

## Chapter 10

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### “John Ellis” – His Hanging Career

As noted in the last chapter, after Arthur Ellis died in 1938, the Sheriff of Edmonton attempted to engage Sam Edwards/Smith for possible hangings in Alberta. However, on September 25, 1939, Sheriff Cane in Toronto wrote to Sheriff Wallace in Edmonton, informing him of the death of Sam Edwards. Sheriff Cane then stated, “I expect to have a capital case here and have arranged with one, John Ellis, to take the place of Sam Edwards. John Ellis’ address is c/o Sheriff McKay, Court House, Cochrane, Ontario.”<sup>1</sup>

#### I. HANGING CAREER

At the hanging in Toronto on October 4, 1939, it was reported that Sam Edwards had recently died and that a new hangman officiated, which allegedly was his first. If the hangman was inexperienced, you would not have guessed it, because it was the fastest hanging in the history of the Don jail.<sup>2</sup> The condemned man mounted the scaffold at eight in the morning and was pronounced dead one minute later. The new hangman rushed away in a taxi. The next hanging was in Welland, Ontario, on December 18, 1939, and the new hangman, “John Ellis,” as he called himself, followed in the footsteps of “Arthur Ellis” in prioritizing speed. Only about three minutes elapsed between the victim being escorted from the cell and the pulling of the trap. As reported, “the deft hangman stepped forward, swiftly bound the prisoner’s feet, adjusted the noose with equal swiftness and then dropped a black hood over his head. The next instant the trap was sprung.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cane to Wallace (25 September 1939) Provincial Archives of Alberta, Sheriffs, Capital Cases, GR 2002.0863 Box 1.

<sup>2</sup> “Petrukowich Hangs at Don,” *Toronto Star* (4 October 1939) at 3.

<sup>3</sup> “Doto Boy Killer Dies on Gallows,” *Buffalo News* (18 December 1939) at 9.

As noted above, when he took over the job from Sam Edwards in 1939, John Ellis lived in the Cochrane area. When he hanged a man in April 1940 in Kitchener, Ontario, the surviving diary of the sheriff revealed that the hangman arrived from Cochrane, about 800 kilometers away. The hangman travelled first class on the train and had a sleeper booked and charged \$100 for the hanging fee.<sup>4</sup> After the hanging at around two in the morning, the sheriff and other officials shared drinks with the hangman, and then the executioner left Kitchener on the 5:30 A.M. train back to Cochrane. Unlike the heavy drinking of Radcliffe and Arthur Ellis, this is the only reference we have as to John Ellis having drinks after or before a hanging. It was reported that souvenir hunters offered him “fancy prices” for buttons off his coat.<sup>5</sup>

As we will note below, after John Ellis became the primary executioner for most of Canada outside Quebec, he relocated from Cochrane to a farm nearer to the Toronto area, presumably to be in a better travel position for the work. When Sheriff Wallace in Edmonton asked the sheriff in Winnipeg about hiring the new man replacing Edwards, the sheriff in Winnipeg, on September 25, 1941, replied that John Ellis had recently hanged someone “quite satisfactory” in Winnipeg and could be reached through the Sheriff’s Office in Toronto.<sup>6</sup> This implies that by this time he had already moved out of Cochrane and the sheriff in Toronto was now his agent.

At his first hanging in Alberta in 1942, John Ellis again set the record for the fastest recorded death in the province, when the victim was pronounced dead one minute after the trap was sprung.<sup>7</sup>

While many executions in the 1940s were performed without members of the press as witnesses and with one-paragraph announcements of successful hangings without any mention of the identity of the hangman, we believe that John Ellis was the official hangman for Ontario, on a yearly retainer that paid a certain

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Thompson “The Final Hanging: The story behind the last execution in the Waterloo Region,” *Waterloo Regional Record* (8 March 2022) at 1 and 4.

<sup>5</sup> “Souvenir Seekers,” *Toronto Star* (27 April 1940) at 7.

<sup>6</sup> Sheriff Howe of Winnipeg to Edmonton Sheriff Wallace (25 September 1941) Alberta Archives, Sheriffs, Capital Cases, GR 20002.0863 Box 1.

<sup>7</sup> “Johnston Pays,” *Edmonton Bulletin* (6 May 1942) at 1 and 2.

amount over and above the fees for specific hangings. He was also the de facto hangman for the Western provinces and at least some of the Maritimes, while Camille Branchaud continued to perform the hangings in Quebec and occasionally in the Maritimes. By our calculation, John Ellis executed 78 people between 1939 and his death in 1950. There were an additional four executions in New Brunswick that were likely also his handiwork. This number does not include the multiple times that John Ellis would have travelled to perform an execution that was commuted at the last moment. Like all the other hangmen, it seems that John Ellis greatly exaggerated his body count. At a hanging in Sarnia in January 1941, the newspapers reported that this was his 97<sup>th</sup> execution.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, the new hangman had some bungles. In 1942, at a hanging at the Don Jail in Toronto, the victim was not pronounced dead until more than a half hour elapsed after the drop. Supposedly, the victim had a "very strong" heart.<sup>9</sup> At a hanging at Oakalla prison in January 1946, the condemned man, who weighed 224 pounds and stood six feet four inches tall, ended up decapitated.<sup>10</sup> This would have been hidden from the public if it were not for the lawyer who claimed the body on behalf of the daughter of the hanged man and noticed stitches under a band of adhesive tape around the neck.<sup>11</sup> After considerable public outcry, the Attorney General of B.C. decided that a full inquiry was unnecessary because the cause of the decapitation was obviously due to the unfortunate miscalculation of the length of the drop by the otherwise competent and experienced hangman.<sup>12</sup>

While hidden in press accounts, another bungle involved the Manitoba hanging of Vescio in 1948, where Ellis gave too short a drop and the victim slowly strangled to death.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Windsor Star* (3 January 1941) at 41.

<sup>9</sup> "Newell Hanged," *Toronto Star* (12 February 1942) at 3.

<sup>10</sup> "Executed Man 'Decapitated,'" *Vancouver Sun* (12 January 1946); "Full Inquiry into Oakalla Beheading," *Vancouver Province* (14 January 1946) at 1.

<sup>11</sup> "Decapitation," *Winnipeg Tribune* (15 January 1946) at 5.

<sup>12</sup> "Doesn't Favor Inquiry," *Ottawa Journal* (19 January 1946) at 2.

<sup>13</sup> See Dale Brawn, *Last Moments: Sentenced to Death in Canada* (Canada: Quagmire Press, 2011) at 260; Also, W E Morriss, *Watch the Rope* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1996) at 98-128.

## II. FINANCIAL MATTERS:

There are some sheriff's records in the archives of British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario which contain various communications with John Ellis as to reservation dates for hangings, travel arrangements, and overall expenses and fees charged for hangings. All the communications involved telegrams or letters sent in care of the sheriff's office in Toronto to and from John Ellis. His real name was never given out by the sheriff's office. As I will note later in this chapter, I have discovered that his real name was John Bernard Moore.

Before he was hired in Alberta, John Ellis sent a fee schedule to Sheriff Wallace in Edmonton. John Ellis would charge \$100 for an execution, plus all expenses, but also charge \$100 and all expenses if he left Toronto and then did not have to hang someone because of a reprieve or commutation. If he did not leave Toronto, he would still charge \$50 for every time a hanging date was commuted or changed by an appeal or whatever. Then he added an extra fee of \$75 over and above the other fees if he hanged a person on a date different from the original sentence.<sup>14</sup> We get a sense that John Ellis was particularly interested in the economic benefits of being the hangman. As far as we can determine, none of the sheriffs agreed to pay the extra \$75 that John Ellis was trying to squeeze out of them.

Looking through a select number of the Alberta execution files reveals that the local sheriff in Edmonton would receive a \$500 advance from the Attorney General's department for expenses in each case before the execution date, and then after the execution, he would remit any money left over. After John Ellis had agreed to come to Edmonton by a certain date, the Sheriff would wire an advance to Ellis for travelling expenses. Since Ellis always took the train from Toronto, he would have to leave several days before the date of the execution.

Unlike Branchaud, who frequently flew to executions, we believe Ellis hated flying. Sometimes he had to fly anyway, as happened in 1940 when he had a hanging in Toronto on July 3

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<sup>14</sup> Memo on Execution Fees (6 October 1941). Alberta Archives, Sheriffs, Capital Cases, GR 20002.0863 Box 1.

and had to be in Regina on July 5.<sup>15</sup> He was particularly unhappy with arranging hanging dates in British Columbia, and even told Sheriff Cotton in New Westminster that he would never come back.<sup>16</sup> This occurred after he had to fly in the middle of winter from a hanging in Brampton, Ontario, on January 23, 1941, to carry out another in Vancouver on January 24. He barely made it on time.<sup>17</sup> Despite his vow not to return, Ellis continued to be the hangman for British Columbia throughout the decade of the 1940s but would always take the train thereafter and make sure that the hanging dates gave him adequate time to travel.

Sometimes the hangman would arrive, or was already on the train, when the condemned man at the last minute was granted a commutation of the sentence by the cabinet. As noted, John Ellis would have to be paid for all his travel expenses plus the \$100 that he would still charge for a commutation fee. For example, he was paid \$200 by the Sheriff of New Westminster when two men were reprieved in October 1944.<sup>18</sup> The issue of a reservation-commutation fee, even if John Ellis had not left Toronto, arose in the case of the double hanging of Sam and George Desjarlais on June 14, 1944, at Fort Saskatchewan, near Edmonton. There were several earlier execution dates that were changed as the sentencing judge set new dates due to various appeals and the granting of a new trial for one of the men, which resulted in a renewed death sentence. While there was some dispute, in the end, John Ellis was paid \$50 as a "reservation fee" each time an execution date was subsequently abandoned due to a reprieve.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, sheriffs were in a difficult position, anxious to secure John Ellis for a date, yet trying to hold off as long as possible in case of a reprieve, so as not to have to pay a reservation fee. It would appear from the Desjarlais file that Ellis reserved dates three times in the case and was paid \$50 for every date that fell through,

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<sup>15</sup> "Indian Slayer Hanged," *Regina Leader-Post* (5 July 1940) at 1.

<sup>16</sup> Note from Sheriff Cotton to Deputy Attorney General in 1943. Archives of BC, GR-2966, AG Correspondence, Hangings 1938-1967, Box 4, File 31, Case 95.5.

<sup>17</sup> Note from Sheriff Cotton to Deputy Attorney General on 28 January, 1941. Archives of BC, *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Memo from Sheriff Cotton in October 1944*, Archives of BC, *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *R v Desjarlais*, Provincial Archives of Alberta, GR 20002.0863 Box 1.

before the date was finally fixed for June 14, 1944. When the hanging date approached, Ellis left Toronto by CPR train on the evening of June 10.<sup>20</sup>

When initially retained back in October 1943, Ellis made sure that the Sheriff understood that he would charge \$100 for each man executed, and not some lesser fee when multiple persons were hanged. Here is the letter that he wrote, which provides a sample of his handwriting:<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

1/0 Sheriff Office  
City Hall  
Toronto, Ont.  
Oct 13/43

R. P. Wallau Esq  
Sheriff,  
Edmonton Alt.

OCT 13

Dear Sir

I enclose you regarding  
the date reserved for you Jan 5<sup>th</sup>  
1944, on Oct 7<sup>th</sup> which I trust  
you received O.K.

There is a little matter I would  
like to draw to your attention  
Sheriff regarding this execution  
regardless has to know when men  
are executed, single or together

my fee for a double hanging  
is \$200.

Why I mention this Sheriff is  
that I have had several double  
hangings, and afterwards there  
was an argument regarding my  
fee.

So I think it's only fair Sheriff  
that we come to an understanding  
beforehand.

Of course I don't know if you want  
these men executed together, that's  
for you to decide. But it better  
if it can be carried out this  
way, one job and done with it.  
However I can take this matter  
up with you when I see you.  
Trusting you are in the best  
of health

yours truly  
John Ellis



In the first case involving John Ellis in Alberta, namely that of Chester Johnston who was hanged at the provincial jail in Fort Saskatchewan at one in the morning on May 6, 1942, the notice that commutation had been denied arrived on May 5, just a few hours before the hanging. The Attorney General's Department, fearing a commutation, tried to delay Ellis's trip as long as possible but finally agreed that Ellis needed to get on the train to arrive in Edmonton on time.<sup>22</sup> Ellis left Toronto via CPR on May 1 in the evening. At the end of the hanging, John Ellis was paid \$154.40 in cash, in addition to the \$140.00 that had been advanced to him for travel expenses before he set out on the journey. The bill that Ellis submitted included the following: \$106.75 for return fare from Toronto; \$31.90 for berths on the train; \$12 for 12 meals on the train; \$5 for room and meals in Edmonton on May 6; \$100 fee for the hanging; \$25 fee for setting up the gallows; \$6 for taxi to and from Toronto and home; \$4 for rope; \$1.50 for a cap (hood); and 25 cents for Vaseline. The sheriff also directly paid the Fort Hotel \$6 out of the \$500 pot for expenses, plus numerous expenses for telegrams, and at the end sent back \$190.72 to the Attorney General's Department from the \$500 pot advanced by the department.<sup>23</sup> The hanging costs that the sheriff was responsible for amounted to only about \$5,600 in 2024 terms.

Arranging a departure date would be a risky affair for John Ellis, given the unreliability of train travel in Canada, especially in winter. For example, in the case of Abraham, hanged on December 20, 1944, the Edmonton sheriff urged Ellis to leave Toronto earlier than he planned because the sheriff feared "accident or unforeseen delay."<sup>24</sup> Ellis left on December 15 instead of his plan to leave on the 16<sup>th</sup>, but then he was delayed in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, and barely arrived in time for the hanging. The Abraham file also reveals that at some stage, John Ellis started to charge a \$5 per day "salary" for travelling, in addition to the costs of meals, berths and transportation. In this case, his fee included eight days of travel, amounting to an additional \$40.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *R v Johnstone*, Provincial Archives of Alberta, GR 2002.0863 Box 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Telegram to Ellis* (8 December 1944); *R v Abraham*, Provincial Archives of Alberta, GR 20002.0863 Box 1.

<sup>25</sup> *R v Abraham*, *ibid.*

While Ellis never increased his hanging fee from \$100, his travel and other expenses increased somewhat over time. For example, in the last execution he carried out in Alberta on February 22, 1950, he left Toronto by train on the evening of February 18. The telegram to the sheriff that commutation had been denied did not arrive until February 20. The expenses submitted by John Ellis included \$122.30 for return fare, \$36.20 for berths, \$26 for meals, \$10 for taxi, \$30 for “salary” over 6 days, \$6 for two caps, and 30 cents for the Vaseline, plus \$200 to hang the two men. In this case, the rope bought at Munro’s Hardware for \$7.50 was paid by the sheriff to the store.<sup>26</sup>

We do not know what Ontario paid John Ellis by way of retainer, but at the beginning of his career in 1940, it was reported that he would charge \$50 for any commutation if he had not yet left Toronto, \$75 if he was on the way, and \$100 if he had arrived for a hanging that did not take place due to a reprieve or commutation.<sup>27</sup>

### III. DESCRIPTIONS AND JUSTIFICATIONS

Over the dozen years that he officiated, John Ellis shunned the press and remained a mystery figure. While the identity of John Ellis was never disclosed, there were a few descriptions of him in the press, mainly dealing with his dress. At his first hanging in Alberta, he “was dressed in a black suit, white shirt and black bow tie, and left immediately after the execution.”<sup>28</sup> At a double hanging in Windsor in 1943, the local press stated, “The hangman, a comparatively young man dressed in a tuxedo, did not speak to either man at any time,” as he worked with speed and precision.<sup>29</sup> Given the wartime scarcity of rope, at a hanging in Oakalla Prison in 1943, the press commented on how Ellis took 15 minutes to unwind all the knots to reuse the rope in the future, rather than his usual practice of cutting the rope when death was pronounced.<sup>30</sup> When the hangman was testing the reusable rope

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<sup>26</sup> *R v Nowell*, Provincial Archives of Alberta, GR 2002.0863 Box 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Kiyoshke Case Cost,” *Windsor Star* (5 December 1940) at 6.

<sup>28</sup> “Johnstone Hanged,” *Edmonton Journal* (6 May 1942) at 13.

<sup>29</sup> “Detroit Killers Hanged,” *Windsor Star* (24 August 1943) at 3 and 6.

<sup>30</sup> “Scaffold,” *Vancouver Sun* (22 November 1943) at 1 and 2.

with sandbags before a hanging in Sudbury in January 1945, the rope broke.<sup>31</sup> Imagine the bungle if Ellis had used the rope without testing it.

At the hanging of five men in Lethbridge in December 1946, four of whom were Nazi prisoners of war convicted of murder, the hangman, presumably John Ellis, was masked on this occasion and was described as "a Canadian army veteran of the First Great War who is about 50 years of age."<sup>32</sup> As we will note when we reveal his real identity, John Ellis was an army veteran who died in his 50s several years later. I believe that the reports stating the hangman in Lethbridge was Camille Branchaud rather than John Ellis are likely wrong.<sup>33</sup> There is no doubt that John Ellis was the hangman in Lethbridge earlier in 1944.<sup>34</sup> Why would there be a different hangman in Lethbridge in 1946? Furthermore, the original date for the hanging of the five was moved to a different date because the "public hangman is engaged in Ontario at that date."<sup>35</sup> The hangman for Ontario was John Ellis, not Camille Branchaud. All of these point to John Ellis as the executioner in this famous case.

At a hanging in Ottawa in 1946, as recollected by a police reporter witnessing the execution, "the hangman, brought in from Toronto, had an ill-fitting toupee and a leather bow-tie."<sup>36</sup> The police reporter stated that the hangman "was a short, baldish man clad in sober black suit, white shirt and black bow tie," and the trap was sprung in less than one minute from the time the victim was escorted from his cell.<sup>37</sup> There was no mention of the hangman in the press when John Ellis hanged a woman in Welland, Ontario, in December 1946.<sup>38</sup> At a hanging in Toronto in June 1948, a

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<sup>31</sup> "Proulx hanged," *North Bay Nugget* (9 January 1945) at 3.

<sup>32</sup> "Hooded Hangman," *Calgary Herald* (18 December 1946) at 2.

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Nathan Greenfield, *Hanged in Medicine Hat* (Toronto: Sutherland House, 2022). The title refers to the original murders by the prisoners of war, not to the hanging of the men in Lethbridge.

<sup>34</sup> March 15, 1944, letter of Sheriff Wallace in Edmonton to Sheriff Fooke in Lethbridge re the hiring of John Ellis for hanging Abramowicz, Alberta Archives, Sheriffs, Capital Cases, GR 20002.0863 Box 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Lethbridge Herald* (17 October 1946) at 1.

<sup>36</sup> "Watching as a man's life runs out," *Ottawa Journal* (5 May 1976) at 8.

<sup>37</sup> Joe Finn, "Behind the Headlines," *Ottawa Citizen* (24 January 1947) at 3.

<sup>38</sup> "Hangs Following Husband," *Toronto Star* (5 December 1946) at 15.

journalist described the hangman as “a little man in an immaculate dinner jacket.”<sup>39</sup> At Oakalla Prison in September 1948, he was a “dapper little man with unbrimmed hat and black suitcase.”<sup>40</sup>

It may be that the hangman did not dress quite as well at the end of his career. In the early months of 1950, before his death in May, Ellis was a sick man, and at a double hanging in Edmonton shortly before his death, it was reported, “the face of the short, gaunt, balding hangman was tense and drawn as he fitted the hoods and nooses... He was wearing an unpressed blue suit, slightly soiled white shirt and black bow tie.”<sup>41</sup>

For the first time as far as I can tell, Ellis also received some press coverage when he was seen purchasing 80 feet of rope at a hardware store in Edmonton. The *Time Magazine* story included some further interesting observations:

A hunched little man... an Ontario farmer... From the prison records, Ellis gets the condemned man's height and weight... Ellis does not see the prisoner until a few minutes before the hanging when he steps into the death cell, quietly says “good morning” and straps the man's arms behind his back. Canada's present unofficial hangman learned his trade and adopted his name from an earlier hangman Ellis who died in 1938... After his assignment in Edmonton, Ellis stayed overnight in the jail, collected his fee... then caught a train for Vancouver where two more convicted murderers are to be hanged this week.<sup>42</sup>

It turned out that the double execution in Vancouver would be Ellis's last. Again, the attempt to dress up for the occasion seems to have been abandoned. The *Vancouver News-Herald* reported that at the double hanging, “No emotion flickered on Ellis's face. He was dressed in a black suit (one button had been poked through the wrong buttonhole on the coat) and a black tie.”<sup>43</sup> He was met at the train station upon his arrival by two journalists for the *Vancouver Province*:

“It's a grim job- the less said about it the better,” was the only comment he would make about his duty of hanging Canada's murderers. “I never

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<sup>39</sup> “Dinner Jacket Hangman,” *Toronto Star* (29 June 1948) at 3.

<sup>40</sup> “Death Comes to Oakalla,” *Vancouver Province* (17 September 1948) at 21.

<sup>41</sup> “City Pair Executed,” *Edmonton Bulletin* (22 February 1950) at 1.

<sup>42</sup> “A Night's Work for Hangman Ellis,” *Owen Sound Sun Times* (6 March 1950) at 4, reprint from Canadian Edition of *Time Magazine* (6 March 1950) at 38.

<sup>43</sup> “Gallows,” *Vancouver News-Herald* (1 March 1950) at 1 and 2.

talk about it. Ottawa does not want me to." ...Hangman Ellis was willing to talk in almost a whispery pleasant voice- of anything but the duty which brings him here... "John Ellis" looks a mild-mannered man who might be a none-too-prosperous farmer, plumber, clerk or gardener... His face is sombre- with the sombreness that makes one think he seldom smiles. His eyebrows protrude slightly over his eyes in a straight line that lends a deep seriousness to his expression. John Ellis is about 5 feet, 7 inches. His dark blue overcoat, slightly battered grey felt hat and shoes covered by low rubbers against the damp streets all add to his anonymity... Asked how he became a hangman John Ellis said: "It's an easy business to get into- but hard to get out of." His tone carries a note of regret.<sup>44</sup>

The comment about Ottawa not allowing him to talk was misleading at best, as the federal government had long ago disavowed any involvement with hiring or regulating hangmen. There was also a curious comment that John Ellis made to the journalists in Vancouver about hanging people while Arthur Ellis was still alive. We have no evidence that he did, although he may well have been an assistant to Arthur Ellis or Sam Edwards. In Vancouver, Ellis stated that "he did the eastern provinces" while Arthur Ellis conducted the executions in the West. "I learned from him."<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. DISCOVERING HIS REAL IDENTITY AS JOHN BERNARD MOORE

We know from press reports across Canada dated May 10, 1950, that hangman John Ellis died in Toronto after he had returned ill from a hanging in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.<sup>46</sup> We have no evidence of any hanging in Prince Albert at this time, nor of a commutation, and the reports probably should have said that he returned ill from Fort Saskatchewan in Alberta, or from Oakalla in B.C, but the death report is otherwise correct.

While the identity of John Ellis was carefully guarded, I have now discovered his real name, which allows me to share some

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<sup>44</sup> "It's a Grim Job,' Hangman Admits," *Vancouver Province* (24 February 1950) at 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> "John Ellis, Hangman, is Dead," *Lethbridge Herald* (10 May 1950) at 9; "Hangman John Ellis Dies of Illness," *Vancouver Province* (10 May 1950) at 21; "Hangman Dies Suddenly," *Victoria Times Colonist* (10 May 1950) at 1.

information about his life. As noted, sheriffs across Canada would correspond with John Ellis by writing letters or sending telegrams in care of the Sheriff's office at Toronto City Hall. The Deputy Sheriff in Toronto at one point wrote to Sheriff Wallace in Edmonton that it sometimes took some time to hear back from Ellis, "who lives several miles out of the city."<sup>47</sup> We also have noted that in the expense accounts that Ellis submitted at various hangings, there would be a taxicab charge to get from his home to the train station in Toronto. For example, in 1942, the charge was \$6,<sup>48</sup> and in 1944, the charge was \$10.<sup>49</sup>

In the Alberta Archives, dealing with the double execution we noted previously, we find that Ellis wrote back to Sheriff Wallace in Edmonton with the usual address at the city hall of Toronto on the letter, but the envelope for that letter was postmarked from Milliken, Ontario.<sup>50</sup> This was a crucial clue for me. In the letter, Ellis noted that he was disappointed at not yet receiving the \$50 retainer fee that he charged for reserving an execution date, which amount he would receive whether the execution happened or not on the date in question. He noted that he needed the money to pay the taxes on the farm. Here is the envelope:<sup>51</sup>

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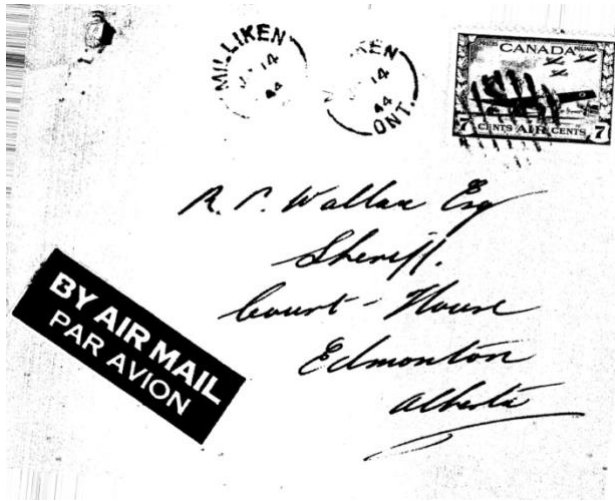
<sup>47</sup> Letter from Deputy Sheriff Zimmerman to Sheriff Wallace (9 June 1942). Found in Pierre Cougan File, GR 2002 0863 Box 1. Alberta Archives.

<sup>48</sup> Statement of Account of John Ellis (3 June 1942) found in Chester Johnston File, GR 2002 0863 Box 1, Alberta Archives.

<sup>49</sup> Statement of Account from Sheriff's Office found in George and Sam Desjarlais File, GR 2002 0863 Box 1. Alberta Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Envelop for handwritten letter from Ellis to Sheriff Wallace (14 January 1944) in Desjarlais File, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> From Desjarlais File, *ibid.*



Given the clue that the hangman lived near Milliken, I browsed through the death notices in the *Toronto Star* for early May 1950, looking for a Milliken connection and within minutes found the following:

**Moore, John Bernard-** At the Toronto East General hospital, on Monday, May 8, 1950, John Bernard Moore of Milligen [sp], age 57 years, beloved husband of Mary Pratt, and dear father of Bernard at home. Resting at the Dixon Funeral Chapel Markham for service on Friday at 2:30 p.m. Interment Pine Hills cemetery. (*Cochrane Northland Post and Timmins Press* please copy.)<sup>52</sup>

Obviously, Cochrane and Timmins are further clues, if we have the right man. As I began to research this John B. Moore, I was confident that he was the hangman, but I could not risk publishing the name without more.

I subsequently found the confirmation I needed in the Attorney General's Correspondence files from the Ontario Archives. In 1942, an issue arose in the Federal Department of Justice as to the proper time for the execution of prisoners. For example, if the date of execution was on a Friday, should the execution happen at the earliest minutes on Friday, say just after Thursday midnight, or should it be around eight in the morning, which was the usual practice in Ontario? The Attorney General of Ontario was anxious to reply to the Federal question and wanted

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<sup>52</sup> Death notice, *Toronto Star* (10 May 1950) at 35.

input from Sheriff Cane in Toronto as to the question. In turn, Sheriff Cane was anxious to get the opinion of the hangman on this question and therefore sent a letter to the hangman addressed as *John Moore c/o Mrs. B. Moore, Milliken*. It may be that John Moore had moved recently from Agincourt, Ontario to Milliken, given that Agincourt was crossed out and Milliken typed in. Clearly, here the sheriff is using the real name of the hangman, and addresses him as “Dear Moore.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Letter from Sheriff Cane to John Ellis (29 October 1944) sent to John Moore. RG 4-32 1942 #1261 Ontario Archives.



Please return to:  
W.H.S. Cane,  
Sheriff, Co. York,  
City Hall,  
Toronto.

October 29, 1942.

John Moore, Esq.,  
c/o Mrs. B. Moore,  
~~Adelmont~~ Milliken,  
Ontario.

Dear Moore:-

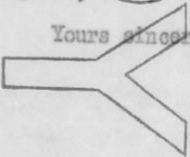
I wrote you on the 23rd October in reference to the hours at which hangings should actually take place. Some years ago they took place at midnight, but of later years they have been taking place at eight o'clock in the morning.

I think Mr. Snyder is waiting to make up his opinion which may be varied by what you think. I do not know and have not heard from anybody in authority that the hour of eight o'clock in the morning was wrong. In fact I believe myself that it is right, but still Mr. Snyder would like to have the opinion of all concerned, and as quickly as possible. Kindly therefore, come in here in the morning with a letter with your opinion in it, which I will convey to Mr. Snyder.

Your cheque for the month is not here yet, and I thought that that was what you were waiting for, but it won't be in for two or three days yet, which will mean another trip for you.

With best regards, I am,

Yours sincerely,



Notice that we also have confirmation that "John Ellis," whose real name was John Bernard Moore, was paid a retainer by the Sheriff's Office in Toronto to be the official hangman for Ontario, given the reference in the letter of "cheque for the month."

We will now attempt in the next chapter to reconstruct some of the biographical history of hangman John Bernard Moore.

