

Cop in the Closet

by ex-Sgt. Jack Fossum

This is the third of five installments of Cop in the Closet, a book chronicling ex-Sgt. Fossum's twenty-one years in the Force. Should anyone wish to buy the book and find it unavailable, it can be purchased directly from the publisher, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., #10 Orwell Street, North Vancouver, B.C. V7J 3K1 Price: \$16.95 in hardcover, cheque or money order, postage paid by the publisher. Ed.

8. THE COP IN THE CLOSET

"Mr. Diefenbaker, in your career as a criminal lawyer did you ever encounter any cases of wiretapping?" Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was being interviewed on the CBC during the parliamentary debate on what was known as the wiretapping bill in 1973.

Yes, he recalled one such case. A policeman and a stenographer had bugged a conversation involving one of his clients. The pair had been concealed in a clothes closet in an adjoining room. He chuckled as he mentioned that the resulting evidence had not damaged his case and had in fact been "laughed out of court."

The scene came vividly back to my mind when I heard his comments; the crowded courtroom, the young stenographer in the witness box being cross-examined by Diefenbaker: "While waiting in the closet for the defendant's arrival how did you two pass the time?" "We played rummy." Turning to the jury with a broad smile, Diefenbaker said, "How cozy. And was that the only game you two played?" I happened to be the cop in the closet and behind Diefenbaker's remarks lies the story of one of the most sensational cases of arson and fraud in Saskatchewan criminal court history.

Before the case came to trial at the 1939 King's Bench court fall assizes in Humboldt, some ten grain elevators, many full of grain, had been put to the torch. In one of the fires the elevator agent, who slept on the premises, barely escaped with his life.

The events that culminated in the trial at Humboldt began with the burning of a grain elevator at Henribourg, a little hamlet near Prince Albert, in 1937. The fire was attributed to accidental causes, possibly spontaneous combustion. However, when elevator burnings continued in the same general area at intervals of a few months it became evident that arson was the cause.

Confirmation came in the fall of 1938 when an unsuccessful attempt was made to set fire to an elevator at Englefeld, a CNR siding east of Humboldt. A partly burned candle stub set in coal oil-soaked rags was found in the bottom part of the building.

Constable Ted Turner of Lanigan RCMP Detachment learned that the day before the arson attempt a man had bought coal oil at a store in the neighboring town of Watson. The sales clerk was able to give only a vague description of the buyer, but on the strength of it, Turner singled out a tall transient with a Scandinavian accent who gave his name as Ed Johanson, home address Prince Albert. When the clerk failed to positively identify the man as the coal oil purchaser, Turner had no choice but to let him go free.

Feeling he was on the right track, Turner began checking into the background of the suspect. He learned that Johanson had been employed on elevator construction jobs in a crew that operated out of Prince Albert.