

THE MYSTERY OF THE MURDERED PEDDLER

A New Brunswick Cold Case

Murder was exceedingly rare in New Brunswick during the 1800s, as it is today. And yet a man was robbed and brutally murdered about two miles from Fredericton Junction. His body was buried where it was found and today lies in a lonely grave in the woods along the Diamond Square Road. The spot is not far from where he bled to death from multiple knife wounds. The man has never been identified and many questions remain unanswered.

Various scenarios abound. Some say he was a peddler; others say he was a cattle buyer from Maine, some say he brought cows from Charlotte County to the train at Fredericton Junction. About the only thing agreed upon is that he stayed the night at the Beehive Hotel, played cards with three other men, talked about his money, and was robbed and killed by them the next day. He was not identified because apparently no one knew his name.

But, how could a man have dinner, spend the evening playing cards with some locals, stay the night at the hotel and no one know his name? I have been in many card games and a few poker games but never with people who didn't give at least a first name. If it is true, that he was in a habit of buying cattle somewhere around St. Andrews and herding them to the train at the Junction each fall, would he not have been known ... at least to the farmers who sold him the cows and the cattle buyer/agent at Fredericton Junction? Someone provided the money that was stolen by those who murdered him.

Why did no one ever come looking for him? Was he not someone's husband, father, uncle, or brother? He lived somewhere and was presumed headed home. He departed from somewhere, he was headed somewhere, and surely, he told someone where he was going when he left and when he planned to return. And yet no one ever inquired about the man who simply became known as 'The Peddler'.

Let's begin our inquiry with what has generally been accepted as being reasonably factual. A man, who was on foot, came into the Beehive Hotel near the entrance to the Diamond Square Road and had dinner. After dinner he decided to stay the night and began playing cards and drinking, 'heavily' according to some accounts, with three local farmworkers who were employed nearby. One worker was a Scot and the other two were Irish; not uncommon during the 1800s as there was much immigration from the United Kingdom. During the evening, the peddler either mentioned, or bragged, about the money he had just made and was carrying it with him. Before retiring for the night, he also informed his new friends that he was heading down the Diamond Square Road early the next morning. The boys saw this as an opportunity for some quick cash, so they waited for the peddler and ambushed him. Their intent was not to murder the man, but just steal his money. However, he was a "rugged man" and was able to fight them off for about a mile. All this time he was trying to remove his packsack, but the would-be thieves wouldn't let him. They were afraid that if he got the pack off his back, he

might be able to kill all three of them. Finally, the man became exhausted from the struggle and two of the perpetrators were able to hold him while the third one stabbed him to death “with great difficulty” we are told. They then watched him bleed out as he rested on a rock. Once dead they removed his pack and dragged the body to the place where it is now buried and covered it with bushes. This was probably in mid to late October.

We can, to some extent, rely on the veracity of this information since our source was one of the killers. “Many years” after the murder of the peddler, one of the perpetrators was sentenced to hanged for another murder in Montreal, or some accounts say, New York. Prior to his ultimate demise, the man was allowed a visit from a priest. The priest asked if there was anything that he wanted to confess before he stood before his maker? This was when the murderer intimated to the priest the details of how he and two buddies had robbed and ultimately killed “an old peddler” near Fredericton Junction. This information was relayed to the sheriff and eventually circulated around the Junction. Unfortunately, we don’t know how many years after the event this occurred. Therefore we cannot be certain of the exact year of the murder. We do know that before this confession the murder victim was seemingly never connected to the man who stayed at the Beehive Hotel. This might explain why his identity was not known at the time, or even years later.

Another reasonably reliable source is the late Stanley L. Sambles (1905 – 1988). He always liked telling the story that his father, John Sambles (1845 -1942) and his grandfather, William Sambles (1808 – 1876) buried the somewhat decomposed body of the peddler. We know that John and William Sambles lived in Diamond Square Settlement near the murder scene. In fact, William was among the original grantees. The burial probably occurred in May the year after the murder although one account says “two months” after the gruesome event. If the murder had occurred in the early fall, it is reasonable to assume that there would be, because of fly larvae and scavengers, little remaining to identify the body. Another reason to think of May for the burial is the reference to “when the hot weather came”. This usually doesn’t occur before late May or early June.

It is said to have happened this way. An “old Mr. Nason” was out looking for some of his cattle when he smelled an extremely foul odor coming from a pile of brush. Thinking it could be one of his cows, he went to the source of the stench and discovered the body of a man. And although the body was somewhat decomposed it was obvious that he had been murdered. This was the conclusion of a Coroners Jury under the direction of Jeremiah Tracy (1809 - 1887), a leading citizen at the time. Since there was no identification and no one had come looking for him, he would have been listed as “unidentified male”, although there is no record of this.

Why did the Sheriff, or someone, authorize a remote burial? The Pioneer Cemetery was only about three miles away and one can assume that in most cases a body would receive a brief Christian burial even if unknown. This is a difficult question. It may be nothing more than the condition of the body – they had no body bags back then – and anyone who has ever smelled a dead body knows that it is virtually unbearable. The fact that there was no identity, and his

pack was gone may also have played a part. Without the pack there would be no indication that he was a peddler. For all they knew, he could have been a newly arrived immigrant, a deserter from the Civil War or simply a vagabond – all three categories abounded in the mid 1800s. Those who were involved with the burial would not have been able to establish motive nor whether he was walking toward Fredericton Junction or heading in the opposite direction. None of this was known until many years later when one of the perpetrators told the story.

It is doubtful that the sheriff came out to the Diamond Square Road, but he might have. Due to difficult travel conditions, it's more likely that the sheriff simply relayed instructions to Mr. Tracy with whom he would likely have been familiar. In any case the burial was, in some way, authorized. The news would have spread throughout Diamond Square Settlement and at least a few people would have viewed the body prior to burial. These people would also have been called to testify at the Coroner's Jury. This five-person investigative body was then, and is now, mandated to determine only the identity of the body and the cause of death.

Now for more mystery. There is no evidence that any public attempt was made to ascertain the peddler's identity – no mention in the news papers and nothing in any available records. Why?

Under normal circumstances, someone would likely have informed the sheriff about the men who played cards with the peddler. He would then have interviewed these guys, the hotel owner, and anyone else who may have had contact with the victim. But there is no indication that anyone made the connection between the dead man and the card player. This may have been due to the time lapse and the number of people who had by then passed through Fredericton Junction. However, if Mr. Tracy could not provide a name, one would assume that the sheriff contacted his colleagues in Charlotte County and Maine asking if they were missing a resident. The stagecoach ran on a regular schedule and if the murder occurred after 1869, the telegraph was available.

Why so many unanswered questions? Let's use a bit of inductive reasoning to see if we can shed some light on this case. First question: Was he a peddler or a cattle buyer or both? We know that he was not wealthy. A wealthy man would not be on foot, nor would he be lugging a big pack. Even a man of ordinary means would at least have had a horse, and maybe a horse and wagon, which was popular at the time. Also, it is unlikely that a man of means would be playing cards with farm laborers, drinking heavily, and talking about his money. No, the peddler was a man of modest means. He may well have been a peddler that also bought a few cattle in the fall and brought them to Fredericton Junction, but the confessed murderer didn't mention anything about cattle. There is also no evidence of cattle ever being loaded on train cars at Fredericton Junction either. To do so would have required a holding pen – economy of scale probably required a full carload - feed facilities and a proper loading ramp. No one can remember these things and there is no record that they ever existed.

Maybe the peddler was exactly that – a peddler. He certainly fits the description. Peddlers, from an historic perspective, were described as a person, usually male, who was an itinerant

salesperson who carried his goods in a pack. But the mid 1800s might be late in history for peddlers since by this time they probably went around with a horse and wagon.

Possibly, like other stories, the cattle buyer story got mixed up with another one over time. If he bought cattle around St. Andrews and herded them to Fredericton Junction over the “old St. Andrews Road” one might ask how he fed them, and how long it would take to walk a bunch of cows from Piskahegan, the last outpost of civilization, to Fredericton Junction 35 miles away through solid wilderness? The Diamond Square Road, which was the original stagecoach road to St. Andrews, was abandoned by 1850 in favor of the new road out the Hanwell, through Harvey and on to St. Andrews and St. Stephen – the current Route 3. If in fact he did herd a few cows to Fredericton Junction, it is possible that he sold them locally. After 1869 he could have sent a telegram for someone to meet him there. If that was the case his name and the buyers name would be on the telegram. Somehow it had to be prearranged, so why could he not be readily identified? As mentioned earlier, maybe no one thought he was the man found dead beside the road. The body was discovered months later so it’s difficult to say how many people had by then stayed at the two hotels and come and gone on the train. There were no detectives, only a civilian jury, and no modern forensics. And how do we really know that no one looked for the peddler? Maybe they didn’t know where to look or who to contact.

I thought the man might be Jewish, so I contacted the Jewish Museum in Saint John. A kind lady suggested that although probably not Jewish, he might have been a bachelor or an immigrant living in meagre circumstances trying to save enough money to bring his wife and/or family over from Europe. Should this have been the case he might only be missed by someone over there and not here.

A reasonable theory, but there is no mention of his ethnicity, religion, or any other distinguishing feature. We do know this: everywhere serviced by the railroad in Canada and the United States were reachable by telegram by the late 1860s. New Brunswick was not only well serviced by telegraph lines along the railroad, but also there were several well-established newspapers. Someone had to know his name, but did the guys who killed him? The convicted felon allegedly said they “killed an old peddler” – no mention of cattle. If the man knew the peddler’s name, he undoubtedly would have used it. Then again, maybe too much time had passed, and he forgot it. The rendition of the story in DAYS OF OLD – A History of Fredericton Junction, written by Katherine DeWitt and Norma Alexander tells us that the information was relayed to the sheriff “many years later”.

Does this mean the information is unreliable? Not necessarily. Some of the information sounds credible, especially the confession about the murder. As often happens, over time certain aspects of a story became corrupted through verbal transmissions. For certain, the killers had to know that the peddler would not be missed ... at least not right away. He must have provided enough personal information to indicate this because the card players would be obvious suspects. Maybe the man told them that he was leaving for a far destination and never planned to visit the Junction again. Another possibility is that the farm workers planned to leave the

community soon themselves and would be long gone before the body was discovered. If they were staying around, they could easily have buried the body. They must have had information that made the robbery, and then murder, worth the risk.

Interestingly, one peddler story says they didn't find much money for their effort. This is believable since the peddler was beginning a two or three day walk through a wilderness road without horse or wagon. He could have taken the train to Fredericton or McAdam and by stage from there to either St. Andrews or St. Stephen if the date was after 1869. There is every indication that he didn't really have that much money, maybe just a lot by his standards.

The exact year of the murder is impossible to ascertain, but it was undoubtedly sometime in the mid 1860s. This was the conclusion of Ms. DeWitt and Ms. Alexander. These women interviewed the older residents of Fredericton Junction in the 1980s for their book and concluded that the murder occurred during that epoch. This makes sense. Jim Jones, a long-time resident, says Stanley Sambles was "adamant" that it was his father and grandfather who buried the body. Thus, if we take an arbitrary date of 1865, that will mean his father was twenty and his grandfather was fifty-three. Jeremiah Tracy, who conducted the Coroner's Jury was fifty-six that year. Considering these dates anywhere from 1860 to 1870 is reasonable.

Also, with that decade other aspects of the case begin to make sense. Because there was no telegraph service in Fredericton Junction until 1869 or shortly thereafter, when the railroad arrived, and roads were little more than glorified trails, alerting the sheriff was very time consuming. Someone, maybe Mr. Tracy himself, had to travel to Oromocto either by horse or by boat to report the murder and receive instructions from the sheriff. Either way it took at least 14 - 16 hours, or more, round trip. Since no one had enquired about the body, no one recognized him and the state of decomposition, a burial on what was then the edge of a field might be somewhat understandable. Mr. Tracy, who was according to his lengthy obituary, "a good man in every relation ... Young and old alike spoke highly of him as a man of truth and honor", would be the type of person to head an inquiry. He "pronounced the death due to foul play" according to Dr. F.A. McGrand in his book, *Backward Glances at Sunbury and Queens* (1967). The doctor also tells us that the peddler "was a cattle buyer on his way to Maine" and that "the partially decomposed body was found two months later by a farmer looking for strayed oxen". Unfortunately, no sources are given, and the information is somewhat sketchy – it could have been two months, but probably was more like five or six months. Where he got his information that the man was a cattle buyer on his way to Maine is also questionable.

However, if one combines the various versions of the peddler story, a reasonable saga emerges. We can be quite certain that the murder occurred in the 1860s and that a farmer found the somewhat decomposed body while looking for cattle and that Jeremiah Tracy investigated. We can be quite certain that the murder took place in the fall and was discovered in the spring because of the condition of the body and the "foul odor" as discussed previously. And it is also said that no one ever came looking for a lost loved one.

That might be explained by the fact that the Civil War (1861-1865) was either at its peak or just over depending on what year the murder took place. Many men from New Brunswick served in the Civil War and could quite possibly have passed through Fredericton Junction on their way to and from the United States. Hundreds of deserters came here seeking refuge and were trying to avoid detection. For various reasons then, including disease, a person could probably disappear in an unknown locale leaving no information for loved ones to trace.

We know that nothing was ever mentioned in the media and there are no official records anywhere. Could the story then be an urban myth? Yes, but that's unlikely. The story in its essence seems plausible having survived these many years and the lonely grave still exists out on the Diamond Square Road. But sadly, we will never know the name of 'The Peddler', the year of his death, who his relatives are, or where he was from.

That said, I hope that I have raised some relevant questions and added a bit of perspective to the story. At least I have enjoyed the exercise and the people that I met in the process. I renewed my acquaintance with Robin Hanson an accomplished artist and sculpturer and fine gentleman that I have known since 1968. Robin is the one who put the sculptures and plaque on the Diamond Square Road about where the attack on the peddler began. He has also placed other sculptures at historic places around Sunbury County. A trip to visit the peddler's grave and to see his sculptures at the picnic park by the rapids in Fredericton Junction is a rewarding venture. Robin's studio/art gallery at French Lake is also a place worth visiting.

Jim Jones, an accomplished raconteur, was probably one of the last people to talk with Stanley Sambles whose relatives buried the peddler's body. He generously shared this and other information with me. In fact, without Jim Jones the peddler's grave site would have undoubtedly been lost. Jim discovered the grave by chance several years ago, asked around to determine who was buried there and then informed J.D. Irving Ltd. just as they were about to go through the area with mechanical timber harvesters. As in similar instances, Mr. Irving spared the site and opened it to the public. The Peddler sculptures are about a mile up the Diamond Square Road and the grave site is about a mile beyond the sculptures, well marked and easy to locate. The iron cross on the grave reads 1840, but this is undoubtedly erroneous.

Josh Green and his colleagues at the Provincial Archives were very helpful and I enjoyed my time spent there. My conversations with the Sambles family and Kathrine Biggs-Craft from the Saint John Jewish Museum were both helpful and enjoyable as was my correspondence with David Goss. His historical walks are appreciated by many as are his newspaper articles.

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