

The Execution of Roland Hutchings

ROLAND HUTCHINGS WAS the last person to be executed in Charlotte County but as the item by Frederick Worrell concluding this piece notes, public opinion regarding capital punishment, or at least its public presentation, had changed a great deal since the execution of Thomas Dowd in 1876. There are different stories regarding the difficulties of even finding persons willing to build a gallows or perform the ceremony; Worrell's account is as good as any. The jailer at the time, George Goodeill, remembered that as Hutchings was led from his cell to his death, he reached out and switched off the light. It was a tiny, human thing to do, thought Goodeill; it was the war, and the saving of energy, like the saving of bones and rags, was just one part of the vast effort required to help defeat Hitler. ~

St. Croix Courier

June 11, 1942

R. A. F. Sergeant Armourer Charged with Murder of Black's Harbour Girl. Battered, Unclothed Body of Bernice Connors Found Hidden Under Moss in Field. Murder Charge Laid in Black's Harbour Police Court Yesterday by Staff Sergeant Davis, R.C.M.P. Heading Investigation

Sgt. Tom Roland Hutchings, an armourer of the Royal Air Force now stationed at the Pennfield Operational Training Unit, was charged with the murder of Bernice Connors when he was arraigned in police court at Black's Harbor late yesterday afternoon before Ellis A. Nason, stipendiary magistrate of the Parish of Pennfield. The charge was laid by Detective Staff Sergeant Frank W. Davis, R.C.M.P., who has been in charge of the investigation. Sgt. Hutchings, a native of England, is one of an R.A.F. group recently arrived in Canada. He was remanded without plea until 10 am June 18.

A crime which for sheer brutality has no parallel in the modern history of Charlotte County was uncovered at Black's Harbor on Sunday when the battered body of Bernice Connors, 19, was found

in a field near the Deadman's Harbour Road, victim of a fiend who beat her to death with a rock and then, apparently fearful that she might survive, returned to cut a jagged slash across her throat. The attractive young woman, a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. Edwin Connors, had been missing since Friday night but no alarm was felt until Sunday. A search had been underway that day only a short time when D. P. Guptill, chief of police at Black's Harbor, found the practically naked body some 40 feet from the highway.

When she failed to return home from the dance her parents thought she had gone to the home of a friend or relative for a few days, as was sometimes her practice; and hence no alarm was given. One of the girl's shoes found on the highway proved the clue which led to discovery of the crime. It was picked up by a resident of the district who took it home where his daughter identified it as belonging to Miss Connors, and subsequently they tried to get in touch with her to tell her of the find. In the attempt to locate her which followed it was soon established that she had not been seen since the dance on Friday night and the police were notified.

Leading the searchers on Sunday, Mr. Guptill went to the road where the shoe had been found and walking along it came upon its mate lying on the opposite side and a little distance away from where the first one had been picked up. The ground here showed signs of a scuffle. Looking about, Mr. Guptill noticed a slight mound in the field which skirts the highway at that point. It was covered with moss. Walking to it and brushing aside some of the covering, the police found the body of the girl, naked except for a light garment thrown across her hips, and lying on her back with her eyes staring straight upward. Her hands were folded across her chest.

The body was discovered Sunday afternoon more than 40 hours after Miss Connors was last seen alive. The back of the head was badly battered as though by a rock or some similar rough implement, and there was evidence of severe head injury. Her throat was also cut but since very little bleeding had occurred from that wound it was presumed that she was already dead when it was inflicted. Dr. Arnold Branch of Saint John, provincial pathologist, was also

called to the scene on Monday, and the body was removed to an undertaking parlor in St. George where he performed an autopsy. Nothing was disclosed of the results of this examination.

Mr. Mehan summoned a jury of Black's Harbour men who viewed the body and the scene of the crime Monday morning and then adjourned the inquest until June 16. Miss Connors attended the weekly dance held at the Community Hall at Black's Harbor on Friday evening, and sometime between 10 pm and 1 am, when the dance broke up, she left the building and was not seen again. A bracelet identified as hers was found on the road leading from the main highway to the Community Hall.

If the police knew anything about who her companions had been at the dance or who she left the hall with, they maintained a strict silence. The spot where the body was found is in the opposite direction from that which she would have taken to her home, and is roughly a quarter of a mile from the Community Hall.

St. Croix Courier

July 9, 1942

Sergt. Hutchings to Stand Trial of Charge of Murder - 36 Witnesses Testify in Three-Day Hearing - Accused has no Counsel and Asks no Questions - Murder Trial Opens Sept. 8

Sergt. Tom Roland Hutchings, 21-year-old armourer in the Royal Air Force, stationed at Pennfield, late Friday afternoon was committed to stand trial at the next court having criminal jurisdiction in the County of Charlotte for the murder of Bernice Connors. The next sitting of the Charlotte Circuit Court is scheduled to open at St. Andrews on Tuesday, Sept. 8.

Accused heard 36 prosecution witnesses testify against him, asked not a single question, and informed Magistrate E. A. Nason prior to being committed to jail to await trial, that he had nothing to say and did not wish to call any witnesses in his own behalf.

Friday afternoon Dr. John M. Roussel, medico-legal expert and assistant to Dr. R. Fontaine in the Province of Quebec, medico-legal laboratory, testified that he had discovered a number of human

blood stains on the R. A. F.'s uniform handed to him by Detective Staff Sergeant F. W. Davis of the R. C. M. P. and Sergeant Davis told of securing the uniform from Hutchings at the Pennfield air station.

During the two day preliminary hearing, Hutchings was not represented by counsel, while M. Groom, Clerk of the Peace for Charlotte County, conducted the prosecution and had associated with him E. B. McClatchy of the Attorney-General's department. Flt. Lieut. Elvanson of the R. A. F. attended the court proceedings and took a watching brief of the Air Force. The second witness of the afternoon was Detective Staff Sergeant F. W. Davis of the R. C. M. P. He told of coming to Black's Harbor in the early morning of June 8, arriving here at 12:15. . . . "I have given the accused the customary warning. I told him he did not have to answer any questions. He said he clearly understood the warning and he gave me a short resume of what he had done on the night of Friday, June 5. I asked him for the uniform he wore on Friday night. He was wearing it at the time, and took it off and gave it to me. I also took several other articles of clothing from his room. He was wearing glasses when I interviewed him at Pennfield," said the witness. He said he took them from the room of the accused, and with the consent of the accused, two pairs of socks, two handkerchiefs, two collars, a tie, a suit of underwear and a pair of shoes. These were later turned over to R. C. M. P. Corporal Rime.

"On the morning of June 10, while looking around the community Hall here, I discovered a bluish handkerchief near the kitchen door. The handkerchief was stained. I kept this in my possession and turned it over to Dr. J. M. Roussel in Montreal on the morning of June 25."

"I interviewed the accused in the jail at St. Andrews on June 13, and asked him to give me a ring he had on his finger, and he gave me the ring," continued the witness.

The tunic, trousers and belt taken from the accused at Pennfield were produced at this point and offered and received in evidence as well as a pair of shoes, a handkerchief found by the witness outside the Community Hall and several other articles taken from the room of Hutchings at the air station.

**George
Goodeill,
jailer, Roland
Hutchings,
and R.C.M.P.
Corporal
Tudor.
Courtesy Barry
Murray**



Detective Sergeant Davis said he had located a rock, stained with blood, on the highway near the spot where the body of Miss Connors was discovered. He found the rock on June 10, and this too was handed over to the Dr. Roussel, and identified by the witness in court and submitted in evidence.

The witness identified the uniform in court as the one handed to him, and said he had made an examination of the clothing and found a number of blood stains on the tunic and trousers. "I would say the stains were human blood stains," said the witness, and then went into details as to the different places the stains had been found. He said there was a single dark stain on the belt, and was of the opinion it too was a blood stain, but could not say that it was a human blood stain. Dr. Roussel said he was unable to group the blood from the

stains. He attributed this to the fact that stains that had been on cloth for some time or on cloth which had been submitted to heat, which lose their properties, therefore making it impossible to group the blood.

St. Croix Courier

December 17, 1942

Hutchings Hanged Yesterday for Murder Bernice Connors - Death Penalty Carried Out at St. Andrews for First Time in 65 Years - Trap Sprung at 1:50 AM - Condemned Man Calm to the End

Tom Roland Hutchings of Peterborough, England, paid the penalty for the murder of Bernice Connors at Black's Harbour last June when he was hanged at St. Andrews early yesterday morning. He went to his death calmly, preserving to the end the silence and poise which had characterized his conduct since he was arrested at the Pennfield air station last summer while serving as a sergeant armourer with the Royal Air Force. The sentence of death was carried out at 1:50 am, Wednesday morning, and he was pronounced dead at 2:02 o'clock.

Thus the book was closed on one of the most gruesome crimes in the history of Charlotte County. The body of Bernice Connors, covered with moss to form an inconspicuous mound, was discovered on Sunday, June 7, near Deadman's Harbor, not far from the Community Dance Hall where she had attended a dance the previous Friday evening. She was not seen alive after that night. The body was about 300 yards from the hall in a field.

Hutchings was arrested Wednesday, June 10 and arraigned in magistrate's court at Black's Harbor the same day before Ellis A. Nason where he was charged with the murder. Preliminary hearing followed, and he was tried in St. Andrews early in October when the Crown called 38 witnesses. Mr. Justice Richards presided. The trial was completed on October 6, when the jury after deliberating 3 ½ hours found him guilty with a recommendation for mercy, and the death sentence was pronounced late that night.

Evidence of the witnesses was that Hutchings was in the company of Bernice Connors when she was last seen walking up the Deadman's Harbor Road the night of June 5, and that he later



Grave of Roland Hutchings, 1995.
Rural Cemetery



Grave of Roland Hutchings, 2025.

Serjeant T. R. R. Hutchings, 6 June 1920 - 16th December, 1942.

Rural Cemetery

appeared at the dance hall with blood on his face and clothing. Hutchings himself made no statement himself at any time, and no witnesses were called by the defence.

While in solitary confinement at the county jail since his conviction, Hutchings for most of the time retained the cool, detached attitude which he had shown ever since his arrest, although as time went by with no news to indicate that Ottawa might act on the recommendation for mercy there were times when he was depressed and morose. He ate heartily and evinced considerable interest in what went on about him. Special guards maintained constant watch outside the cell.

On Monday of this week it became certain that the death penalty would be carried out when officials of the remission branch of the Secretary of State at Ottawa announced that "the law was to take its course." All the arrangements had already been completed by Sheriff C. [Charles] W. [Wesley] Mallory. A scaffold had been erected in the yard of the courthouse, and Camille Blanchard, official hangman for the Province of Quebec, was already on hand to carry out the execution.

Hutchings' last visitors, at 1:30 am, were a chaplain and a doctor from the Pennfield station, Squadron Leader Mann and Squadron Leader Stewart, respectively. When the time came to leave his cell, Hutchings walked out unaided, but outside, turned, walked back deliberately and switched out the light, then rejoined the official party and walked with firm steps to the courtyard and up the 18 steps to the gallows. He wore a beltless R. A. F. tunic with his sergeant's stripes on the arms, and slacks. Accompanying him were Squadron Leader Stewart, his two special guards and the hangman. The door was sprung at 1:50. Twelve minutes later he was pronounced dead. The execution was the first to take place in Charlotte County in 63 years. The only spectators were the official group. The scene was screened from outside view by a temporary fence and a covering over the top. Medical men in attendance were Dr. H. P. O'Neill of St. Andrews and Dr. R. A. Massie of St. George. The body was buried in the Rural Cemetery at St. Andrews.

The official record was completed Wednesday morning when the formal inquest was held before Dr. F. V. Maxwell of St. George.

St. Croix Courier

May 20, 1948

"Shiretown Items"

Hanging of Dowd

Few people now living in St. Andrews remember the execution of Thomas Dowd who was convicted of murdering Thomas Edward Ward, of New River, on the 18th of September, 1879, but all the older folks here have heard the story many times. Jack Smith, M. P., a friend of W. A. Stuart in Ottawa, recently came across an old *Toronto Globe* which gave all the details in a full column write-up and my good friend Wes sent the paper along to me. In reading the article I was stuck chiefly at the apparently different attitude of the public of those days to such an event as compared with the reaction of the present inhabitants of St. Andrews to the recent hanging here of a young airman. The latter incident occurred in the middle of the night with no one present except the necessary officials. The body was buried quietly with little ceremony or celebration. Not a carpenter in town would aid in the construction of the gallows and the work had to be done by the officials themselves. What thoughts this young man may have had during his last few days of life were known only to himself, to his clergyman, and to his God. In the case of Dowd, however, elaborate preparations were made for the occasion, his execution was carried out with pomp and pretentious religious ceremony, and he was provided with a funeral worthy of a potentate. The hanging took place in broad daylight and his address to the audience in attendance might well be classed with those touching words of Mark Anthony over the dead body of Julius Caesar. Dressed in his dark trousers and vest and clean white shirt, standing there before an admiring group of spectators and holding the centre of the stage in this thrilling drama, this man Dowd no doubt felt that he was the hero of the hour. And yet hanging is supposedly a deterrent. I offer no opinion as to the value, good or otherwise, of capital punishment, but I do believe that Anglo-Saxon civilization at least has come a long way in the past seventy years.