

BOOZE, BANKS AND BULLETS

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The "Roaring Twenties" is generally remembered as the time that Americans went wild after the First World War. That war had been five years of suffering and slaughter that was supposed to be "the war to end all wars". To add to the misery of the people as they tried to get on with their lives, the government voted in Prohibition. Liquor was only to be available for medical purposes. In fact, liquor became the largest factor in crime at that time and in some cases made criminals into millionaires.

Canada also survived the "Roaring Twenties" on a much smaller scale but had its own famous bootleggers, bank robbers and gun-battles. The cities in eastern Canada were often just across a river from large American cities looking for illicit spirits to quench the thirst of their citizens. There the rum-runners often used speedboats as well as fast cars.

Western Canada was not without its share of excitement especially along the unpatrolled border between Manitoba and Saskatchewan and the United States. Bootleggers had actually blazed numerous trails along back roads to avoid what little law enforcement there was. The only problem with these roads was the weather, as they were usually just mud roads. In addition, the winter snows would block the roads so the criminals would operate in their own areas for a while.

In 1920, the Manitoba Provincial Police had been reorganized into a larger, uniformed force responsible for the traffic and liquor laws throughout the province. The previous twenty-five years, the Provincial Police Force consisted of only a few officers under Chief E.J. Elliott who were on call to assist local town police when necessary. The new Commissioner of the Manitoba Provincial Police was Colonel J.G. RATTRAY, a retired army officer who was born in Pipestone, Manitoba and served in the First World War.

The police force was obviously not a high priority for the government at the time as the pay was low and equipment was of poor standard. Some officers were actually issued old confiscated weapons that were not reliable. Transportation consisted of a number of motorcycles to patrol vast areas and a few cars scattered about the province. The cars were generally small inexpensive Fords or Chevrolets that did not have much power.

Police forces at the time were jealous of their jurisdictions and co-operation was often lacking. This did not only apply between the federal, provincial and city forces but carried over to co-operation with American authorities. It was known by Canadian authorities that a number of American gangs operated from Minot, North Dakota and made raids into Canada and then fled back to the safety of their own country. The

American authorities denied knowledge of such gangs in their areas. In part, this was caused by the feelings Americans had that Canada was bringing this trouble on itself because it was selling liquor that it knew was destined to be smuggled into the United States. This was leading to crime and violence in their areas so there was little sympathy.

A period in 1921-1922 seems to have been the breaking point in the Manitoba and Saskatchewan versus North Dakota problem. It involved the murder of a police officer in the United States as well as a murder in Saskatchewan and the removal of the Commissioner of the Manitoba Provincial Police. This in turn led to the reorganizing of the Provincial Police.

It started on October 12th, 1921, with a break-in to the Bank of Hochelaga in Elie that got the gang some \$1,200.00. The same gang was believed responsible for a break-in to the liquor warehouse in Carnduff, Saskatchewan on November 16th where 60 cases of liquor were taken.

Things were relatively quiet over the winter as travel on the back roads was difficult but it started up again in the summer. On August 21st, an attempt was made to enter the Union Bank in Melita which was unsuccessful. A week later, on August 28th, a gang struck the Bank of Hamilton in Killarney where they were successful in blowing the safe to steal \$11,000.00. The next night they tried the Bank of Hochelaga, again in Elie but this time failed.

September saw the gang return to the Union Bank in Melita at about 03:00 am on the 23rd. This time the raid turned violent. Several men entered the town on foot after parking their cars on the outskirts as usual. They went to the power station and overpowered the night watchman and tied him up. They then cut the telephone and telegraph wire to isolate the town before they walked over to the bank. The bandits did not attempt to conceal their identity as they went about their work. They first woke up two bank employees who lived above the bank and marched them downstairs in their pyjamas and made them stand on the wooden sidewalk while one-armed bandit guarded them.

The other gang members set about drilling into the bank safe to set their explosives. In all, it would take eight charges of dynamite to blow the door open. The first explosions woke a number of residents and one man ran to the fire tower and rang the bell thinking it was a fire. This woke more residents but only one man dared to take any action and this could have cost him his life.

The editor of the Melita Enterprise newspaper walked towards the bank and was ordered to stay back by the man guarding the bank employees. As the editor continued walking the guard fired several shots into the ground in front of him. The editor was determined to get to the bank and only stopped when he was shot in the foot by one of the bullets.

The bandits meanwhile managed to blow open the safe door and steal a large quantity of cash and securities. It was later reported that \$108,189.00 was taken. The bandits then fled in their cars while the townspeople cared for the injured man and also tried to restore telephone communications. When they were able to contact the police, it was Constable John TULLOCK who attended from his post in Reston.

On September 27th, a gang of bandits travelled into Saskatchewan and successfully entered the Bank of Montreal in Ceylon where they blew the safe and made off with \$6,500.00. They also drove east towards Manitoba but stopped near the border at Moosomin where they were also successful in blowing open the safe in the Union Bank where they got another \$6,000.00. After this night's work, they headed back south.

The next bandit attack occurred on October 4th in Bienfait, Saskatchewan. There was a liquor supply depot here managed by a Paul Mateoff. An American, Lee Dillinge from Lignite, North Dakota arranged to purchase a load of 100 cases of liquor for the sum of \$6,000.00 which was to be picked up at the depot. Dillinge arrived in his own car along with a truck and driver for the liquor. Dillinge handed over the money and as Mateoff was counting it, shots were fired through the window which struck and killed Mateoff. Dillinge ducked out of sight when one of the bandits entered the depot and calmly removed the money from the body of Mateoff. When the bandit fled, Dillinge ordered his man to load the liquor onto the truck and they also left.

A Saskatchewan Provincial Police car had patrolled through Bienfait only minutes before the robbery and continued on. A short time later a high-powered Cadillac sped by them. This vehicle had recently been stolen in Estevan and was used by rum runners. The police car gave chase while the officers fired several shots but they could not catch them with their standard car. The bandits were able to travel so fast to the next town that they were able to stop and cut the telephone wires there to prevent the officers from calling ahead.

The bandits then headed south on the back roads and crossed the border to lie in wait for the Dillinge car and liquor truck. They forced the vehicles to stop and hijacked them leaving the drivers to walk to the nearest town. The empty truck was later found burned out.

A few days before the Bienfait robbery, American law enforcement officials had also been faced with a violent bank robbery in West Hope, North Dakota, where the town Marshall was killed.

Copycat bank robbers added to the problems facing the provincial police. On October 9th, a lone armed robber entered the Bank of Montreal in Altona around noon and held up the teller. He received over \$2,000.00 and fled to a waiting car. In his hurry, he missed another \$6,000.00 that was in the vault.

The Canadian law enforcement agencies finally started getting together to battle this menace of hit-and-run bandits. The R.C.M.P. offered their assistance but

Commissioner Rattray did not want to give up any authority. Several towns suggested forming a civilian night patrol committee and Commissioner Rattray gave his approval.

The final straw came on October 24th, 1922 in Pipestone, the birthplace of Colonel Rattray.

The Saskatchewan Provincial Police received information that a gang was going to raid the bank in Pipestone that night. About 9:00 pm, they phoned the Manitoba Provincial Police in Winnipeg to inform them. Colonel Rattray was not available at that time but the message was given to Inspector James BAIN. He in turn notified Inspector W.G. CLARKE in Melita and Sergeant A.E. ROSS in Brandon. The sergeant then notified constables at Reston, Virden, Deloraine and Waskada. There was an R.C.M.P. detachment in Waskada and the Provincial Constable notified the constable thereof the warning at about 10:00 pm. The RCMP officer offered to assist and go to Pipestone but was advised by Inspector Clarke not to as "that place is taken care of and you will follow your usual patrol".

The R.C.M.P. in Winnipeg were not notified until about 04:00 am after the raid had taken place. This was done by Winnipeg Chief of Detectives George SMITH after he was notified.

Now here was an opportunity to catch at least one gang right in the act if the police acted quickly and with sufficient manpower. But the Provincial Police did not act quickly and certainly did not use sufficient manpower.

Constable John TULLOCK was dispatched from Reston to go to Pipestone and organize some citizens to assist him. His attendance at the scene of the Melita bank robbery and shooting should have been enough to make him realize there would be a number of bandits so he should have a large number of citizens to assist. Whatever his reasons, he only got four citizens to arm themselves to assist him. It may be that no-one else was willing at that time of the evening. The next questionable decision was to place himself and the four men in a building across the street from the bank which left the rear door unguarded. Again, it may have been that he wanted to be able to communicate with all his posse at the same time but it did leave a weak spot. One final blunder during the actual break-in turned this potential surprise into an embarrassing farce.

The information was correct and around 03:00 am the bandits arrived. It was a very dark night when they parked their cars on the outskirts of town near the elevator and walked in. They first broke into the CPR tool shed and then cut the telephone and telegraph wires. They next picked up an eight-foot length of a telephone pole and carried it to the rear of the bank to use as a battering ram. As soon as they began to shatter the back door of the bank, Constable TULLOCK and his posse started to shoot into the front of the bank without waiting for them to enter. Some 17 shots were



George Smith

fired without success as the bandits fled unopposed from the back of the bank. They got to their cars and headed westward towards Saskatchewan.

When word of what happened in Pipestone reached Winnipeg everyone questioned the effectiveness of the Provincial Police. The Manitoba government quickly responded by suspending Commissioner Colonel Rattray, Inspectors Bain and Clarke and Sergeant Ross on October 27th. At the same time, the Attorney General of the Province asked for assistance from the Winnipeg Police Department. Chief of Detectives George SMITH was seconded to become the Acting Commissioner of the Provincial Police and served in this capacity until December 18th.

The internal investigation resulted in the Attorney General asking for the resignations of Colonel Rattray and Inspector Bain on November 10th. Inspector Bain asked for time to consider this and then submitted his resignation but Colonel Rattray refused to resign. On November 16th, 1922, Commissioner Colonel J.G. RATTRAY was dismissed.

In his short time as Acting Commissioner, George Smith sent extra men to patrol the border area and obtained new weapons including a Thompson Submachine gun. He also was able to purchase two used Cadillacs and hired professional chauffeurs as Special Constables to operate the cars in the border area.

On December 18th, 1922, the Attorney General appointed M.P.P. Inspector, Colonel H. J. MARTIN as Commissioner of the Manitoba Provincial Police. He served as the last Commissioner until the Force was absorbed into the R.C.M.P. on April 1st, 1932. *Last update: September 19, 2007*



Colonel H.J. Martin