

The Capture of the Strangler



Erle Leonard Nelson, 'The Strangler', whose list of murders included a large number of women in the United States and two in Winnipeg, was captured at Wakopa on June 15, 1927.

Originally from San Francisco, he was the first recognized serial killer in North America. Moving from place to place he, would rent rooms in Boarding Houses, then kill the land lady and steal her husband's cloths. He crossed into Canada, and after killing two people in Winnipeg he went to Regina, and from there...

The story of his capture is told by Lawrence Smith ...

" he hitchhiked with a travelling salesman coming all the way down the back roads, cops looking for him all over the place, but they can't cover all the roads, he hitched to Boissevain, and at that time the railroad ran south into Bannerman down into St. John's, he was trying to get back to the States. He got as far as Wakopa and Mrs. Morgan,(he stopped in at the Morgan's store), Mrs. Morgan said she got a real funny feeling in the back of her neck about this character so she told Les and Mr. Dingwall to keep an eye on him. He was hiking down the old railway line. Les went up on top of the elevator to keep an eye on him while Mrs. Morgan phoned the police. And they caught him in Bannerman."

Mr. Smith also has some insight into his final day....

"At that time U of M was right across the street from the Vaughn Street Jail, and the ladies residence overlooked the wall into the prison yard. And I got his from a very good source because my mother was in residence. And the girls were renting the rooms out so people could peer out the window and watch this guy take the big drop."

And so it happened that not only did a Killarney resident have some interesting details about The Strangler's final moments, it was in Killarney and Wakopa that the final chapter of his international criminal career took place.

His story continues in "Refections" ...

Following a three-province search, Nelson was caught thanks to the quick thinking of Albert Dingwall, Wakopa grain buyer and L.H. Morgan, the Wakopa storekeeper.

Recounting the experiences, Mr Dingwall said the CN train had just left when he met a stranger who had just left the Morgan store. 'It was the boots he was wearing that made me suspicious', said Dingwall. 'I told Les (Morgan) who I thought the man was, and suggested to Mrs. Morgan that she should phone the police at Killarney.

Morgan and Dingwall started to follow him to see where he was going. Jim Whiteford was driving a team and wagon going to Bannerman and gave him a lift, so it was presumed Nelson was heading back to the United States.

Sgt. W.B. Gray with Const. Sewell of Killarney detachment effected the capture and lodged him in Killarney jail, in the basement of the town hall.

Mr Dingwall, who now resides in Willow Lodge in Killarney, still has the letter he received advising him of his share of the reward money. Mr. Morgan and Mr. Dingwall each received \$300. Two other persons also participating in the capture, George Dickson and Dunc Merlin, each received \$150.

There was great excitement in town during the evening.

Residents tell us the town constable Willaim Dunn, who was in charge of the jail, left the cell block for a few minutes to purchase fodder for his pipe. That was all the time the Strangler needed. When Mr. Dunn returned, Nelson had disappeared.

After an all-night manhunt, the suspected Strangler was captured about 9 o'clock the next morning just as a special train arrived with a score of police and bloodhounds from Winnipeg. His escape and capture made an exciting experience. Every man in town and countryside for miles around had joined in the search.

After his escape from the Killarney jail, Nelson sought shelter in a barn where he discovered a pair of boots and skates. As he was in his stocking feet, he took off the skates and wore the boots.

Early that morning, Alf Wood a local resident, reported a stranger had accosted him for the makings for a cigarette. As soon as he could, Mr. Wood got word to Constable Gray where he had seen the man. Gray, accompanied by Constable Renton of Crystal City detachment headed for the last place Nelson had been seen. Just then the whistle of the train was heard and Nelson emerged from his hiding place in a local lumberyard, thinking the train he heard must be a freight and a means of escape. He was immediately captured and placed on board the train.

Nelson was tried and sentenced to hang Friday, January 13, 1928.