

The Darker Side: The Streetsville Laundry Murder

By Nicole Mair

On the evening of June 9th, 1910, Miss Mabel Graydon left her home in Streetsville to walk Max, the family's setter dog. As she passed by the laundry shop recently acquired by Joe Cong (alt. Chong, Gong), a Chinese man who moved to Streetsville from Toronto three months prior, she was unsettled. Lounging there outside the shop she saw two unfamiliar men. When she was returning from the walk around thirty minutes later, the men were not immediately visible. The dog, supposedly sensing danger, began to run and bark at the shop, attracting the attention of the strangers once again. Fearful of the attention, Miss Mable Graydon rushed back to her home, directly across from the shop, bolted the door and closed the blinds.

Later that evening, Miss Mabel Graydon, still concerned over the safety of herself and her neighbour checked once again on the laundry shop. At that time she saw that the door of Cong's house had been left wide open. Not long afterwards she heard his door slammed shut and bolted closed from within. She heard a scream, she saw the lights go out, and there were sounds of a scuffle and struggle from within the house across the way.

Her fear peaked once again, Miss Mabel Graydon and one of her sisters (likely either Miss Hattie Graydon or Miss Mysia Graydon) each ran to one of the homes of their neighbours, Mr. James Kee and Mr. O.R. Church, and waking them from their beds, insisted they go inspect Mr. Cong's house.

Both Church and Kee agreed to the requests of the Graydon sisters and went over to the laundry shop to investigate. Kee walked around the house a few times, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. After awhile he went up to the window and glancing in saw a man with a Christy hat and a dark complexion, who he took to be Cong. Church also walked around the house, but his view through the window was obscured by a red curtain and he could see nothing. Kee and Church seeing each other there agreed they could neither hear nor see any signs of an altercation. So they left not wishing to disturb their neighbour any further.

The next morning, the Graydon sisters still suspicious from the events of the previous night, were keeping watch on Cong's laundry shop. They did not see a fire lit from within their neighbour's house, and another villager noticed that the shop had not opened at its usual hour. The Graydons immediately went to report what they had seen and heard to the reeve of Streetsville, Mr. W. Morgan.

Morgan and the constable, William Sexsmith, went to go investigate the house. They found it in much the same state as Church and Kee had seen it the night previous. All the doors were locked and everything appeared normal, aside from the shop still remaining closed. On further inspection, however, they found that a window at the back of the house, though closed, had not been locked. This would later lead them to believe it was used by the perpetrators to escape the scene.

Inside the house the investigators found the sight of the scuffle that the Graydon sisters had heard the night before. There was blood pooled on the floor, bloody fingerprints on the walls, the furniture had been upturned and left in disarray and in the center Joe Cong lay huddled and bleeding with a wound on the back of his head. On the floor nearby were two ordinary looking sticks, later discovered to be the two missing rungs from a ladder at the back of Cong's house. Cong who had lay wounded for twelve hours was still alive when Morgan and Sexsmith arrived, although in shock and unable to move or speak.

There was \$100 believed to have been found missing from the store, however, a small stash of \$42 was found undisturbed. This led the investigators to believe that Cong had been beaten and left for dead because he would not tell the intruders where his savings were hidden.

As the day wore on, more stories about the two mysterious strangers began to surface. James Bailey, the butcher, told the authorities he had seen the two men the day before. The pair had been lounging outside his butcher shop on Wednesday and Thursday morning, the day of the crime. On Thursday the two men had followed one of Bailey's regular customers into the shop. The customer had ordered a specific cut of veal and came to pick it up. Bailey went into the fridge to get it. After the customer had left, the two men requested the same cut. Bailey, already suspicious of the men, refused to get it for them, fearing they meant to shut him in the fridge and rob his shop. Eventually the men purchased a different cut of meat and left without incident.

Bailey offered a detailed description of the two men, declaring he would recognize them in an instant. The first man was short and stout, with a black coat and vest, odd trousers, a black moustache and a black Christy hat. The second man was tall and wearing suit of light clothes.

Another witness, Joe Thomas, an eight-year old Streetsville resident, saw the two men hanging around the village while he was walking home the same day. He told the authorities, "One of the men asked where the laundry was. I did not let on I heard him and passed on."¹ The men were also seen at Kumph's hotel, at the library and they even sold three razors to the village barber for one dollar.

Two of Cong's brothers arrived in Streetsville to take him to Toronto General Hospital by train. Although it was reported that he began to recover, Cong was never well enough to speak. Then on June 12th, 1910, Joe Cong passed away in the hospital, escalating the crime to murder. The doctors determined that his death was due to pressure of a clot on the brain caused by the blows.

¹ "Heard Sounds of the Murder." *The Toronto Daily Star*. 14 June 1910. p. 9.

The authorities immediately sent out a bulletin all over the country warning of the two men on the loose. It described one man as 26 years old, 5'7" and of medium build, with a fair complexion and clean shaven, wearing a dark grey check suit and a stiff black hat. The second man was described as about 29 years old, 5'6" and about 150lbs, with a dark moustache, a dark suit and a soft felt hat.

Immediately following the murder a number of pairs of men were arrested and questioned. None, however, were held for long, when the stories they produced were deemed likely enough. In Milton, two men were spotted fitting the description the morning after the murder, however, the constable failed to act and they got away.

It seemed that the murderers had well and truly escaped and the case of Joe Cong's laundry shop murder would remain a mystery. Or perhaps not?

On October 23, 1910, a break was finally made in the case. Two men by the names of Walter John Bell and Charles Gordon Jones were arrested while in the act of robbing the Eglinton Hardware Company in Toronto. The two men were wanted in connection with nine additional charges of burglary, five of which involved assaulting and robbing Chinese laundries. The two were to be held until they could either be transported to Streetsville or the witnesses could be brought to Toronto in order to identify them. Due to their robbery trials in Toronto, however, Bell and Jones were held up until November, when the Toronto Star reported that they would be sent back to Streetsville for identification.

On November 9th, 1910, Walter John Bell and Charles Gordon Jones were found guilty of eight out of the nine charges of burglary. Strangely, many of the items that the two men were guilty of stealing were deemed to be of little value. For example, some of the items taken by the men included an overcoat, a pair of gloves, 12 postcards and a jackknife. For their crimes, Bell and Jones were sentenced to eighteen months in prison.

Circumstances, however, quickly changed. Walter John Bell's lawyer entered a plea of insanity. It was reported that Bell had already previously resided in an asylum. It is possible that Charles Gordon Jones also plead the same. This new plea had a huge impact of the Cong murder case. As *The Globe* reported on November 11, 1910 in response to the pleas of insanity, "it is now considered unlikely that the charge held against them by the police of Peel county in connection with the Streetsville murder will be pressed."² Walter Bell at least was indeed found to be insane. In the 1911 census of Canada there is a record of a Walter Bell residing at the Mimico Insane Asylum. Unfortunately, no similar record can be found of Charles Jones in an asylum or otherwise.

Joe Cong had owned and operated a laundry shop in Toronto for three years at 109 Berkeley Street before coming to Streetsville. For three months he set up a small business and established a reputation as a quiet, respected resident of the Streetsville community before his life was brutally cut short. At this time it is unknown what happened to Joe

² "Bell and Jones Sentenced." *The Globe*. 11 November 1910. p. 9.

Cong after he passed away. There is no current record of his burial anywhere in the Streetsville area. It is possible he was taken back to Toronto by his brothers. Additionally, although Walter John Bell and Charles Gordon Jones were the most likely suspects, we may never know for sure if they were the culprits, or if the real murderers did indeed get away.

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