



Doug Grow

How the feds slipped one past ever-vigilant media

Only one photographer even noticed 'money parade' to bank's new building

It's pretty tricky for anybody to slip something past those of us in the ever-vigilant Twin Cities media. But every once in a while, small things do slither through the chinks in our coverage armor.

Sunday, for example, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis managed to slip a few zillion dollars down a downtown Minneapolis street in a four-hour operation that involved armored cars, the U.S. Secret Service, 80 Minneapolis police, the State Patrol, the Hennepin County Sheriff's Department, Metro Transit, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad and some patrol boats on the Mississippi River. With one exception, we media folks didn't notice.

On the one hand, I suppose this operation from 3:30 to 7:30 Sunday morning

could simply be written off as a story about stuff being moved from one office to another.

But in this case, the stuff being moved was fairly intriguing. The stuff was money — 42 armored-truckloads of currency and coins, as well as securities. It was being moved from the vault in the Fed's doomed building at 250 Marquette Av. to its plush new quarters at the foot of the Hennepin Avenue Bridge, a move of about 3½ blocks. The Fed doesn't say how much loot it keeps on hand in Minneapolis. But it does say that on a typical day it sends and receives \$55.4 million in currency and coins, and on a typical day it destroys \$4.7 million in "unfit currency."

Those involved in planning and executing the move remain surprised that

they were able to pull it off so quietly and with so little media curiosity. If it hadn't been for Tony Knoss, an overnight photographer at WCCO-TV, Channel 4, there would have been no media mention of this undertaking.

But about 2:45 a.m. Sunday, Knoss was listening to the police scanner. The radio waves were jammed with urgent-sounding voices.

"When I first heard all that was going on at that time of day I figured they must be transporting nuclear waste from Monticello or something," Knoss said.

Following his instincts and scanner messages, he hustled to the action. He couldn't believe his eyes. Police holding shotguns had formed a perimeter around a five-block area of downtown Minneapolis. A State Patrol helicopter

was in the air. The Sheriff's Department boats were patrolling the river. Buses blocked streets. A train also was used to set up the perimeter. No detail had been overlooked. For example, doors to buildings along the transfer route were taped, so police could tell if anyone had tried to enter or leave.

Knoss found out what the fuss was about, shot some film and headed back to work. His film was the only local coverage of this strange event.

Living up to its name, the Secret Service even this week remained pretty secretive about what was involved in the operation. (I suppose you can never be too careful. Slow-moving thugs may be planning to travel back in time and attack last week's caravan.) But this much is known: Planners who worked out details of the move for two years demanded secrecy from all involved.

For example, to carry out the operation the Secret Service needed 20 buses to block intersections. The buses needed drivers, so Metro Transit needed to solicit volunteers.

"We needed to pull out at 1:45 [a.m.] to be downtown by 2, but we couldn't tell the drivers what the work was," said Bob Gibbons, Metro Transit spokesman.

The bus drivers proved to be more curious than most local journalists. Because of the unusual request, they signed up for the job just to find out what was going on. (The feds paid Metro

Transit about \$50 an hour per bus for use of the buses and drivers.)

Dealing with residents who live along the transfer route also proved to be a delicate problem.

Authorities wanted to secure such places as the Towers Condominiums, home to about 700 people. But they didn't want to let 700 people know that the treasure of the Ninth District Federal Reserve Bank was going to be vaultless.

"It was an awkward situation," said a person involved in the operation of the Towers. "But when the Secret Service tells you, 'Don't tell anyone,' you're reluctant to talk."

So, before the move, resident of the Towers received this notice: *Please be advised that access to the Towers will be restricted during a portion of this week-end . . . Residents are advised to carry their photo identification with current address on their person when leaving the complex. Residents may be requested to prove residence in order to re-enter the Towers.*

It's not surprising that residents were rather perplexed by the notice, and a little startled when they looked out their windows early Sunday and saw helicopters, patrol boats and heavily armed cops guarding an extraordinary money parade, which managed to go unnoticed by most of us in the ever-vigilant media.