

JOHN VERNE

THE MURDER OF SERGEANT JOHN VERNE

Researched & written by Jack Templeman



Sergeant John Verne

Sergeant John Verne was well known throughout St. Boniface as 'Sergeant John' by school children and adults alike. He joined the small St. Boniface Police Force on August 20th, 1920 and was promoted to Sergeant in 1922.

On Tuesday, July 24th, 1934, Sergeant Verne was on duty in the St. Boniface Police station located in the basement of the City Hall on Provencher Avenue. At this time the force only consisted of 10 men and Verne was acting as Chief Constable while Chief Baudry was on leave. On day shift there was only one man on beat patrol and a detective came in later in the morning. The remainder of the men were spread out on afternoon and night shifts or were on weekly leave. The usual routine was for the sergeant to serve in the station and pass calls on to the beat constable. In an emergency, he would take the cruiser and respond alone, or pick up the beat man on the way. When he left the station, he called the fire hall directly behind and a fireman came to answer the phone.

On this particular day, at about 08:15 a.m., Sergeant Verne received a report of a robbery taking place at the Norbridge Pharmacy, 11 St. Mary's Road. He jotted the address on a pad, then called Fireman Art Humphries to take the desk. Verne then proceeded to the pharmacy alone.

The hold-up at the pharmacy was being committed by George D. Jayhan, Shea or Zaha. He had been born in Ridgeville, Manitoba and was 34 years old. Little is known of him other than he spent considerable time in at least six institutions in the U.S. before being deported back to Canada at Windsor, Ontario in 1932. He was arrested there for possessing stolen goods but only received a

fine. Then he moved west, right out to Vancouver and it was probably there that he became a heroin addict, as the inland cities were not drug oriented in those years.

Jayhan's record indicated he was often caught and a study of the Norbridge Pharmacy robbery leaves one to wonder how he managed to evade capture during earlier robberies in Winnipeg.

Shortly after he arrived in Winnipeg in 1934, the city started to experience a rash of drug store break-ins and then robberies by a nervous suspect. He was armed and always tied up the proprietors. His nervousness caused concern that he might become violent and he finally did on July 24th.

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The gun he had been using in the hold-ups and finally in the murder had been stolen from a break & enter at McBurney Drugs, 890 Sargent Avenue in May of that year.



Jayhan had prepared for the robbery the day before by stealing a Desoto Sedan from 489 Kingsway Avenue in Fort Rouge. Then early on Tuesday, he set out to rob the drug store and entered it about 08:10 a.m. Only the pharmacist Frank Wade was there when Jayhan

entered with the revolver. Wade was forced to show Jayhan where the narcotics were stored before being taken to a back room and tied up, as was the usual routine. Jayhan gathered the drugs into a carton and then emptied the cash register. Next Jayhan started to steal all the cigarettes and was placing them in a separate carton when his day started to go bad.

The delivery boy, William Rodger, arrived for work and walked in on Jayhan. Jayhan had to stop and take the boy into the back room and tie him up beside Frank Wade. Hardly had he re-entered the store when the first customer of the day, Raymond Jackson, walked in. Again, Jayhan had to herd him into the back room and tie him up.

Before anyone else arrived Jayhan took the box of stolen cigarettes out to the stolen car parked behind the store. When he returned to get the box of drugs, he must have been surprised to find both Wade and Jackson had freed themselves. He did not know that Jackson had time to phone the St. Boniface Police with Sergeant. Verne receiving the call.

Jayhan tied the two men up again and left the store shook up as he forgot the box of drugs, his main concern and reason for the robbery.

When Jayhan had been holding Mr. Wade up, a young boy, Jackie Dick, was passing the store and saw what was happening. He did not enter but ran to the service station then located at Marion and St. Mary's Road. While the service station operator called the police, Dick was joined by four other boys who had been at the station. They all watched the drug store and saw Jayhan drive off in the stolen car. Then all the boys ran over to the drug store and went in.

Meanwhile, Jayhan had hardly left the store when he must have realized that he forgot the drugs so he returned within minutes and now found the five boys in the store. This time he just herded the boys into the back room and told them to stay there without bothering to tie them up. He did not notice that Wade had gotten loose again as he hid in the store until Jayhan went back out with the box of drugs.

Jayhan ran back to the car in the lane and in haste driving out to Horace Street, he had to cross a wooden sidewalk that blew out a tire. He abandoned the stolen car but this time remembered to take the box of drugs as he ran east on Horace Street towards Tache.

Right after Jayhan ran out of the store, two more customers, J.M. Reid and E. McKinnon came in and met Wade who told them what happened. All three men got into Reid's car to give chase and started to go east on Marion Street to parallel Jayhan. They saw Jayhan stop and run back towards St. Mary's Road so they turned also.

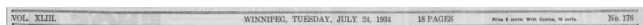
Jayhan must have realized as he ran on Horace that Winnipeg was the other direction. When he got to St. Mary's Road, he flagged down a car driven by William Cormode along with his son Campbell and ordered them at gunpoint to head over the Norwood Bridge. He then ordered them to continue over the Main Street Bridge and head north. Before Broadway, he ordered them to turn

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right between the H.B.C. building and the C.N. station where they went under the subway. They then made a left turn in the C.N. yards to head towards Water Avenue.

The first customer in the store, Jackson, also got free and ran out in time to see Jayhan run back to St. Mary's Road and commandeer the Cormode vehicle. He got the license number, 10-641 and supplied this to Sergeant Verne who arrived before the car got out of sight. Verne gave chase over the bridges, followed by the Reid vehicle and then Jackson in his vehicle.

Before the commandeered vehicle could reach Water Avenue, Verne overtook it and forced it to a stop. Verne got out of the cruiser and Jayhan got out of the other car on the passenger side. Both men had walked to the back of the vehicle and faced each other about 6 - 8 feet apart. Jayhan opened fire on the officer with a Colt .455 striking him twice in the stomach.



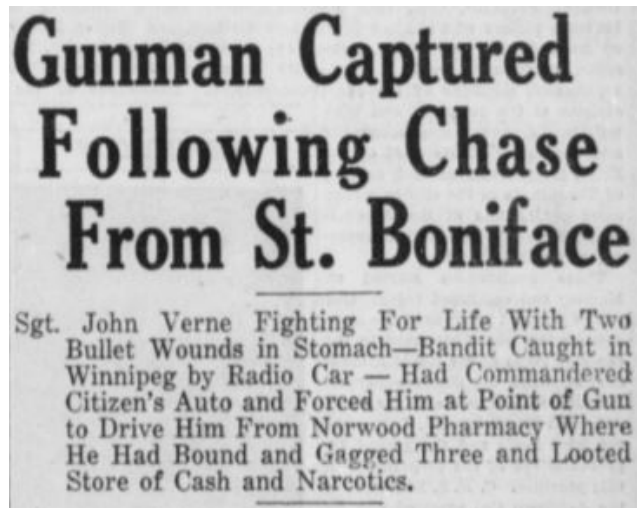
Policeman Critically Wounded Attempting to Capture Bandit

Jayhan got back in the Cormode car and ordered him to drive away. Verne was loaded into the Reid vehicle with Wade holding him as they rushed back over the Provencher Bridge to the St. Boniface Hospital. McKinnon followed in the police car. Jackson attempted to follow the Cormode car but lost it. He did manage to find a Winnipeg beat constable and gave him the license number of the wanted car. The constable quickly called the information in from a call box and it was broadcast to the Winnipeg cars.

It must be remembered that at this time, the police radio system was in its infancy and Winnipeg was one of the first in North America to have one. It was established in 1930 and was a one-way system

until 1939. Messages had to be acknowledged by phone or from a call box.

Once again, Jayhan probably set a record in being captured. The officers did not even have time to acknowledge the message. They were stopped at the intersection of Main and Bannatyne when the message was broadcast by the dispatcher and the wanted car crossed Main Street in front of Constable E. Gibson #23A and G.W. Rocky #96A. The officers swung behind it and Constable Gibson fired one warning shot at the car. The driver, Cormode, threw it out of gear and slammed on the brakes. The chase was over at Bannatyne Avenue and Albert Street. Jayhan did not resist. Mr. Cormode and his son also found themselves in handcuffs for a while until things were sorted out. The box of drugs and the gun with four expended cartridges were recovered from the car.



No time was wasted in those days. St. Boniface Police were notified of the arrest at 8:50 am, less than an hour after it all began and by 9:45 am, Jayhan was booked into the jail after giving a full statement. In the statement, Jayhan claimed that the officer had his gun out and he thought he was going to shoot so Jayhan fired at the officer. This statement was an obvious lie as Verne had not carried his gun and was unarmed when shot down. The gun and his other personal effects were later removed from his locker. This carelessness or lack of fear left him in a disadvantaged position that resulted in his death. Verne was a big man, very

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strong and fearless. In 1928, he had wrestled with three criminals and one shoved a gun into his side and tried twice to fire it. Verne overpowered him and he never got the chance for a third try at the trigger. All three received penitentiary terms and the lash.

Verne was conscious when conveyed to the hospital and he insisted on walking in although assisted by Wade. His condition was critical from the beginning and he had lost a lot of blood. At 3:35 p.m., he was on the operating table and being given a direct blood transfusion from Constable Bill Russell (later Chief) when he succumbed to the wounds.

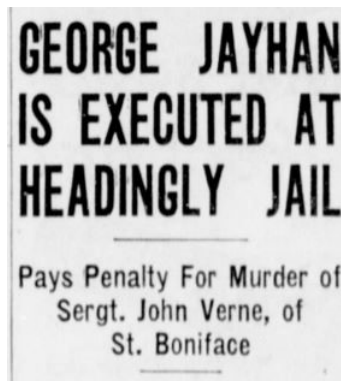
As was the custom of the day, a Coroner's Inquest was called immediately and held on the 26th. All the witnesses were called, as well as Detective Sergeant Melville from the Winnipeg Police who read out Jayhan's statement admitting the robbery and shooting the policeman. The report of the Inquest states it was not felt prudent to have Jayhan there in person. Naturally, the jury named Jayhan the slayer. The jury also recommended the department be increased in size and in the future, two armed officers should respond to hold-up alarms.

Another custom of the time was to have the body moved to the family home before the funeral and this was also done on the 26th. Early on Saturday morning, the body was moved from the home on Deschambault Street to the Council Chambers of the City Hall where it lay in state from 07:00 a.m. till 09:30 a.m. The body was then taken to the St. Boniface Basilica for the funeral service.

'Sergeant John' was so respected by the people of St. Boniface that all flags were flown at half-mast and many businesses closed. The Basilica overflowed with citizens as well as police from Winnipeg and all local municipalities, the RCMP, and railway police forces. The Winnipeg Police

Department provided six constables, a sergeant and an inspector as honorary pallbearers while St. Boniface Constables Butner, Bessette, Hand, Patenaude, Desautels, and Russell served as the pallbearers. More than 30 children from St. Boniface schools carried floral tributes into the Basilica as Verne's four sons followed the casket. The burial took place in the St. Boniface Cemetery on Archibald Street.

Jayhan was held in the Rupert Street jail until committed for trial and the city doctor attended each day to administer morphine to him. His trial was in November and on the 14th he was sentenced to hang. On the 13th he again showed his born loser qualities by attempting suicide by slashing his wrists. The effort only got him a one-hour delay as he was treated and returned to court.



On another Tuesday, February 12th, 1935, at 7:44 am Jayhan paid the supreme penalty on the gallows at Headingly Jail. Justice took only a few months & removed any possibility that this killer would hurt

anyone else. Another custom of the times saw a mug shot of Jayhan framed in a picture of his rope given to the St. Boniface Police Department. That reminder is now at the Police Museum. Verne was 39 years old when he died. The St. Boniface Police did not have any pension provisions at that time but the Police Commission authorized a payment of \$400.00 (about 2 months pay) to Mrs. Verne. The City also assumed the funeral costs and provided the services of the City Solicitor to assist her at a hearing of the Workman's Compensation Board in August. The Compensation Board would usually pay a pension of about \$40.00 to the widow and a small amount for each child under 16 years of age.