Liberty's vigilant lawman is key to capture of John Ray

By JIM ORSO
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LIBERTY — He's Liberty's one and only lawman, said Police Chief Albert Viar — unless, he added, you count his cousin who is a member of the Adams County Sheriff's Department.

Things usually don't get too riled in Liberty, Viar said. But they did recently when a man believed to be John Larry Ray came to town. It was Viar's brief pursuit that led to Ray's arrest several weeks later at Alton.

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"It makes me feel real good. Yeah, I feel real good about it," Viar said. Without evidence taken as a result of the chase, Ray still might be at large.

The Farmer's Bank of Liberty was robbed of $15,000 on May 30. Four days later, a farmer telephoned Viar to report a "suspicious car" that had been parked on a country road about a mile from the bank.

VIAR WENT to the car, recorded identifying information from it and walked to the farmhouse nearby to talk to the complainants. While talking with the farmer and his wife, Viar saw the lights of the car go on, and it sped away.

"That's when I started putting everything together," Viar said.

He chased the car and saw a satchel being thrown from it. After a time, the car "rammed a ditch," he said, and the driver escaped into the darkness.

Fingerprints found in the car turned out to be Ray's. About $11,000 in the satchel thrown from the car belonged to the robbed bank. And Viar discovered a "well-used" campsite near where the car had been parked before the chase.

"He had spent a lot of time there. There was a hole there where the satchel had been buried. He must have been digging it out while I was talking to those people," Viar said.

VIAR SAID residents of this tiny community of 500 "lived in fear for a while" after learning the man who robbed the bank may have been Ray, a federal escapee since February.

However, Ray was captured last week in Alton in a chance encounter with an off-duty Madison County Deputy.

There is a lesson in all of this, says Viar:

"People have to be cautious, have to lock their doors and their cars and look out for things. That's what I was telling them when they were calling me while he was still loose. I said all you can do is be cautious."