

The Murder Oak

The well drained sandy ridges snaking across the landscape south of Delta Marsh provide ideal growing conditions for bur oak, Manitoba's only native oak species. Bur oaks thrive on the old river levees built up when the present day Assiniboine River once flowed into Lake Manitoba. There are thousands of bur oak growing on the uplands near the marsh, but one is special. It stands all alone at the side of a dirt road, visible for miles, and known since September 1945 as the murder oak.

Baldwin "Baldy" Jonasson was a 47 year old farm hand working for Wesley Owens on a farm near Flee Island. On Sunday night, September 9, 1945, Baldy picked up 16 year old Pearl Dell in Portage la Prairie to give her a ride back to the Owens place, where she also worked. Monday was wash day, and when she had left for the weekend, Pearl assured Mrs. Owens that she would be back by Monday morning to help with the wash. As it turned out, neither she nor Baldy Jonasson would ever return to that farm.

On Tuesday morning, September 11, 1945, Jim Wilkinson, a neighbor to the Owens, was leaving his yard in a horse and wagon and saw something lying on the roadside to the west. He drove up and discovered Baldy Jonasson. Baldy was very weak and had a gash in his neck and a cut across his wrist. Jim went home to get his brother Arthur, who had a car and could drive Baldy to the hospital in Portage. When Art got there, Baldy said his car was stuck in the ditch further west down the road, and that Pearl was dead. Art and Jim loaded

Baldy into their car and drove down to his car. They indeed found Pearl slumped over in the passenger seat. Art called the police from Hill's farm nearby and then took Baldy into Portage Hospital.

RCMP Sergeant Newman later interviewed Jonasson in hospital and took his statement. Jonasson said that he had an accident at the corner further west of where the car had been found. It had rained hard on Sunday and the roads were slippery. He had taken the corner too sharply and hit a culvert. Pearl's head had gone through the windshield as had his. He removed a piece of windshield glass from her neck and she died in his arms without saying a word. He then got the car back on the road and proceeded east towards Owens' place but said that he had become very weak and the car ran into the ditch. It took him from Sunday night until Tuesday morning to move the relatively short distance

between where the car became stuck and where Jim Wilkinson found him.

RCMP officers investigated the accident scene and an autopsy was performed on Pearl Dell. It was found that she had been hit over the head with a blunt object, such as a hammer, and that her throat had been cut twice by a sharp instrument. Wheel tracks made by Jonasson's car in the soft mud were traced back to a pasture north of where Jonasson had said the accident took place. Blood stains were found on the pasture gate post and a straight razor was found beneath a lone oak tree near the gate. Later, a hammer was found in the pasture not far from the gate.

When confronted with the evidence, Jonasson changed his story. He said that Pearl was mad at him for picking her up early on Sunday night. He wanted to get back early because of the rain and he thought that the roads would be bad. He had driven up to the pasture and the car had stalled. They talked for a while and then Pearl reached over and cut his wrist with a straight razor. When Baldy got out to crank start the car, Pearl kicked out the windshield on her side and cut her own throat. He got the car started and then drove to the corner and hit the culvert, where his head went through the windshield.

The evidence, however, didn't support either of Jonasson's versions of the events. The windshield had been broken from outside the car, as virtually all of the windshield glass was found inside the vehicle. The blow to

Pearl Dell's head occurred before her throat was cut, and it seemed improbable that she could hit herself over the head with a hammer and cut her own throat twice so deeply before losing consciousness.

On November 17, 1945, a jury found Jonasson guilty of murder and he was sentenced to death by hanging. The execution was carried out in Headingly Gaol in February 1946.

The pasture where Pearl Dell lost her life is now a barley field, and the road is seldom traveled. The only witness to the crime was the lone oak tree, known thereafter as the murder oak, which stands silent vigil to this day.

And it still isn't talking.



The Great Delta Dog Derby - 1927

On Saturday, 12 February 1927, hundreds of excited spectators watched the running of the Delta Dog Derby, as a culmination of weeks of preparation and planning.

The Delta Dog Derby Committee had organized the event for dog owners engaged in the fishing trade at Delta. It was to be a test of speed and endurance. Teams would run a thirty-five mile course from Delta to Portage and back. Starting at fifteen minute intervals, teams would travel along the town line to Main Street, then west on Saskatchewan Avenue to Tupper Street and north to Delta. The starting and finishing point would be the McDonalds' hotel at Delta.

Officials were appointed to ensure fair play. At the Delta end, these officials were W. Berubie, Harry Howels and Steve Williams. The Portage official was E. A. Gilroy. CNR time was to be observed and, as each team passed Mr. Gilroy, the driver was to be handed a card of credential stating that the team passed Portage at a certain time.

Cash prizes totaling \$125.00 had been raised to stimulate interest and competition. With this incentive five entries had been received a week before the race. These were the teams of Olie Sigurdsson, Dave Foltz, Paul Crazzel, Bill Foltz and Jack Glennie. However, two days before the race, Gus Hawkinson added his team to the competition.

On race day the teams drew for starting positions and at 8:30 a.m. the Delta Dog Derby began.

To the lusty cheers of onlookers the teams left Delta. Spectators followed all along the route, and Main Street and Saskatchewan Avenue were filled with the curious and interested.

The winning team proved to be the later entry, Gus Hawkinson, whose dogs completed the course in three hours five minutes and ten seconds at an average speed exceeding 11 miles per hour. This was twenty-one minutes ahead of the second place team of Paul Crazzel. Olie Sigurdsson's team placed third, followed by Bill Foltz, Dave Foltz and Jack Glennie. Gus Hawkinson picked up the top cash prize of \$56. The second prize was \$36 while third place took home \$26.

After the race, the competitors, officials and spectators enjoyed a sumptuous turkey dinner served in the McDonalds' dining room followed by a dance which lasted until the wee hours.

As the event was an even bigger success than anticipated, the organizers hoped that the Delta Dog Derby would become an annual event.

Were any photos taken of the 1927 race? Was there a Second Delta Dog Derby in 1928? Please contact us if you can help answer these questions.

Delta History on the Internet

Visit our web site, which contains more information about the project, historical photographs, and back issues of *Delta History News*. It is located at:

www.umanitoba.ca/delta_marsh/history

You can help!

- provide photographs, reminiscences, family stories, or any other information pertaining to Delta Marsh
- let us know about people you know who have information about Delta Marsh
- contribute your time to help collect and organize information, contact people, and prepare the book
- make a tax-deductible donation to help with costs of the project

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Delta History Fish Fry

The second Delta History Fish Fry, held at the Herman Prior Center in Portage on 2 March, served all-you-can-eat pickarel while providing information about our project. Sincere thanks to all who attended!

Another fish fry is planned for **Monday, 1 July (Canada Day)** at Delta, as a concluding event in Fort La Reine Heritage Days (29-30 June). Proceeds from this fundraiser will be used to help us hire a student researcher. More information will be in the June issue of *Delta History News*. Hope to see you there!