

The Darker Side: Liberty for the Bank Robber

By Sue Brettell

3 GUNMEN SHOOT FIRST, THEN GRAB \$,000

PORT CREDIT CANADIAN BANK OF COMMERCE HELD UP WHILE WOUNDED ACCOUNTANT LIES BLEEDING ON THE FLOOR

Headlines, Toronto Star, Dec 9th, 1938

PORT CREDIT BANK IS HELD UP WHILE WOUNDED ACCOUNTANT LIES BLEEDING ON THE FLOOR

Three Thugs Force Truck Driver to Accompany Them Into
Place at Point of Gun, Opening Fire Soon as They Enter
—Staff Ordered to Lie Down Along With Customer
—Culprits Flee in Radio Truck With Speaker

Three armed men walked into the bank of Commerce at Port Credit shortly before noon, shot the accountant in the arm and then took \$1,000. R. A. Bryant was the wounded bank employee.

When warning, the first man in opened fire and shot Bryant at short range. The three men ordered the bank staff to lie flat on the floor. Two of the gunmen jumped over the counter, ransacked the vaults and picked up all the loose change and currency they could find.

The second man forced a truck driver from McKim's store near the bank to accompany them into the bank. They pushed a gun into his face to prevent him from speeding the truck.

Eye reports said the three men walked into the bank and began shooting at once. All shots went wild but the one that hit Bryant.

All three gunmen wore caps and overalls. They were said to be in their late 20's.

Even while they fired their guns, the robbers said something about "change for a \$5 bill".

N. T. Thacker, who was in the teller's cage, said that Bryant was standing just beside the cage. He fell to the floor when struck by the shot.

Bryant was treated by Dr. George H. Watson, who was first called to the bank. Dr. T. A. Robinson, assisted in treatment before the victim was rushed to Toronto.

W. E. Clancy, lead-keeper, and A. G. McDermott, manager, were also forced to the floor with the accountant and teller.

The robbers fled in a light delivery truck bearing 1938 license plates. Long Branch police report the truck was stolen there recently from Damon Stannach. A loud-speaker was affixed on the top of it and it bore the name "Rogers-Majestic Radio."

Gun Stuck in Stomach

It walked into the back and reached the business end of a gun in the stomach and was told to shut up and lie down on the floor. F. R. Clark, a customer declared, "None of the men wore a mask, but the man who held me up put his gloved hand over his mouth as though he were afraid I would recognize him."

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POLICE BELIEVE ROBBER WINGED IN GUN-FIGHT

Garageman Shoots Warning
Shots and Seizes Thieves
Away

ESCAPE WITH \$3,000

Thieves swept through Ontario county last night, raided stores and service stations and escaped a wide police net with almost \$4,000 worth of loot. County Constable W. Miller believes he "winged" a robber with one of nine bullets he fired as four fugitives raced through Clarendon in a high-powered car.

Port Perry, Cassarea, Whitby, Blackstock, Uxbridge and Bowmanville were visited by the racing thieves and at times pursuing police cars were only seconds behind them.

Police linked last night's robberies with others that have occurred throughout the district during the past month.

Joe Murray, town watchman, spotted four men carrying clothing

One December night, in a noisy tavern in downtown Toronto, three men discussed the idea of robbing a bank. At the time they had no particular bank in mind. The next morning, Friday December 9th, 1938, John Shea reportedly drove Alex McDonald, aged 21 and Leo Gauthier, aged 33, to the Canadian Bank of Commerce at Port Credit in a truck stolen from Damon Stannach's radio store, where Shea was a manager. Just before noon, Shea parked the truck opposite the bank and the three men entered dressed in blue caps and overalls. Initial reports indicated that the men "walked into the bank and began shooting at once". Later reports from staff and the bank manager stated that only one shot was fired. One of the men stood at the door of the bank,

the second man asked the teller for change for a \$5 bill, and the third man shot Ray Bryant, a 28 year old accountant, at point-blank range when he failed to respond fast enough to his demands to open the safe.

One customer, F.R. Clark, said that he had "... received the business end of a nickel-plated revolver in the stomach and was told to shut up and lie down on the floor" along with the manager, Mr. McDermott, and other customers and staff.

With a revolver pressed to his head and blood pouring from his arm, the terrified Ray Bryant told the gunman that he couldn't open the safe because he only had part of the combination. The agitated gunman eventually allowed him to call the teller, N.T. Thacker, who also had part of the combination, so that they could open the safe together. Two of the gunman were said to have jumped over the counter to ransack the vaults before collecting all the loose change. Once they had scooped up all the cash they could find, the three men sped away. Despite the loudspeakers on top of the truck, and bearing the name "Rogers-Majestic Radio", they escaped the police who were combing the area. The first newspaper reports indicated \$4,000 had been stolen, however later reports confirmed a cash haul totalling \$2732.

One customer, a brave Miss Hilda Blower, reported that she had called at the bank to make a cash deposit for her employer, W.H. Thompson Lumber Company, when one of the men

threatened her "Get down on the floor or I'll put a bullet through the back of your neck". She said that the men were "searing and using all sorts of bad language". The gunmen did not find the money she was carrying.

Within one week of the robbery, police arrested Gauthier in a restaurant on College Street, and McDonald as he entered his home at Poplar Plains Road. Following the arrests, city detectives gathered up ten men from the streets of Toronto for a line-up, together with McDonald and Gauthier. McDonald was positively identified as the man who stood outside the bank just before the robbery, but Gauthier was not identified.



At Brampton court on December 19th, 1938, Leo Gauthier and Alex McDonald were charged with armed robbery of the Canadian Bank of Commerce in Port Credit and attempting to maim Ray Bryant. It was not until over a month later, on the night of January 21st, 1939, that a squad of detectives awakened John Shea from his sleep at gunpoint and arrested him. Once Shea had been arrested and had admitted to driving the truck in the Port Credit bank robbery, the trial could go ahead and the three alleged bank robbers could be brought to justice . . . or could they?

Shea and Alex McDonald were also facing charges relating to two other incidents. Shea faced charges of holding up John Smith, shoemaker, in his Queen Street East store, and stealing \$100. Shea, Alex McDonald, and his older brother, Donald "Mickey" McDonald, were implicated in the death of James Windsor, a bookie in North Toronto, who was murdered on the night of January 7th, 1939. At the murder trial, on May 3rd, 1939 in a Toronto court, Shea testified against Alex and Mickey McDonald. Mickey was on trial for the second time; he had been convicted in the spring of 1939 but had won a new trial. Mickey accused Shea of framing him because he thought he had been double-crossed over the Port Credit hold-up.

The trail of Shea, McDonald and Gauthier in the Port Credit bank robbery continued at Brampton court on June 22nd, 1939, but only for one day. There was an uproar in court as the trial was abruptly halted when Attorney-General Conant stated that "the accused must be tried by jury". This impending direction indicated that the penalty for the accused could exceed more than five years. The trial did not resume again until October 30th, 1939.

On October 30th, witnesses were called to testify regarding the shooting of Ray Bryant. There were no less than three different accounts surrounding who fired the shot. Although Bryant had been unable to describe his attacker immediately following the robbery, other than he was "short", he now believed Alex McDonald was the man who shot him. Shea stated that Gauthier was the man who had fired the shot that injured Bryant. However, Mr. Regan, defence council, said that "Shea had misled the Crown when he said that Gauthier did the shooting"

and that he had information to say that, "smoke was issuing from the gun in Shea's hand after Bryant was shot". With an array of conflicting information, it seemed an impossible task to determine "who" shot Bryant.

Headlines in the Toronto Star on October 31st reported that because Shea "turned King's evidence" and testified against his alleged accomplices, McDonald and Gauthier, charges against him of armed robbery and wounding would be dropped. McDonald and Gauthier plead not guilty to the charges of armed robbery and attempting to maim Ray Bryant.

In Toronto, at the murder trial of James Windsor, on November 2nd, 1939, all charges against Donald "Mickey" McDonald were dropped due to the unreliability of evidence supplied by Shea. News from the Toronto court travelled quick to Brampton, where the trial for the Port Credit robbery continued; it was thought that charges against McDonald and Gauthier would also be dropped.

McDonald and Gauthier were reported to have walked into the dock at Brampton court with smiles on their faces. The smiles were short-lived however, when Shea, despite admitting being the driver in the Port Credit Bank robbery, walked from Brampton court a free man, whilst Alex McDonald and Leo Gauthier were each sentenced to serve a total of 20 years; 10 years for robbery while armed and 10 years for wounding Ray Bryant. Basil Essery, council for Gauthier, who found the situation regarding Shea "nauseating" exclaimed, ". . . never in thirty years of practice have I seen a self-confessed robber, thief and cheat lifted wholly out of responsibility in such a manner".