

JAMES DODDS - AN ARSONIST'S FLAME

Researched and written by Constable Scott Taylor

Edmond Molyneux sat at the table staring at his poker hand. Across from him sat fellow fireman and his close friend Charlie McPherson, who peered over his cards with his best poker face. McPherson, Molyneux, and 2 of their comrades sat at a table in the No. 3 fire station on Maple Street, playing cards and drinking tea. The leader of their brigade, Captain Dewitt and the rest of his men sat at a nearby table swapping stories. March 9, 1912, had started as a relatively routine evening for the fire brigade at the No.3.



*Edmond Molyneux
(from Winnipeg
Fire Department)*

They'd earlier been called to a burning haystack which was easily controlled by Dewitt's men. They'd since returned to the station where they fed their horses and prepared the fire apparatus for the next alarm. As they sat in the station on that Saturday night, enjoying their card game and each other's company, Charlie McPherson and Edmond Molyneux were only hours away from, meeting their fate.

March 9, 1912, would start as a seemingly routine Saturday night in Winnipeg. Allan Cup playoff hockey was at the old Auditorium on Fort St., and people were outside enjoying the first signs of spring. By the time March 9 was over, however, a man with a match would become responsible for making it one of the darkest days in Winnipeg history.



*Charles McPherson
(from Winnipeg
Fire Department)*

James Dodds was born in 1889 in Scotland. When he was 17 years old, he emigrated to Canada, and specifically, London, Ont. He stayed in London only a short time before moving to Welland, Ont., where he worked in the steel industry. When Dodds was 20, he decided to move West & chose Winnipeg as his destination. He worked for various companies for short periods, including the Vulcan Iron Co., Ruddy-Koesler Co., & The Alaska Bedding Co. A sign painter by trade, Dodds eventually landed a job with the Irvine-Derrett Sign Co. He became highly regarded by Mr. Derrett as an expert sign painter & dependable employee. Despite his work ethic, however, Mr. Derrett noticed a rather strange behaviour associated with James Dodds. Dodds showed a peculiar interest in anything connected with fires. It seemed for the previous 18 months, Dodds had a lot to be interested in. Winnipeg was in the grips of an arsonist. From October 1911 to March 1912, countless Winnipeg and St. Boniface buildings had fallen victim to an arsonist's flame.

Business owners were terrified their establishments would be next. The arsonist was the subject of much talk during that period. James Dodds seemed very interested in the arsonist. He regularly arrived at work recounting in great detail for his co-workers ablaze he had been a spectator at the previous night. His co-workers found his interest in fire peculiar perhaps, but never anything more. Little did they know that what James Dodds possessed was not merely an interest in fire, but rather an obsession.

March 9, 1912

As the evening of March 9 was a seemingly routine evening for the fire brigade at the No. 3 station, it was, in parallel, a seemingly routine evening for James Dodds as well. While the brigade at the No. 3 whiled away their time, Dodds did what he had done on several evenings for the past year and a half. He wandered the streets of Winnipeg with a pocketful of matches and his mind dancing with the excitement of fire. At about 6 p.m., that evening, while walking on Maple Street, Dodds noticed a hay-shed at the rear of the CPR immigration offices. He could not resist, and soon flames were eating away at the shed as Dodds slipped into the night. He crossed the CPR tracks and headed northbound to Sutherland Ave. Here a pile of hay became his next target, and within moments, the perfect orange-red glow of fire danced around the hay. It was this hay fire that the brigade from the No. 3 had been called to earlier in the evening. Dodds watched, with his usual excitement as the brigade quickly put out the fire, and packed their equipment, returning to the station. Dodds needed more.



James Dodds

With the hay fire out, he headed towards Main Street. He made his way to the rear of 776 Main, the Radford Wright Company. It was here that he found an old shed attached to the building. Beside the shed were some straw and boxes, and Dodds decided he would make this fire bum slowly, allowing him ample time to walk away and enjoy his work from a distance. He placed a piece of paper and some straw between some boxes struck a match and made good his exit. He moved along to Higgins Ave. where he climbed on a pile of lumber in a lumber yard. This afforded him a perfect view for the excitement which lay ahead. Dodds, however, was an impatient man and after approx. 20 minutes, decided to walk towards Radford Wright. In the meantime, George Dudman, a machinist's helper from the Stuart Machinery Co., noticed the fire growing at the rear of the Radford Wright building. He immediately fled, running to sound an alarm. By all accounts, it appears Dudman ran right into James Dodds, who was returning to see his work. Dudman eventually found Winnipeg Police Constable J. Bruton, who in turn sounded the fire alarm. The No. 3 was on its way.

The Radford-Wright Company

The Radford-Wright door and sash company was a prominent, successful business in Winnipeg in 1913. Its owners, W.T. Wright and F.W. Radford were highly respected Winnipeggers who were both aldermen in the city council. Both of these men's names would later grace streets within our city. The Radford Wright Co. was in the business of producing door and window sashes. The building consisted of 3 floors plus a basement, with various levels of production going on at each level. The second floor became of particular importance the night of the fire. It was a large open floor that was used to prime windows before being glazed. This floor, approximately 35 feet from the back wall of the building, contained 2 large vats of Naphtha and dipping oil, used in the priming process. While the fire Dodds set outside the building was growing, a crowd began gathering, unaware of the explosive element on the 2nd floor.

As the No.3 brigade rolled up to the fire, Capt. Dewitt immediately instructed his men to attend to the rear of the building where the flames were already lapping at the second floor. He sent another alarm and the No.1 station responded. What happened next has always been cause for some speculation. Some indicate the fire had never reached the interior of the building, while Capt. Dewitt had always insisted it had. In any event, Dewitt sent his men into the building (including Edmond Molyneux and Charlie McPherson) to fight the fire. While these men were in the process of checking the floors, either the fumes from the Napthe barrels met the flames from outside the building, or the flames were inside the building and met the Napthe barrels. Regardless, what followed was a massive explosion which literally blew the roof off the building & destroyed large portions of the walls. Charles McPherson of station No. 3 died instantly. His friend, Edmond Molyneux, died shortly after midnight at the St. Boniface Hospital. History had been made. McPherson and Molyneux were the very first City of Winnipeg firefighters to die in the line of duty. Along with them, 5 civilian spectators, among them a 12-year-old boy, died from the blast.



*Radford-Wright Building after Fire
(from Western Canada Pictorial Index)*

During the fire, Dodds waited at the corner of Main and Sutherland until the No. 3 Brigade had passed, on the way to Radford-Wright. He then ran back with them to watch them fight the fire, as he had done so many times before. He would later testify that he had seen fire in the interior of the building. As he watched Capt. Dewitt's men go to work putting out the blaze, Dodds was overwhelmed with excitement. He saw Capt. Dewitt yell to a nearby policeman to call another alarm. At this moment, he decided to go to the front of the building and see what was going on.

It was this action that very likely spared Dodd's life. While he was walking around to the front of the building, a fatal explosion occurred. When the explosion was over, two civilian spectators at the front of the building lay dead. It was not until several hours later that the final death toll of the blaze would be determined. Seven people, including the 2 men from station No. 3. Dodds would stay at "his fire" until 3:30 that morning, then return at 7:00 am (Sunday morning), where he would stay all day. On this day, he took his boss Mr. Derrett (from Irvine-Derrett Sign Co.) with him to the blaze. Mr. Derrett would later recall how strange and morbid he felt Dodds' behaviour was. Dodds took several photographs of the blaze including many close-ups of the deceased.

The Arrest

The death of seven people at the Radford Wright fire did little to stop Dodd's behaviour. For the next year, he continued lighting many blazes. His more notable "achievements" included the Emanuel Baptiste Church (on Emily & Bannatyne), the warehouse of the J. Light Foot Co. at 112 Charlotte Street and the Mason-Risch Piano Co. Shortly after the Radford-Wright fire, Dodds took a job as a farmhand in Roland, Manitoba; he would then frequent the city from time to time for one reason or another. Apparently, his job at the Irvine-Derrett Sign Co. was abruptly concluded after the business burnt down. The cause of the fire was determined unknown though I am sure there were suspicions cast.

The police had an extremely difficult time identifying the city's arsonist. This was largely in part to the fact that James Dodds was not a citizen of Winnipeg. He would spend weeks on the farm in Roland before his passion for fire overwhelmed him. At which time he would stay at the St. James Hotel for several days. It was on these days he would satisfy his needs for fire. Dodds had continued lighting fires for approximately a year after the Radford-Wright tragedy. His string of luck, however, was about to end.

On Wednesday, March 26, 1913, Dodds was in Winnipeg walking near the rear of a stable at 217 Smith Street. He was unaware, that for the past two days, city detectives had suspicions about him and had been trailing him. Why they became suspicious of Dodds is not known for certain. It is thought that a previous co-worker from Irvine-Derrett Sign Co. had tipped off the police about Dodds' strange interest in fire. In any event, on the afternoon of March 26, Detectives Batho and Smith watched Dodds enter a stable at 217 Smith. (Interesting note, Detective G. Smith would later become Chief of Police from 1934-1947) His grandson, Constable Andrew Smith #1544 is a current member of the Winnipeg Police Service). As Dodds exited the stable, moments later, and attempted to enter another one, Smith and Batho grabbed him.

Although Dodds adamantly denied any involvement in the fire currently burning at the stable, his excited demeanor gave police increasing suspicion. After searching Dodds at the scene, they found a handful of matches stuffed in his pockets. Due to the surrounding circumstances, the detectives were convinced that Dodds was their man.

He was arrested & taken to police headquarters for further questioning. Dodds eventually gave a 2-page statement to Detective Smith admitting to 20 fires. When asked by Detective Smith his reasons for lighting the fires, Dodds stated, "excitement was the main object. I like to see them both - the firemen come and I like to see the flames." Dodds was placed in a police cell awaiting trial. Two days after his arrest, while in his cell, Dodds summoned a detective. He informed this detective he wanted to speak to police Chief McPherson. Dodds was brought to the Chief's office. Once there, Dodds revealed to McPherson that he was responsible for nearly 200 arson fires in the past 2 1/2 years. The most notable of these fires was the Radford-Wright fire, which many thought was an accident.

Dodds provided Chief McPherson with another 2-page statement which explained in great detail, the fires he had been responsible for igniting. One of the comments that Dodds made was that because there had been so many fires, it was difficult to remember them all. It is interesting to note, however, that later on in Dodds' statement, he goes into great detail about the fires he lit and in fact, told Chief McPherson that he had gone back and torched some buildings twice.

It would later come out in Dodds' trial that he kept a memorandum notebook of all the fires he had set. He would testify that shortly before his arrest he had destroyed the book for fear of it being used as evidence against him if he were caught.

On Monday, March 31, 1913, James Dodds was brought before Magistrate R. MacDonald where 10 charges of arson were laid. Dodds was sentenced by MacDonald to 15 years in jail, concurrent on all charges. A manslaughter charge was also laid against Dodds in connection with the seven Radford-Wright deaths. Dodds was held in custody, however, he would never face the manslaughter trial. New evidence came about, that deemed James Dodds incapable of standing trial due to reasons of insanity.

Because of this new evidence, Dodds' previous convictions for the arson charges were subsequently thrown out as well. James Dodds was sentenced to 6 years at the Brandon Mental Health Facility, and upon his release, a further condition of deportation was ordered. Dodds served his full 6-year term in the Brandon Mental Health Facility and was deported back to Scotland in 1919. It seems by all accounts, James Dodds may have slipped through the penal system with this insanity plea. In his statement to Detective Smith, he is asked by Smith if he has any sickness to which he replied, "I have never had any sickness nor my relations. I am in the best of health and knew what I was doing."