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**Witness to notorious bank robbery dies**

A Brainerd man, who survived a downtown bank robbery headed by the notorious Baby Face Nelson 70 years ago, has died.

Zane Smith died Friday at Bethany Good Samaritan Village in Brainerd. He was 89.

Smith was a young man -- just a few years out of high school -- when he arrived to work at 8:15 a.m. Oct. 23, 1933, at the First National Bank building at the corner of Sixth and Front streets in Brainerd, where he worked as a clerk and messenger boy.

He told The Dispatch in 1999 that he had recently started working at the bank, a building that still has bullet nicks in the brick from that October day when Baby Face Nelson and his

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gang held up the bank, holding  
hostage several bank employees,  
including Smith.

Smith said that morning he carried the day's mail to bank president George D. LaBar's desk and didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, even though five bank robbers, armed with at least two machine guns and .45-caliber automatics had been inside the lobby and working as look-outs in the street for about two hours. They had gained entry at gunpoint just before 6 a.m. when a worker came to check on the basement furnace, he said.

"Baby Face Nelson crouched down on his knees in front of a huge pillager," said Smith in 1999. "He jumped to his feet and took after me. He took ahold of the top collar of my top coat and twirled me around and socked me in the jaw."

The blow knocked Smith off of his feet and he was dragged across the floor to a spot where the bank janitors, Mr. and Mrs. L.A. Peterson, and guard Bob Titus, were located.

One by one the bank employees were corralled and stretched out on the front office floor until they numbered a baker's dozen. When the tellers arrived, each was taken in turn to open their separate vaults.

In the end, the bank robbers stole \$32,000 from the bank. The loss was covered by insurance.

With the money collected and the time approaching 9 a.m., Baby Face Nelson and his gang left the employees in a rear bathroom. The robbers sprayed the lobby with machine gun fire as they exited and as a Chicago salesman attempted to enter the building.

Smith said between the yelling and the spray of bullets, the employees thought the salesman had been shot. Additional gunfire spattered nearby buildings.

"They simply sprayed up and down the street as they left to make sure that no one was going to bother them," said Smith.

The gunmen had been staying at a resort on the north side of Round Lake and were familiar with the first names of bank employees, work schedules and escape routes.

"It was quite the experience," Smith said, "but one I wouldn't like to go through again -- after it was all over and you realize what could have happened."

After surviving one bank robbery, Smith had a bigger shock several years later. As a teller at the bank, Smith received a disturbing phone call. The caller said, "We've got your wife.

Nothing will happen to her if you do exactly as we say."

Instructions were to get \$20,000 and take the money to the Burlington Northern depot less than a block away. Smith reported the call to the bank president, who told him to follow the instructions. As it turned out, the threats to his wife Malvern's safety proved baseless. For a month following the incident, police officers drove the Smiths' children back and forth to school. Smith said it was a worse experience than being threatened by Baby Face Nelson and his gang.

Smith was born Oct. 7, 1913, in Brainerd to James R. and Flora (Halsted) Smith. He married Malvern L. Kalland. His wife died Jan. 5, 1982.

Smith worked in banking for many years and retired as vice president of First National Bank in Brainerd. He remained active in the community.

Survivors include two sons, Zane S. Smith, Brainerd, and Gregory H. Smith, Minneapolis; two daughters, Wendy DeGeest, Mora, and Seri Smith, Phoenix, Ariz.; and two grandchildren.

His wife and a half-brother, Paul Smith, died earlier.

Services will be 11 a.m. Tuesday at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Brainerd with Pastor Deborah Celley officiating. Burial will be in Evergreen Cemetery in Brainerd.

Friends may call from 5-8 p.m. today at Halvorson-Johnson Funeral Home in Brainerd and one hour before services Tuesday at the church.

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