

... a man
from the past.

by Roy C. Higby

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sketches by Donald Lux

edited by Ray Hanlon



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AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

XVI

The Chester Gillett-Grace Brown murder case was immortalized by Theodore Dreiser in his book *An American Tragedy* and later by two motion pictures. The latest is *A Place in the Sun* made by Paramount Pictures. At least one other book was more recently published entitled *The Death of the Bridegroom*. Many newspaper articles have been written and I understand there are more to come. Years ago a Cleveland newspaper published a series of articles under the title *The Lake of Tears*, a story of this and other events on Big Moose Lake. For many years, to the point where it became monotonous, I was approached by people asking to tell the story because I was personally involved in the case. To avoid constant repetition, in 1958, I scribbled a brief resumé of my experiences and what I knew of the murder and trial, followed by the execution of Chester Gillett in Auburn Prison. Within the year we were entirely out of 200 mimeographed copies and had more printed. Now, if someone asks about the case, I hand him a copy of my story to save time.

Chester Gillett was a young man raised in an atmosphere of strict religious beliefs. His parents were members of a Rescue Mission in Kansas City. At the age of twenty, he decided that he would see something of the world. After drifting about for a short time, he located a position with an uncle of his in the city of Cortland, New York. His uncle owned and operated a shirtwaist factory and employed many young women who operated sewing machines and did hand work. Young Gillett was given a

position as foreman in charge of several women in a division of the plant. He settled in a rooming house, as he was short of funds. His uncle, having done his duty by giving the boy a position, apparently forgot that he existed and failed to have him meet any of the family. Gillett's life had been so rigidly controlled and influenced by strict surroundings up to this time that, becoming a free man on his own, he was poorly prepared to cope with a life of independence. Probably he had a warped sense of social and economic values.

Grace Brown was an attractive girl of eighteen, one of several sisters and brothers. Her home was in South Otselic, a small village near Cortland, where her father owned a farm. She, too, came from a strict and religious family. She was about five feet, two inches tall, with brown eyes, brown hair and a cheery disposition. In order to supplement the family income, Grace had secured a position in the Gillett factory and was one of the group over which young Gillett had been made foreman. Since both were alone in a strange town, it was not unnatural that these two young people became acquainted and started to have occasional dates. They soon became seriously interested in each other. It was not long before he was visiting her in her room and their relations were something more than platonic. Things went along smoothly until the following spring of 1906 and it is assumed the young couple planned to be married. At least Grace had been promised this.

All of a sudden, the uncle's family, who were among the social élite of the city, decided to invite the young man to dinner at their home, where he was to meet some of the younger social set. As he had a likeable personality and knew how to be gracious, he was accepted immediately by the family and their friends. He became enamoured of one young lady and was soon paying her constant court. He had forgotten Grace, who was expecting their child.

A sensitive young person, alone and afraid, she tried to understand when Chester told her that he must cultivate his uncle's family and their friends in order to get ahead and become successful in business. She almost never saw him except at the factory, where conversation was difficult. By early summer, with her pregnancy more advanced, she had to leave her position and return to her home. Her family, especially her mother, knew that Grace was unusually moody and nervous, but were unable to gain any information from her. Within a short time she left home, advising the family that she was returning to work. Actually she stayed in another town from which she wrote the pitiful letters to Chester which were later to become exhibits at the trial.

These letters were dramatic and moving, written from the heart, begging him to marry her and become the father of her unborn child. They had much to do with the case's becoming notorious throughout the country. All of the letters were later found in Gillett's trunk and are presumably still on file in the Herkimer County Court House. I believe that Dreiser,

who spent much time looking up the trial records, copied the letters for use in his book, substituting fictitious names.

Grace had threatened to go to his family with the story, and Chester realized that he must do something to extricate himself from a difficult position. He wrote to her, asking that she meet him and they would go on a trip to the Adirondacks, where he would become her husband. The first night they spent in a Utica hotel, where a chambermaid heard them quarreling and Grace crying bitterly. The following day they entrained for Tupper Lake, where they again stayed at a local hotel, taking a train the next morning for Big Moose where they arrived about eleven o'clock. From the station they road two miles to the Glenmore Hotel by buckboard, which was a part of my uncle's transportation company. This large hotel was owned by my uncle, but was under lease to Andrew Morrison at the time. The couple registered as Carl Graham and wife of Albany, and engaged a room by the day. Immediately after lunch they went to the boathouse where a boatman was in charge of about forty boats owned by the hotel. Gillett had with him his topcoat, suitcase, tennis racket, umbrella and camera, while Grace had left her purse, suitcase and coat in the room. The boatman admitted later that he thought it unusual for a guest of the hotel to carry all of his baggage with him in a rental boat as he assumed they would return in time for supper. No one will ever know, but it is quite possible that Grace may have had a good idea by this time what would happen. Perhaps she had resigned herself to what seemed a hopeless situation.

As the two had not shown up for supper or for breakfast the following morning, the management sent men out in boats to look for them. There was fear that they might have been drowned, although the boat they had was considered quite safe. It was a St. Lawrence skiff, with heavy siding and open gunwales. At about ten o'clock that morning they found the boat floating near the shore of South Bay about a mile and a half from the Glenmore. Gillett's straw hat was floating on the water nearby. There was no sign of life about in this lonesome part of the lake and it was presumed they were both drowned. Not having equipment for rescue work, the men returned to the hotel where preparations were made to search the lake bottom.

I was thirteen years of age at the time and had my first position as purser on my uncle's steamer. I earned thirty-two dollars on this job, with which I later bought myself a bicycle. The boat was about forty feet long with a small cabin at the front and a raised pilot house at the bow. Aft the engine room was an open space where baggage was stored for delivery around the lake. The crew consisted of my uncle as pilot, Frank Crabbe as engineer and myself. We made two trips around the lake, about twelve miles daily, delivering mail, passengers and baggage to the numerous camps and hotels. Just aft of the engine room were two openings like doors, one on each side, through which passengers entered the boat.

Mr. Morrison asked my uncle if his men could take the steamer and help in the search. We agreed to do this right after we completed a short delivery trip. At one o'clock we left the hotel pier towing rowboats to the scene, where several men used them to drag for the bodies. Crude methods were used in those days such as looking through stove pipes into the water for objects on the bottom and dragging with ordinary fish hooks. Only the engineer and I were left on the boat, which had been anchored to a bag of sand dropped from the stern. My mother had told me I must stay on the steamer and not join in the search, but there was nothing to prevent my looking over the side of the boat, which I proceeded to do. Almost immediately I saw a white blur on the bottom of the lake in some eight feet of water and called Frank's attention to it. He insisted it was our anchor until I convinced him the boat was drifting in the wrong direction for that. Then he took a long pike pole off the roof of the cabin and began prodding at the object. These pike poles were capped with a heavy, pointed iron shoe and used by lumbermen for poling logs in the water to keep them away from rocks, thereby preventing jams of timber in rivers. On the boat we used ours for easing into the dock in windy weather or poling out of shallow water. Frank used this pike for several minutes until he became convinced it was a body. He called in the boats, and by letting down a hook which attached to some article of clothing, they brought the girl's body to the top.

A carpet was taken from one of the guideboats and laid on the bottom of the steamer in the stern. It was on this carpet that her body was gently laid. Later this carpet was to become important at the trial, because a laundress at the Glenmore had washed blood out of it, and someone conceived the idea that it may have come from the boat which Gillett had rented. I recall that Grace Brown wore a white shirtwaist and light green skirt; she had a deep cut diagonally across her forehead from the edge of her hair across one eyebrow and blood oozed from the cut when they laid her on the carpet. The general theory at that time was that she had struck her head on the sharp side of the boat in falling out of it. They searched for an hour or so longer for her companion until someone declared that it must have been a case of foul play, especially after hearing the boatman's story of what Gillett had taken with him in the boat.

Their boat was righted and towed back to the hotel livery. Grace Brown's body was placed in the room they had originally rented. My uncle wired the Albany police that Mr. and Mrs. Carl Graham of that city has apparently been drowned in Big Moose Lake, asking that relatives be notified. He also called the Herkimer County sheriff and arranged for him and the coroner to take the first train to Big Moose. It was only a short time before a wire was received from the Albany police to the effect that there was no one in that city by the name given. This information definitely convinced local people that they were involved in a murder case.

Of course, newspapers had been notified, and through the efforts of a

Utica paper the couple were traced the following day and identified. In the meantime, my father, who was justice of peace, the sheriff and a deputy started tracking Gillett. They found that, after the crime, he had apparently walked to the nearest highway, which he followed to Eagle Bay, six miles away. Once in possession of his name, they easily located him staying at a hotel in Inlet, a small village at the head of Fourth Lake. He had joined several of his society friends who were staying there, including his girl friend. Evidence later seemed to indicate that he corresponded with them and knew where they were all the time, planning to join them after the murder. Not aware of what happened, they welcomed him cordially and one of the young men even loaned him five dollars. The day following the tragedy, the entire group, including Gillett, had taken an all-day excursion to Blue Mountain Lake. The second day, the sheriff walked in on Chester while he was with his friends and told him that he was under arrest for the murder of Grace Brown. Naturally the group was greatly shocked and some of them refused to believe the story, never having heard of Grace. But I believe they all left for home that day.

Feeling was running high among the local people and there was talk of taking justice into their own hands. The sheriff and his deputy arranged with the railroad company to be picked up by a train a mile or so below the station, to avoid the danger from any enraged citizens who might wish to get their hands on the prisoner. He was taken to the Herkimer County jail and confined there until the conclusion of his trial more than a year later.

As it was known that Gillett carried a tennis raquet and umbrella which were not in his possession when apprehended, officials offered a reward for them. Both were soon located, the raquet thrown into the woods off the highway and the umbrella in back of a log on a small bridge. The tennis raquet was in a canvas bag. When taken out it was found that the bow was broken, which seemed to indicate it had been used to strike something. This led to the conclusion that he had struck Grace Brown on the head before throwing her overboard, thus causing the skull injury which had cut her forehead. An interesting sidelight is the story of the old woodsman who found one of the lost items. When offered a ten-dollar reward, he replied, "You can keep your damned ten dollars and I will give you twenty, which is all I have, for five minutes alone with that murderer." This was indicative of the general feeling at the time. In those days womanhood was held in the highest respect by guides, lumbermen and natives. The idea of a nice young girl being brought into their home country and murdered in cold blood, roused their ire to a boiling point. I would not have given much for his chances if some of the boys could have gotten their hands on Gillett.

As there were no school facilities at Big Moose, my father had purchased a home in Utica where we were sent each year after Labor Day. I was living there during the period of the trial and was taken by father to two days of sessions. On one of those days Grace Brown's father and brother tried to

take the law into their own hands and get at Gillett, and no one could blame them for that. Because of my age, father had arranged with local men that my name should not be brought into the case and I was never subpoenaed by either side, and I was not permitted to talk about it in any way, even with my schoolfriends.

While the boat was at the Glenmore, I collected a strand or two of Grace Brown's hair that had been caught in the gunwale and gave it to my mother. Years later she gave me an envelope, yellowed with age, containing the hair and a picture of Grace and Chester that was in the *Utica Saturday Globe*. I still have these in my office safe.

Gillett had a fair complexion and somewhat shallow face. Throughout the trial he sat with his hands covering his face, his elbows on the table. The history of the trial has been written and rewritten so many times more factually than I could write it that there is no need to dwell on that angle of the famous case. The boat was shipped to Herkimer and placed on exhibit in the courtroom. Experts testified that Grace had no water in her lungs which is usually present in drowned persons. Also that the cut on her forehead showed no varnish from the edge of the boat, which should have been in evidence from such a severe blow. The presiding judge was Irving Dieffendorf, a man most highly thought of in the community. The prosecuting attorney for the state, Earl Ward, was also a highly regarded and able attorney. Gillett's lawyer was a man named Mills, who was a nationally known defense counsel. He had been engaged by the uncle, who was, of course, anxious to clear the Gillett name, if at all possible. Throughout the trial, the other girl was only spoken of as Miss X due to the fact that she came from a fine family and was an innocent victim of circumstances. One evening, some twenty-five years later, I was sitting in our lobby before the fireplace talking with a group of hunters. When they went to bed, one man remained and told me that he was a brother of Miss X, after which we discussed the case at length.

The verdict of guilt was based largely on the fact that Grace Brown's skull was fractured and medical testimony indicated that she was either dead or unconscious before entering the water. Gillett was executed at Auburn Prison about a year later. The chaplain of the prison, who was the last person to talk with him, made a statement to the effect that, "the state had made no mistake." One of our guests in later years had been secretary to the wardens of Auburn for some time. He told me that the same chaplain advised him Gillett had confessed to his spiritual advisor that he had killed Grace with the tennis racket. So far as I know this confession was never made public.

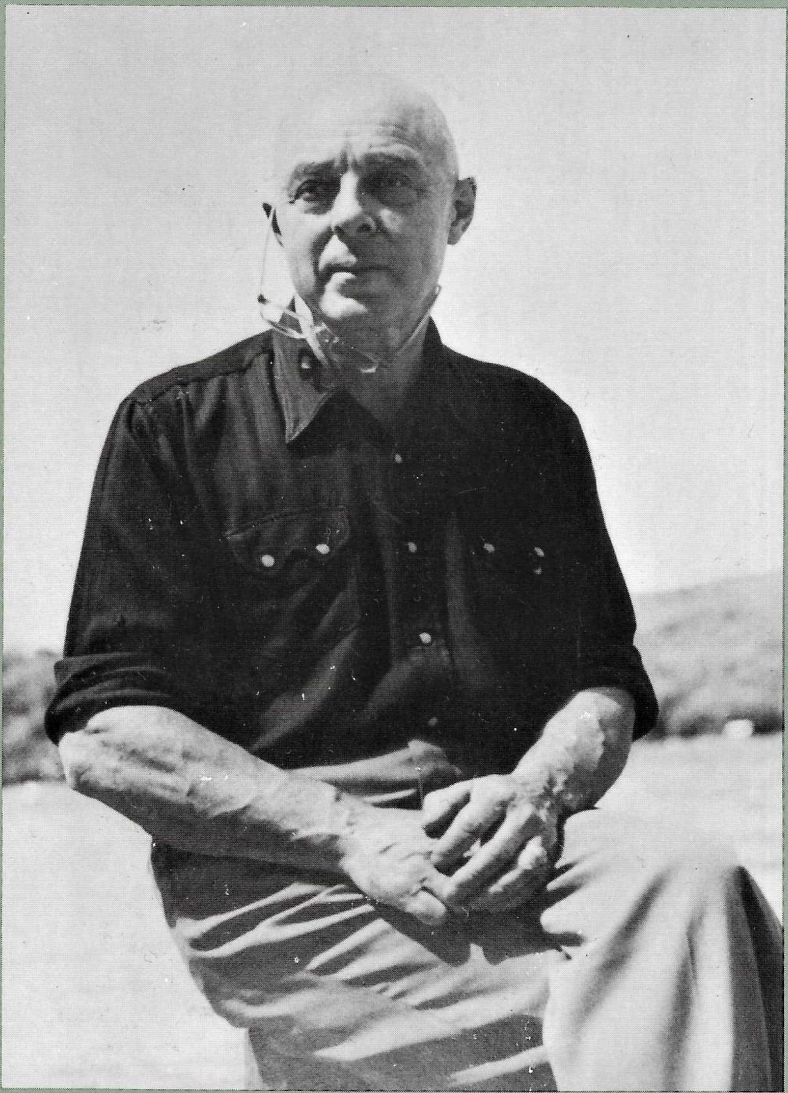
An interesting aftermath came about one day when the District Attorney visited my father for lunch at our Utica home and father asked me to tell my story of how the body was found. Mr. Ward told father, and I quote, "Jim, if the defense had got this boy on the stand we would never have convicted Chester Gillett." They would have impressed the jury with

the fact that the injury to the girl's head came about as a result of the engineer's using a sharp iron-pointed pole while trying to identify the body on the lake bottom. Be that as it may, Gillett was definitely guilty, as his confession indicates, and justice was served.

For many years some residents of Big Moose felt that the publicity of the crime would harm our community, but I have been unable to see that it has helped or hurt us in any way. The murder trial was headlined in papers from coast to coast, and a friend even mailed us a paper from Italy covering the case. I have never been able to determine just what made it so sensational. However, this was about the time that the dailies were starting to report major crimes, and the dramatic background and love story angle may have given them adequate material. Grace Brown's tragic letters and the remote scene of the murder may also have been factors. Even today I am asked many times to retell the story, which I have often done. But I have refused permission to some writers wishing to use my name and background of personal experience with the case. Having in mind the possibility of a miscarriage of justice and a different outcome if I had been permitted to testify at the trial, some years ago, two attorneys asked that I permit them to write an article around the story of the pike pole. Of course, being a boy at the time, I had to do as I was told but have often thought that, had I been an adult, it is doubtful that I would have mentioned this incident.

While I may have erred in my story in minor ways regarding some of the incidents, the murder having occurred almost seventy years ago, this report is very close to an exact story of the Gillett-Grace Brown affair as it happened. So far as I know there are not more than a few people still alive who were connected with the case.

At this time the famous marshal and gunman Bat Masterson was writing for a New York daily paper and in one of his articles on the tragedy referred to the residents of Herkimer County as "bushmen". Later Bat and two members of the staff were fined for these statements.



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