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Two If By Sea

At 2:00 A.M. early Sunday morning on February 4, 1912 Ladysmith Night Watchman Thomas O'Connell was making his rounds on High Street when he noticed that the door of Rolston's hardware was partially open. As he climbed the steps to investigate, a man stepped out of the door and pointed a gun at him with the command, "Hands Up!"

In response, O'Connell immediately stepped forward and grasped the hand holding the revolver. A struggle ensued. Tom was a big, powerful man and managed to wrest the gun from the burglar, who then turned and ran down the street towards the harbour. As the watchman reached down to pick up the discarded weapon, a second man stepped out of the store's darkness and struck him across the back with an iron bar. O'Connell staggered to his feet, shook off the effects of the blow and ran after the fleeing men. He fired several shots in the dark, but the two burglars disappeared around the corner of High Street and Esplanade.

Just then, the store owner Bob Rolston appeared from upstairs and rushed outside to where O'Connell was standing with the revolver, still searching for a target. Tom explained what had happened and then they re-entered the store. They discovered that the two thieves had placed two rifles and some ammunition on the floor along with several knives and other merchandise. They also found that the front door lock had been sprung by the iron bar used to attack Mr. O'Connell, and that in making their getaway, both men had left their hats behind. One of the hats bore the well-known insignia of a mercantile firm in Tacoma. Chief Constable Allen was immediately informed and a formal investigation was begun.

This was the second burglary reported in a little over a week in Ladysmith. There were also recent robberies in Cedar and Nanaimo, and a boat belonging to Archie McKinnon had been stolen on the previous Friday. Residents also informed Constable Allen that a mysterious white sloop had been spotted in Oyster Bay on Saturday, and the navigator did not appear to be familiar with the harbour.

The manager of Ladysmith Hardware, William Rolston, told the police that a man had entered the store on Saturday and inquired about the price of the two guns later found on the floor on the night of the burglary.

In those days, committing a crime in Ladysmith was not difficult, but making your escape was problematic. A quick telephone call to the Duncan and Nanaimo officials could effectively seal off the highway to the south and north of the town, and escape by scheduled train was not recommended! That is why many of the criminals in that era chose to make their getaway by water. As Josephine (O'Connell) Lineham recalls "Dad told me that it was the practice of burglars or robbers from the mainland to keep hidden boats on isolated islands, and on dark nights to row over to Ladysmith and break in to Bob Rolston's or Simon Leiser's store to replenish their stock of guns, knives and ammunition."

On Monday morning, Constables Allen and Cassidy and Tom O'Connell engaged a gasoline launch and went out searching for the mysterious white sloop. They located the boat near Cowichan Gap and arrested the two men on board, William Sampson and Einar Landhims. Constable O'Connell immediately identified Landhims as the man who had pulled the gun on him during the robbery.

On Thursday, February 8th, the two accused men were brought before local Magistrate Harrison and were identified by both William Rollston and Edward Forward, employees of Ladysmith Hardware as the two men who had entered the store the previous Saturday. Bill Rollston also testified that the hat found on the hardware floor was identical to the one worn by Sampson when he visited the store. That was enough for Judge Harrison, and the two men were committed to trial and sent to the Nanaimo jail.

As a result of this incident, Tom O'Connell was cited by the town for his bravery in taking on two much younger men who, as the Chronicle boasted, "were no match for the strength and courage of Thomas O'Connell from County Cork." The veteran night watchman, whose salary has previously been paid by the local businessmen, was then sworn in as a Ladysmith Police Constable with the power to make arrests and collect fines. Mayor Dier reported to Town Council that such powers were necessary, as O'Connell "frequently must deal with rowdy miners, hotel drunks and quarrels over women of low repute." In addition, a grateful Bob Rollston presented Tom with a handsome Colt 45, which he was thereafter authorized to use in his nightly rounds of Ladysmith.

By Ed Nicholson



Photograph from Chronicle of Ladysmith by Viola Cull



Title: Ladysmith. Interior of Rolston's Hardware Store

Ladysmith Historical Society,