

The Great Boom: Washburn's famous crook ²²

The Bank of Washburn is a monument to one of Washburn's most famous citizens, a charming con-man named Arthur Clarence Probert. He was born in October 1892 in Paterson, New Jersey. By 1886 he was in Wisconsin, employed as a cashier for a lumber company in Mason. In 1887 he moved to Washburn with his wife, opening a bank in the new town hall. In 1890 he constructed the Bank of Washburn of native brownstone in the then fashionable Romanesque architectural style. He moved his bank from the town hall into the new building on January 1 1891. The bank, along with the Washburn hotel, dominated what was then the commercial center of the city. He also built a large residence on the northeast corner of Third Avenue East and Fourth Street (still standing).

By 1893 Probert was a highly successful businessman and a leading member of the community, involved in several enterprises in addition to his bank and elected to the town board. But that summer his financial affairs were struck by disaster. He announced that due to the national financial crisis the bank was unable to meet its obligations. In April 1896 he was arraigned on a charge of embezzling \$1,500 from his bank in Lodi. At a jury trial in July he was found guilty as

charged, with a sentence of 30 months in the state prison at Waupun. At first he worked in the prison shop but later was promoted to prison librarian. Although he lost his accumulated "good time" because of scams he tried to carry out in prison, he was released after having served 27 months of his sentence.

CJ 10/29/09
**Lars
Larson
Guest
columnist**

He returned to Washburn, though he soon departed, probably because he had received a cool reception. By January 1899 he was in Niles, Michigan, where he continued a long career as a scam artist. He posed as a medical doctor, having allegedly graduated from a medical college in Chicago. He and an associate, another fictitious doctor, sold fancy certificates to doctors, adorned with the names of physicians used without their permission, entitling the bearers to bring patients to their "hospital" for treatment. The scheme collapsed when word of Probert's reputation in Washburn reached Niles. In early 1901 Probert was in

northern Indiana, where he opened two banks, both of which failed. He was arrested on a charge of embezzlement but apparently escaped prosecution. He then moved to Chicago where he tried to carry out the hospital scam, which fell apart when one of the doctors, whose name he used on his certificates without permission, pressed charges. Arrested on the charge of misusing the mails, he escaped prosecution again either because the charges were dropped or because he fled. He was next reported to be in Dayton, Oregon, opening a bank there in February 1904; however, he fled before a shortage of \$500 was discovered.

Probert's next known location was Redding, California, where he was employed as the manager of the commissariat department of a copper mining company. From there he went to Ben Lomond, California, starting a new life using the name Clarence P. Davis. He established a bank, a newspaper, and a mercantile business, attaining the pinnacle of success by marrying a socialite in an elaborate church wedding in Oakland, California. But a traveling salesman, who stopped at Ben Lomond, recognized Clarence P. Davis as the Arthur C. Probert he had met in Chicago, wanted there for mail fraud, and informed the

authorities. Probert managed to escape but was never apprehended. His businesses were liquidated and his wife had the marriage annulled.

The setting for his next known and perhaps final escapade was Tacos, New Mexico, where he arrived in July 1909. As usual he established a bank, this time with his brother, Hubert, and was soon involved in a newspaper, fruit growing, copper mining, railroad ventures and other enterprises. Active in Republican politics, he was known as a successful businessman and a leading member of Taos. He did not attempt to conceal his identity, publishing articles on fruit growing under his real name. But rumors about irregularities in his bank were found to be true by a state auditor, who closed it. Probert was tried for bank fraud in November 1912, found guilty, and sentenced to six to eight years in prison. The verdict was overturned by the New Mexico Supreme Court in April 1914, which ordered a new trial. Unfortunately, information about what happened to Probert after mid-1914 could not be located. There is no record of a new trial or that he served a sentence in the New Mexico penitentiary, although it has been suggested that he may have fled to Mexico to escape prosecution.