

# MURDER ON THE PRAIRIES

Murders of Constable William Wainwright - Benito Town Police,  
Constables John Shaw & George Harrison and Sergeant Thomas Wallace  
- RCMP

*Researched & written by Constable Scott Taylor*

On Monday, October 7th, 1935, farmer John Kollenchuk was guiding his team of horses and plow through the field of his small farm located between the towns of Arran and Pelly, Saskatchewan. Although October 7th was an unseasonably mild day, Kollenchuk knew the harsh prairie winter could arrive at a moment's notice, and wanted his work complete long before this occurred. Like many farmers in his area, Kollenchuk was a Russian Doukhobor - a member of a religious sect that had fled persecution in Russia. Many Doukhobors had settled on farms in the area and were known as hard-working, religious people who strictly abstained from liquor and tobacco. Although October 7th was a day that seemed like any other, Kollenchuk was about to embark on a finding he would never forget. It was a discovery that would set in motion one of the largest man-hunts in Canadian history - a manhunt that would end in seven people dead, including 4 police officers.



As Kollenchuk's plow approached a slough, approximately 50 ft. off the road, his horses became very skittish. No matter how much he yelled or used his whip, his horses refused to go any closer. Kollenchuk went to investigate. There he would make his gruesome discovery: the bodies of 2 slain police officers. His unfortunate finding was the climax of a scene that played itself out in the early morning hours of October 5th, 1935, on a lone, dark Saskatchewan dirt-road.



*Cst. William Wainwright*

At approximately 12:30 a.m., on October 5th, Cst. William Wainwright, the town Constable of the tiny village of Benito, Manitoba (near the Saskatchewan border) and his partner,



*Cst. John G. Shaw*

Constable John G. Shaw of the Swan River RCMP detachment, stopped four young Russian Doukhobors, driving a 1935 Coach. These males were Joe Posnikoff, John Kalmakoff, Pete Woiken and Paul Bogarra. The four ranged in ages from 18 to 21 years. Shaw and Wainwright had stopped the four young men for having an unlicensed vehicle. After a brief discussion, they allowed the four to continue, despite the minor traffic violation. Sometime later, however, Shaw and Wainwright must have discussed the possibility of these males being involved in a recent robbery in

the tiny town of Pelly, Saskatchewan. Despite the late hour, Constables Shaw and Wainwright decided to find the 1935 coach and take the males to Pelly for questioning.

As fate would have it, at approximately 4:00 a.m., on October 5th, the two police officers located the car with its occupants in Arran, Saskatchewan, as they were dropping off two girls from a dance. For reasons unknown, Paul Bogarra was released with the car in Arran, while the other three males were loaded into Cst. Shaw's unmarked police car. Whether common practice or not in 1935, the three males were placed in the cruiser car without being searched, a mistake that would prove fatal. The police car made its way along the dark country roads finally getting on the straightaway of Highway #49 towards Pelly.

While Cst. Shaw drove, one of the males suddenly pulled a knife and attacked Cst. Wainwright, slashing his head and neck. Cst. Shaw was immediately attacked by the other prisoners and suffered a cut on his cheek and right hand. Although fighting to hold off his attackers, Cst. Wainwright was eventually overpowered by the trio. His .38 calibre revolver was taken and he was shot in the eye with his own service weapon. Cst. John Shaw, who tried to ward off his attackers while driving the police car, was shot 3 times in the back of the head with a .32 calibre revolver ( a gun the trio had with them when encountered by the police). The police car careened into a ditch where it came to rest. The three murderers then dragged the bodies of Cst. Wainwright and Cst. Shaw into the slough of John Kollenchuk, who would discover them some two days later. Amid the quiet, Saskatchewan night, two young men had been brutally murdered.

The actions of the trio immediately following the murders are somewhat sketchy. It is known that they pushed the blood-stained police car out of the ditch and made good their exit from the crime scene. Although one would surmise that after murdering 2 police officers, the trio would get rid of the blood-tainted police car and create some significant distance between themselves and the murder. This was not the case, at least not immediately following the slayings.

A farmer by the name of William Pereluk would later reveal that on Saturday, October 5th, at approximately 10:30 a.m., three males appeared at his farm located approximately 10 miles northwest of Pelly (this must have been very close to the murder scene). As was customary in those days, Pereluk offered the three a meal, which they gladly accepted. In speaking with Pereluk, they indicated they were detectives in search of the murderer(s) of two policemen near Arran. Now at the time, the two bodies had yet to be discovered, and Pereluk had no knowledge of this crime. He did note that all three were carrying revolvers and one was wearing a police belt. After eating with Pereluk, the trio informed him they would continue their "search" south to the United States. Whether this was meant as a subterfuge can only be speculated, as the trio never headed south but instead went west.

By the afternoon of October 7th, some newspapers in the western provinces were headlining their evening editions with phrases like, "TWO MANITOBA POLICE OFFICERS FOUND SLAIN", "TWO CONSTABLES KILLED NEAR MANITOBA BORDER" and "THREE FARMERS HUNTED". By Tuesday morning, every major newspaper in Canada was carrying the story, along with the descriptions of the three Doukhobors and the still-missing police car. Radio waves were also transmitting these descriptions, reaching thousands of people across the country.

One such person was Lucille Zeller. She was the wife of Roy Zeller, who owned a small service station in the town of Exshaw, Alberta, located approximately 20 kilometers east of Canmore, Alberta. At about 7:20 p.m., on October 7th, Lucille was listening to the radio in the house attached to the garage while her husband tended to a customer. For Roy, these customers seemed unusual. They were three young men he described as "rough looking", who pulled into his station and asked for only one gallon of gasoline. As Roy tended to their unusual request, the radio in the house broadcast the descriptions of the three Doukhobors as well as the plate of the missing RCMP vehicle (MB 29-812).

Lucille Zeller immediately recognized the trio and as she exited the residence to inform her husband, they handed Roy Zeller the correct change for their gallon of gas and drove off, heading west. Lucille Zeller immediately contacted the Canmore RCMP where she informed Constable J. H. Bonner of her discovery. Upon hanging up, she also contacted Constable Grey Campbell of the Banff RCMP detachment. Upon taking this call, Cst. Campbell informed Cst. George Harrison, who was also on duty. As luck would have it, there were also two off-duty Mounties in the detachment when the call was received. These were Sgt. Thomas Wallace and Constable G. Coombe. As is the inherent nature of police officers, Sgt. Wallace and Constable Coombe immediately placed themselves on-duty and the two uniformed officers, along with the two plainclothes officers, piled into a marked cruiser car and headed east, towards Canmore. Although unknown to them, two of the four Mounties would never see Banff again.

As the three fugitives left Roy Zellers' gas station in Exshaw, they were facing the reality that money was becoming a problem. Before them stopping at Exshaw, they had attempted to go through the East Gate of the Banff National Park but didn't have the \$2.00 fee necessary to pass. With near fumes in the gas tank of the police car, the trio decided to use the last of their money for the gallon of gas in Exshaw. Unbeknownst to them, this decision, along with the help of Lucille Zeller, would seal their fate. As the three left Exshaw, again heading west towards the Banff gate, they decided their only chance at freedom was to hold up a fellow motorist, either for gas, money, or both.

They pulled over to the side of the road, and a short time later, Calgary businessman Mr. C.T. Scott and his wife came across the police car and its occupants. Mr. Scott and his wife were on the way to Banff for a small vacation. The trio waved flashlights at Mr. Scott, who stopped, with intentions of offering assistance. As the three

approached Mr. Scott, he immediately became suspicious of their intentions. While they asked him for gasoline, he told them he would be glad to help them. What he didn't let on, however, was the fact that while he was talking with them, he was in the process of stuffing \$85.00 from his pocket into his car seat. Suddenly, Joe Poznikoff pointed a revolver at Mr. Scott's head, while John Kalmakoff did the same to Mrs. Scott. Both were ordered out of their car while the trio removed about \$10 in change from Mr. Scott's pocket. Poznikoff asked Mr. Scott if there was any more money and Mr. Scott indicated there was not. Poznikoff then pointed the revolver at Mr. Scott's head, cocked the trigger, and stated, "If there is, you know what it means".

Although somewhat scared, Mr. Scott also noted how confused and disorganized the three young men appeared to be. At one point, they took Mr. Scott's pocket watch, however returned it when he promised he wouldn't tell the police. After several long minutes on the side of the highway, it was eventually decided that the trio would follow Mr. Scott's car through the park gate. Unbeknownst to anyone, however, was the fact that just ahead, the four Mounties from Banff had arrived at the gate, and were spot-checking all cars going into the park.

As Mr. Scott's car approached the Mounties, with the trio approximately 12 feet behind, he yelled out, "The bandit car is right behind". Cst. Coombe immediately waved Mr. Scott through, and the still night suddenly erupted with gunfire. The trio, recognizing the police, fired upon them and the Mounties immediately returned fire.

During this gunfight, Sgt. Thomas Wallace was struck in the chest with a bullet, while Cst. George Harrison was shot in the throat. The glare of the trio's headlights made it very difficult for the Mounties to return fire with any accuracy. Cst. Harrison, although fatally wounded, made one last heroic act before collapsing: he shot out the suspect's headlights. As he and Sgt. Harrison lay on the cold roadway, a police car from the Canmore detachment arrived, pulling up behind the suspects.

The fugitives, under a barrage of Mountie gunfire, fled for the cover of the nearby bushes. They continued firing at the Mounties, now through the cover of a bush. Cst. Grey Campbell, under a hail of gunfire, pulled the wounded Sgt. Wallace and Cst. Harrison into a nearby car and sped away east towards Canmore. As Sgt. Wallace and Cst. Harrison lay in the back of the speeding car, Cst. G. Coombe remained at the scene.

As the gunfire had ceased, Coombe's eyes searched the bushes for any movement. Suddenly, he observed something in the thick bush near the shooting. He immediately turned his flashlight towards it and saw Joe Posnikoff with a revolver in his hand. Cst. Coombe raised his revolver and shot at Posnikoff, striking him in the head and killing him instantly. As Cst. Coombe advanced on Posnikoff, lying motionless in the woods, he noticed him clutching a .38 revolver in his lifeless hand. This was Benito town Constable William Wainwright's Colt .38 Special service revolver, used earlier in his murder.

As word of the latest encounter with the trio reached Banff, Inspector A.G. Birch, who would head the entire operation to capture the murderers, began gathering as many weapons and ammunition as he could find. His intentions were to get to the scene of the shooting and co-ordinate a Posse of citizens to help locate the outstanding Doukhobors.

As word spread of the two Mounties being shot, carloads of citizens from the Banff-Canmore region, along with dozens of policemen from all over the surrounding area, arrived at the scene to offer assistance. The citizens were issued rifles and split into small search parties. Sgt. John Cawsey and his Police Service Dog "Dale" attended the scene. The weather had turned very harsh, with cold, wet snow and high winds beating down on the searchers. Despite this, "Dale" soon picked up the trail of the remaining two fugitives.

The citizen posse, along with police officers, searched the woods all night for the duo. Despite the hundreds of searchers, the two fugitives had remained ahead of their would-be captors most of the night. However, by 10:00 a.m., on Tuesday, October 8th, their luck was about to run out. Two citizens, D. White, and E.A. Thompson, (from Canmore), were assigned the duty of watching the highway, in case the pair attempted to cross, heading south. At approximately 10:00 a.m., White and Thompson saw the pair crossing the highway, heading into the bushes.

This information was immediately relayed to Inspector Birch, who compiled a search party to follow the duo. At approximately 10:30 a.m., as this search party walked over a hill deep in the bush, they were immediately fired upon.

The posse, which included Banff Park Warden William Neish, scrambled for cover. With no casualties, Neish lay quietly, scoping the woods ahead of him for the source of the bullets. Neish's keen eyesight picked out what appeared to be a rifle barrel, pointing in his general direction, from behind a rotten log. Known as a crack shot, Neish placed the rotten log between his sights and fired twice. What followed was a loud scream, then silence. Peter Woiken had been hit. Neish then focused his attention on the area behind the log, where he believed the second gunman lay. He shot twice at the log behind Woiken, and John Kalmakoff was struck with one of his bullets in the stomach. Both Woiken and Kaimakoff lay screaming and writhing in pain as Neish approached his adversaries. Beside Kaimakoff, he noted a Winchester .303 rifle. Although dying, both Kaimakoff and Wolken were taken to Banff hospital, however succumbed to their injuries later that day.

In the midst of the overnight search for the fugitives, Sgt. Wallace and Cst. Harrison were rushed from the Canmore hospital to Calgary. Despite desperate efforts by doctors in Calgary to save the pair, Sgt. Wallace died from his wounds at approximately 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday, October 8th. At approximately 5.00 p.m. the same day, Cst. Harrison also died from his wounds, bringing the police death toll to four. Nearly 65 years later, this still marks one of the darkest days in Canadian Police history.

In the end, the total body count was seven: four policemen and the three young farmers from small-town Saskatchewan. The reason behind the actions of the three farmers will never be known. It appears likely that the intuition of Cst. Shaw and Cst. Wainwright was correct in suspecting the males for the robbery in Pelly. With this being said, however, it still seems hard to understand how three young men could brutally murder two police officers in the execution-style method they used. It is a question that could never be answered, for the answer died with the three men in a cold, wet bush at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.