

Looking Back: An unresolved murder case in Whonnock



By Maple Ridge News

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In 1907, Richard Stanley Whiting, a newcomer from England, became the owner of the Whonnock general store and Whonnock's postmaster.

Three years later he married Margaret Benson, who also came to Whonnock in 1907, and they moved to property above what is today called Byrnes Road.

He interested a fellow countryman named Dearman George Probert, also from Herefordshire and probably a relative, to join him to run the store.

Probert arrived in Canada in 1910 and moved into the home that was part of the store building.

In the morning of Friday, May 26th, 1911, a burglar entered the Whonnock general store and helped himself to some clothes and food. Noticing the post-office safe, he entered the adjacent home, where shopkeeper Probert and a lodger named Charles Crowe were sleeping.

Reportedly armed with a double-barrelled gun, the intruder attempted to force the shopkeeper to come over to the store and open the safe for him, but in a struggle for control of the weapon, Probert suffered a bullet shot in the arm and another in the abdomen.

The burglar escaped.

Eight days later, Probert died from blood poisoning in Vancouver General Hospital.

The murderer was never identified.

Contemporary newspapers give few and conflicting details of the murder, but in 1955 the weekly magazine of the Province published an article about this case. The writer was B.A. McKelvie, a journalist known to sensationalize the past based on fanciful research. Still, in this instance, McKelvie's story seems truthful when he tells about Crowe running for help to the nearby West house, followed by the wounded Probert. Mrs. West, née Martha Mary Lee, was a nurse – the only one in Whonnock – and she and her brother Olaus attended to Probert's injuries until the arrival of Dr. Funk, who was stationed at the Stave Dam.

Almost a year after the murder, in February 1912, two bothers of Probert came from Calgary to reopen the case. With the help of private detectives, they reportedly had secured "valuable evidence," suggesting that local people could have been involved in the robbery and holdup. Nothing came of their efforts to identify the culprits, but the echoes of the idea that the perpetrator or perpetrators were from Whonnock are reflected in a grotesque version of the May 1911 murder in George Godwin's novel *The Eternal Forest*, published in 1929.

At the beginning of the novel, Blanchard [Whiting] says: "You weren't here when the store murder happened ... They never got the fellow. He made a clean get-away. They telegraphed down the line. No go ... Well, he was supposed to have smashed open that door ... [b]ut he never did. It was a put-up job. There never was a holdup man in the store at all."

Blanchard mentions that someone saw a woman dressed in white running from the back of the store to Armstrongs. In this version, Blanchard [Whiting] is pointing his finger to Mrs. Armstrong [Mrs. West] as the murderer.

But later in the novel, Old Jim, the chief of the Indian reserve, tells a different story. At the night of the murder, he saw Mrs. Armstrong, Blanchard and another man drinking and laughing in the store. The other man made advances to Mrs. Armstrong, angering Blanchard, who hit him with a bottle. The man pulled a gun. Mrs. Armstrong grabbed him and the gun dropped. It got into Blanchard's hands and he shot and killed the man. Mrs. Armstrong ran off to her house.

Many years later, the late Brian Byrnes, a long-time Whonnock resident, asked Whiting about Godwin and his book.

Whiting's only comment was, "That beastly beggar."

– By Fred Braches, a local historian who lives in Whonnock.

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