

Excerpt from

Mostly Murder: True Crime from Norfolk County, 1772-1955

by Cheryl MacDonald

The Last Hanging in Norfolk

Early on the morning of Wednesday, February 3, 1954, Ray Chambers stopped at a service station on the southeast corner of Cockshutt Road and Highway 3 in Renton. The trucker, a regular customer at the business operated by 68-year-old Bruce Beatty and his 63-year-old wife Ida, went to pump his own gas and found the power had not yet been turned on.

Heading into the small restaurant that was part of the business, Chambers heard moaning coming from the Beattys' living quarters. He knocked on the door then walked in on a nightmare.

Bruce Beatty was lying in a pool of blood on the floor, semi-conscious and badly beaten. There seemed to be blood everywhere — on the floor, the furniture, a soft drink cooler and on an axe on a nearby sofa. Chambers took in the situation in a matter of seconds, then raced across the street to another service station to summon the police.

Constable Sam Way of the Simcoe OPP was the first to arrive. He found Mrs. Beatty in the bedroom, also badly beaten, but still alive. Another police officer arrived a short time later.

As they waited for the injured couple to be transferred to Norfolk General Hospital in Simcoe, the police officers noted three empty cans which the Beattys normally used to store change. It seemed that robbery was the motive for the brutal attack.

Just two days earlier, on Monday, February 1, the Beattys had gone into the OPP station in Simcoe to complain about a bad cheque written by Homer Ames. Not only had Ames purchased gas at the station, he had also stayed with the Beattys for a little while. In fact, police would eventually discover, Ames and a white woman he introduced as his wife had been paying guests from December 23 until Boxing Day and had eaten Christmas dinner with Bruce and Ida Beatty, Ida's sister and her two nephews.

Ray Chambers, the trucker who found Bruce Beatty after the attack, recalled seeing two black men in the Beatty's restaurant early on February 1. The younger man, who was in his 20s, was unfamiliar, but Chambers had seen Ames four or five times before.

After learning about the bad cheque, Constable Way drove his cruiser as far east as Jarvis, hoping to catch up with Homer Ames, but without any

success. When he returned to the Beattys' station in Renton, the couple seemed rather nervous. The next time he saw them was after the attack.

Bruce Beatty died in Norfolk General Hospital at 6:40 p.m. that night and Mrs. Beatty was transferred to Victoria Hospital in London with serious head injuries.

Meanwhile, police discovered that Homer Ames was actually Jerry Simmons, 47, of Syracuse, New York, who had spent a few hours having his car repaired at Aitken's Garage in Simcoe in December. On February 4, a province-wide alert was issued for Simmons.

Police were also interested in late model black '98 Oldsmobile which Thomas Tyrrell had seen at the Beattys' service station. Tyrrell, who ran the gas station across the road from them, had noticed the car at the station around 10:20 p.m. on the night of February 2.

Around 10 o'clock on the morning of February 5, Constable Donald Pursley of the Simcoe OPP was on routine traffic patrol when he spotted a black '98 Oldsmobile with Michigan plates. When he stopped the car, he found three black men inside, one of whom was Jerry Simmons. Realizing that Simmons was on the list of suspects in the Beatty murder, Constable Pursley told the driver of the car to follow him back to the Simcoe station.

Once they arrived, all three were held on vagrancy charges. The driver, who also owned the car, was identified as 43-year-old Henry Little of Detroit. The younger man was Joe Glenn Lotharp. He was 23, recently laid off from his job at Ford, and a nephew of Little.

Inspector D.V. Whiteley of the OPP criminal investigation branch and Sergeant Leslie F. Throop of the Simcoe detachment handled the interrogation. They were primarily interested in Lotharp and Simmons, who were questioned extensively on Friday night and early Saturday morning, then interviewed again later Saturday. Initially, Simmons said he had never been in the Norfolk area before. But one of Lotharp's fingerprints was found on an oil can at the Beattys' gas station. In addition, there was blood on Simmons' shirt, boots, and gloves and a black hair found under one of Bruce Beatty's nails matched a hair found in Simmons' hat. Ray Chambers also confirmed these were the men he had seen in the restaurant.

At 9 p.m. Saturday night, mere hours after Bruce Beatty was laid to rest in Simcoe's Oakwood Cemetery, Constable Sam Way charged both men with murder.

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