

## WEB RECASTS CENTURY-OLD MURDER MYSTERY

Who killed William Robinson?

In 1869, a judge and an all-white jury convicted a native man of killing the black settler who was found shot to death in his log cabin on Saltspring Island.

Starting today, students of Canadian history can use a unique World Wide Web site to decide for themselves whether justice was done and whether the real story about life on a seemingly idyllic island in colonial British Columbia has ever been told.

The Web site wanders through hundreds of pages of original documents, including letters, court documents and newspaper accounts, about a case that involves racism, land, and frontier notions of justice.

"Here's a way of getting students into some of the really key issues of Canadian settlement but draw them in through investigating a murder mystery," John Lutz, a history professor at the University of Victoria, said yesterday.

Dr. Lutz said it is the first time in Canada the Web has been used to present course material not available in any other way to large university classes.

The site allows students - and anyone else who wants to call it up after 6 p.m. EDT-unprecedented access to original documents in a case where the evidence leads away from the conclusion of the judge.

"The evidence was shoddy, it looks like a frame-up," Dr. Lutz said yesterday.

Ruth Sandwell, a doctoral student at Simon Fraser University who did much of the research for the site, said her findings challenge the widely held view that Saltspring Island was a rare example of racial harmony in colonial British Columbia.

The island was home to about 25 black families who had come to British Columbia seeking refuge from persecution in the United States.

There were also a dozen white families on the south end of the island and a few Indians, although the natives apparently were not living permanently on the Island when settlement started.

Mr. Robinson had staked out one of the nicest sites on the island, a spot now occupied by a pub and the Vesuvius Bay ferry terminal.

He was one of three black settlers killed in 1867-68. His murder was the only one solved. A native named Tshu-anahusset was accused of the murder, tried in Victoria and hanged.

"The lesson will prove a salutary one for the Indians," the Provincial Colonist reported the next day.

For Dr. Lutz, one of the lessons of the Robinson case is that some things have not changed that much in the past century.

"The romantic story we told about how blacks and whites and native people all got along so well, that's been exploded by this event," he said.

Other documents show that another settler who was briefly accused of the Robinson murder later ran off with the constable's daughter. He was brought back and charged with kidnapping.

And the constable's wife later tried to poison a neighbour, Dr. Lutz said.

"Life was complicated and violent and dysfunctional in 19th-century British Columbia just like it is in 20th-century British Columbia."

Ms. Sandwell said when she started exploring collecting a data base on the history of Saltspring Island, she found that after the murders, most of the remaining black settlers moved away and the prime land they had was taken over by whites.

What she did not find is a definitive answer to the question of who killed Mr. Robinson.

"I have a theory but it is not supported by all the evidence," she said.

Using the original documents, the Web site leads visitors through the events leading up to the murder and the trial that followed and shows land records that imply that others may have had motives far stronger than those of the native who was hanged outside the police barracks in Victoria shortly after 7 a.m., July 24, 1869.

At the trial of Tshuanahusset, no motive was given other than, "the general bad- Indian motive," Ms. Sandwell said. "It was a travesty."

The Web site, Who Killed William Robinson, Race, Justice and Settling the Land, can be found at: <http://www.uvic.ca/history-robinson/index.html>.

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