

## **The D'Autremont Brothers and the Old West's Last Train Robbery** **By Dennis Powers**

The completion of Tunnel No. 13 beneath the Siskiyou Pass in 1887 allowed Southern Pacific to connect California and Oregon by rail. Located a short distance east of the historic pass, the grades on both sides of the Siskiyou Summit are steep. Some thirty five years later, the D'Autremont brothers saw this as the ideal location to pull off what's considered to be this country's last Old-West-style train robbery.

On October 11, 1923, the train was traveling from Seattle to San Francisco and cresting the Siskiyou Summit after its Ashland stopover. Awaiting the lumbering train was 19-year-old Hugh D'Autremont and his twin, 23-year-old brothers, Ray and Roy. They had heard rumors that the train was hauling nearly \$500,000 in gold. They decided to stop the train at the 3,107-foot-long Tunnel 13, because it would be easy to get onto as it slowly chugged its way to the crest. The grade to the north of the summit is 3.67%, the steepest one on this trip.

Roy and Hugh jumped onto the train when it slowed to test its brakes, while Ray waited at the tunnel's other end with the dynamite. They jumped onto the baggage car and climbed over the coal tender. Leaping down into the engine cab, Hugh with his gun drawn ordered the engineer to stop, which he did at the south end of the tunnel. As coal smoke began to leak into the cars, the passengers were upset, of course, but didn't know what was going on.

When the postal clerk locked himself inside the mail car, the twins packed their dynamite against one end and ignited the explosives. Not knowing what they were doing, the immense explosion destroyed the car, ripped open one side, and killed the clerk. Hearing the explosion and choking in the dense smoke, the passengers staggered towards the end of the tunnel and away from the wrecked track and train.

The unfortunate brakeman managed to make his way out through the thick smoke, but his appearance startled the brothers. Ray with a shotgun and Hugh with a .45 semiautomatic opened fire and killed the man. Knowing that they didn't have time or any money or gold in sight, the D'Autremonts shot and killed the train engineer and fireman, the only witnesses they believed had seen them. Wiping their feet in creosote to keep the bloodhounds from their scent, the brothers fled into the woods. Despite an extensive manhunt by local posses, angry railroad workers, Oregon National Guard troops, and even federal personnel, the brothers had managed to disappear.

With four men murdered and mangled car remains, it was maddening to the authorities that this crime couldn't be solved. It wouldn't have been, but for a forensic scientist by the name of "The Wizard," Edward O. Heinrich, who was pioneering in the use of forensic science to solve criminal cases. A scientist in a University of California-Berkeley laboratory, he received from law authorities the scant evidence left behind: a single pair of coveralls and inconclusive passenger testimony.

In a few weeks, Heinrich informed them that their “coverall man” was white, light complexioned, had light-brown eyebrows, a mustache, medium-brown hair, and was near 5-feet, 10-inches tall. He was a logger in the Pacific Northwest, left-handed, and very meticulous about his appearance. The man smoked and when caught, Heinrich said he would probably be wearing a new jacket and a bowler hat. When Roy D’Autremont finally was caught, he was smoking a cigarette and wearing the jacket and hat.

Wizard Heinrich, also called the “Edison of Crime Detection,” determined that the “dirt” discovered on the overalls was not oil or grease, as the police had thought, but fir pitch from Douglas fir needles peculiar to the Northwest. The man with the coveralls was left-handed, since in swinging with his left hand, his right-side pocket would face the tree and collect wood chips, as found in that pocket. In a breast pocket, Heinrich discovered fingernail clippings, rolled-up cigarette butts, and mustache wax that indicated that this person was a vain man.

The definitive clue found was a crumpled up, mail receipt, deep in a pencil pocket, and signed by Roy D’Autremont. The address was in “Lakewood, N.M.,” where the brothers and their divorced mother had lived in 1920. Although the D’Autremont brothers had left the area, assumed new identities, and started new lives, they were eventually caught. In 1927, Hugh was arrested while in the Philippines with the military; he had been fingerprinted when joining the Army. The twins were soon arrested in Ohio.

The brothers were tried in the Jackson County courthouse in Jacksonville, convicted, and each one sentenced to life in prison. Paroled in 1958, Hugh died from cancer a few months later. Roy had a mental breakdown in prison and was given a frontal lobotomy; he died just a few months after his 1983 parole. Ray’s sentence was commuted in 1972 by Governor Tom McCall, and after working years as a part-time janitor at the University of Oregon, he died in 1984.

Sources: Finn J.D. John, “13 was unlucky number for train passengers, robbers alike,” *Offbeat Oregon*, April 5, 2009, at [Train Robbery \(With Image\)](#); Jeff LaLande, “The Oregon Encyclopedia: Siskiyou Pass,” at [Siskiyou Pass](#); Bill Miller, “The ‘Wizard of Berkley’ & the D’Autremont brothers,” *Mail Tribune*, August 30, 2009, at [Forensic Scientist Heinrich](#); Paul Fattig, “The (not so) Great Train Robbery,” *Mail Tribune*, October 11, 2012, at [Film and Additional Information](#).