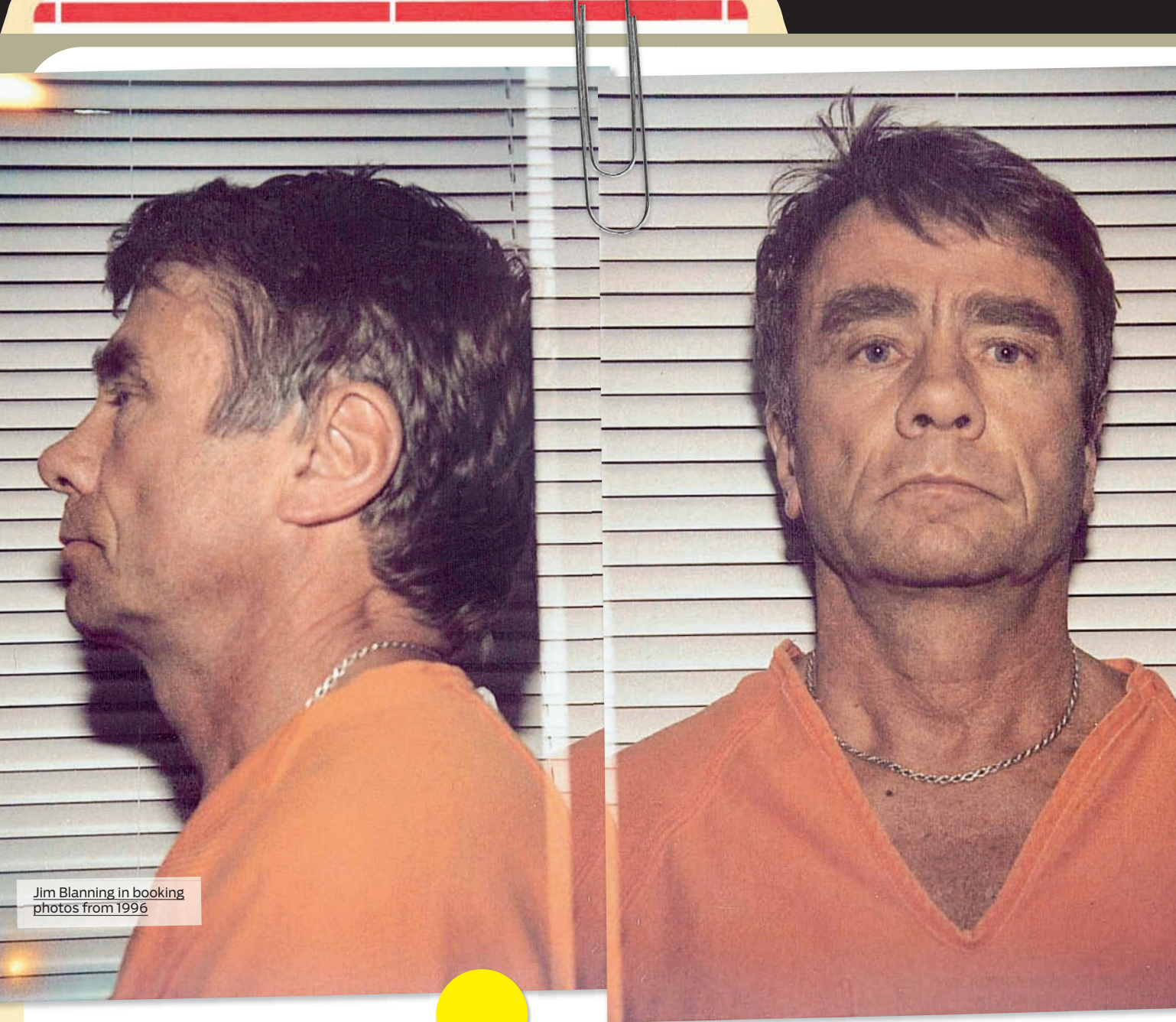




Jim Blanning in booking
photos from 1996

Last Resort

NAME Blanning, Jim

DATE December 31, 2008

CRIME Terrorism/Attempted bank robbery

AGE 72 **HT.** 6'0 **WT.** 180

HAIR Brown **COMP.** Caucasian

EYES Blue

BUILD Athletic

OCCUP. mining-claim developer

CASE HISTORY

For almost 70 years, former ski patroller and local legend JIM BLANNING rode Aspen's evolution from broken mining outpost to chic mountain playground. But when his hometown spit him out, he came back with a vengeance. And bombs.

AUTHOR Mike Kessler



December 31, 2008. 2:32 P.M.

Chance Dannen, a banker at the Wells Fargo branch in Aspen, Colorado, looked down from his desk chair and stared at the bomb by his feet. It didn't appear to be the work of an actual terrorist. It was just a large plastic storage bin, really, its sides and lid sloppily covered with holiday paper, as if wrapped by a clumsy child. But there it was, staring back.

Twenty seconds earlier, an elderly man had strolled in wearing jeans and a parka, a black knit hat, and huge black glasses. He put the package on the floor and handed Dannen a small, empty pizza box with a typewritten note on top. The man was out the door by the time Dannen got through the first sentence, which read, YOU HAD BETTER BE ONE VERY COOL INDIVIDUAL AND NOT START A PANIC OR MANY IN ASPEN WILL PAY A HORRIBLE PRICE IN BLOOD.

Dannen tiptoed around the package and took the letter to his manager. PUT \$60,000 IN USED \$100S IN THE WHITE BOX, it continued. DO NOT MOVE OR COVER THE VERY BIG FIRECRACKER IN THE CONTAINER. UNIQUE CHEMICALS AND ELECTRONICS. ANY DYES, TRACKERS, OR OTHER BULLSHIT WILL CAUSE DISASTER TO ALL.

The note made cryptic references to "rag-head martyrs," along with Karl Rove, Dick Cheney, and their "monkey," George W. Bush. Wait 20 minutes, it said, and then take the cash-stuffed box outside for pickup. If all went according to plan and the "firecracker" went undisturbed, the device would deactivate in two hours. But there better not be any tricks. The letter stated that Aspen's three other banks were getting held up, too, with help from accomplices, and that another package was hidden in a "high end watering hole" for "added insurance."

Nobody on the street noticed the suspect when he left Wells Fargo. Authorities theorize that he retreated to an alley half a block away, behind the Elks Lodge, where he picked up one of three more gift-wrapped bombs that he'd stashed next to a dumpster. He carried it a few yards to Vectra Bank, at the corner of East Hyman Avenue and South Hunter Street, delivered it with a note, and left, passing the bank's security camera at 2:36 P.M. He probably got to the corner of Hunter and Hopkins, looked down the block toward Wells Fargo, and, seeing the cops and the evacuees gathering outside, aborted his mission. Then he blended in with the crowd, whose New Year's Eve was about to be ruined.

Before long, Aspen police were swarming in and CBs were crackling all over northern Colorado. Every Crown Vic in the region was hurtling toward the Roaring Fork Valley: cops from Vail, FBI agents from Glenwood Springs, the Grand Junction bomb squad—190 responders in all. At 5:34 P.M., the Aspen Police Department (APD) issued a reverse 911 call to all the landline phones within two blocks of the crime scene; less than an hour later, they issued a second call, this time covering 16 square blocks. Buses got rerouted. Traffic backed up. Residents and tourists, waiters and cooks, managers and merchants—everyone had to clear the area immediately. As for all those New Year's Eve parties and dinner reservations and free-spirited downtown shoppers? No sale. Aspen finance director Don Taylor puts the loss to local merchants at nearly \$2 million.

It was a dark moment, and it was far from over: The suspect was unknown and on the loose, and nobody could guess who he was. A few

weeks after the events of that night, Chris Womack, 46, lead investigator for the Aspen police, told me that the bank's video wasn't any help. "We reviewed the image from Vectra's surveillance camera and released it to the public," he said, "but no one could ID the suspect. We didn't even know if it was someone local or an out-of-towner."

By the time the 911 calls went out, cops and sheriff's deputies were gathering three blocks from Wells Fargo and Vectra, in the basement of the Pitkin County Courthouse, where city and county law enforcement share office space. They interviewed bank employees and racked their brains. If it was someone local, who? Among the many criminals, cranks, and jokers who'd passed through the Roaring Fork Valley over the years, who would choose Aspen's biggest night to threaten the town's 25,000 residents and visitors?

Nobody came up with a candidate, but a few hours later the answer would become head-smackingly obvious.

HIS FIRST NAME might as well have been "Fuckin'." As in: Who's that guy with the woman on his arm, a wad of cash in his hand, and a grin twice as wide as the Hotel Jerome bar? It's Fuckin' Jim Blanning! Did you hear about the guy who dropped his drawers at La Cantina and waved a dildo at the county commissioner? Ha! Fuckin' Blanning.

"People said that a lot over the years," Blanning's old friend Jackie Parker told me when I arrived in Aspen two weeks after the town's bizarre, headline-making New Year's Eve. "He'd be up to something, and every time we'd all just be like 'Fuckin' Blanning.' He had a way of surprising you, but at the same time, you expected it."

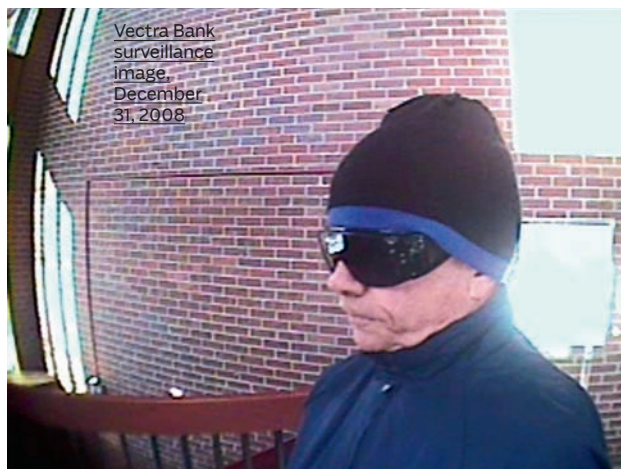
Even if he'd tried to lie low, Blanning—who was 72 on the night of the crime—had always been hard to miss. He was six feet tall and broad-shouldered, with a slow, confident stride. In his heyday, he was all bright blue eyes, thick brown hair, and a mellow-scratchy baritone.

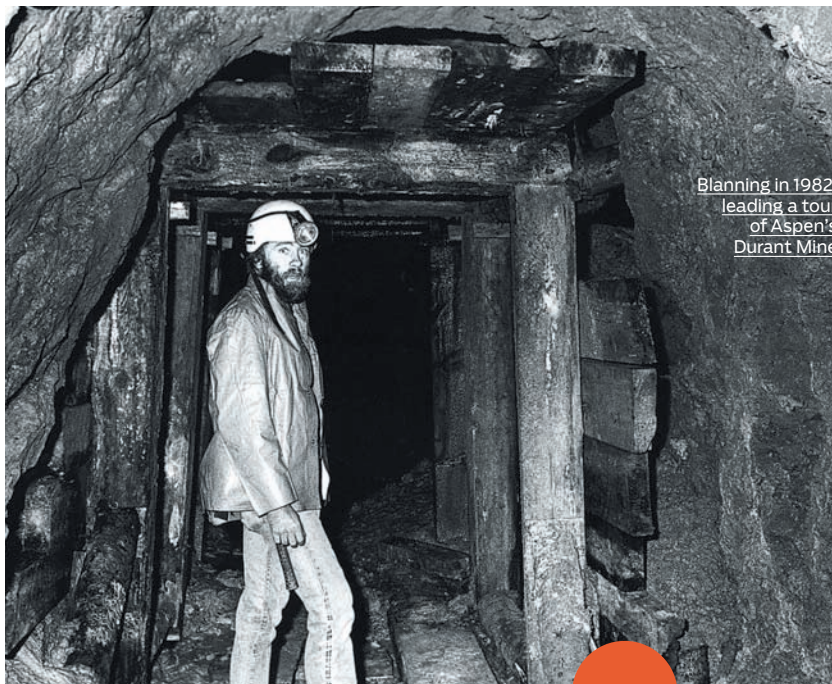
Everybody knew Blanning. Hell, he'd been an Aspenite since the 1940s, when he was just five years old. If you'd ever caught the first gondola of the day, you probably saw the grown-up Jim grinning and gripping, saying things like "Glory morning!" If you'd ever had a night-

cap at Little Annie's, then surely you heard him telling stories or marveling at life's little surprises. "Jim was always open to what the universe had to offer," says 37-year Aspen resident Joni Bruce, 62, his fourth wife. "His favorite saying was 'Fate is the hunter!'"

This was Jim Blanning from the days of Old Aspen, mind you, the wash-down-a-Quaalude-with-a-pull-tab-Coors-and-turn-up-the-Eagles Aspen of the seventies and eighties. Back then, Blanning didn't just show up for the party; he *was* the party. "I remember walking into the town's first disco back in '75," recalls Pitkin County sheriff Bob Braudis, a towering 64-year-old who was Blanning's friend for more than 30 years and whose native Boston accent has survived four decades in the Rockies, "and there's Blanning, dancing away in his cowboy boots and Wranglers. He could have fun with a bar full of miners or the prince of Thailand's nephew."

"Jim was the last of the wild men," says Bruce. "He was a tremendous character with a huge presence. He was a partyer, a prankster, totally gregarious and good to his friends." Blanning was the kind of dude who would hold court at the Pub or the Jerome, buy rounds, excuse





Blanning in 1982, leading a tour of Aspen's Durant Mine

himself to go tow a friend's truck out on Highway 82, and still make it back for last call. "He was one of my most generous friends," says Jim Wingers, 64, who met Blanning in the early sixties. "One winter, when I was laid up with a broken leg and couldn't work, he came by and gave me four grand, no questions asked."

When Blanning had money, it usually was the result of a complicated real-estate transaction involving one or more mining claims. Pitkin County's backcountry was loaded with old claims—10- to 20-acre parcels established during the silver boom of the early 1870s—most of which were abandoned during a market crash two decades later. But where prospectors had found failure, Blanning saw dollar signs—he was one of the first to grasp how easily old mining claims could be flipped into lucrative real-estate opportunities. By the mid-sixties, he'd already bought several, which could go for as little as \$300 back then.

Blanning wasn't the only person to buy and sell claims, but his devotion to the trade was legendary. The potential was limitless, he'd insist, beaming with optimism at buyers or investors. There were untapped veins of silver! You could build cabins and subdivisions on those old parcels and have your own little slice of paradise! The cash came in sporadic chunks—\$3,000 here, \$25,000 there—but, Wingers says, "Blanning always had a place to hang his hat." Usually it was a trailer on one of his properties, recalled fondly by an old bedmate as "the stabbin' cabin."

The only thing that rivaled Blanning's passion for mining was his appetite for women. "Right when I moved to town, I told a girlfriend that I'd met this guy, Jim Blanning," Bruce recalls. "And she just laughs and says, 'Oh, Jim's the first guy you date when you move to Aspen.' When it came to women, he was the town greeter."

By the mid-seventies, when Bruce married Blanning, he was 40, three times divorced, and an estranged father of two. Wife number one had taken the kids—a boy and a girl—and hit the road early. Wives two and three had come and gone so fast that no one remembers their names. Bruce, who wore a gold "4" medallion while married to Blanning, filed for divorce after eight months, partly over concerns that her husband's hound-dogging might be pathological.

"After his final marriage, Jim went through women like they were nothing," says his younger brother Bill Blanning, now 71 and living in Denver. "Aspen was bad for Jim in that regard. These women

would show up on vacation, and Jim's handsome and strong, a real mountain man. He'd tour them around town, take them up in the backcountry. Women just loved it."

For all his party-boy charm, Blanning was also prone to erratic behavior. He'd buy dinner for the gang one night and borrow for it the next, pleading poverty. According to consistent and oft-told legend, he initiated countless police chases around town, usually involving alcohol and a snowmobile. In 1986, on the night of his 50th birthday, Blanning got busted for a DUI while tearing through Aspen in an old Jeep—on the sidewalk.

Many old-time Aspenites recount these stunts with a sort of quaint fondness. But Bill Blanning is less sanguine. "Jim did what he pleased, when he pleased, no matter what it meant to other people," he says, offering as an example a party in the sixties that took an unpleasant turn when Blanning spiked the punch and locked everybody in the house. "Maybe he was what you call bipolar. You never knew what you were gonna

"He'd be up to something, and every time we'd all just be like 'Fuckin' Blanning.' He had a way of surprising you, but at the same time, you expected it."

get with Jim. When things were looking up, he was your best friend. He was gonna make millions and take you around the world. But he'd get some wild thing in his head. He could turn on you just like that and become a monster. And the next week the monster would be gone, and he'd be sorry and respectful."

Not everyone got Blanning's respect, especially the police. From the sixties through the mid-eighties, Blanning's name landed on 73 incident reports with the APD—traffic violations, failure to appear, petty theft, assault with a deadly weapon. That Blanning never spent more than a night or two in jail back then is a miracle, though Braudis chalks it up to his charm and intelligence.

"He usually knew how far he could push things," Braudis says. "He knew what to say and when to say it for maximum benefit." But Blanning's get-out-of-jail-free card didn't last forever; he did serious time starting in the late nineties. As Braudis would ultimately figure out, his crime back then—a racketeering conviction that put him in a federal prison from 1996 to 2002—was the key to what he did on New Year's Eve 2008.

5:30 P.M.

ABOUT AN HOUR AFTER SUNDOWN, when Grand Junction's bomb squad arrived in Aspen, authorities found two more packages in the alley behind the Elks Lodge, sitting on a black plastic sled. The contents were unknown, so the three-man crew sent in a robot to assess their weight and determine whether they contained liquids. Even now, bomb-squad member Matt Carson won't say exactly how the devices worked—he's worried about copycat bombers—but he emphasizes that the threat was real. "We gathered enough information to know that it wasn't a hoax," he says.

That night, Carson and his partners opted to use a "remote opening tool," essentially a high-pressure water cannon that obliterates and extinguishes any bomb parts or flames in its path. By 7:30 they were

almost ready to make short work of the devices in the alley.

Meanwhile, everyone in Aspen had accepted that the night was officially a bust. The big fireworks show was postponed. People with dinner reservations retreated to overcrowded establishments outside the danger zone. Down-valley residents with up-valley plans stayed in Woody Creek and Carbondale and Basalt. Mexican and Salvadoran dishwashers hopped on the bus back to Glenwood Springs. A man at a bus stop panicked and passed out, causing a minor scene.

Out at Aspen High School, volunteers set up a refugee camp for about 2,000 hotel and condo dwellers with nowhere to go. Aspen mayor Mick Ireland prepared to ride his bike to the school to perform ambassadorial duties with the tourists, to assure them that everything would be back to normal soon. But just before he left, police hurried him off to an undisclosed location, citing a new threat.

This fact emerged at around 7:45, when the managing editor at *The Aspen Times*, Rick Carroll, found a handwritten note by the paper's front door, on Main Street. "For the first 2 years in prison I woke up every [day] wishing I was dead," it read. "Now it comes to pass. I was and am a good man." The note named two people: Sheriff Braudis and Mayor Ireland. "May Bob help to understand it all," it read. "May Mike Ireland rot in hell."

Carroll rushed the note, which had a Denver address written on it, over to the courthouse. When Braudis saw it, his eyes went straight to the signature at the bottom. He immediately recognized Jim Blanning's scrawl. He'd seen it many times, on incident reports and on letters that Blanning sent him from prison. And as far as he knew, Blanning had been living in Denver since he got out on parole in 2002.

"Anyone who knew Blanning came to expect some pretty bizarre behavior," he explained. "I knew him to be manic, and also to be depressed, but never violently so." Nevertheless, when Braudis read the letter, he had a premonition: "I knew we'd find his body by morning."

APD radioed the bomb squad to announce that they'd identified a suspect and that he had a history of arrests and disputes with Aspen officials. When the bomb squad neutralized the packages in the alley, the contents dispersed like shrapnel. The detritus consisted of cell-phone parts, mousetraps, and bladders of gasoline—items that, in Braudis's opinion, were pieces of a viable device.

"A cell phone receives a call and vibrates, setting off a mousetrap," he explains, theorizing about Blanning's bombs. "The mousetrap snaps down on a well-placed strike—a match or a road flare—igniting a spark or a flame. Flame meet vapors from five-gallon plastic bladder of gasoline. Boom."

"IF YOUR FATHER WAS ALIVE," Bill Blanning recalls his mother saying to little Jim, "he'd have straightened you right out." But James Blanning Sr., an officer in the Army's 26th Cavalry, had died as a sick and starved POW in Japanese custody when Jim Jr. was five, Bill was four, and Dick, the last child, was two. (Dick declined to be interviewed for this article.) The Blannings were from Des Moines, Iowa, but they'd bounced from base to base and were living in the Philippines when James Sr. died. Sistie Blanning took the kids to Colorado Springs, where her parents were living. She and the boys traveled to Aspen regularly to learn how to ski. They settled there permanently in 1945.

Few Aspenites are left from those days, but former *Aspen Times* editor and longtime columnist Mary Eshbaugh Hayes, 80, remembers

Sistie as "a bohemian, an artist." With help from a generous local baroness, Sistie bought and ran the Garrett House, a rooming establishment on West Hopkins Avenue, where Jim and his brothers grew up.

As the oldest of three boys, Jim was the ringleader. "He was strong and powerful," Bill recalls. "He pretty well got his way. He pounded my brother and me when we were little. We were constantly terrorized by him."

According to Bill, if Jim wanted a toy, he'd take it. If he needed money, he'd pawn something, never mind that it usually wasn't his to sell. "He took anything he wanted, anytime he wanted," Bill says. "He didn't have a whole lot of conscience about using other people's things. He'd say, 'Oh, I traded you for it—I can't remember what I traded, but now it's mine.'"

In the mountains, Jim became fascinated with mines. He'd seen the



Blanning's Cherokee at the spot where police found his body

old mining maps and photos in the Hotel Jerome, where the family lived for their first few months. But the real thing blew his mind. There were tunnels and shafts under thousands of county acres—a giant honeycomb playground where he could explore and, according to Bill, experiment with old tools and explosives left behind by prospectors after the Panic of 1893.

After graduating from Aspen High in 1954 and then bashing gates with the Aspen Ski Club and doing a stint as a ski instructor, Blanning headed to the University of Colorado at Boulder. College being college, and Blanning being Blanning, he once floated a stick of dynamite down a small runoff channel that passed underneath a sorority house. "I don't think he got caught for that one," Bill says. Not long after, during a school parade, Blanning and some friends flipped the master switch controlling the power. "One of the other guys snitched," Bill says, "and Jim got expelled."

In '56, Blanning joined the Air Force, where, according to Bill, the regimented military life kept his wilder instincts in check. After serving three years, he returned to Aspen in 1959 and began odd-jobbing—shuttling tourists into town, working at ranches, driving a delivery truck. In '61, he left town to help cut trails at a new Colorado resort called Breckenridge. There, he got to know Dieter Bibbig, a young German who'd recently moved to Aspen.

"We were on the same crew, and I was telling someone how I

wanted a gun for elk season," Bibbig says. "Blanning walks up to me and says, 'Hey, Dieter, I've got a rifle I can sell you.' It was a .30-30 Winchester. I gave him \$40 for it." It was the only good deal he would ever get from Blanning.

8:00 P.M.

IN THE BASEMENT OF THE COURTHOUSE, authorities started calling Blanning's friends, asking about his whereabouts and whether they thought he really intended to hurt anyone. Soon, Blanning's pal Jay Parker and two Aspen police officers took a trip up to Smuggler Mine, northeast of town. Parker, a co-owner of the defunct mine, had spent plenty of time palling around with Blanning in its tunnels and shafts. Back in 1994, their good friend Stefan Albouy, a mining buff and claim developer, had committed suicide at Smuggler, and Parker was worried that Blanning might follow his friend's example. But Blanning wasn't there.

Meanwhile, a police background check had turned up a green 1997 Jeep Cherokee registered to one of Blanning's LLCs. The landlord at his Denver property said the Cherokee had a spare tire on the roof. Word went out over the radio.

Leads came in and fizzled. At 10:18, someone reported having seen Blanning at the Steak Pit earlier in the day. Another saw an elderly man shaking a police barricade near Wells Fargo. A man who'd been at Ace Hardware that afternoon said he'd seen a man buying black plastic sleds, just like the one Blanning had used to tow his packages. But it wasn't Blanning; it was a guy who runs the horse-drawn-carriage business on Ute Avenue. He'd shown

target of Blanning's rage. "I'd been negatively referenced by constituents before," he said later, "but this was unusual. I don't know why he had all this animosity toward me."

THE ANSWER TO THAT STARTS with Blanning's up-and-down track record as a businessman. His first notable venture was a bar called the Molly Gibson, which he opened in the winter of '63 in a Hyman Street space now occupied by a Quiksilver store. Business was brisk, but Blanning was a lousy bookkeeper and the place folded in less than a year. He got over it. By that time, he'd also embarked on his life's work as a buyer and seller of mining claims.

For the next three decades, Blanning sank all his time and money into this work. Sometimes he'd look at a claim map, decide which parcel or parcels he wanted, track down the heirs of the original name on the deed, and buy them out for a few hundred dollars. The land was remote and lacked infrastructure, so most owners were happy to dump it. This method was labor-intensive, but it was cheap and legal.

Blanning had other methods, however, that were less straightforward. One involved close scrutiny of the 1872 Mining Act, which requires counties to advertise mining-claim sales and auction the parcels off at a specified time every year. If Blanning could find proof that no such advertising or auctioning had taken place for a specific deed, well, too bad for Pitkin County—Blanning would lay claim to it.

Usually, though, Blanning searched for claims that were the property of old corporations—prospecting businesses that had packed up and left decades before. There were hundreds of them. Blanning would discover one, establish a new corporation with the same

name as the defunct one, and become the rightful owner. "Jim referred to this as 'resuscitating' a corporation," says Chip McCrory, 54, a former Pitkin County assistant district attorney. "But Blanning wasn't resuscitating anything. He'd adopt an old corporation's name just to take ownership. Then he'd turn around and sell it as a piece of real estate, regardless of its intended use."

Conservationists view the 1872 Mining Act much like gun-control advocates look at the Second Amendment—as an antiquated piece of legislation created in a context that no longer exists. "The Mining Act is outdated and obsolete in many ways," says Ireland. "Land pirates" like Blanning, he says, "were trying

to parlay that obsolete law to their advantage and buy up mining claims for subdivision. No one could have foreseen this in 1872."

Even so, Blanning did his share of legitimate business, selling cheap land in the seventies and eighties to ski bums and service workers. Several houses on Ute Avenue—at the base of Aspen Mountain ski area—sit on former Blanning claims, as do a few homes in the Castle Creek area and an 8,000-square-footer on top of Red Mountain. "I think the price on that claim was \$5,000," says Jim Wingers. "It's worth a lot more now."

According to everyone who knew him, Blanning was relentless about taking possession of every square inch of a parcel. "He had some claims that were being encroached upon by Ruthie's Restaurant," Wingers says, referring to the popular eatery at Aspen Mountain. "Jim put up a rope and made the skiers go through a six-foot-wide area so he could

continued on page 113

Personal, to the Aspen Times Editor
For the first 2 yrs. I was in prison I woke up every
wishing I was dead. Now it comes to pass, I was and am a
good man. Too many people and I do hate Rove/Bush with
a passion. Last Will & Testament - 3 crime scenes
1590 Wolff St Apt. 307 + 1615 Calif. St. #601 Denver. Also 1590 Wolff St
I began with all three to Bob Bradis + Mike Ireland
May Bob help to understand it all. May Mike Ireland get in hell.
The story is in the scene. Enclosed is a copy of bomb letter
Wells Fargo and Vectra. There are 2 more mass
bombs in the parking lot behind
the Elk Club. By the dump site

Blanning's letter to *The Aspen Times*

up at the stables that morning to find that his horse-manure sled had been stolen. Police assume that Blanning swiped it to haul his bombs.

Around 11:00, cops headed out to Midnight Mine, a road that passes several of Blanning's former claims. Every law-enforcement officer available cruised Aspen, looking for a Cherokee with a tire on the roof. Blanning could easily have fled town, but some speculate that he stuck around to watch the hubbub. Jay Parker thinks Blanning "probably drove to a spot with a good view of town so he could look out over the whole scene and see the mess he made."

There is, however, another possible scenario—that Blanning was driving around looking for Mayor Ireland. The police took this possibility seriously. Ireland was brought to an "undisclosed location," where he would wait out the night's events with police protection. He was as surprised as anybody to hear that he was a

count the number of people passing through his property. This drove D.R.C. Brown, the resort's owner, up a wall. Jim settled for two lifetime ski passes and some cash."

MICK IRELAND MOVED to Aspen in 1979 to be a ski bum but switched tracks in '85 and enrolled at the University of Colorado Law School, in Boulder. He first heard about Blanning in the summer of '86, while on break. Blanning, by way of his land research, was convinced that the town was in danger. "We'd had a big winter followed by a wet spring," Ireland explains, sitting at a conference table inside city hall. "Blanning claimed that a seismograph showed the mountain was cracking and was wet enough to slide and bury the town near Wagner Park." Blanning was wrong, but he meant well. He was convincing enough that officials briefly evacuated the area.

Out of law school and back in Aspen, Ireland took a job as a reporter for *The Aspen Times* in the summer of '88. He'd heard about a group that was buying up mining claims with the intention of selling the land for development, and he began reporting the story. To Ireland, people like Blanning were using claims "for reasons other than their intended purpose." A few years later, Ireland was appointed county commissioner. One of the first projects he was involved with was a land swap involving 125 acres near Mount Sopris, which sat atop more than 50 mining claims northwest of town. The rub: Blanning's name was on some of the deeds. Blanning signed on to a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service and won. But the case went federal, and the judge ruled against Blanning, saying that his ownership of the claims was based on duplicitously acquired deeds.

That battle, in part, inspired a legislative move by the county to rein in residential development on old mining claims. After several months of debate, the measure passed, placing strict limitations on rural building. By this time, of course, Aspen was a world-famous destination resort. Workers were being priced out of town and forced downvalley to Basalt and Carbondale and even Glenwood Springs, 40 miles away. Blanning, whose entire livelihood was tied up in mining claims and who wasn't known for squirreling away cash, found himself left out of the game.

He had to make a statement. One evening in 1994, he threw a hardbound copy of the U.S. Constitution through a courthouse window. While preparing for the stunt, he'd called up Sheriff Braudis's girlfriend, Dede Brinkman, a filmmaker, and asked her to document the crime. "It's a two-

camera shoot," he told her.

Later that summer, he climbed the stairs to the roof of the Pitkin County Courthouse, tied a rope to the cupola, wrapped the other end around his neck, and stood at the edge of the building, threatening to jump. Braudis, along with several other law-enforcement officers and friends of Blanning, took turns trying to talk him off the ledge. "He's screaming all kinds of stuff," Braudis recalls. "'Bob, they ruined my life, these fuckin' elected officials. They're all wrong and I'm right. I can't live like this, man.'" When Blanning finally came down, he melted into the arms of the police chief and wept.

While psychiatric treatment, or at least a break, was probably in order, Blanning opted to stay in the land business. It would be his biggest mistake. In 1995, he learned that Dieter Bibbig, the Austrian to whom he'd sold the rifle back in '61, kept his Aspen home not in his name but rather under the protection of a limited-liability company. Owning property under an LLC is a common way to protect assets in the event of a lawsuit. But just as a driver has to re-register a car, an LLC owner must renew the corporation every few years. Bibbig had let his LLC lapse. As far as Blanning was concerned, the property was up for grabs, just like the abandoned mining claims he'd

scored over the years. He "resuscitated" Bibbig's LLC under his own name and then took out a \$350,000 loan, using Bibbig's house—a Victorian on Park Avenue—as collateral. He defaulted on the loan, then sold Bibbig's house out from under him.

"It was not a real-estate transaction," says Chip McCrory, the former assistant D.A. "It was a criminal act. He didn't resuscitate Bibbig's LLC. He stole it." Bibbig had to spend nearly a quarter million on lawyer fees to get his house back. The incident prompted McCrory to investigate Blanning further. "The paper trail seemed endless," he says. "We found three or four mining-claim sales where Blanning was adopting these old corporations' names, passing property through a series of shell corporations... and trying to sell them. The county believed that he'd done business in violation of racketeering laws, so we charged him accordingly." That meant using the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act (RICO), a federal law created to maximize punishment for organized-crime figures. Forced to choose between prison and a plea deal with financial demands he couldn't fulfill, Blanning opted to go to trial. The jury found him guilty, and the judge gave him 16 years in prison.

Blanning had a few weeks of freedom after the sentencing, which he used to make



VICTORINOX
SWISS ARMY

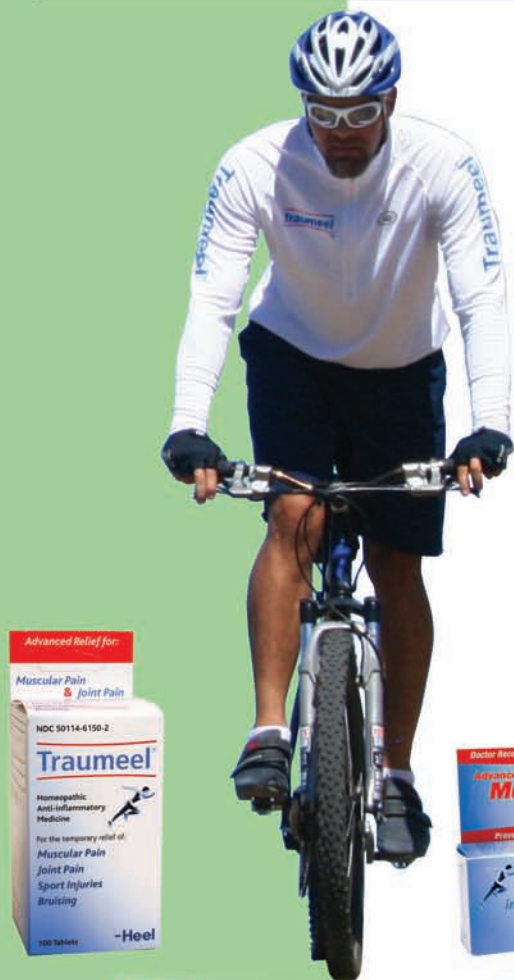
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ASPEN **continued**

a final statement. One Friday evening he walked into La Cantina, where county officials regularly met for after-meeting drinks. He approached their table, took off his clothes, and folded them neatly on a nearby chair. "All he had on was a Speedo, with this giant purple thing sticking out of it," recalls Ireland. "It was a huge purple dildo. He just stood there with his hands on his hips, staring at us."

The incident earned Blanning an indecent-exposure charge and got him branded a sex offender before he was shipped off to the federal pen in Cañon City, Colorado. "It was a totally draconian sentencing," Braudis says. "The Bibbig case should have been a civil case, not a federal RICO case. And the pervert thing, that was just excessive. Blanning got way more than he deserved. At that point, I knew his life was over."

In 2002, at age 66, Blanning was released and given an "intensive supervised parole." He'd done six years. After a year in a halfway house in Denver, he rented an apartment in the city's Sloan Lake neighborhood. Every few months, his brother Bill would stop by to check in and occasionally leave money. Their meetings were brief, and Blanning did most of the talking—about mining claims or the nightclub he frequented on weekends, where he'd dance with the ladies and nurse a Coke to save money. Whenever Bill left, he'd say, "I'm glad to see you're doing all right and getting by, Jim." And each time, Blanning would respond, "Well, if worse comes to worst, there's always Plan B."

11:45 P.M.

DIETER BIBBIG GOT the call just before midnight: Jim Blanning was behind the bomb scare and on the loose. He hung up, went into another room to get his rifle—the rifle Blanning had sold him 47 years earlier—and waited. But Blanning never showed; he was busy preparing his final message, a suicide note, handwritten and four pages long, addressed to Sheriff Braudis. He wrote, in part:

I came loaded for bear, as you will see. I was going to do just as the bomb note [stated]. Could have done some serious damage. Oh well. Too tired—to the bone... My body is shot and the ongoing black depression has [made] mush of my mind lately... Many people know I had a wonderful life until Mick Ireland and JE [Jodi Edwards, another county attorney] got me. God knows I would love to have cut Ireland's and Chip McCrory's balls off before skinning them. I wandered around for hours this afternoon. God knows I have a long history—Aspen School, Air Force Nuclear Weapons—Ski Patrol and Instructor... more deeds/property, etc. than most

anyone. Not sure where you will find me. Should be interesting to hear everyone tell stories about me.

Sometime in the early-morning hours, Blanning pulled into a small parking area next to the North Star Nature Preserve, about two miles south of town, toward Independence Pass. He turned off the engine, stepped out of the vehicle, put a .38 revolver under his chin, and fired. The bullet pinballed inside his skull, never emerging. Police found him at 4:27, face up in the snow, legs outstretched, eyes open.

Moments later, Grand Junction's bomb squad deployed the "remote opening tool" on the Wells Fargo package, which they'd safely moved to the sidewalk. When the blast of water hit it, a four-story fireball shot into the sky. "We'll never know whether the devices would have actually worked," APD's Chris Womack later told me. "But I personally believe that Blanning intended to do damage."

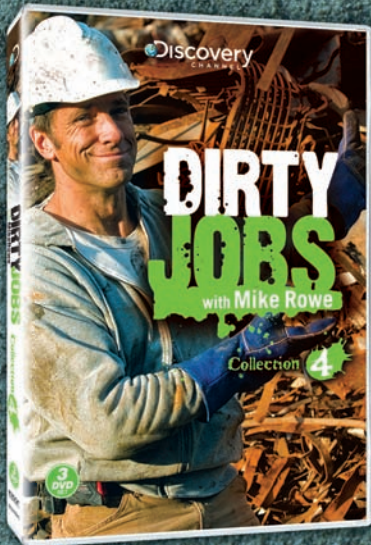
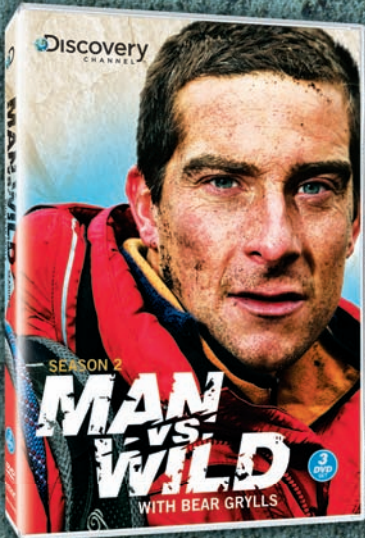
He certainly had the firepower. In addition to the .38, he wore a fishing vest that held eight semi-automatic-rifle magazines and three .38-caliber speed loaders. In his Cherokee, authorities found maps of Aspen with several addresses marked, among them the homes of Ireland and McCrory. There was also an AR-15 rifle and enough camping gear for a person to survive in the woods for weeks.

Whether Blanning intended to do any real harm will be the subject of debate on Aspen's barstools and chairlifts for years to come. Some will demonize him, or categorize him as a slightly more personable version of the Unabomber. Others will mythologize him as a man driven mad by the forces of government. Braudis comes down in the middle.

"Jim Blanning was not Don Quixote fighting windmills," he says. "He's not a romantic figure. Some people ascribe his troubles to the closing of the door by government, but that's romanticizing Jim Blanning, and I'm not gonna do that. He was a friend. And he was one of many colorful characters I've met in Aspen. He had demons. He'd become critical, and critical people have to take things to the next level. Unfortunately he did that by fucking up New Year's Eve and then electing to kill himself."

SHORTLY INTO the new year, Vail police announced that Blanning was a suspect in two robberies from 2005 and 2006, both at WestStar Bank, in Vail Village. Blanning had made purchases and deposits equal in value to five-figure amounts taken from the bank, and the suspect in surveillance footage wore a hat, glasses, and jacket iden-

THESE GUYS AREN'T AFRAID TO GET DIRTY.


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tical to the outfit Blanning sported in Aspen on New Year's Eve. The Vail suspect wore white gloves and bronze face paint. Authorities found matching gloves and tubes of bronze makeup in Blanning's Denver apartment—along with mining-claim maps, field guides, books, camping gear, and receipts dating back to the 1950s. Blanning had even saved the famous purple phallus from his visit to La Cantina.

At the time of the Vail robberies, Blanning didn't own a car. Police found no evidence of any car-rental transactions after his release from prison, and they have no leads as to a possible getaway driver. A friend of his in Denver told me that he

thinks Blanning may have taken a bus—an audacious and crafty move but not beyond the scope of his behavior. Detective sergeant Craig Bettis of the VPD believes that after the second robbery, Blanning may have simply walked out of WestStar, trekked up Vail Mountain, and camped out for a few days until the heat died down.

"He certainly was bold enough," Bettis says. "But at this point, all we can do is guess."

MIKE KESSLER'S STORY ABOUT CANCER CASES AT A COLORADO NUCLEAR-WEAPONS PLANT WAS INCLUDED IN THE BEST AMERICAN MAGAZINE WRITING 2008.