

The mass murderers never brought to justice in old Ontario

Phil Egan - September 2022

In July, it was decided that a man accused of killing four members of a Muslim family in a targeted truck attack would be tried outside of London, where the crime occurred.

Prejudice against the accused and presumption of guilt, it was thought, threatened a fair trial.

History has shown, however, that sometimes these prejudices work the other way.

It was an appalling crime that captured the attention of the entire province. The Donnelly killings in Lucan back in 1880 demonstrated that law and order was still a fragile structure in Ontario's last frontier.

Most shockingly, the ringleader of the band of killers was a county constable.

James and Johanna Donnelly had married in Ireland in 1840 before setting sail for Canada.

The pair sowed the seeds of conflict in 1847 when they squatted on Canada Company land in Biddulph Township. Seven children were born in Canada to the scrapping Donnelly clan.

In 1857, a dispute over ownership of the land resulted in James Donnelly killing a man named Patrick Farrell in a fight. Arrested and found guilty at trial, Donnelly was sentenced to be hanged.

A petition for clemency by his wife, Johanna, was successful and Donnelly's sentence was commuted to seven years in Kingston Penitentiary.

In the ensuing years, the Donnelly clan earned a reputation for lawlessness and violence.

Conflicts with neighbours in Biddulph Township were frequent, and the family soon had many enemies. Accusations of theft, trespassing, assault, arson, and attempted murder followed in their wake.

Police officers were frequently assaulted by the Donnelly men, and even matriarch Johanna developed a venomous hatred of one in particular – a constable named James Carroll.

The evil reputations of the "Black" Donnelly's worsened as a result of what would become known as The Stagecoach Feud. In May of 1873, James's son, William, began a stagecoach business operating from Lucan to London and Exeter. William was joined in the extremely successful venture by his brothers Michael, John and Thomas. That same year, a man named Patrick Flanagan purchased a competing line. Flanagan hated the Donnelly's, and was determined to drive them out of business. The scene was set for the battle between the Donnelly Stagecoach Company and the Flanagan and Craven Line. The feud erupted in pandemonium. Competing stagecoaches were smashed, and horses mutilated. Livery barns were put to the torch.

The final act in the saga of the Donnelly Massacre may have been set by the renewal of a 200-year-old feud between Catholics and Protestants. Father John Connolly of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church came from the "Whiteboy" tradition – Roman Catholics who identified with Ireland's "original rebels." The secret 18th century organization used to stage nightly raids on Protestant landowners, who they viewed as oppressors.

Connolly's hatred of Protestants had been challenged publicly by James Donnelly, who had many Protestant friends. In Ireland, those people who associated with Protestants had been known as the "Blackfeet" – suggesting the origin of the term "Black Donnelly's."

In June of 1879, Fr. Connolly created a Peace Society in Biddulph Township which, in turn, generated a Vigilance Committee. Members of the Peace Society agreed to willingly open their properties to inspection for stolen items. The Donnelly's refused to join or submit to searches by the Vigilance Committee.

On the evening of February 3, 1880, members of this group gathered, primed for retribution. Another barn burning was being blamed on the Donnelly's, and Fr. Connolly had offered \$500 for the detection of "the wicked persons responsible," decrying the fact that "evil had fallen on the community."

This was enough for the Vigilance Committee, many of whom were close neighbours of the Donnelly's. With Constable James Carroll in the lead, more than 30 of the vigilantes marched on the Donnelly homestead. In the horrific assault that resulted, five members of the family, including a young niece, were bludgeoned to death.

"The massacre of the Donnelly family, by an armed mob, is a crime which has no parallel in the history of Canada," proclaimed the Listowel newspaper in February, 1880.

Despite two trials, nobody was ever convicted of any charge associated with the massacre, although those responsible were well-known to many.

Canadian justice, it appears, was somewhat less than blind when it came to the Black Donnelly's.