

The Strange Disappearance of Crown Lands Agent J.L. O'Donnell by Ernie Bies April 25, 2019

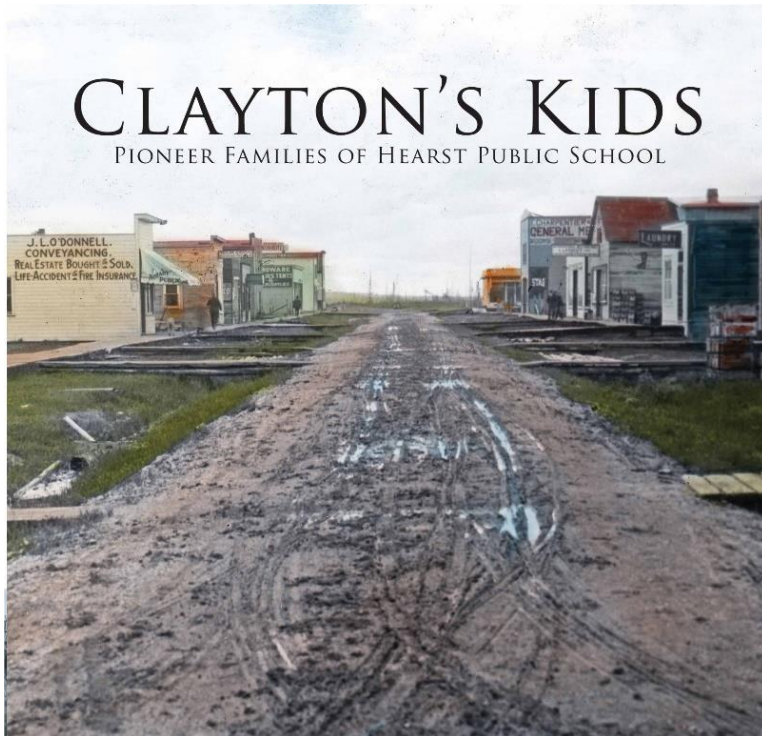
Hearst Historian Laurent Vaillancourt has a new morning ritual. Every day he browses archival copies of the Porcupine Advance, a newspaper that was published in Timmins from 1912 to 1950. In searching for early references to Hearst he came across the mysterious disappearance in 1924 of J.L. O'Donnell, Crown Lands Agent. Laurent remembered that I had mentioned O'Donnell in my *Wyborn's of Hazel* story from 2013 and sent me the links. I had referenced a letter dated August 28th 1923 signed by J.L. O'Donnell, Notary Public and Secretary of the Hearst Board of Trade.



The 1921 census shows John L. O'Donnell, age 27, living in dwelling number 12 with his Irish wife, Noreen, who was 23 years old. O'Donnell's occupation was agent. He had a boarder named Owen Evans, also 27 years old, who had immigrated from Wales in 1907. Evans' occupation was

"insurance" so presumably he worked for O'Donnell.

When the town was incorporated in 1922, a school audit was commissioned in order to collect taxes from all the property owners. J.L. O'Donnell was appointed as the property assessor. The audit report shows that O'Donnell paid taxes on a building at 167 George St. dating back to 1914 as well as a property in Kendall Township, Concession 12, lot 27. It should be noted that the records before that were destroyed in the fire of 1914. The audit report also showed salary payments of \$25 to J.L. O'Donnell as Secretary of the School Board in 1915 and \$35 as Assessor in 1916.



O'Donnell is also featured on the cover of Clayton's Kids, Pioneer Families of Hearst Public School showing his place of business on the North side of George St. The photo shows George St. looking East from 9th St.

His sign read:

J.L O'Donnell

Conveyancing

Real Estate Bought and Sold

Life, Accident and Fire Insurance.

Tragically, a shortfall was later discovered in his books in 1924, and he was charged with theft.

The clippings below from the Porcupine Advance tell the rest of the sad story,,,, or do they?

April 16, 1924, p. 12

(Announcement was made last week that J. L. O'Donnell, Crown Lands Agent at Hearst, was over \$2500.00 short in his accounts. He was appointed by the Drury Government. It is understood that he has left the North Land.)

July 9, 1924, P. 10

\$1000 OFFERED FOR CROWN LANDS AGENT, DEAD OR ALIVE

It is understood that a reward of \$1000.00 has been offered for the production of the body, dead or alive, of J. L. O'Donnell, former Crown Lands Agent at Hearst. While out on bail awaiting trial on a charge of theft from the Government, O'Donnell is said to have left on a trip down the Pagwa River. His companions on the trip returned and reported that O'Donnell had apparently gone insane and taken to the bush and they had been unable to locate him again. Search parties made earnest effort to locate the missing man but up to date without success. He is believed by many to be in the deep bush beyond Pagwa and it is thought that he may still be alive. Another searching party started out last week to hunt for O'Donnell. The Imperial Bank of Canada is credited with offering the reward of \$1000.00 for the production of O'Donnell, "dead or alive."

July 2, 1924, p. 10

POLICE SEARCHING FOR FORMER CROWN LANDS AGENT

Inspector W. Moore, of the Provincial Police, went to Hearst last week to investigate the disappearance of J. L. O'Donnell, former Crown Lands Agent at Hearst, who is out on heavy bail on charges of theft from the Government, and who has been missing for a couple of weeks. It is feared that O'Donnell has gone insane and lost himself in the deep bush north of the Transcontinental. O'Donnell was committed for trial on May 28th, with bail set at \$7,000.00. After the preliminary hearing, O'Donnell is said to have left on a trip down the Pagwa River, 75 miles west of Hearst. It is now said that O'Donnell returned with a companion until about 40 miles from the railway when the former Crown Lands Agent suddenly took to the bush. Every possible effort was made to locate him but he had disappeared without leaving a clue and so the rest of the party pushed on to the railway and advised the authorities of what has occurred. It is feared that O'Donnell has gone insane and in his disordered mental state has taken to the bush where he has probably met his death from hunger and exposure before this.

Dead or Alive. Shades of the Wild West. Hopefully some trigger-happy hunters didn't take it seriously. The intent was probably asking for proof of death if he did perish in the bush land, not shoot on sight.

Makes for an intriguing plot for a story if he did find his way to the railway tracks and hop a freight for the real Wild West, maybe even before the trip down the Pagwa?