

The Great Nelson Jailbreak: an enquiry into a family legend.

It's been about 2 years since I became interested in learning about the life of my great grandfather John Henry Ruddell. He lived all of his adult life in and around Nelson and Morden Manitoba. Being John Henry's great grandson I am 3 generations descended from him. I'm retired so not really young anymore and I have the time to search out family history!

I never expected to find the large amount of information that I did by reading old newspapers. I also never imagined how many contacts I would make along the way in my research.

My knowledge of our family was passed from my grandfather, Harry Ruddell, to my father Cecil Ruddell, and then to me. It was by word of mouth; and by a few artifacts and pictures that have survived the 130 odd years since John Henry settled in Nelson and started his family. I learned quickly how the old stories that I heard from them had grown with each generation as they came down to me. According to historians all oral histories somehow evolves that way. That's why they're called legends, I guess.

Using the Pembina Manitou Archives collection of old newspapers I learned more about my old family than I imagined I could ever learn.

John Henry Ruddell and his brother William George Ruddell arrived in Nelson in 1879 and 1880. John Henry arrived first. The brothers were very close and lived in the same area their whole lives--first Nelson and then Morden.

W. G. Ruddell had two sons and a daughter. Through the internet I found a descendant of William George's daughter Alma Ruddell. I contacted her and we have been able to exchange pictures, newspaper clippings and stories. Our correspondence has been a bonus to me! Family

trees expanded quickly in the days of large families, so history gets disseminated very fast. One has to search far and wide to put answers to puzzles and questions! See Brenda's question below.

brenda	Nov 9
to me	
Hello from the chilly nation's capital!	
Things are finally getting back to normal here and I am slowly making my way back to my genealogy files. As it is all-consuming, I try to make sure I am caught up on everything else otherwise it won't get done once I get started! LOL	
In your travels through the newspaper archives for Morden and area, did you happen to come across a story about a man being broken out of jail the night before he was to be hung? My Auntie Pat (my dad's sister) once told me a story about how her grandfather (William George) and his uncle (John Henry) helped a man escape from the jail. Have you ever heard such a tale? I'm curious to find out if it is true or not.	
Thanks Hope all is well with you out there. Cheers, brenda	

I was surprised when I got this e-mail from Brenda. As soon as I read it I remembered I had been come across an article about a jailbreak in one of the early papers. I couldn't remember for sure if it was in the Mountaineer from Nelson, or in the Manitoba News from the early days in Morden. It might be quite the wild goose chase but my curiosity got the best of me. I went back through about a hundred or so old copies looking for that article. Maybe I just have too much time on my hands!

At any rate I finally found it. It was just too coincidental for me to leave alone. That clipping

went immediately in my files for the sake of posterity. Of course I had to send it on to Brenda.

Magistrate's Court.

Mayor Duncan, officiating as Justice of the Peace, was on Thursday called upon to preside at the trial of a young man named John Davis, accused of larceny of a coat and a pair of pants from the room of Mr. Jas. McCann, in the Queen's Hotel here. Davis, it appears, had put up at the hotel on Wednesday night, and on Thursday morning Mr. McCann, on going to his room, found things badly mixed, and on investigation missed his coat and pants. A little consideration led him to suspect Davis, who in the meantime had hitched up his horse and was driving out of town. An information was immediately sworn out before Mayor Duncan, and without delay a messenger was dispatched after Davis, who was brought back to town, and on arrival here was arrested by Constable Rowe. The coat was found in his possession, and the pants were afterwards found in the scrub. After hearing the evidence, Mayor Duncan committed the prisoner for trial, and he was handed over to the constable to be conveyed to Winnipeg jail. While at the hotel, Davis claimed that he was out here on a shooting trip. He is known to a couple of settlers in the neighborhood, who say that he belongs to a very respectable family, and has two brothers in the English church ministry in Western Ontario.

LATER.

The above was written on Thursday night. On Friday morning, when constable Rowe went to the lock-up, where the prisoner had been confined over night, he found that some one had tampered with the lock, and on opening the door, it became glaringly evident that Davis was not there. Inquiry at the stable showed that the liberators had been there also, as the horse and rig belonging to the prisoner were gone. People here who may sympathize with Davis' escape, will not so readily excuse the barefaced manner in which it was accomplished.

Mountaineer 1884-09-06

I didn't know what an "information" was but it was sworn out to apprehend a suspected I could clearly see that. Also, who went to find Mr. Davis and how did he get him back to Nelson? What did this messenger do or say? Was it "excuse me Mr. Davis I must let you know that the Constable wants you to come back to Nelson because he thinks you stole Mr. McCann's coat'.

Or was it more like a citizen's arrest with the inducement to come back to Nelson being

brenda

Nov
10

to me

Looks like a close fit doesn't it? Circumstantial evidence - Queen's Hotel - did Wm Geo own it at that time?

From western Ontario? two settlers, shooting trip?

Could be the one my aunt and my dad told me about. I wish they were here for me to ask more questions. I think I'll contact my cousin Dan in Winnipeg to see if he remembers hearing anything like this.

Fun eh!
brenda

looking at business end of the business end of a shotgun? At any rate it seems like it was a rather "western" way of getting justice done.

After the breakout was discovered there was some serious detective work done to try to shed light on the second crime—the Great Jail-break. There were only five hundred or so people in the whole town and its surrounds. The tone of the article suggested the editor had at least an inkling of the identity of the culprits that did the evil deed. Was it my great grandfather and his brother helping out a family friend from Ontario? I don't know, but like Brenda says; "Fun Eh?"