

The Early 1900s



Researched and Written by Jack Templeman

CHIEF CHRIS NEWTON, 1919 - 1934



Chief Chris Newton

Following the dismissal of Chief MacPherson, the appointment of a Chief Constable was needed immediately to retain control over the remaining policemen who did not an oath of allegiance to the police force and the City of Winnipeg and to reject membership in a union as well as the Special Constables hired to assist with the strike. Deputy Chief, **Chris H. NEWTON** was appointed as the fifth Chief Constable of Winnipeg.

The strike had been well controlled by the unions who asked their members to stay at home and not cause trouble. There were small problems and on June 10th a large gathering took place at Portage and Main where the crowd roughed up some Special Constables. On June 21st, now referred to as Black Saturday, another large crowd was gathered on Main Street at William Avenue in front of the city hall when a streetcar tried to drive by southbound. The streetcar was being operated by a non-union man and the crowd stopped it by pulling the trolley off the wire. The crowd then tried to roll the streetcar over and set it on fire.

At this time a contingent of Royal North West Mounted Police officers came down Main Street on horseback and tried to disperse the crowd with

batons. It was later claimed that the officers were met with a hail of stones and other objects as well as some gunfire. They were forced to turn their horses at William Avenue where they regrouped and then came charging back onto Main Street in front of the city hall with revolvers in one hand and batons in the others. Shots were fired into the crowd and one man was killed instantly, another was seriously wounded and died the next day and a number of people were wounded or suffered injuries in the melee but the street was cleared. Then a large number of Specials took to the street and blocked it off so the fire department could put out the streetcar fire.

This sudden outbreak of violence and death seemed to bring the city to its senses and the strike wound down and ended soon after. Most of the "dismissed" police officers were permitted to rejoin the police force if they were now willing to sign the oath and quit the union. There was a list of undesirable officers whose conduct during the strike was such that they were not to be rehired and except for three who were returned soldiers they were not rehired.

To read more of the strike visit Winnipeg in Focus at <https://winnipeginfofocus.winnipeg.ca/1919strike>

The morale in the department was very low at this time and Chief Newton set about rebuilding the department both with manpower and with pride in the Force. One of his first concerns was to permit the formation of the Winnipeg City Police



Athletic Association. This was intended to promote athletics within the department and to arrange social functions for the members and their families. This turned out to be the origin of the present Winnipeg Police Association which did later become the legal bargaining agent of the rank and file police officers.

The other project that Chief Newton was instrumental in getting started was the Police Pipe Band in 1920. Over the years this band has become internationally known and is still recognized as an excellent ambassador of the city. The department also had a dance band for a short time which played at police socials and other functions but this eventually disbanded.

The roaring 20's brought a lot of excitement to Winnipeg as well as to the rest of North America and many notorious criminals came here as well. Fortunately, no officers were killed during this period although several were shot and wounded. In 1924 Percy Moggie committed a bank robbery and got into a gun battle with Detectives **Fred BATHO** and **Robert FRAYNE** wounding both officers. He was captured and sent to prison but continued his criminal ways for many years after.

In 1926 bank robber, Wilfred Bonnin killed a bank official and then shot and wounded Det. Insp. **George SMITH**. Bonnin was also wounded but recovered and was convicted and executed.

In 1928 several drug stores were held up and one druggist was killed by Carl "Gunner" McGee. When detectives tried to arrest him he shot Det. Sgt. **Charles McIVER** before being killed by the officers. It is interesting to note that both George Smith and Charles McIver later became Chief Constable as did another officer who was wounded some years later while another officer whose partner was killed also held that office.

Spectacular Arrest of Wanted Man When Special Police Train Arrives

One of the most sensational murder cases in North America was brought to a conclusion in Winnipeg in 1928 with the execution of one of the first recorded serial sex killers, Earle "The Strangler" Nelson. This man came from San Francisco and travelled across the northern United States in 1926 and 1927 killing as he went. He then hitch-hiked to Winnipeg where he murdered a young girl on Smith Street and then a woman on Riverton Avenue. He fled the city and went to Regina briefly then came back into Manitoba heading for the United States when he was arrested south of Killarney by members of the Manitoba Provincial Police. He was turned over to Winnipeg Police who did an excellent job in the investigations which led to his conviction and execution. Newspapers and magazines all over North America published articles on the crime and put Winnipeg on the map. Nelson was identified in 24 of the American murders as well as the two in Winnipeg and there were other similar murders where identification could not be made.

Chief Newton continued to keep the Winnipeg Police Force at the forefront of new police technology with the introduction of the first radio-equipped patrol cars in Canada in 1930. Radio at this time was limited to one-way broadcasts and because it was operated by a number of batteries it could only be used twelve hours a day so the batteries could be recharged. When messages were given out the officers would either respond directly or use a call-box to confirm the message. The importance of this radio system proved itself in 1934 when St. Boniface Police Sergeant **John VERNE** was shot and killed behind the C.N.R. station while chasing a robber. The license number of the getaway car was called into the police and



broadcast within minutes. One of the radio-equipped cars was on Main Street at Bannatyne as it was broadcast and the wanted car passed right in front of them crossing Bannatyne. A very short chase ensued and the killer was captured. It was not until 1939 that two-way radio was introduced in Winnipeg.

The Depression of the '30s saw unemployment soar and even the employees of the City were in danger of losing jobs until an agreement was worked out where all employees would take a cut in pay of 10% in 1931 and a further 10% in 1932. No hiring was permitted. These conditions remained for several years.

Chief Newton was not able to lead the department out of the Depression as he got involved in an altercation reportedly following a traffic accident in 1934. The altercation led to blows and the other man complained of assault. Newspapers showing the injured man caused an uproar and while the Police Commission considered dismissing Chief Newton, he avoided the possibility by submitting his request for retirement. His resignation was approved and when he did go to court over the assault it was as an ordinary citizen rather than a police chief.