

TWO CAN KEEP A SECRET - IF ONE IS DEAD

Researched and written by Detective Sergeant John Burchill

On Friday, January 10, 1896, at 9:15 p.m., Superintendent Thomas Glenwright of the Electric Street Railway Company in Winnipeg was preparing to put the day's cash receipts into the company's vaults when a man walked into his office, withdrew a revolver from beneath his overcoat and took aim at his forehead. Glenwright, watching in horror as the hammer came back on the gun, quickly jerked his head to the right as the gun fired. The bullet whizzed past his head and crashed through the company's double-pane glass window facing onto Main Street. Unbeknownst to the robber, Glenwright's accountant, Edwin Johnston, was in the next office when the shot was fired. Johnston quickly called out to Glenwright and then slammed his door to distract the robber. The distraction worked and the would-be robber fled the building empty-handed. Neither Glenwright nor Johnston was able to identify the robber as he had been wearing a large brown overcoat, a black felt hat and had a white handkerchief tied over his face.

The would-be bandit, John Nankerville, ran all the way to the house he shared with his sister in Fort Rouge and stuffed his brown overcoat, black felt hat and white handkerchief under his bed and went to sleep. Robberies were not Nankerville's strong point - he had botched many in his lifetime and had been in and out of Stony Mountain Penitentiary since he was first convicted of burglary back in 1885.

William Smith, a friend of Nankerville's since 1885 when they were cellmates in Stony Mountain, read the newspaper article of the botched hold-up the night before at the Electric Street Railway with delight. The vague description of the suspect given by the Superintendent and his accountant sounded just like Nankerville and Smith knew that Nankerville often carried a loaded 38 caliber revolver tucked in his belt. With this in mind, Smith went to visit his old friend and asked him outright if he was the one who had attempted to rob the Railway Company the night before. Nankerville admitted that it was.

For several weeks it bothered Nankerville that he had admitted the details of the botched robbery to Smith. He felt Smith might betray his confidence and tell someone that he had done the robbery. Surely the police would charge him with attempted murder and send him back to the penitentiary. He wasn't going to go back to Stony Mountain – not now, not ever - he had to take care of Smith before he told someone.

On Tuesday, February 4, 1896, Nankerville went to the Salvation Army on Main Street and met with Smith. Nankerville, knowing that Smith was always short of money, advised him that he knew of a house on Armstrong's Point (now West Gate/Middle Gate) that contained a large amount of cash and that he had devised a plan to break into the house. Smith agreed to help Nankerville with his plan and arrangements were made for Smith to meet him later that evening behind his house. When Smith arrived, he and Nankerville shared a bottle of whiskey and discussed their plans. Nankerville decided that it would be best if they walked all the way to Armstrong's Point along the frozen river so that no one would see them coming. Smith agreed and they headed off down the river towards Armstrong's Point.

When the duo came in sight of Armstrong's Point, Nankerville let Smith get slightly ahead of him, pulled out his English "Bulldog" 38-calibre revolver from beneath his coat and shot Smith

in the back of the head behind his right ear. Smith fell to the ice, but much to Nankerville's surprise he was still alive. Nankerville apologized to Smith saying that his gun had accidentally gone off and that he would help him get to a doctor. Nankerville helped Smith up and as they walked towards the riverbank Nankerville placed his revolver at the back of Smith's head and again pulled the trigger. Smith fell to the ice, but somehow the bullet completely missed the spinal column and lodged in the roof of his mouth. Smith struggled to get up off the ice but Nankerville placed his foot on the back of Smith's head and forced him back into the snow and shot him behind the left ear. Smith would not die. He rolled over and tried to get up. A panic-stricken Nankerville shot at Smith again, the first bullet pierced his right wrist and when the last shot misfired Nankerville savagely beat Smith about the head with his revolver until he was unconscious and then used his boots to bury Smith in the snow. Nankerville then threw his gun as far as he could down the riverbank and ran away.

At about 3 a.m. on Wednesday, February 5, 1896, Smith regained consciousness, crawled up the riverbank and pulled himself onto the doorstep of an area resident. Smith cried out for help and he was eventually helped into the man's house where he was tended to by several of the area residents (including one Lendrum McMeans who later became a member of the Senate). Sergeant Alex McCharles and Detective Archie Munro attended to the area and, finding Smith still alive, (the severe cold having congealed his wounds), wrapped him in a blanket and conveyed him by horse and buggy to the General Hospital (although the Misericordia Hospital would have seemed closer, it was not to open until 1900).

At the hospital, Smith advised McCharles and Munro as to the identity and address of his assailant before he was taken in for surgery with Dr. Hugh Perry. The two Detectives notified the Chief of Police, J. C. McRae, of the incident and then attended to Nankerville's home where they placed him under arrest and seized all of his clothing including a brown overcoat, black felt hat, white handkerchief and a loaded handgun found underneath his bed. Nankerville was detained at the James Avenue Police station while they continued their investigation. Detective Munro, after realizing that the seized gun had not been fired for some time and could not have been the assault weapon, conducted a search of the riverbank near the scene of the shooting, locating Nankerville's discarded 38 calibre "Bulldog" revolver and determined that the boot prints at the scene also matched impressions left by the soles from Nankerville's boots.

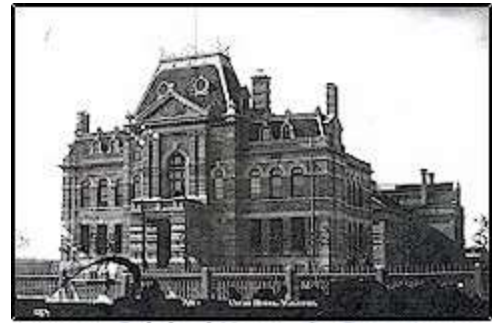
While Smith was still in surgery Chief McRae called Deputy Attorney General McLean and Police Magistrate Wolf and informed them of the details. Fearing that Smith was about to die McLean decided to hold a Preliminary Hearing that morning and a private ward in the hospital was turned into a courtroom. Nankerville was brought to the hospital and Smith testified to the court as to the events earlier that day and the fact that Nankerville had admitted to him about attempting to rob the Electric Street Railway Company. Other witnesses were called and then Nankerville was allowed to cross-examine Smith. Although Nankerville implied that it was a case of mistaken identity, Smith remained firm that it was Nankerville that had shot him. After listening to all the evidence collected at that time, Magistrate Wolf committed Nankerville to stand trial a month later on Wednesday, March 11, 1896.



J.C. McRae
Chief Constable
1887 - 1911

On March 6, 1896, while Nankerville was in custody at the Vaughan Street Gaol waiting to stand trial, he asked his guard William Downey for some writing paper and a pencil. Downey complied and gave Nankerville some paper. He wrote on the paper, sealed it, and then gave it to Downey to post. Nankerville requested that Downey not read the letter and asked that he disobey orders by posting it himself, thus bypassing the gaol censors. Downey agreed and took the letter straight to the Superintendent's office where it was read. In the letter addressed to "Erman", Nankerville admitted to shooting Smith but felt that he could beat the charge by pleading self-defence!?

On March 11, 1896, a little more than a month after the incident, Nankerville appeared in the Kennedy Street Court House before the Grand Jury and Chief Justice Bain. The trial lasted all day and at about 8 p.m., the Grand Jury found Nankerville guilty of attempting to murder William Smith. On March 12 Nankerville again appeared before the Grand Jury and, based on evidence supplied by Smith, Nankerville was convicted of attempting to murder Thomas Glenwright of the Electric Street Railway Company. Chief Justice Bain sentenced Nankerville to life in prison on both counts of attempted murder.



*Original Kennedy Street
Court House - circa 1890
Courtesy: Ron Pryhitko*

William Smith recovered from his wounds and left Manitoba, however, when he tried to return twenty years later was arrested and ordered out of the city as a dangerous criminal. Nankerville, on the other hand, died while serving his "life" in Kingston Penitentiary.

While this story may not seem all that unusual for Winnipeg's early "wild west" days, it is actually the swiftness with which justice was once carried out (a Preliminary Hearing in less than 12 hours, a speedy jury trial within one month of his arrest, and a convict who was actually sentenced to "life" in prison), that is really amazing. Those were the days...

Sources:

Hutchison, R.H. (1974). A Century of Service: A History of the Winnipeg Police Force (1874-1974). Winnipeg: Winnipeg Police Department.
Winnipeg Centennial Library, Micromedia/Periodicals/Circulation, Newspaper Archives.
Winnipeg Police Department. (1920). History to 1920. Winnipeg: E.C. Cleaver.
Winnipeg Police Museum and Historical Society record books and archives.