
JON JONASSON (J.J.) SAMSON

First Icelandic Officer, Winnipeg Police

*Written by John Burchill, President
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J.J. Samson, 1909 Winnipeg Police

In 1875, 235 Icelanders travelled north by flatboat on the Red River from Winnipeg to the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. There they had been promised an Icelandic reserve. This reserve, established by an order-in-council, became New Iceland, a unique political structure in Canadian history. In 1876, 1200 others joined the first group. Fifty immigrants had remained in Winnipeg the first year, and 200 the second, creating the basis for the first permanent urban Icelandic settlement in Canada. ¹

Another Icelandic settlement was established in North Dakota in 1878. The main settlement was in Pembina County, with Icelanders also settling on the western edge of Cavalier County and in Walsh County to the south. There was, however, a continuous inflow of Icelandic settlers to Winnipeg from Pembina, as well as Iceland, and New Iceland (Gimli), that by 1901 Winnipeg had an Icelandic population of about 4000 people.

Jon Jonasson (J.J.) Samson born on June 30, 1873, in Hegranes, Skagafjord, Iceland. He came to North America in 1887, first settling in the Icelandic community in North Dakota. In 1900 Samson emigrated from North Dakota to Winnipeg along with his wife, Gudbjorg (Bertha) Olafsdottir, and children, Una Kristbjorg Isleifsdottir (Bertha), Alfridur Jonina (Freda), and Jonas Samson. The three children were born in North Dakota. Four more children were born in Winnipeg, including Valtyr Olafur (Walter Oliver) Samson (who would later join his father in the Manitoba provincial police).

Samson found work with the Winnipeg Police Force on June 17, 1903. ² He was dismissed on June 9, 1919, when he refused to sign an oath of allegiance during the Winnipeg General Strike. At the time, Samson was an assistant morality officer. The family lived at 273 Simcoe Street and would stay there for most of their lives.

¹ Icelandic Canadians, The Canadian Encyclopedia. Online at:
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/icelanders>

² Having the ability to speak another language was an asset in Manitoba at the turn of the last Century. Whether it was Swedish, German, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Italian, or Chinese, it enabled the police and courts to communicate and understand these diverse immigrant communities.

Samson's brother, Samson (Sam) Jonasson Samson, born on July 17, 1876, in Skagafjord, Iceland, was the second Icelandic officer hired by the Winnipeg Police on April 30, 1904. He was also dismissed on June 9, 1919, when he refused to sign an oath of allegiance during the Winnipeg General Strike.

J.J. Samson's career was uneventful, much of his career being spent as a court assistance officer or "crier", keeping order in the court. However, he was known for his strength and was singled out as a member of the Winnipeg Police tug of war team. On August 3, 1916, he was mentioned in the 27th Annual Icelandic Games at the Exhibition Grounds as anchoring the civilian Icelandic tug of war team against the military. The event was rumoured to have 8000 spectators and was carried out under the auspices of the Manitoba Amateur Athletic Association.



1918 Winnipeg Police Tug of War team. J.J. Samson is front row, centre.

For his pro-labour views Samson was not re-hired by the Winnipeg Police after the strike, but operated a motor transport or livery business from his home for the next three years. He did make an attempt to run for Winnipeg City Council in November 1919 as the labour candidate for Alderman in Ward 3. However, he lost to the incumbent, George Fisher, by 3000 votes.

On December 1, 1922, Samson was hired by the provincial police, primarily as a temperance officer working under Inspector Joseph Neill. However, on January 4, 1924, Samson was one of eleven officers and three stenographers who were slated to be let go from the provincial police in the name of efficiency. While consideration was being given to war veterans and seniority,

Samson lacked both. Nevertheless, he was kept on the payroll at full salary as a special constable.



J.J. Samson, 1929 Manitoba Prov. Police

Besides having twenty years of police experience, what might have separated Samson from the rest were his two dogs -- 'Bob' and 'Ben.' Both dogs were bloodhounds, and Samson would use them during his work to track missing children or suspected criminals.

Police dogs were not unheard of, but rare. The city of Ghent, Belgium, was recognized as the world leader in the use of police dogs, starting in 1899. The Natal Police in South Africa were the first to employ tracking dogs, importing its first bloodhound in 1908. Transvaal followed soon thereafter by establishing its own dog unit. In 1911, a dog-training facility was erected at Quagga-poort, outside Pretoria. Although the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) had existed since 1893 to share ideas, with several provincial police officers having come from the South African police, they may have brought this knowledge with them as well.

Samson would remain in the East Division, based out of Winnipeg, for the rest of his career. On April 1, 1932, he transferred his service to the RCMP with the amalgamation of the provincial police. Samson became invalidated to pension on June 30, 1933, when he reached the mandatory retirement age of 60. However, he was re-engaged as a special constable with the RCMP working in the provincial court as an orderly until December 14, 1937.

Samson died on February 19, 1961, at the Grace Hospital. He was survived by his wife and six of his children. His daughter, Bertha, predeceased him in 1958. Samson was interred at Brookside Cemetery, plot D7-0124-0.

His brother, Sam, lived most of his life at 628 Victor Street. He died on May 19, 1955, in Winnipeg. He was buried in Gimli Cemetery. He was survived by his wife and three of his children.



S.J. (Sam) Samson, 1909 Winnipeg Police

NOTE: In 2024 the Winnipeg Police celebrates its 150th anniversary as well as the 50th Anniversary of the metro amalgamation. Anyone wishing to recognize a police member who made a substantial contribution to policing in Winnipeg or its surrounding municipalities during the past 150 years is asked to send me their name and (if known) a brief description of their accomplishments.

Veteran Court Orderly Honored



Church and State Join In Extending Greetings

Constable John J. Samson (right), for many years' court orderly in provincial police court, was honored by his associates this morning when Magistrate T. J. Murray (left) presented him with a purse of silver as a parting gift marking his retirement after 31 years of police service.

December 27, 1937, Winnipeg Free Press. J.J. Samson retires from the provincial police court
