

Julia Johnson Mystery

Wednesday, April 25, 1928



On April 25, 1928, five year old Julia Johnson was playing in her yard at 138 Austin Street. Behind her home was the Green River Building at 187 Sutherland Avenue, which had been closed down and vacated just a few weeks earlier by the N.P. Beverage Company.

Julia was last seen alive about 3:50 p.m. playing with a tennis ball across from her home by several neighbours. She was waiting for the neighbour's daughter to get home from school to play with. Five minutes later Julia was nowhere to be seen.

Julia's mother began searching the area without success and the Winnipeg Police were notified at 4:30 p.m. to help in the search. The Green River Building was found to be locked and secure and nothing unusual was observed in the yard.

As Julia had not been found by the next day, the Detective Division was assigned to the investigation. The officers had little to work on. If she had been abducted someone should have heard a commotion unless it was someone who she knew and trusted. The most puzzling part of the mystery was the extremely short time frame - five minutes - and she disappeared.

A door to door search began in the area and detectives interviewed all the neighbours. Several people claimed to have seen an older man in the area talking to children. The local papers published the report of the missing child and all the speculation that surrounded it. They asked for help from the public because the police had run out of leads.

Although the family was very poor they offered a reward of \$50.00 which was a large sum of money at the time. Eventually the Free Press, Winnipeg Tribune, Winnipeg Police Commission and private donations increased the reward to \$2000.00. Tips came in from as far away as British Columbia and Santa Monica, California.

Legitimate tips were followed up and one of the most interesting involved a neighbour who faked his own death and ran away to Seattle, Washington. He was arrested in Washington and when his true identity was established he expressed extreme concern about anyone in Winnipeg learning of his whereabouts. He was deported back to Canada and returned to Winnipeg. When questioned about Julia he refused to discuss the missing child and was released.



In 1929 the entire area bounded by the Red River and the Louise Bridge, the CPR tracks, and Main Street to Manitoba Avenue was search again by the police. Every empty building and shed was searched including the Green River Building on Sutherland Avenue.

Over the years until 1937 the police continued to follow up leads but nothing of consequence turned up. Newspapers published stories about Julia's disappearance each year adding to the intrigue. Finally, on March 22, 1937, a machinist working in the Green River Building (which was being put back into use by the Muzeen and Bilythe company), found Julia's body.

As he was dismantling the combustion chamber of a large unused boiler in the basement, the machinist found Julia's well preserved and mummified remains in the broiler ash, along with her toque and the tennis ball she had been playing with.

Discovery of Tiny, Crouched Skeleton in Old Rusted Boiler in Basement of Warehouse on Sutherland Avenue Ends Nine-Year-Old Mystery



Julia's body was fully clothed and lay bent in a U-Shape so that the head and feet were almost touching. The folded position indicated it was pushed to the back of the boiler. One shoe was off her foot. The ulna and radius bones were separated at one elbow. X-rays also showed that she had a fractured pelvis but nothing else. Her neck was examined for signs of strangulation but nothing was found.

Now that the body had been found the police investigation re-opened. It was determined there had only been two keys to the Green River Building in April 1928. One was held by the rental manager for the property, the other was kept at the blacksmith shop next door so that the meters could be read and prospective tenants could view the inside of the building.

While the investigation continued an Inquest was held and the evidence known at the time was presented. The jury found that Julia's death was from causes unknown, but they were entirely dissatisfied with the conflicting evidence provided by the rental manager and the meter reader on the one hand, and the blacksmiths who worked next door on the other whether or not a second key was actually kept there. ¹



The investigation did not turn up any more leads and remains unsolved to this day. What of the neighbour who faked his death and ran away. What of the mysterious key that was or wasn't left in the blacksmith shop? Was Julia's death intentional or accidental? Was her body hidden to conceal a crime (other than the crime of concealing a dead body), or out of fear that she had been injured or killed while playing on private property?

¹ The two police officers who searched the building in 1929 had both died by the time of the Inquest and it was unknown where they had obtained the key to search the building.