

A Murder, but no Mystery

The city of Morden has an impressive old courthouse. Like all growing towns a century ago, it also had a jail. So did Killarney, but it seems that the accused in serious cases were sent to Morden for trial, and in one notable case, for the carrying out of the sentence. Murder was fairly rare on the Canadian frontier, but it happened. And when it did happen the penalty could be death by hanging. Between 1874 and 1851 there were 52 executions in Manitoba. Most of them (35) happened in Winnipeg. A few took place in Dauphin and Brandon. Only once was an execution carried out at the Morden Jail and that murder happened on a farm near Killarney.

While the pioneer era was a peaceful one, as time passed and more people were attracted to the region, there were bound to be issues. One in particular made the news of the day.

Georgina Brown was a single thirty-six year old woman who kept house for her brother on his farm near Killarney. Twenty three year old Lawrence Gowland was a former Barnardo Boy, one of many orphaned or destitute children sent from England to places all across Canada. Many ended up working on farms.

While the charitable organization operated by Dr. Barnardo had a worthwhile purpose and many success stories, it also had its problems. Some children ended up being poorly cared for and essentially used as cheap labour. Some were troubled souls, and didn't adapt well to their situation.

After lunch on May 21, 1907 John Brown left his home to go to Killarney, leaving his sister Georgina, and the hired man, Lawrence Gowland at home.

Upon returning a few hours later he found Gowland severely injured and bleeding. At first he thought that his sister had gone to visit the neighbour, something she had planned to do, but not finding her there he returned and found her dead in her room. All the evidence pointed to Gowland as the killer.

While being attended to by the coroner and Dr. White, he confessed and said he had tried to kill himself with a butcher knife after killing Georgina.

He survived to stand trial in Morden for his crime.

After recovering from his suicide attempt he had reportedly decided he would rather live, and indicated life in prison would be preferable to hanging. He didn't get his wish, and after his conviction he was the only person to ever be hanged in that place on Dec. 13.

The newspapers of the day covered the trial in detail, as they generally did.

The Winnipeg Tribune, in describing the execution, mentioned the prisoner's courage in facing his fate.

"The doomed man went to the scaffold without a tremor. As early as six o'clock in the morning a number of persons had assembled outside the prison, and before daylight arrived those summoned as jurors had taken their places in the sheriff's office." Winnipeg Tribune Dec. 13 1907,

He is interred in the prison yard of the Morden jail.

It was reported that he was troubled, perhaps even repentant by his situation, but the newspaper reports don't offer many insights into who Lawrence Gowland really was, and why he might have become a killer. We did learn that he had spent a year on the Barnardo Farm at Russell, and afterwards worked for a farmer north of Manitou. He was considered, "rather intelligent, but possessed of a violent temper. He is said to have suffered intense mental agony since that time, and is almost a wreck of his former self."

Georgina is buried in the Killarney Cemetery.