
HARRY MEAD

Aqueduct Constable

*Written by John Burchill, President
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Prior to 1880, Winnipeg's drinking water was taken from the Assiniboine and Red Rivers and delivered in barrels and tanks by ox-drawn carts driven by private "water-men". The cleanliness of the water was always in doubt, prompting City Council to contract with the Winnipeg Water Works Company to supply water to Winnipeggers from 1880 to 1899. However, the quality of the water, pumped from the Assiniboine River, remained poor as the river was commonly used as a dumping area for manure and other refuse.



Winnipeg Water Works wagon, 1871. City of Winnipeg Archives

In April 1899, the City of Winnipeg took over the Water Works plant and distributing system. By October 1900, water was supplied to most parts of the city through artesian wells. However, a major fire that started at the Bulman Brothers lithography and print shop on Bannatyne Avenue in October 1904 resulted in untreated water from the Red River being pumped into the water supply system to help fight the fire. The untreated water was heavily contaminated with typhoid bacteria, resulting in 1,276 cases of typhoid and 133 deaths, triple the previous year. The typhoid outbreak prompted a renewed interest in locating a safe water source.

In 1912 the Manitoba Public Utilities Commission supported a study that recommended an aqueduct from Shoal Lake as being the best source of water for Winnipeg. Engineers estimated the total cost of building an 84.5-mile aqueduct that would support a population of up to 850,000 people, would be \$13 million (adjusted for inflation, this would be about \$350 million in 2024). The plan was approved by Winnipeg voters on October 1, 1913. Surveying along the route began and construction of the aqueduct commenced on March 1, 1914.

FIRE RUINS WINNIPEG BUSINESS BLOCKS

Terrific Conflagration in Heart of the City Causes a Loss Exceeding Seven Hundred Thousand Dollars--- Blaze Started at Ten O'clock Last Night in New Bulman Building, Which Was in Ruins Within an Hour---Flames Jumped Bannatyne Street and Destroyed the J. H. Ashdown Company's Mammoth Retail Hardware Stores---Woodbine Hotel and Duffin Block Badly Damaged---Fire Stopped at the Rialto Block After a Fierce Fight---Bulman Building Was All Ablaze Before Alarm Was Sounded---The Fire Brigade Did Excellent Work.

Winnipeg Free Press, October 12, 1904. Headline.

As the aqueduct would supply water to several different municipalities besides Winnipeg, the Greater Winnipeg Water District (GWWD), originally comprised of the City of Winnipeg, the City of St. Boniface, the Town of Transcona, the Rural Municipality of St. Vital, and parts of Fort Garry, Assiniboia, and Kildonan, was incorporated by an Act of the Manitoba Legislature (S.M. 1913, c. 21). Section 78 of the Act made it an offence to *“willfully or maliciously hinder or interrupt, or cause or procure to be hindered or interrupted, the corporation, or its servants, agents, contractors, workmen or any of them, in the exercise of any of the powers and authorities in this Act, as to waterworks, plant or equipment, or water supply, authorized and contained ...”*.

As no roads existed along the proposed route of the aqueduct, the GWWD built and operated the Greater Winnipeg Water District Railway to run parallel to the aqueduct to facilitate the movement of materials and workers. Construction of the railway began in 1914 and was completed in 1915. The track runs from St. Boniface to Waugh, Manitoba near Shoal Lake. After the aqueduct was completed, the railway was also used to carry freight and passengers to reduce the costs of construction.



Greater Winnipeg Water Works railway car. City of Winnipeg Archives

Considering the size and scope of such a project being carried out during the height of the First World War, security of the aqueduct and the GWWD property was important for the safety of all Manitobans. As such, Harry Mead, an experienced railway constable was hired to provide that security.

Mead was born April 16, 1880, in England, came to Canada in 1901. While his previous experience is unknown, by 1906 he was the Chief Constable at the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) Shops in Winnipeg. Mead held the Chief Constables position until June 5, 1914, when he was appointed as an Aqueduct Constable to “*patrol the line and do various duties in connection with the Right-of-Way*” of the GWWD. To carry out his duties, Mead was cloaked with all the powers and authority of a provincial constable and was to be paid \$75 per month plus expenses.¹



GWWD Syphon at Birch River Crossing, March 21, 1916

The building of the aqueduct and railway brought changes along GWWD line – homesteads were granted, and settlements began to spring up along the Birch River. These settlements created other problems unrelated to the construction of the aqueduct and a portion of Mead’s salary was taken over by the Provincial Police.

During his tenure Mead was involved in two murder cases in the GWWD area. The first occurred in the new settlement of Birch River, which had sprung up along mile 77 of the railway. One of the new residents was 69-year-old John Drohomiericki, who had brought his younger wife Mayra from Winnipeg, ostensibly to get away from George Obmiwaka who was ‘fatally’ attracted to his wife. Obmiwaka followed the pair to Birch River and when John found them together on April 5, 1917, he shot Obmiwaka once in the chest and then again in the face before he beat him about the head with the butt of the gun.

Mead, along with provincial constables James Bain and John Parr went to Birch River and arrested John Drohomiericki after a Coroner’s Inquest and brought him back to Winnipeg along with the body of Obmiwaka.

¹ In the 1915 and 1916 Henderson Directory, Mead listed his occupation as "Aqueduct Constable" with an address of Monominto, Manitoba. This is consistent with his address at the time of the 1916 Census -- Township 10, Range 7, Springfield, Manitoba. While Monominto no longer exists, the Monominto Cemetery is located in the Municipality of Springfield off Richland Road 54N near Monominto Road 39E, south east of Anola. The settlement was just south of the GWWD railway and aqueduct.

A Preliminary Hearing was held on April 18, 1917, before Magistrate Noble and Drohomericki was committed for trial at the June Assizes. After a short trial in which he admitted the offence, Drohomericki was convicted by a jury of manslaughter. Justice Thomas Llewellyn Metcalf suspended the sentence and released Drohomericki stating that:

The provocation [by Obmiwaka], deliberate, brutal and continued, was such as might well overcome the resistance of reason or destroy the mind [of Drohomericki] ... his wife and her paramour, flaunted their disgusting intimacies in the face of the helpless and friendless old man, taunting him. He finally took the law in his own hand and fired the fatal shot.

Provocation, or a wrongful act or insult sufficient to deprive an ordinary person of self-control before there is time for their passion to cool, was and still is a partial defence to murder. At the time one of the recognized types of provocation was the observation by the accused of his wife committing adultery. Today provocation may still reduce murder to manslaughter under section 232 of the Criminal Code; however, the precipitating conduct of the victim must be one that would otherwise constitute an indictable offence punishable by five years or more in prison.

The second murder occurred at a lumber camp at mile 94 of the GWWD railway on June 4, 1918, near Waugh, Manitoba. Mead and constable James Bain went out on the railway line using a handcar or “jigger” to investigate the axe murder of Louis Morcie. After interviewing all the workers in the camp, Constables Mead and Bain singled out 14-year-old Mike Podolczuk and his cousin Nick for the murder. Originally suspicion fell on Nick Podolczuk, however Mike admitted he had had struck Morcie after the older man came at him while they were chopping wood. Mike indicated that he first struck Morcie with his axe across the shoulder. When Morcie fell down he panicked and struck him again on the side of the head, and again on the back of his head – then ran away and hid his axe after telling his cousin what he had done.



Constable James Bain and jailors with Mike Podolczuk and Cousin, 1918.
Manitoba Prov Jail, Winnipeg. Manitoba Archives N2651

Mike Podolczuk was arrested after a Coroner's Inquest and brought back to Winnipeg for trial at the June Assizes. After a short trial in which he admitted the offence, Mike Podolczuk was convicted by a jury of manslaughter. Due to his age, Justice Alexander Casimir Galt sentenced Podolczuk to 5 years at the Industrial School for Boys in Portage la Prairie. If he had been older, lectured Justice Galt, he would have surely hung Justice Galt stated:

In ordinary circumstances a sentence of several years in a penitentiary would be passed upon you where you would be compelled to associate daily with criminals and take chances on coming out worse than when you went in. Fortunately, there had been provided in this country an institution especially adapted to such cases as yours and to this institution at Portage la Prairie, I sentence you.

As a result of this additional work, in 1917 Mead drew a salary of \$720 per year as a constable with the Provincial Police. His salary remained the same for 1918 and rose to \$960 in 1919. In 1920 he received \$520. In 1919 Mead charged over \$400 in expenses to the Provincial government, almost four times what he billed in 1918. While Mead was not involved in any murder cases he was involved in the arrest of Albert Slavinsky of Elma, Manitoba, for a serious offence against a girl under the age of 14. Slavinsky was subsequently found guilty by Judge Robert Maxwell Dennistoun and sentenced to 3 months in jail and one whipping of 12 lashes on November 24, 1919.

The entire construction project was finished by 1919, when the first water from Shoal Lake arrived at the McPhillips Street reservoir on March 29, 1919. With the end of the war and the completion of the aqueduct, in April 1920 Mead returned to the railroad business, securing a position as a Conductor with the Canadian National Railway (CNR). Mead remained with the CNR until 1945.

Mead died on January 30, 1974, at the age of 93. He was predeceased by his wife Isabelle Mead (nee Moore) in 1959. They had one daughter Lilian Mead, born May 25, 1912.

Although the aqueduct solved Winnipeg's water troubles, its construction required the use of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation land. Through clauses in the Indian Act, the land was purchased from the Department of Indian Affairs. In order to divert cloudy water away from the aqueduct's intake, a channel was dug between Falcon River and Snowshoe Bay. The channel cut off a large part of the First Nation community from the mainland.

After more than a century of being unable to travel by road to and from the mainland, Shoal Lake 40, welcomed the opening of Freedom Road, that now provides year-round, all-weather access to the community and improves the accessibility of essential goods and services. The community was able to begin using the road in December 2018, and it was fully completed in June 2019.

NOTE: In addition to the various police departments in the Winnipeg metropolitan area, there were a number of constables who performed specialized functions across the municipal boundaries. The Aqueduct Constable is one example. However, there was also the Harbour Patrol, and Winnipeg Parks Police, which we will read more about later.