

# **Murders on the Skeena**

TRUE CRIME IN THE  
OLD CANADIAN WEST  
1884—1914

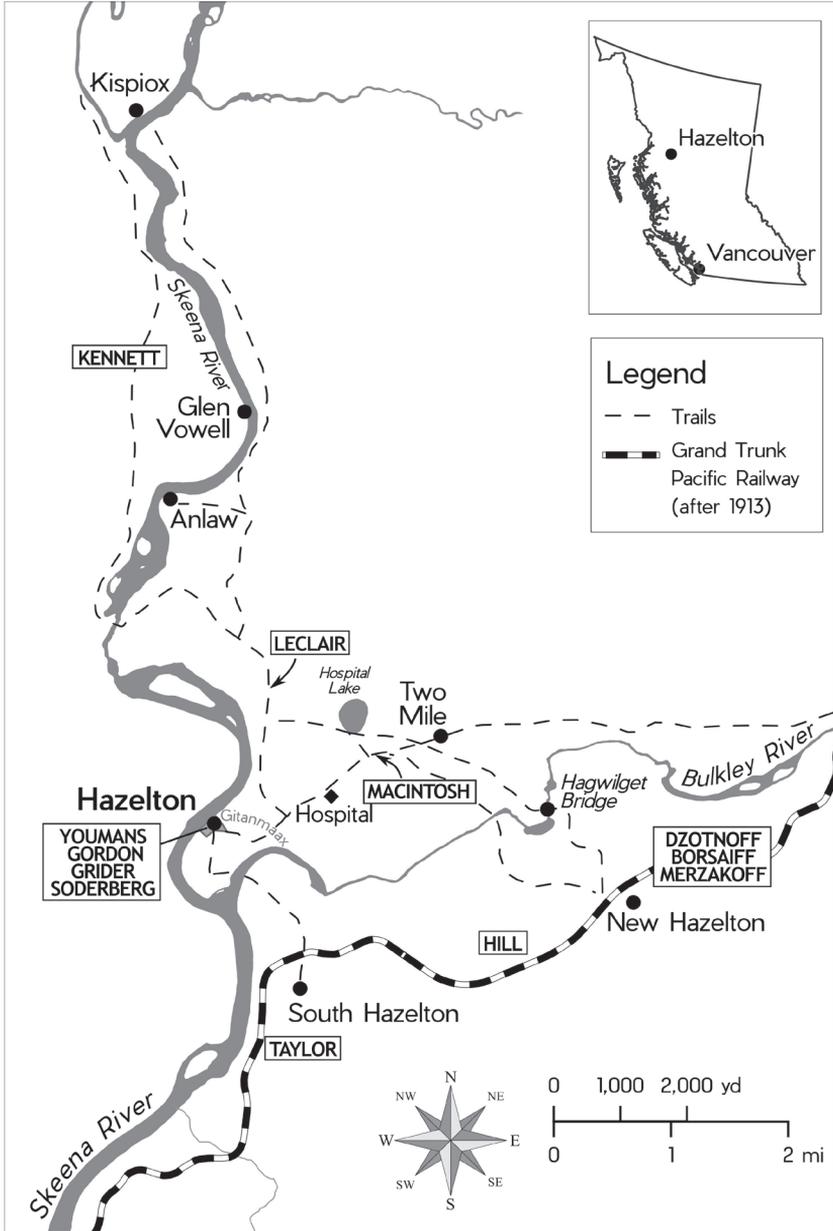
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# Hazelton, 1884-1914



## Preface

Violent death is part and parcel of the lore of the American Old West. Movies and television have given us pictures of shoot-outs in bank robberies, gunslingers in dusty streets and revolvers drawn in anger over poker tables. Such pictures have become embedded in our collective consciousness. In many ways, the story of the Canadian West appears to have been quieter, more polite, more, well, Canadian. The small town of Hazelton on the Upper Skeena River in northern British Columbia may, however, contradict that peaceful impression. When it comes to murders, Hazelton has more than its fair share. I do not know if Hazelton had more murders than any other small town in the province, but it certainly feels that way. This book, based on contemporaneous documents, tells the story of some—but by no means all—of these murders.

Hazelton has a rich history. The Gitxsan people have lived in the district for millennia. In 1900, approximately four hundred of them lived in the village of Gitanmaax, located where the Bulkley and Skeena Rivers merge. A few more than that lived in Kispiox, which was situated approximately ten miles up the Skeena River. Gitanmaax was at the centre of half a dozen Gitxsan villages. Approximately four thousand members of the Gitxsan Nation lived in the whole district, although it is hard to be accurate about the numbers.

In 1833 Simon McGillivray, the first non-Indigenous person recorded as having visited the confluence of the Skeena and Bulkley Rivers, wrote about the Rocher de Boule mountain (now spelled Rocher Déboulé) in his journal. The Gitxsan name for

this mountain, which is a significant and much loved feature of the district, is Stekyawden, although it has been spelled in several different ways. During the next fifty years the confluence of these rivers was known as the Forks of the Skeena or, more commonly, the Forks. The discovery of gold in the Omineca Mountains to the east in the early 1860s and the aborted Collins Overland Telegraph from the United States through Alaska to Europe in the mid-1860s pulled traders, prospectors, packers, settlers and missionaries into the district.

In early 1871, traders built a few shacks and stores on the river-bank next to Gitanmaax. On account of the many hazel bushes all around, they named the small settlement Hazelton. The surveyor Edgar Dewdney laid out a townsite in May of that year. From 1871 to 1913, Hazelton, although small, was the most important town in the interior of northern British Columbia, because it was the highest point of navigation on the Skeena River.

The first steamer managed the difficult and dangerous journey upriver from Port Essington in 1891. Until then all goods had been brought upriver to Hazelton by canoe or from the distant Cariboo by mules. Even after 1891, steamers could not get upriver from October to May when ice and tumultuous waters made navigation impractical or impossible. In these winter months, Hazelton was effectively cut off from the outside world. The mail was brought in from the coast by dogsled only twice each winter. The arrival of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in 1913 changed everything.

Even though it was the jumping-off point for the carriage of goods to the hinterland, Hazelton was never populous. In 1900, it had a resident population of approximately forty settlers, including the Indian and government agents, a telegraph operator, a missionary, packers and traders. Additionally, many prospectors from the Omineca spent the winter there. When the Gitxsan reserve at Gitanmaax was established in the 1890s, it completely enclosed Hazelton, which consequently could never grow beyond its thirteen

acres. When the railway came, two stations and two new towns, New Hazelton and South Hazelton, grew up south of the Bulkley River.

One theme throughout these early years was the encroachment of non-Indigenous settlers onto land that Indigenous people considered theirs. At first, this would have seemed relatively insignificant. The traders, a few missionaries and a small but increasing number of prospectors in Hazelton were too few to be a threat to anyone. Newcomers brought to the Gitksan people the opportunity for employment as packers, as canoemen on the river and as workers in the gold fields in the Omineca, where they also prospected on their own account.

During this time, the Indian agent represented the federal government to the Gitksan and the Gitksan to the government. Richard Loring, the first Indian agent, arrived in 1889 and remained until 1920. He had many duties. Although, representing the colonial authorities, he was necessarily paternalistic and laid down rules and regulations for the Gitksan, he also tried to prevent abuse. He distributed seeds and farm implements, gave vaccinations and delivered medical care to the best of his competence. Many of the settlers married Gitksan women, learned their languages and to some extent knew their customs and laws. For many years, the Indigenous population and non-Indigenous settlers coexisted with varying degrees of amity.

The story of the two decades leading up to 1914, though, is one of firmer establishment of colonial law and governance, of an increase in the non-Indigenous population, of settlement on land and of the arrival of the railway. It was also one of growing and often justified grievances among the Gitksan. After the Gitksan reserves had been established in the 1890s, the pace of settlement picked up. The pre-eminence of Canadian law, the giving away of Gitksan land to settlers and the racial intolerance of many of the newcomers inevitably led to increasing resentment and hostility. New fishery laws that disadvantaged the Gitksan people were enforced. Settlers

sold liquor to the Gitksan people illegally—an amendment to the Indian Act had prohibited the sale of alcohol to Indigenous people since 1884—and this caused trouble. There were occasional flash-points. In the face of a few threats, many in the settler community feared conflict. On the whole, though, the restraint and forbearance of the Gitksan population during these years were remarkable.

Several of the murders in this book should be seen within the context of this relationship. The killing of Amos “Charley” Youmans in 1884 by Haatq was not only a clash between the two men but also a clash between the laws and customs of the encroaching non-Indigenous settlers and those of the Gitksan people. In the Skeena River crisis of 1888, there were four killings. Kamalmuk (known to non-Indigenous settlers as Kitwancool Jim) killed Neatsqua, who he thought had bewitched his children to death. Constable Daniel Franklyn Green fatally wounded Kamalmuk during the attempt to arrest him. Kamalmuk’s father-in-law, Neeseeguech, was then killed by Tobusk, who was then himself killed by Morlcken, Neeseeguech’s brother. (Because there are so many characters in this story, I have listed them in Appendix 1.)

When William Gordon stepped out of prison, he would have felt himself lucky, and with good reason. If the authorities had found the body of his partner Isaac Jones, he would almost certainly have been convicted and then hanged for murder at the prison in New Westminster.

Credulous prospectors almost lynched William Grider on the banks of the Skeena in Hazelton. No doubt he too felt he had a lucky escape.

The 1906 murder of Alex MacIntosh and Max LeClair led to Simon Gunanoot’s long sojourn in the surrounding forests and mountains. Following his surrender in 1919, he was tried for capital murder. While the murder itself was not racially motivated, the hunt for Gunanoot did take on a racial tone when the provincial government made his arrest a test of its authority.

The mysterious but unrelated murders of the settlers Oscar Soderberg and Ernest Kennett remain unsolved to this day.

Although there were no actual murders in the two attempts to rob the Union Bank in New Hazelton, there was a fierce gun battle and numerous dead bodies. It was probably only by luck that no citizens of New Hazelton lay dead in the street.

In 1914, liquor played a major part in the savage murder of Albert Taylor. But who murdered him?

Gitxsan names can be confusing for non-Indigenous people. The Gitxsan people did not have a written language. Settlers and others spelled Gitxsan names any way they wanted. Spelling therefore was often wildly personal, with variations even in the same sentence. For the names of Indigenous people in this book, I have used names and spellings from non-Indigenous contemporary documents of the time. Sometimes writers of the time may just have got them wrong. Even with the best of intentions, non-Indigenous writers may not have successfully recorded names used by and familiar to Gitxsan people, either then or today. Consequently, some may sound unfamiliar to Gitxsan readers, and for that I apologize. These may include names such as Tobusk, Neeseeguech, Morlcken and Neatsqua. The head chief in Gitanmaax was Gidumgaldo; I use the spelling adopted by Neil Sterritt in his excellent book *Mapping My Way Home*,<sup>1</sup> but the name is sometimes spelled Geddum-cal-doe or Gitumguldoe. In contemporary documents, Gunanoot's name is often spelled Gun-a-Noot or Gun-an-Noot. To reduce confusion, I have spelled it Gunanoot.

The spelling of the names of Gitxsan villages also varied. Kispiox, for example, was variously spelled Kispiax, Kishpiax, Kishpyax, Kitsbyox and Kish-py-axe. Kitwancool or Kit-so-culla is now Gitanyow. Kitwanga, Kitwangah, Kitwanger or Kimangor is now spelled Gitwangak or Gitwangax. Kitsequeckla, Kitsegucla, Kitsequykla or Kitsit-you-cled is Gitsegukla. Except where quoted in contemporary documents, I have chosen to use the modern spellings for names.

The name of the first murder victim in the Gunanoot affair was spelled both McIntosh and MacIntosh. For consistency, I have spelled his name MacIntosh. Youmans was often spelled Yeomans, which gives us a clue about the pronunciation. Again for consistency, I have spelled it Youmans.

People wrote, and we must assume spoke, about Indigenous people at the time of these murders using terms that today we rightly consider highly offensive and unacceptable. Their use in this book is strictly confined to the quotations from the journals and letters. Not to set them down as written would be dishonest to the facts of history. We should, though, be cognizant of the truth that all historical fact is filtered in some way. Selection of facts, translation, transcription, the reliability of second- or third-hand information, wishful thinking, failing memories and deliberate distortion all shape our pictures of the past. As L.P. Hartley famously wrote in the prologue to *The Go-Between*, “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”<sup>2</sup> Not everything they did can we be proud of.

The first two chapters of this book show the power of colonial government reaching out to override Indigenous laws and their rights to land. This may be uncomfortable for some. It is, though, undeniable and should not be swept under the carpet. The damage done by colonial governance rightly requires the hard work of reconciliation and the changing of attitudes and practices of systemic racism. No one can now plead ignorance of the evils and the racism of the residential schools. This should not be rationalized away.