

Cst. Herron J.



HERRON, JAMES - CST. Regimental No. 913

March 2, 1891 - St. Mary's River, North-West Territories Age: 29

When they found Cst. James Herron, he had a bullet hole above and behind his right ear. His revolver lay at his side. A post-mortem examination of his eyes showed that he had gone snow blind. It also revealed that parts of his nose, wrists and fingers had been frozen before death. There were no tracks or footprints found near his body. Thus the inquest jury was left to decide whether he had killed himself accidentally or on purpose. Was his fatal gunshot wound caused by his exhaustion and the fumbling of his frozen fingers or had the constable killed himself intentionally due to madness or sheer desperation? The jury refused to resolve the issue and left the puzzle for others to consider.

Whatever really happened to Cst. James Herron on that freezing day in March over one hundred years ago, one thing can be said for certain: this was a man who was clearly the author of his own misfortune.

Herron was a rugged individual with a stubborn streak who had emigrated from Ireland as a teenager. In Ireland, he worked as a farmer in Waterford and a labourer in the City of Dublin. He came to Canada to join the North-West Mounted Police and signed his first engagement papers at Regina in July of 1883. In 1891, he was working out of the detachment at Kipp in the North-West Territories, a tiny settlement between Fort Macleod and Lethbridge in the southern section of present-day Alberta. By this time, Cst. Herron had been stationed on the prairies for over eight years and was completely familiar with the dangers of the weather on the western plains.

Late in February, he was left temporarily in charge of the Kipp Detachment because his supervisor, Cpl. Wm. Devitt, was away on business. On Monday, March 2, Cst. Herron decided to go out on the weekly patrol to the St. Mary's Detachment. His colleague, Cst. P. Walker, assumed that he would be accompanying him. He was surprised when Cst. Herron told Walker that he would not be coming along.

Walker reminded Herron that Cpl. Devitt's explicit orders were that "no man shall go singly on the weekly patrol." Walker argued that the rule was to be "strictly observed," but Herron refused to listen and scolded Walker with the reminder: "I have never yet been lost out on the prairie. I am too old a prairie hand for that."

When Walker saw that Herron was about to leave without taking his snow goggles, he warned him that this was unwise, suggesting that they were essential at this time of year. Once again Herron rejected his advice saying, "The snow and sun never affect my eyes." Without further discussion and with his dog at his side, the incautious constable spurred his horse and rode off into the bitter wind and swirling snow of the prairie winter.

Two days later, Herron's dog hobbled back into the Kipp Detachment badly frozen. Cst. Walker realized that the faithful animal would never have left Herron's side unless there was a problem. He immediately organized a search party. Scout Denny and a native scout, named Black Eagle, followed Herron's trail and could see that the policeman had gone directly towards his destination without faltering. A good distance along the trail, they came across Herron's saddled and bridled mare. It was wandering back along the trail in waist deep snow, about one and a half miles away from the St. Mary's River. The horse had obviously backtracked a long way because Herron's original trail continued for miles.

The scouts followed it, straight as an arrow, to a point where it became apparent that Herron had become hopelessly bewildered . . . circling and backtracking and wandering aimlessly in the snow. Because the river was always in sight of the trail, the Indians knew that a man could not lose his way here unless he had become snow blind.

Not much further beyond this point, the scouts found Herron's body on the bank of the St. Mary's River. His tracks indicated that he had dismounted (possibly to build a fire) and then wandered around aimlessly. It appeared that he had lost contact with his horse and, being blind, was unable to retrieve it. Without his horse, without his sight and apparently without being able to build a fire to ward off the numbing cold, he could easily have become utterly despondent.

His frozen body was brought back to the detachment and examined. Shortly thereafter a service was held in his honour at the Episcopal Church and then Cst. Herron was buried in the Union Cemetery at Macleod, North-West Territories. He died a bachelor. A trunk containing his few personal belongings was shipped back to his father in Waterford, Ireland.