

Story 1: Sedley Church Murders

Snapshot 1: Small Town Beginnings

This is a story based on true events of a murder that took place in the small town of Sedley, Saskatchewan, on the Canadian prairie on October 17, 1977.

It was early October in a rough part of the city's downtown. Inside a smoky beer parlour, built in the 1930s and reeking of stale alcohol and cigarette smoke, sat a man in his mid-thirties. He wore a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and scuffed white runners. His face was sharp and angular, framed by stringy brown hair that fell to his shoulders, a full beard, and a thick moustache. His medium-height frame carried a heavy chest and spindly legs. He looked like someone you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. His name was Robert Gulash.

On the table in front of him sat two 8-ounce glasses of draft beer. A thin column of smoke rose from a cigarette resting in a clear, flat ashtray at his left hand. Robert was a heavy smoker. Around him were three other men, all as dangerous looking as he was. They were hard-timers—ex-cons who had done time in federal prisons across Canada. This beer parlour was their kind of place, a haven where they could congregate with their own. Their conversations revolved around one topic: money and the means to get it.

Most of these men were in their mid-thirties to early forties, and some were likely on conditional release from prison. Their parole conditions certainly prohibited them from being in bars, but they came anyway. Thirsty for beer and hungry for news from the streets, they risked their freedom to sit there. Parole officers rarely sought them out in places like this, preferring to wait for the cons to report to their offices.

Many of them lived in shelters like the Salvation Army or halfway houses scattered across the city. Their clothing was an assortment of second-hand casual wear or donated work gear supplied by community groups. They survived on social assistance or unemployment insurance, occasionally supplementing their income with casual labor paid in cash. Most hid their earnings to avoid reductions in their government checks. The real hard-timers, however, found other ways to make money—pimping or dealing hard drugs whenever they could slip past the scrutiny of their parole officers.

Robert Gulash, 34, was one of these hard timers. He had served two-thirds of a 10-year sentence at the Prince Albert Penitentiary for kidnapping and robbery. Years earlier, needing beer money, Robert and an accomplice robbed a motel clerk at gunpoint, making off with a meager \$32. To ensure the clerk wouldn't report them, they forced him into their car and drove him to the outskirts of the city. There, in the bitter cold of minus 30 degrees Celsius, they released him without his coat, hat, or gloves. Before leaving, Robert fired one shot into the air and two more into the ground near the clerk's feet, warning him never to identify them in a police lineup. "If you do," they said, "we'll find you and kill you."

By sheer luck—or divine intervention—the clerk managed to flag down a passing car and avoid freezing to death.

Robert was, by all accounts, unhinged. Whether he was born that way or made that way by circumstance is anyone's guess. Violence seemed to run in his family. Two of his cousins were serving manslaughter sentences in federal prison for beating a man to death with a screwdriver and a wrench over a small debt, then dumping his body in a slough. Dark souls seemed to permeate Robert's bloodline.

Years before the motel robbery, Robert had been charged with pointing a rifle with intent to kill. During a party, he got into an argument with another man. Hours later, Robert was spotted hiding in the bushes outside the man's house, armed with a .303-caliber rifle. Neighbours called the police, who managed to talk Robert into dropping the weapon. He had been drunk at the time. The judge, convinced by his defence attorney that Robert had been provoked and inebriated, handed him a suspended sentence. It was his first conviction.

Robert's drinking only got worse. Alcohol fuelled his impulsive, unpredictable, and often violent behaviour. Since his release from prison, he had started mixing beer with soft drugs like marijuana and hashish, which only worsened his volatility.

He lived on social assistance, which covered his basic needs, and took casual labor jobs to fund his habits. Though Robert had a decent education, he lacked any motivation to improve his life. For him, the beer parlour and its seedy underbelly were home.

Robert was no longer required to report to a parole officer, so he moved out of the halfway house into a small room above the beer parlour. For six dollars a night, he got a bed with clean sheets every three days, a metal chair, and access to a shared bathroom with only a sink. The other rooms on his floor were occupied by an eclectic mix of tenants, including young women who used their rooms for evening work. Robert often paid for their company, finding a sense of neighbourly camaraderie in their presence.