

# The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Project

By Ruth Sandwell and John Lutz

Everybody loves a murder mystery. Of all the historical situations researchers encounter nothing has quite the same impact as discovering an innocent person hanged, a guilty person going free. Co-directors of the GREAT UNSOLVED MYSTERIES IN CANADIAN HISTORY project located at the University of Victoria, John Lutz (Department of History, University of Victoria) and Ruth Sandwell (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto), have just received funding from the Canadian Content Online Program (CCOP) of the Canadian Heritage Ministry to move ahead with phase two including two new mysteries “What happened to Aurore Gagnon?” (Peter Gossage, Research Director) and “Nobody Knows His Name: Klatssasin and the Chilcotin Massacre” (John Lutz, Research Director) to complement the pilot “Who Killed William Robinson?”.

The overall multi-year goal of this project is to provide teachers and students in high schools, colleges and universities with 13 websites, each an archive of primary historical documents and supporting resources about different unsolved mysteries in Canadian history. As students work their way through the mysteries, they will be engaging the major themes in Canadian history, learning about all the regions of Canada, and the major ethnic groups in the country. Students will also be developing the complex analytical and critical skills of historians, identifying, selecting and evaluating the ‘evidence’ left to us from the past, and incorporating it into a coherent narrative framework of description and explanation. Each site will be available in French and English and the translation is being managed through the translation program at the University of Sherbrooke. Each will be accompanied by teacher’s guides synchronized as much as possible with provincial education department teaching outcomes.

## Phase I: Who Killed William Robinson?

This project developed out of the response to the website “Who Killed William Robinson? Race, Justice and Settling the Land.” This site, which has been used in over 40 universities/colleges and 100 highschools, has won the NAWEB (North American Web) Award for the best educational site in North America in 2002 and the 2003 MERLOT Award for Exemplary Online Learning Resources in History.

Between December 1867 and December 1868, a small rural community in colonial British Columbia was the scene of three brutal, seemingly unconnected murders. All of the victims of these Salt Spring Island murders were members of the island’s Black community, and Aboriginal People were widely blamed for all of the deaths. This Black community had fled persecution and slavery in California in 1858, but the murders in 1868-9 fractured the community and drove many away.

Many in Salt Spring Island’s Black community returned to the United States which was more congenial to them after the Civil War had brought an end to slavery. An Aboriginal man, Tschuanahusset, was convicted and hanged for the murder of one of these men, William Robinson. The trial was a sham and afterwards, compelling evidence came to light suggesting that he was not the murderer.

## Phase II: New Web Archives (1): The Cruel Stepmother: Whatever happened to Aurore Gagnon.

Although virtually unknown in English Canada, Aurore Gagnon is an icon of Quebec popular culture. Known universally in Québec as ‘Aurore, l’enfant martyre’, she was a twelve-year-old girl whose tragic death in February, 1920 became a *cause célèbre* in the province. Her father and stepmother faced murder charges for the neglect and abuse that ultimately killed her, leaving over fifty welts and scars on her body. Although ‘who’ – the father or the step-mother – was responsible for Aurore’s death remains an intriguing question, the deeper unsolved mystery surrounding Aurore’s story must be framed in terms of ‘why’. Why did this poor, rural couple behave so brutally towards a twelve-year-old girl in the first place? And why has this story resonated for so long in Quebec? In ensuing decades, the events surrounding her murder were interpreted by theatre troupes, novelists, and the filmmaker Jean-Yves Bigras, whose 1951 melodrama *La petite Aurore l’enfant martyre* etched a version of this domestic tragedy in to the collective memory of a generation of *Québécois* and *Québécoises*.

## Phase II: New Web Archives (2): Nobody Knows His Name: Klatssasin and the Chilcotin Massacre.

This website looks at a crucial but nationally unknown war between the TSILHQOT’IN people and the Colony of British Columbia, in 1864. Who did it is only part of the mystery here. Klatssasin, whose name literally means, “We Do Not Know His Name” was hanged with five others including his 17 year old son for the death of a road building crew, a team of packers and the only settler in the area. The mystery lies in asking why the TSILHQOT’IN attacked, and in deciding who won the Indian War that followed.

## PHASE III: CALL FOR MYSTERIES

To complete the project we would like to invite proposals for the remaining mystery sites in the series.

The mysteries may be about a murder or other crime but may also be about a missing person, violence, or any other historically relevant mysterious event, perception, person, place or thing. There does have to be some investigative element as well as interpretive aspects to the (clearly defined) problem

we are asking students to solve using reason, evidence and historical judgement. (The question may not be "who" so much as "why" and "why did (and does) this particular mystery create such a public outcry?")

distributed and which can be tied to themes of importance to Canadian history as a whole. If you have a mystery you would like to see in this series see the call for mysteries or for more details on the project please see [www.canadianmysteries.ca](http://www.canadianmysteries.ca)

We will attempt to select mysteries that not only have a rich evidentiary base, but also are regionally and temporally

