

The Cow Head Double Axe Murder

Amy Nicolle

Amy Nicolle is a retired teacher who has a wealth of knowledge on the local history of Bonne Bay. When I visited her, she told me the story that involved her great great grandfather and great great grandmother. They were witnesses at the trial of John Pelley, who was hanged for a double murder.

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I CAN TELL YOU the story the way I heard it. Sarah Singleton, or Sarah Cross - we are not sure about her last name - was working with the Bird firm at Woody Point. Now, whether she was housemaid with the family, or what, I don't know. But she was working in there. The way the story went, she had a boyfriend, Joseph Randell, and a brother, Richard Cross.

Joseph and Richard went to Cow Head where they had a trapline out. But there was another fella in Cow Head as well. Joseph and Richard were gone a long time and Sarah got worried about them.

John Paine was an agent for the Bird firm out here in Rocky Harbour. She came here to Rocky Harbour to see if John Paine would go to Cow Head with her to look for her brother and her boyfriend.

The way the story goes, they snowshoed from Rocky Harbour to Cow Head. On their way down they came across a camp and this man was standing in the doorway. They spoke to him and Sarah told him that she was looking for her brother and her boyfriend, and asked if he had seen them.

Now, this man's name was John Pelley. So he said yes, he saw them. They had been there but they were gone in on the trapline. Now, of course, John and Sarah couldn't come back to Rocky Harbour that night, by snowshoe, so they stayed in the camp for the night.

During the night, Pelley went out and brought his gun in the camp. Sarah or John asked him why he was bringing the gun in, and he said there was a weasel in the camp.

In the meantime, Sarah was sitting over by the fire. She noticed a pair of mitts hanging up that she had knit for her brother. John and Sarah got a bit suspicious. The next morning they left and came back up again to Rocky Harbour and on into Bonne Bay. John Paine got some more men with him. They went down and looked behind the camp there and found the two bodies of the men.

Pelley confessed to the murder. One story states that they tied him to a tree, put birch rind around it and threatened to burn him.

They arrested Pelley and brought him back to whatever Justice was in Woody Point at that time, and then onto St. John's for trial.

Pelley was accused of murder and John and Sarah went in as witnesses. He was found guilty and hanged publicly on September 5th, 1809, while they watched. He was from Bay Bulls.

Sarah Cross's boyfriend was dead, and while they were in St. John's, Sarah and John Paine got married, eight days after Pelley was hanged.

They are my great great grandparents.

