

THE JULIA JOHNSON MYSTERY

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On the 25th of April 1928, Winnipeg was just breaking out of winter. Julia JOHNSON was just five years old and lived with her immigrant parents at 138 Austin Street. Julia was a shy girl and rarely ventured far from home. On that day she was playing near her home waiting for a little friend to come home from school. Julia played by herself with a tennis ball.



Julia Johnson

Behind the JOHNSON home was the Green River Building at 187 Sutherland Avenue. The building was vacant and the lot between the building and the back of the JOHNSON home was rented by the blacksmith's across the street to store wagons used for hauling scrap.

Nathan TAPLINSKY, the blacksmith at 190 Sutherland often chased children off the wagons so they would not hurt themselves. Mr. TAPLINSKY later stated that he saw Julia and some other children in the wagon lot at about 2:00 p.m. that day as he left his shop. He knew Julia, so was able to say it was her he saw.

Between 3:00 and 3:30 p.m. Julia was playing with the tennis ball on Austin Street across from her home where she was spoken to by Mrs. A.J. NEWMARK and her son.

At 3:50 p.m. Pauline KRAL was in her house at 136 Austin Street when she heard a noise which was Julia bouncing the ball on the house. She spoke to Julia from the second-floor window and Julia asked when her daughter Elizabeth would be home and she stated "I am lonesome". The girl was expected home at any moment so she told Julia to play like a good girl and Elizabeth would be home soon.

About five minutes later Mrs. KRALS' son Alfred came home and asked if she had seen Julia as Mrs. JOHNSON was looking for her. She told him that she had just spoken to her and they both went outside and joined Mrs. JOHNSON in the search.

Mrs. JOHNSON became quite alarmed because Julia was so shy and did not venture far from home. Other neighbours joined in searching the whole neighbourhood without locating any sign of the child. Everyone wondered what could have happened to Julia in that short time, five minutes approximately.

Mrs. JOHNSON contacted the Police Dept. And at 4:30 p.m. Constable Thomas MCKIM was notified via a call-box on #4 beat on Sutherland Avenue. MCKIM spent the rest of his shift with the family and neighbours searching the area.

Because of the proximity of the TAPLINSKY Wagons where the children often played, Constable MCKIM and John JOHNSON, brother of Julia, checked the Green River Building and found it secure and nothing unusual in the yard. After dark, the search was discontinued although the police patrolled the area during the night.

On April 26th the girl had not been found and the thought of foul play caused the Detective Division to be brought into the investigation. Insp. R.R. MACDONALD who was in charge of the North End 'E' Div. took charge of the investigation aided by Chief of Detectives George SMITH (later Chief Constable), Sgt. Of Detectives Fred BATHO, Detective Sgt. Charles MCIVER (later Deputy Chief) and Detective Alex KOLOMIC.

The officers had little to work on. If she had been abducted someone should have heard a commotion unless it was someone who she knew and trusted. The most puzzling part of the mystery was the extremely short time frame - five minutes - and she disappeared from the face of the earth for all intent and purposes.

A door-to-door search began in the area and detectives interviewed all the neighbours. Several people claimed to have seen an older man in the area talking to children. The man was described anywhere from 46 to 65 years, wearing dark clothing, with an unshaven appearance and Eastern European in appearance. The witnesses were taken to Rupert Street Station to view gallery photos. All the suspects picked out were located and eliminated in this case.

The local papers published the report of the missing child and all the speculation that surrounded it. They asked for help from the public because the police had run out of leads. Although the family was very poor they offered a reward of \$50.00 which was a large sum of money at the time. Eventually, the Free Press, Winnipeg Tribune, Winnipeg Police Commission and private donations increased the reward to \$2000.00 (old posters are displayed at the Winnipeg Police Museum).

The interest, in this case, spread far and wide and the police received numerous mail-in tips from as far away as British Columbia and Santa Monica, California. The writers ranged from strange to bizarre to weird. People had visions of Julia being held in a pink house in Lockport, alive after several years trapped in a sewer, the victim of different ethnic groups with suggestions of using her for a sacrifice or for breeding her when she got old enough. Obviously, these tips were given the time they deserved by being filed immediately into a crank folder in the file.



Legitimate tips were followed up and one of the most interesting involved a neighbour who had a lengthy criminal record. He refused to talk to the police when questioned and since the police had nothing to go on he was released. In the summer of 1929, he faked his drowning in the Red River and ran away to Seattle, Washington. He was arrested in Washington and when his true identity was established he expressed extreme concern about anyone in Winnipeg learning of his

whereabouts. He was deported back to Canada and returned to Winnipeg. When questioned again he still refused to discuss the missing child. It would appear this was the last contact police had with him.

In 1929 the entire area bounded by the Red River and the Louise Bridge, the CPR tracks, and Main Street to Manitoba Avenue was searched again by the police. Every empty building and the shed was searched including the Green River Building on Sutherland Avenue which was searched by Inspector R.R. MACDONALD and Constable J. BEATTIE #99E along with Peter VANDERGRAFF.

Over the years until 1937 (almost nine years later exactly) police followed up leads but nothing of consequence turned up. Newspapers published stories about the disappearance each year adding to the intrigue.

Finally on March 22nd, 1937, machinist Wilfred ADAMS was working in the Green River Building which was finally going to be put back into use by a company named Muzeen and Bilythe, Machinists. They would be the first to use the building since it became vacant before the disappearance. ADAMS was to dismantle a large boiler in the basement that had been disconnected and pushed over to the wall.

At 2:00 p.m. that day ADAMS cut open the combustion chamber of the boiler and made a grizzly discovery of a young girl quite well preserved and mummified in the boiler ash. A toque and a tennis ball also lay in the boiler with the body.

Julia JOHNSON had been found.

Constables A. WATTERS #131 and W. LINTON #27 attended to 187 Sutherland in CC#9. Coroner Dr. H.M. SPEECHLY was notified to attend. Detective Sergeant Robert HAMILTON and Detective Dave NICHOLSON were assigned to the case and George SMITH (now Chief Constable) and Charles MCIVER (now Deputy Chief) attended.

The body was fully clothed and lay bent in a U-Shape so that the head and feet were almost touching. One shoe was off her foot. The ulna and radius bones were separated at one elbow. X-rays also showed that she had a fractured pelvis but nothing else. The neck was examined for signs of strangulation but nothing was found.



Forensic work was still a fairly new investigative tool and an examination was carried out by the University of Manitoba's Dr. Daniel NICHOLSON of the Pathology Department. Tests conducted on the child's clothing for blood or spermatozoa found only some blood on one of her stockings.

Now that the body had been found the police investigation reopened and the first concern was who had access to the Green River Building. The last occupant was the N.P. Beverage Company owned by a Walter HAMILTON. The business closed down and HAMILTON vacated it on April 7th, 1928. HAMILTON was located and indicated there were only two keys for the building and these were given to John GODWIN of the Montreal Trust Company. GODWIN was the rental manager of the building.

When GODWIN was located in Toronto he remembered the incident and said he went to the building and found it secure and in good condition. GODWIN claimed that he had gone across the street to the blacksmith shop to arrange to leave a building key there so that the meters could be read and prospective tenants could view the inside of the building.

GODWIN said he spoke to Nathan TAPLINSKY in the presence of the partner Abraham BULSTEIN and TAPLINSKY agreed to keep a key and told GODWIN to hang it on a nail in the doorpost.

GODWIN stated that he had used the key on several occasion after and always put it back on the nail. He was sure it was still at the blacksmith shop at the time the child disappeared.

Police located William CLARK who was a Winnipeg Hydro meter reader in 1928 and he stated that he had obtained the Green River Building key from Abraham BULSTEIN at the blacksmith shop so he could read the meter. He had returned the key to the blacksmith shop.

Unfortunately, Insp. R.R. MACDONALD had died in 1936 and Constable BEATTIE died in 1932 before the discovery of the body so it was not possible to learn how they entered the building in 1929 to search it. It was also unknown if the inside of the old boiler was checked but if it was, the body could have been missed as the combustion chamber was at the back and dropped down.

On April 8th, 1937 Detective Sergeant HAMILTON and Detective NICHOLSON brought TAPLINSKY and BULSTEIN to the Rupert Street Station where they were joined by Deputy Chief MCIVER who lead the questioning when each man was interviewed.

TAPLINSKY stated as he had in 1928 that he had seen Julia and some other children about 2:00 p.m. and had chased them away from the wagons. He denied seeing her at any time later in the day. The most surprising part of the interview was his denial that the Green River Building key was ever left in his blacksmith shop. When pressed on this point he became nervous and started to cry but maintained that the key was never there. The interview ended that way.

BULSTEIN also denied that the key had ever been left in their shop. He stated he had not seen Julia on the day she disappeared.

While the investigation continued an inquest was held and the evidence known to that time was presented. The jury's finding was 'from the evidence submitted, we the jury find that the deceased, Julia JOHNSON's death was from causes unknown, and we are entirely dissatisfied

with the conflicting evidence submitted by GODWIN (Rental Mgr.), CLARK (Meter Reader), TAPLINSKY and BULSTEIN (Blacksmiths)".

Sometime after the inquest, Issac SALMONONT was located in Toronto. He had been employed in the blacksmith shop in 1928 at the time of the disappearance. He could offer no information of the child but he did confirm the key hung on a hook by the door although he did not know what it was for.

The investigation seemed to grind to a standstill and to this day remains unsolved. Since most of the people involved in this case have passed on, the Julia JOHNSON Mystery will be remembered and compared to cases like the 'Babes in the Woods' in Vancouver.

Was this a murder? If so, was then what was the purpose and of course who did it? What of the neighbour who faked his death and ran away. What of the mysterious key that was or wasn't left in the blacksmith shop.

If it wasn't a murder, could it have been a death by misadventure if the child fell from a wagon and was killed or seriously injured and thought to be dead? Could someone have just panicked and hidden her body. The folded position indicated it was pushed to the back of the boiler. If she was grabbed and carried away why would someone be sure to pick up the tennis ball and toque and hide them as well?

Five minutes and a little girl disappeared from the face of the earth for nine years.

At least the family was finally able to know she was gone and she was laid to rest in peace.