

# Stories From The Archives — Magnus Johnson: Bedwell Bay Pioneer

Researched By: [Ralph Drew](#), Belcarra, BC, January 2025.

'Old Man Johnson', an old Icelandic hermit, was a squatter who used to live in a small cedar-shake cabin located at the head of Bedwell Bay, most likely close to Ray Creek for easy access to a supply of fresh water. Based on information from the 1931 Canada Census, <sup>(1)</sup> the individual was Magnus Johnson (1861–1935) who immigrated to Canada from Iceland in 1888. According to a 'Vancouver Sun' newspaper article at the time of his death, <sup>(2)</sup> Magnus had been living at Bedwell Bay for 40 years.

In 1926, twelve-year-old John Grohn and his family camped in a big army tent beside his cabin. John remembers: <sup>(3)</sup>

"I got friendly with the hermit and used to go and talk to him. He was quite old, and had an Icelandic accent. He told me all kinds of stories. He was squatting in a small cedar shake house. It had a shed and a lean-to piled full of newspapers and old magazines he'd been saving over the years. He had an old rowboat and he brought us a salmon for a buck. One night there was a thunderstorm and our tent lit-up with white flashes. All of a sudden, we could hear singing going on outside. The old guy was shouting Icelandic verses. I guess the god Thor was up there banging, so he was out there chanting!"

– John Grohn

Years later in 1933, when the Colwill family moved to the LePage house next to Sasamat Creek, the old hermit was still living at the head of Bedwell Bay. The Colwill children recall that he had fruit trees near his small shack. Don Colwill used to visit the hermit but his sister, thirteen-year-old Audrey, was scared: <sup>(4)</sup>

"Whenever anyone went near his house he called from inside: 'I've got a gun, I've got a gun.' When he died, the police boat came-up and took him away. They had to burn the old place down because it smelled so bad." – Audrey Williams (*née* Colwill)

Magnus Johnson was found dead in January 1935 aged 74 years. <sup>(5)</sup> His body was removed by the Provincial Police <sup>(6)</sup> and the provincial coroner ascertained that he had died of pneumonia. <sup>(2)</sup>

## References:

- (1) [Magnus Johnson, 1931 Canada Census](#), Fraser Valley Electoral District 229, Sub-District 63, Dewdney (Unorganized), page 9.
- (2) "[Pioneer Found Dead](#)", Vancouver Sun, Thursday, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1935, page 13.
- (3) John Grohn, interview by Michael Cotton, March 1996.
- (4) Audrey Williams (*née* Colwill), interview by John Doerksen, January 1997.
- (5) "[Found Dead](#)", Vancouver News-Herald, Wednesday, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1935, page 1.
- (6) "[Aged Man Found Dead](#)", Vancouver Sun, Tuesday, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1935, page 2.