interrelation.

My role as Manager of the Maine National Bank Branch in Hartland changed quite substantially as we began to conform to the expectations of a large commercial, city-based entity. Responsibilities increased and more decisions based on my own judgment were expected. The extra training became very important in an unexpected way.

The Bank Robbery

A local law enforcement officer came secretly to my house one night to inform me they had a tip there was to be a bank robbery on a certain day and there would be officers placed strategically around the area. This was to be kept completely secret except to my head teller so that the people planning this would not be alerted. The day in question my employee and I were very much on edge and when nothing happened there was relief but still anxiety. We were instructed to keep this to ourselves but to be on the alert.

Having been alerted and given training previously as to what we should and should not do, we tried our best to be ready. On a Thursday morning two unknown men came to the door before banking hours to try to enter. We waved them away signaling 9:00am but noted their appearance. They were wearing sport jackets with dress pants, clean shaven and with neat haircuts. Most of the customers we were expecting would be wearing work clothes already soiled from having been at work for several hours at the local tannery, or at best casual shirts.

Since we knew by sight all of the workers in local businesses it was obvious they were not local people. They came back shortly after; one leaned on the customer counter in front of the outside window and the other stood in front of the door. I looked outside; not a soul to be seen. There was ALWAYS someone around at that time of the morning. This was the beauty of the location of the bank...you could see in all four directions of the intersection but not today.

The man leaning on the counter pulled out a gun from his pocket and said "This is a holdup" as the other man immediately aimed a gun at us too. Strange how much time seems to elapse at such a time...I'm thinking, what am I supposed to do? So I put my hands up and stood there. My teller did the same thing. One of the robbers immediately said "No, No! Put your hands down!" Then, "Lie down on the floor" and we followed instructions. I could hear them coming behind the counter and one said "Keep your head right down" I tried but wearing glasses makes that very difficult. Evidently I succeeded well enough because they were opening our teller drawers and storage cabinets. Then they moved over to the safe in the corner. I worried "Did I spin the timer dial enough so they can't get in there"then I'm thinking "I'm glad Lillian (our cleaning lady) keeps this floor nice and clean".

I would have guessed they had been there about twenty minutes as I heard them speak to someone as the door opened and closed. We waited a while longer before slowly raising our heads to be sure they were gone. I looked at the clock...FOUR MINUTES....that couldn't be right. I had looked at the clock when they came in as I was trying to see if anyone was coming up or down the street. When we got up, a little old lady was standing there. A customer that we knew. The robbers had politely opened the door for her to let her in.

We followed protocol, locking the bank door and taping a paper sign saying we were closed. Then we called our Pittsfield Office to have them call the State Police and FBI, keeping our poor customer inside with us. We separately wrote down everything we observed about the robbers as well as the vehicle and license plate. Our little bank was inundated with local and State Police as well as FBI and technicians who dusted everything for fingerprints. Outside were newspaper and TV reporters with cameras as my teller and I tried our best to stay out of sight...pretty difficult when you are surrounded with big plate glass windows on three sides.

About 5:00 I asked the police officers if they could provide something for us to eat...we had to stay in the bank all this time. Besides dealing with the officers, we talked with our superiors in the bank who were arranging for replacement of the funds that were stolen. We were instructed that the bank was to open as usual the next day-Friday. That hadn't occurred to us, but we both took a huge breath, accepted our instructions and prepared ourselves for another rough day. Thankfully, since it was doubly busy in order to take care of Thursday's regular payroll as well we did not have time to answer any questions from our customers. In any event, we would have spent the day explaining that we could not discuss it because of the investigation that was ongoing.