

McNulty's Meanderings - Murder in Steveston

The town of Steveston was founded by Herbert Steves in 1890. It expanded rapidly and soon became a wild west town in need of its own police force. Within months, June 7, 1890 to be exact, the Richmond Municipal Council appointed its first Police Constable in Herbert Charles Drummond without salary to keep law and order. Council of the day was very concerned with gambling and the sale of liquor, especially to first nations people.

In addition, the municipality wanted their police for the protection of life and property, but also the municipality wanted the police to collect licence fees, fines and taxes.

Right from the beginning, the city fathers instructed the police constable to “spare no pains in bringing to justice any party or parties who may be found violating the Licence Bylaw and selling intoxicating liquor in the municipality.”

For the next ten years the municipality had difficulty in retaining policemen and employed 12 different officers, including Alex D. “Sandy” Main.

The Alex Main true story:

Alexander D. “Sandy” Main was appointed police constable for the municipality on June 12, 1897, at a salary of \$75 per month. On April 1, 1899 Alex Main was appointed Chief of Police. He was reappointed Chief on January 31, 1900 at the same salary with the “understanding that all fees collected buy him belong to the Corporation.”

On Sunday, April 14, 1900, Alex Main, a one man police force at the time in Steveston with a population of 350, went to investigate some stolen property from a farm. He had left home accompanied by his Newfoundland dog at his heels, early in the day having breakfast with his wife. He did not return that night to his home and Mrs. Main went looking for him the next day to no avail. All he carried with him were the old fashioned Beans handcuff in his hip pocket, his badge, and a notebook and pencil. He was dressed in his second best blue suit. At that time and the municipality did not provide uniforms. It was not until much later were revolvers and uniforms provided.

Main had been attacked by 3 men. He was killed with a curved bush hook. The men buried him with his dog underneath him a short distance away.

On Monday morning the whole town turned out to look for him all day with no results. Word of Main's disappearance eventually reached the office of Vancouver Police Chief John M. Stewart. He posted the occurrence on a notice board when it was picked up by a friend of the Main's, Detective Thomas H. Wylie. No sooner had he read the notice, he headed for the Chief's office with a request for time off to search for his friend. Permission was granted. The Victoria Daily Colonist of Tuesday April 17, 1900 reported-"Steveston Police Chief Missing-Vancouver, April 16. Chief of Police Main of Steveston has been missing since Saturday Morning, when he left with a search warrant for a couple of Chinese shacks about a mile from town. Search parties have failed to locate him. It was thought he might have fallen dead, as he was troubled with heart disease, but the body cannot be located. Vancouver police have gone to Steveston to aid in the search."

On Tuesday Wylie arrived in Steveston and spoke with Mrs. Main. There were no clues but the fact that Main had been seen talking to a Chinese man.

With this Wylie called, Lee Koy, President of Vancouver's Amalgamated Chinese Benevolent Society in Vancouver. Lee had been of help to Wylie in the past with Chinese cases in Vancouver. Within a couple of hours Koy was in Steveston with Wylie searching the shacks and sheds in Steveston's Chinatown. By midday they found the man that Main was last seen talking to on Saturday morning, Wo Lee, a market gardener. The gist of their conversation revolved around the whereabouts of another Chinese man, Yip Luck. Wo Lee said that he told Main that Luck lived with two other men in a cabin near the dyke about a mile east of town. Today that would put him near Britannia Shipyard.

This was Wylie's first and only lead. He requested the assistance of four prominent townsmen to help him. They were blacksmith, Isaiah Trites, his brother, Frank Trites, another blacksmith, George Shea, who owned a bloodhound and J.E. Murchison, who had recently been sworn in by the Reeve, Michael Brighthouse Wilkinson, as a special constable.

The five men and dog made their way about a mile east of town on the dyke to a bush clearing where they found a one room cabin. Upon entering the cabin, Wylie confronted two Chinese men, Yip Luck and Chung Chee Chong. Wylie noticed that Chong was far from well as he was bothered by a incessant cough.

Here Wylie looked for clues and through interpreter, Lee Koy, questioned the occupants in the cabin if they had seen anything of Main. Wylie was a

seasoned policeman. Studied them and felt there was something suspicious in their manner. Wylie searched the cabin and examined everything he could find. In one of the corners he found a pair of overalls, the seven pocket kind used by railroad men. Chinese men simply never bought these kinds of clothes. He also found a pipe, but not the kind used by Chinese.

Wylie gave directions to the other five to spread out around the building and look around and see what they could find. John Murchison first called attention to the potato pit. He opened the doors and spotted a handle sticking out of the potatoes which turned out to be a "steel-bladed, slightly curved brush hook with some dried brownish stains on the handle." Wylie requested of Shea, that since they had a bloodhound with them and could give the dog the scent it might lead somewhere. It seemed like a long shot, but the hound nosed around and led them to a spot about 50 feet away from the cabin where the ground had been recently turned. George Shea picked up a stick and started to probe the ground. He struck something. Then they dug with their hands until they touched cloth. Quickly they got a shovel and dug until they found the body of Main with the remains of his dog underneath him.

The Victoria Daily Colonist of Wednesday, April 18, 1900 reported - "Chief Main's Body Found- Chinese thieves Had Buried It Near the Scene of His Fatal Quest-Horribly Hacked With an Axe His Dog Laid in the Same Grave- Vancouver, April 17 - Chief of Police, Main, of Steveston left on Saturday morning to search Chinese shacks a mile out of town for stolen goods. Only his dog accompanied him. As Chief Main did not return, search parties were organized and have been looking for the missing man or his dead body ever since. Today Trites a fisherman noticed some fresh earth overturned about one hundred yards from the shacks, Chief Main went to search for stolen goods. He removed the earth and discovered the mutilated remains of the missing man. The body was horribly hacked with an axe and the dead man's dog lay beside his masters body with its throat cut. Chinese thieves have been arrested as the murderers and stolen goods have been located in their shack."

Wylie, through Lee Koy, confronted the Chinese men with their gruesome discovery. Big Yip Luck denied that he knew anything of the situation. Chung was fearful and shouted in Chinese "He killed him...he killed him with the axe." Promptly the pair were searched and were put in cuffs and taken to Steveston. Later, local physician, R.B. McKibbon, made an examination of Main's body and found that he died from a blow to the head. Corner, W.J. McGuigan, from Vancouver was summoned. After his investigation, the result was that Main did

not come to his death by natural causes, or from mere accident, or mischance, but came to his death from violence. Thus it was a murder verdict. The two suspects were put in wooden cells at the police station in Steveston.

However, there was unrest in the community and it was thought better to move the pair, for safekeeping, to the New Westminster provincial jail. While at the provincial jail Chung Chee Chong confessed that a third man, Ah Wong, was involved, but fled the scene on the Sunday morning in fear. He was later apprehended.

The Victoria Daily Colonist of Friday, May 11, 1900 reported-“ The Main Murder- Trial of the Prisoners Postponed for a Time.-New Westminster, May 10- The trial of the Chinese suspected of the murder of Policeman Alex Main of Steveston has been again postponed. In the meantime the prosecution are thoroughly preparing their case. The scene of the murder and other views which may be of use when the trial continues have been taken by a photographer.”

The Victoria Daily Colonist of Friday, October 26, 1900 reported-“ Yip Luck Confesses- Tells His Story of the Murder of Chief Main Near Steveston- Vancouver, Oct. 25- Yip Luck, the Murderer of Chief Main, yesterday told his story of the crime, which in brief is as follows: He had been building a shack on Sunday, and Policeman Main told him he must not work on that day. Yip saw him write in a book, and he was frightened. He gave Chief Main \$2. Other things of a similar nature occurred after that, and he thought as a matter of course that he was being ground down by a system of blackmail. He consulted with the other Chinese, and they decided to kill Chief Main. Jai Pan made the suggestion. The other Chinese offered to give Ah Chan-who since died in jail- two tins of opium to do it. A plot was laid. Jai Pan told the Chief that someone had stolen his tools, and asked him to search Yip Luck's place. The Chief came in response to the summons . He saw Yip Luck working in the field with a new ax and mattock and asked him where he got them. Yip Luck watched his chance, and when Chief Main's back was turned struck at him with the axe cutting his victim down the back of the neck. Jai Pan watched him from the bush, and coming out, helped him to bury the body.

Yip is from Canton, coming to British Columbia in 1884. He is 45, and has no religious belief, but is now studying the Bible, written in Chinese, seems to be quite indifferent when reminded of his approaching end.”

Trial:

Yip appeared before Mr. Justice Paulus Aemillus Irving. Below him at a desk was the Crown counsel, W.J. "Bill" Bowser, also present was the court interpreter, Charlie Cumyow. The charge was murder. When the interpreter repeated the charge, the prisoner muttered briefly. Cumyow told the court Luck said he pleaded guilty to the charge. Judge Irving asked if the accused thoroughly understood what he was doing as the accused had no counsel. The plea was accepted through an interpreter as guilty. Judge Irving sentenced the accused Yip Luck to die on the gallows on Friday November 16, 1900.

Execution:

When the fatal day rolled around, November 16, 1900, it was after many days of heavy rain.

The Victoria Daily Colonist of November 17, 1900 reported- "Execution of Yip Luck-The Chinese Murderer of Chief Main Dies on the Gallows-He Confesses that the Crime Had been Planned Beforehand, Vancouver, Nov. 16 - The hanging of Yip Luck in the yard of the provincial jail at New Westminster this morning was witnessed by about 80 persons. The hanging was accomplished at 8:10 o'clock, but the murderer of Chief of Police Main at Steveston was up before daybreak. He was in excellent spirits and quite talkative. He calmly declared that he was not afraid to die, that he was a Christian and that although he had removed Main, he knew he would go straight to Heaven. By and bye he said he would come back again. He exhibited a tombstone which he had ordered made, and which he has kept for several days in his cell. The stone bears his name, age, birthplace and date of the execution, it is to ornament his grave in China, where his remains will be interred.

Yip Luck confessed that the murder of Chief of Police Main had been determined some time before the actual commission of the crime, the reason given being the accusation of the Chinese that Main was extorting from the Chinese residents of Steveston, particularly from the Highbinders of whom Yip Luk was a leader.

The procession to the scaffold was led by the sheriff, followed by the condemned man, then the public hangman and the governor of the jail and the jail officials. Thomas Touche, a Chinese missionary was also of the party. It had been arranged that Yip should recite the Lord's Prayer on the scaffold, but at the last minute Yip remarked to the missionary that he thought he would not say the prayer, as he was afraid of his voice trembling.

There were 15 steps up to the scaffold and at the steepest part Yip faltered, and was assisted by the public hangman. On reaching the scaffold, Yip took a last look at the sky, and then the cap was placed over his head and the rope adjusted.

John Radclive was to perform the hanging. He was rather nervous. However, due to the rain, there was a sizable hitch in the proceedings, with constant rainfall hitting the scaffold for several days, the trapdoor had expanded to a point where it refused to open. "A mummer of surprise broke from the onlookers" the Province explains, "which was increased a moment later as a second attempt was made to spring the trap. Again the body of the condemned man settled perceptibly, but the trap remained in position. The strain on the nerves of the man must have been fearful, as twice the door beneath his feet was jarred, but failed to act, but with all this uttered no sound.

On the third attempt, this time by Sheriff Armstrong, the door opened. The drop was 3 feet 9 inches. Yip's neck was broken by the fall. He was pronounced dead in 11 minutes." Luck was buried outside the B.C. Penitentiary Walls, New Westminster. Yip Luck was the first man in B.C. to plead guilty to murder of a Policeman. This was the first and only time in B.C. History that a Sheriff had performed the actual execution."

Main:

Alex Main had a huge funeral in Vancouver. Tom Wylie and his wife supported Mrs. Main. The pallbearers were Vancouver City Policemen.

However, it would take 96 years before Main would be officially honored nationally as a fallen officer. His name was engraved on the police and peace officer memorial on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.



A.G. Waddell, appointed Richmond's Chief of Police in 1914.
City of Richmond Archives Photograph #1985 206 1



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W. J. McGuigan

of **Vancouver**

, in the Province of British Columbia,

Coroner, do hereby solemnly declare that in the case of the death of **Alexander Main**

, from information received by me as Coroner, I am

of opinion that there is reason for believing that the deceased did not come to his death from natural causes, or from mere accident or mischance, but came to his death from violence, or unfair means, or culpable or negligent conduct of others, under circumstances requiring investigation by a Coroner's inquest.

And I make this solemn declaration conscientiously believing it to be true, and knowing that it is of the same force and effect as if made under oath, and by virtue of the Canada Evidence Act, 1893.

W. J. McGuigan

Declared before me at **Vancouver**)
this **17th** day of **April** **1900** .)

Thos. F. McGuigan, J.P.

NOTE.—This declaration may be made before a Justice of the Peace, a Commissioner for taking affidavits, or a Notary Public.