

The Hot Stove Murder

A true event from Fort Frances, Ont.

Seventy-year-old William Lyon Mackenzie King, of the Liberal Party, presided as prime minister over Canada on June 10, 1944 when, just a stone's throw away for some of us, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 62-year-old President of the United States, leader of the Democrats, watched over his country.

Both leaders had their hands full since Second World War was in full force. Overseas a Nazi SS Division over-took the village of Oradour-sur-Glane and burned it and its residents to the very foundations. The residents of Rainy River District saw and heard their share of gruesome events.

This local, true, but unfortunate tale (to say the very least) is disturbing in nature. I will advise those with weak stomachs to stop reading. For those with a taste for local history and with stronger stomachs, I invite you to read about this sad but true crime.

This crime is known as The Hot-Stove Murder.

Sixty-six miles east from Fort Francis, Flanders (named after Flanders Fields in the First World War) was once a thriving centre thanks to the many men who sweated in huge lumber camps there.

Now, not much is known about Flanders from the 1940s, other than it was a centre for huge logging camps. According to a Flanders resident and local historian, Bill Wiersema, who bought the old school house in 1996 where now he and his wife reside, Flanders used to be called Mayflower in the early part of the twentieth century.

"There's so much history here that you can't believe it," he said.

He also noted that his family's history goes back to his great grandfather who worked in the logging camps. But, other than today's real estate prices and the weather, little information is known about the Flanders of old. One unconfirmed source says that a fire in 1937, called the Dance Fire, burned the area where 17 people perished.

According to a local telephone directory, there are only four who reside in Flanders with telephone numbers, but there are cabins and cottages peppered throughout the area.

In the 1940s, in Fort Frances, movie goers went to see William Powell and Hedi Lamar in *The Heavenly Body* at the Royal. The Canadian government was encouraging the sale of as many Victory Bonds as they could, and Coca-Cola, in their new advertising campaign, was telling everyone that its refreshing drink was best served ice cold. Carnation Milk could be purchased at two tins for 19 cents, grapefruit, two for 17 cents, or prime rib roast at 29 cents a pound.

In 1944, when Magic Baking Powder stated that muffins make the meal, only a single train, which visited once a day, was Flanders's contact with the outside world.

Mrs. Viola Jamieson and her children lived alone in a cabin-like house which was left in the once thriving Flanders. Mrs. Jamieson, 49 years old, and two children, lived almost in complete isolation. Her only income was a small pension of some type for the past 20 years.

One day in early June 1944 four young men exited the daily train and made a beeline to the unfortunate woman's house. It was reported the gang all had the makings of Nazis. "Ruthless," "cruel," "vindictive," "a lack of morals" were all words used to describe the young men. After reading what they did, well, I'm sure you can think of some colourful metaphors of your own.

William Schmidt, 29, of Fort Frances, was leader of the gang comprised of brothers Tony, 22, and George Skrypnyk, 25, of Atikokan, Eino Tillonen, 19, of Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay). They all had European backgrounds.

It was reported that at about 10 a.m. the four men entered Mrs. Jamieson's home in search of money. They seem to have heard that she had hundreds of dollars, maybe even thousands of dollars. After searching the house in vain though, they only found a few dollars.

Around two hours later, Mrs. Jamieson returned home with her two sons aged 10 and 12. The assailants were said to have thrown a sheet over her head when Mrs. Jamieson entered her house. Her sons were then taken and locked in the root cellar.

Then the intruders demanded money. They wanted her to confess just where the money was and they thought that by torturing her they would find out just where the treasure was hidden.

First the four men held flaming pieces of paper to her body. Later they tore her clothes off and forced her to sit on the hot stove. Her arm, hands and both her front and back were burned, inflicting second and third degree burns to over 30 per cent of her body. They later forced a hot poker inside her. Her torture reportedly went on for four hours. Only the sickest of minds could ever think of doing this to another person.

It was at this time; two boys passed by on their bicycles and heard her screams. They ventured closer to the house, but were chased away by one of the thugs.

After one of the torturers suggested seeing how much water they could force her to drink another apparently refused the suggestion. It was then they threw her into the root cellar along with her boys. Just before the evening train arrived, the demented assailants left the woman for dead.

After the men left, one of Jamieson's boys dug his way through the earth roof and ran to Flanders station and notified the police. Residents of Flanders immediately rushed to the rescue and administered first aid, but on July 2, 1944, at 10 p.m. the poor woman died of her wounds at the La Verendrye hospital in Fort Frances.

The hospital, just four years old at the time, had 50 beds and was operated by the Order of Grey Nuns. This newly constructed hospital cost just over \$100,000 at the time.

Dr. J.E. O' Donnell, who performed the post mortem, said the woman died of infectious toxemia (the condition resulting from the spread of bacterial products (toxins) in the bloodstream (commonly referred to as blood poisoning) as a result of burns. There were third degree burns from the lower abdomen to below her breast on the right side and also on the left breast, the left forearm and on the elbow and hand. Both hips also endured severe suffering.

The story does not end here however. Enter one Isaac Sheldon, 50 years old, who lived with the victim and her two boys for six years and introduced further complications to our gruesome event. He might very well be able to shed some light on why the men decided to rob the poor victim.

When he returned home from work on June 11, Sheldon noticed the cellar had been dug up.

According to a newspaper article of the time, dated Aug. 17, 1944, Sheldon said he knew one of the accused – Schmidt. Sheldon reported to the police \$1,300 was stolen from the house about June 1, one thousand belonging to Mrs. Jamieson and about \$300 to himself. A further \$700 was still hidden on or near the premises.

That explained how much money was on the premises but it doesn't explain how the intruders knew how much money was at the homestead. The intruders must have heard about the money from somewhere. Did Sheldon tell Schmidt about the money on the premises? After all, Sheldon said he knew Schmidt. Did Schmidt go to the house and take the money in a first robbery and later go back with the others for the rest? It was stated that Schmidt was the leader of the gang. This would make sense. Or was there maybe some other leak of information? The possibilities are endless. But one thing is true, not only do loose lips sink ships but they also end lives as well.

At a time when local newspaper ads were telling housewives what the best deals in town were to make their households duties easier, Inspector Kelly of the Ontario Provincial Police took charge of the case on June 26. The Ontario Provincial Police posted a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the culprits.

Soon investigation led to the finding of a lamp. The lamp, which held the finger prints of the Skrypnyk brothers, was found at the scene of the crime.

His Honour Justice Barlow of the Supreme Court of Ontario ruled the court in which the case was heard for 10 days.

The overcrowded courtroom was filled with men and women, but some reported it had been the women who were more interested in the trial. It was also reported that there were women who brought their knitting needles and knitted as the trial undertook its forward momentum.

Mrs. Pearl Lee who lived with Schmidt was called to the stand. She stated that Schmidt confessed to her that it was he and the others who did the horrendous crime.

The trial was reported to be fair in every aspect. As the final verdict was read, only the youngest of the culprits was to be spared the hangman's rope. Tillonen was to spend the rest of his days in prison.

The rest of the young men heard their fate from the judge. "You are sentenced to be hanged buy the neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your souls."

This seemed to satisfy the public that justice was served. But there were some people who believed that death was too good for the men.

It seemed to be lunacy to even consider an appeal for these monsters but that was exactly what happened. Why on God's green earth did these monsters deserve an appeal? No one knows for sure.

After an appeal was made, the original date of execution, Dec. 6, 1944, was moved forward to Mar. 1, 1945. The result of the appeal seemed to be quite a concern for the townspeople. They were denied the sight of the three hanging by their necks.

The sheriff, the jailer, the jail surgeon, the district coroner and the justice of the peace were on hand. In fact, they were the only ones permitted by law to attend the actual execution of the condemned men along with the spiritual advisors of the condemned.

When the three were seen to arrive someone stated, "All three of the men were very

haggard and showed the effect of being in jail all winter.” It was noted that the three men didn’t flinch and all three walked to the gallows unassisted and unflinching. Just who said this is unclear. Some sources claimed the sheriff said it while other sources claim it came from either Rev. Father Bala or Rev. W.J. Gamble, the men’s spiritual advisers. William Schmidt asked Rev. W.J. Gamble to tell his parents not to worry; that he had found peace and forgiveness with God.

Shortly after midnight, the hangman pulled the lever which ended the three men’s lives. At 12:30 a.m. the monsters were pronounced dead (or at 12:50 a.m. according to other sources).

The bodies were lowered into graves which were originally dug prior to Dec. 6, 1944. They were sprinkled with quicklime, (a chemical which speeds the decay of flesh and bone). No marker was ever erected.

Mrs. Jamieson’s daughter Bernice, apparently lived in a rooming house directly across the street from the jail and was said to have been up with friends and outside the house at various times during the morning of the execution.

This tale of torture and mayhem also doesn’t end in Fort France’s past. James Fontana remembers that time when chocolate bars were scarce because of the war effort. James Fontana was a youngster who used to walk past the jail en-route to school.

James Fontana remembers that in the Hot Stove case the bodies of the men who were hanged were reportedly buried on the jail property. Before the town of Fort Frances built the present fire hall there was a small brick police building on the property facing Portage Avenue. At the south-east corner of the property, about twenty yards in from the street, there was a very mature but not-too-tall cedar tree. The tree was very close to the building.

"As kids we were told that the bodies were buried under that tree. Late on summer nights when we were playing and it got dark, we would dare each other to go and stand under the tree. It was a rite of passage, I guess. The tree would have been just a few yards from where the gallows had been situated, so it sounded convincing to us. And it still does."

As for Eino Tillonen, he served 16 years in a maximum prison in Manitoba, trained as a mechanic, was released, married and died in his 80’s in Thunder Bay, Ont.

I was in contact with one of Tillonen’s close friends who stated that Tillonen loved the outdoors, was a nervous person but “would give the shirt of his back for another person.”

The Hot Stove murder was just one murder that happened in this area and in our country.

Below is the actual article written the day of the executions of the guilty. Since the following is directly from the newspapers, I am leaving the spelling and grammar errors in for authenticity.

Fort Frances Times and Rainy Lake Herald
June 15, 1944

Flanders' Woman Alleged Burned and Robbed

Mrs. Jamieson who resides in the vicinity of Flanders was reported to have been robbed with violence at her home Saturday night.

Three men were said to have thrown a sheet over her head when she entered her the house and when she refused to tell them where her money was kept, the assailants are said to have set papers on fire and burned her arm and later set her on a hot stove burning her body both front and back, and also burner her hands on the stove to force her to tell them where she kept her money.

After burning her terribly one of the trio suggested that they " see how much water she could stand," Mrs. Jamieson related in describing the terrible treatment she was forced to undergo. However one of them men said "no" and she was thrown into the root cellar where two of her boys, aged 10 and 12 had already been imprisoned by the trio.

One of the children dug his way out through the earth roof and ran to Flanders station where police were notified.

Residents of Flanders were immediately rushed to the rescue of Mrs. Jamieson and administered first aid. She is now at LaVerendrye hospital, painfully suffering 30% burns. Local physicians are pleased with the first aid given which probably has saved Mrs. Jamieson's life. She was brought to Fort Frances on freight train Saturday, when the Canadian National Railway officials learned of the seriousness of her condition.

Provincial police have been notified and assailants have not yet been apprehended.

July 6, 1944

Torture Victim Dies

Mrs. Viola Jamieson of Flanders, died Sunday morning at ten o 'clock as a result of burns allegedly to have been inflicted when, according to her statement, three ruffians entered her home Saturday evening, June 10, unable to get money from her, placed the tiny woman on a hot stove, resulting in 30 per cent burns to the arms, legs, back, and chest.

She was immediately brought to the LaVerendrye hospital on a freight train caboose as soon as the Canadian National Railway officials learned of the seriousness of her condition.

Three men were said to have thrown a sheet over her head when she entered the house and when she refused to tell them where the money was kept, the assailants are said to have set her papers on fire and burned her arms and later set her body on a hot stove burning her body both front and back, and also burned her hands on the stove to force her tell them where she kept her money.

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However on of the men said "no" and she was thrown into the root cellar where two of her boys, aged 10 and 12 had already been imprisoned.

One of the children dug his way through the earth roof of the roothouse and ran approximately a mile to Flanders station where police were notified.

Residents of Flanders were immediately rushed to the rescue of Mrs. Jamieson and administered first aid.

Following her death, Provincial Police who have been conducting an intensive investigation since the alleged crime was committed, have posted a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the culprits. Special investigators have been assigned to duty by the Department at Queen's Park.

Funeral Services for the late Mrs. Viole Jamieson who died Sunday morning at LaVerendrye hospital, were held from St. Mary's church, Wednesday, July 5, at 9:00 a.m. Reverend Fe. Beaudin officiated and burial took place in the Fort Frances cemetery.

The deceased had been a resident of Flanders for the past 20 years. Surviving her death is her husband, James, of Kapuskasing, Ontario; three daughters, Mrs. Bernice Casnig, Irene and Tillie of Fort Frances; and six sons, Pte. Harley Jamieson and Pte. Francis Jamieson in England, Miner of the U.S. Navy, Bernard of Pickle Crowe, Ontario, and Harold and Arthur of Fort Frances.

Fort Frances Times and Rainy Lake Herald
August 17, 1944

Four Face Torture Killing Trial Here

Four men from this district, Anthony and George Skrypnyk, Eino Tallonen and William Schmidt, were committed for trial on a charge of murder in connection with the torture slaying of Mrs. Viola Jamieson, 49, of Flanders, Ontario, at the preliminary hearing before Magistrate Wolfe at Kenora Monday.

George Armstrong of Fort Frances, in charge of road work near Flanders, told the court he was summoned by the son of the deceased woman about 6:30 June 10. Armstrong, because of what the boy told him, went to the root house, broke in the door and found the woman partly buried in gravel, tried to raise her but she fell, and he then raised and assisted her out of the root house. he described her burns, noting especially sever burn and loos skin from the area between shoulder and top of her girdle. She was conscious.

Constable Parfitt, Ontario Provincial Police, Fort Frances, got word 7:30 p.m., and went to Flanders with Constable Savage and West. They made enquiry at C.N.R. station and Ontario-Minnesota Pulp and Paper Company office, and then went to the house. Only door to the house was through the kitchen. They found the house in disorder, plates, sealers on the table, and in the living room bedclothes were strewn around.

In the root cellar the entire gravel floor had been spaded over, At the entrance porch of the root house was an Aladdin lamp.

"Dr. J. E. O'Donnell, of Fort Frances, said he knew Mrs. Jamieson and had performed the post mortem July 3, 36 hours after death. The woman died of infectious toxemia as a result of burns, he said. There were third degree burns from abdomen to below breast on the right side and also on the left breast, the left forearm and on the elbow and hand. Both hips have endured sever suffering he said."

Isaac Sheldon, 50, said he had lived with Mrs. Jamieson for the past six years at Flanders. Two boys also lived in the house.

He described his movements before the crime and said he had driven 22 miles to his work on that day with the woman and boys. When he left them, they drove home in the truck. He said he only

knew one of the accused --- Schmidt.

Sheldon said \$1,300 was stolen from the house about June 1 and was reported to the Police; one thousand belonging to Mrs. Jamieson and \$300 to himself. A further \$700 was still hidden near the premises.

"He returned home June 11, after the crime and noticed the cellar had been dug up."

Inspector Kelly, criminal investigation department of the Ontario provincial police, took charge of the case June 26.

Inspector Kelly said he took possession of the lamp and sent it to R.C.M.P. in Ottawa for finger printing. Sgt. Ralph William Wonnacott, finger print expert, said that he had received two sealers from the Provincial Police for examination.

"He said he found prints on one sealer and on a lamp glass also submitted. He testified that one impression was identified as that of George Skrypnyk. That on the lamp chimney was identified as that of Anthony Skrypnyk."

Crown then called Mrs. Pearl Lee. She said she lived William Schmidt in the west and later came to Fort Frances. Later they went to Fort William where they worked at the Canada Car Company. There they met Anthony Skrypnyk and a girl named Laura. Later they met George and May and finally Eino Tillonen and a girl named Norma. After describing an earlier trip by Schmidt to Fort Frances, she said that on July 23 in Port Arthur Schmidt told her that he and "the boys" had done the thing at Flanders. He said that if he had listened to her, he would not be in the position he was. He said that the Skrypnyk boys and Tillonen were with him.

At this point H. J. Donley pointed out that this evidence would only be used as hearsay in the case of the Skrypnyk's trial. However the Crown counsel proceeded. Mrs. Lee said Schmidt told her: If it was not for Tony he would not have done it. He broke down and said he would never listen to Tony again ... Tony insisted on his going. She said Schmidt told her the Skrypnyks planned it. Schmidt tried to delay but they said they would go anyway even if he did not.

She said he left that evening to go to Manitoba with \$50 she gave him. (Schmidt was arrested at Morris, Man.)

Mr. Kajander of Fort William and H. J. Donley of Kenora are retained as defence counsel for Tillonen. The trial will be held in Fort Frances at the next meeting of the High Court which opens September 26.

"The preliminaries were held before magistrate Wolfe of Kenora with Deputy Attorney General C. L. Snyder conducting the prosecution for the crown."

After hearing testimony of the foregoing witnesses and reading a statement which was not read aloud to the court, Magistrate Wolfe committed the quartet for trial at the next sitting of the Supreme Court in the District of Rainy River.

Attending the preliminary hearing from Fort Frances were the following: N. L. Croome, district Crown Attorney; H. L. Cruso, District Police Magistrate; Dr. J. E. O'Donnell who gave medical evidence; George Armstrong who appeared as a witness; Constables Savage and Parfitt of the Ontario Provincial Police; Harold Jamieson, son of the late Mrs. Jamieson; Edward Allan of Rainy River, railroad engineer, witness, who was not called; and Wilfred Christie.

Hot Stove Murder

Fort Frances Times and Rainy Lake Herald - March 1, 1945

Trio Paid Penalty on Gallows Today

Widely Publicized "Hot Stove" Case Is Concluded

Three men, William Schmidt, 29, of Fort Frances, George Skrypnyk, 25, and Anthony Skrypnyk, 22, both of Atikokan, paid with their lives on the gallows in the jail this morning, the penalty for their participation in what has become known as the "hot stove" murder of Mrs. Viola Jamiesson of Flanders, 66 miles east of here.

Finia was written to the widely publicized torture-murder case, when the third of the trio was pronounced dead at 12:50 this morning by Dr. W. G. Boyle, jail surgeon, and Dr. D. R. Young of Emo, district coroner.

The Skrypnyk brothers went to gallows together a few minutes after midnight.

"The trio accompanied by a fourth, Eino Tillonen, 19, of Port Arthur, whose death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, as a result of a plea for leniency asked by the jury, attacked Mrs. Jemiesson at her home near the village of Flanders on the afternoon of June 10. In attempting to force her to divulge the hiding place of her money which they went to steal, one or more of the quartette forced her on a stove which resulted in burns which resulted according to medical testimony, in her death July 2 at the LaVerendrye hospital here."



Having been found guilty by a jury of fellow-citizens in the Sittings of the Supreme Court of Canada, High Court Division here, in September, at which His Honor Mr. Justice Barlow presided, the quartette was sentenced to hang December 6, as punishment for their crime. The specially constructed high board enclosed gallows for the execution of the quartette was torn down, unused on the original execution date, December 6, with Tillonen having had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment and the other three men granted a stay of execution until today, pending a decision on an appeal by Shmidt for a retrial which was denied recently, following a review of the evidence by the Ontario Supreme Court of Justices/ A plea for leniency to the Minister of Justice at Ottawa entered after retrial was denied; went unheeded.

Rev. Father Bala was spiritual advisor for the Skrypnyk brothers while Rev. W. J. Gamble was spiritual advisor for William Shmidt. They were with the condemned men immediately prior to their execution. "The trio were said to all have appeared very haggard from their several months ordeal in jail and the suspense of waiting. All three however, walked to the gallows unassisted and unflinching." The coroner's jury men who viewed the bodies of the condemned men were Jack DeVries, N.R. Everson, Everette Fournier, Mathew Grynol, Bennie Lindberg, C. L. Saunders and Llyod Stenson.

"William Shmidt asked his spiritual advisor, Rev. W. J. Gamble to tell his parents not to worry; that he had found peace and forgiveness with God. When visited by his father in jail yesterday afternoon, William Shmidt is reported to have told him that he and the Skrypnyk brothers wanted to thank those people of Fort Frances who had tried to help them. They were all very appreciative of the sympathy and assistance of the clergy." Mrs. Anton Casnig (Bernice), daughter of Mrs. Jamiesson, lives in a rooming house directly across the street from the jail and was said to have been up with friends and outside the house at various time during the morning of the execution.

"Light from the jail windows was blacked out with heavy blankets and a heavy guard of provincial police patrolled the jail grounds. No one other than the sheriff, jailer, jail surgeon, district coroner and justice of the peace were permitted entry to the jail grounds of building." Warm or unfrozen earth for filling the graves which had been left open since last

fall when they were dug prior to December 6 within the walls was a problem but was supplied by I. W. Smith, local contractor from and excavation started last fall under his office building.