

Introduction:

The Murder of Mary Lane

Wednesday, 5 July 1899, was one of those pleasant afternoons that compensates for the plunging cold of the prairie winter. At 21° Celsius, the weather in Brandon, Manitoba, seemed perfect for an outdoor tea party. Not 30 feet from the back entrance to their home, the four children of Robert and Mary Lane—Thomas, Edith, Mary Jr, and possibly Evelyn—along with several friends—Kathleen and Helen Johnson, Georgina Hanley, and a girl whose surname was Henderson—sat on the lawn of a vacant lot, enjoying the party that Mary Lane, the mother, had promised them if they were good. Mary, 32 years old and pregnant, worked inside, hanging curtains on the parlour windows. Just after four o'clock, she ran screaming out the front door and onto the public sidewalk, took a few steps south on Tenth Street, and collapsed. Blood stained her dress. She had been shot in the back at close range—her skin and blouse singed by flames from the pistol—and the bullet had passed through the top of her lung, lodging finally just above her heart. In some apocryphal accounts a toddler, presumably Evelyn, was playing on the floor at the time of the shooting, and the dying Mary had snatched the child up in order to protect it before running out to the street.¹ Mrs Johnson, the next-door neighbour, was first to answer the screams. Another neighbour, Mr Sampson, ran to call for a doctor and for Mary's husband, Robert, while the Lane servant girl appeared on the scene to bathe Mary's face with water. When Sampson returned, Mary was still alive, but before the doctor or Lane could arrive, blood accumulated in her lungs and she suffocated. She died without saying who had shot her.

Within minutes of the shooting Mary's body was carried into the Lane house and laid on the parlour floor, while a teacher, Miss