

THE SENTENCE

GODERICH, ON
SEPTEMBER 30, 1959 - 10:55 P.M.

The judge waited until the jury settled into their seats. The wooden floors and chairs creaked.

“Do you find the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty?” asked a court official.

The jury foreman, rising, said, “We find the defendant guilty as charged, with a plea for mercy.”

“The prisoner stand up,” said the judge.

Slowly, a boy rose to his feet. Instead of being in court, he should have been starting the eighth grade. He was fourteen years old.

The judge looked down at him.

“Steven Murray Truscott, have you anything to say? Why the sentence of this court should not be passed upon you according to law?”

“No,” Steven replied.

“Steven Murray Truscott, I have no alternative but to pass the following sentence upon you.

“The jury has found you guilty after a fair trial.

“The sentence of this court upon you is that you be taken from here to the place from whence you came.

“And there be kept in close confinement until Tuesday, the eighth day of December, 1959.

“And upon that day and date you be taken to the place of execution.

“And that you there be hanged by the neck until you are dead.

“And may the Lord have mercy upon your soul.”

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CHAPTER ONE

LYNNE HARPER IS MISSING

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 10, 1959 - 7:55 A.M.

When fourteen-year-old Steven Truscott came down for breakfast that morning, sleepy-eyed, he could not have imagined that three days later he would face a murder charge.

He grabbed a piece of toast his mother had prepared. His fifteen-year-old brother, Ken, had been up first. Steve hoped Ken had left some cornflakes.

Steve was in grade seven and was the best athlete in his school at the Royal Canadian Air Force base in Clinton, Ontario, where his father was a warrant officer.

A sharp knock sounded on the side door. Steve's mother, Doris, walked the two steps down from the kitchen to the landing and answered the door. She did not recognize the man who stood outside.

“I was wondering if your boys had seen Lynne?” the man asked. He looked worried and shifted nervously.

“Lynne who?” asked Mrs. Truscott.

“Lynne Harper.”

She recognized him now: Lynne’s father. Mrs. Truscott had met Mr. Harper once before, several months ago, but did not make the connection right away. On the air base, families and people moved in and out often. However, the name was familiar. Lynne was Steven’s classmate.

Mrs. Truscott called to her oldest son, Ken, who was on the basement stairs, shining his shoes. “Did you see Lynne Harper last night?”

Ken didn’t even bother to look up. He was in high school and seventh graders meant nothing to him.

“No,” he replied.

In the kitchen, Steve could hear the exchange. Now his mother turned to him.

“Steve?” asked his mother.

“Yes, I gave her a lift to number eight highway,” Steve replied, rummaging for a cereal bowl.

Mrs. Truscott beckoned to Steve to step closer to Mr. Harper. “Come down here.” Steve stepped down from the kitchen and faced Mr. Harper with only a screen door between them.

Mr. Harper asked again if Steve had seen Lynne.

“I gave her a lift to number eight highway,” Steve repeated.

“Where did you give her a lift?” Mr. Harper asked again.

“From the school down to the number eight highway,” Steve replied. This was the third time Mr. Harper had asked the question. To Steve, it appeared that he did not want to accept the answer. The highway was about 1.6 km north of the school on the county road. It was past the railway tracks and over the bridge across the Bayfield River.

After an awkward silence, Steve added that he then returned to the bridge, where others were playing in the river. From the bridge, he said, he saw Lynne hitchhiking and then get into a grey car.

Mr. Harper took a deep breath. “Oh, my God!” he said. He turned and slumped away.

He had reason to be frightened. Lynne, twelve years old, had not returned home the night before.

Police had been called and the search for a missing person had begun.

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Everyone at school that morning knew that Lynne Harper was missing.

Air Vice Marshall Hugh Campbell School was a

twelve-room school on the air base. One-room rural schools were common in 1959. In size, this school matched schools in the suburbs of Toronto.

Still, the school was small enough to buzz with the news.

In Mr. Edgar's classroom, the empty seat near the teacher's desk drew everyone's attention. Earlier in the school year, Lynne had been moved to a seat near the front of the classroom. She was friendly, but talked a lot.

Steve sat near the back right-hand corner of the room. A couple of desks away sat his buddy, Arnold "Butch" George. Across the room sat thirteen-year-old Jocelyne Gaudet, a girl with her hair in ringlets.

By morning recess, the police had arrived. One by one, students were called to the staff room. Police wanted to talk to anyone who had seen Lynne the previous evening.

When it was his turn, Steve told his story to police: he had met Lynne at the school, and near 7:30 p.m. he had given her a ride to the highway.

She had been angry with her parents, she told him. They had ridden along the county road, over the bridge near the swimming hole. He had crossed the bridge. He had left her at Highway 8. She had been heading to visit ponies at the white house on the highway, a few

hundred feet east of where Steve had left her.

Steven said he then returned to the bridge and looked back toward the highway. He had seen a car stop, likely a 1959 Chev, he said, with a yellow licence plate or sticker. The car pulled onto the county road from the highway, then pulled back at an angle, still pointing east.

From the bridge, 400 metres away, he saw Lynne get into the front seat.

Police were obviously very interested in Steve's account of the previous evening. That was no mystery. He had seen her last.

Steve did his best to provide details of the ride from the school to the highway. He was helpful. Friendly.

Those who knew Steve would have expected that. He was the top athlete in his school; even the younger kids admired him. He was 1.75 metres in height, and towered over most of his classmates. Light brown hair, hazel eyes, an infectious smile . . . it was no wonder girls liked him.

He was not an A student, but he was no failure, either. He achieved Bs and Cs — enough to get by. He liked to be active: fishing, swimming, riding his unique three-speed bike everywhere. When the school football team won the Little Grey Cup the previous fall, Steve was

identified by the local newspaper as the star of the team.

At Bob Lawson's farm across the road, he often helped with chores. "Others would fool around," Bob Lawson said. "But if I were in my welding shop, Steve paid attention. He liked to learn how to do things."

At home in his basement that year, Steve had built a go-cart. Instead of the usual axel pivot for steering, he had figured out a way to articulate the steering so each front wheel swivelled together, but independently. Like a real car.

In their hunt for Lynne, police tried to track down anyone who had been on the county road that evening.

The county road to the bridge near the highway was a popular place. A number of people, kids and adults, had walked, biked, and rode along that stretch that night. The heat and humidity — it was an unseasonal 31 degrees Celsius — had sent many to the river to fish, swim, or just find relief.

Lynne's parents originally thought she may have hitchhiked. In 1959, hitchhiking was not unusual. It wasn't a smart thing to do, and parents discouraged it. But Lynne and many of her friends had hitchhiked before. To town. Across the base. To the highway.

Lynne had argued with her parents about going swimming in the pool on the base. She had a grandmother in

Port Stanley. Her parents told police that perhaps she had fled there in anger.

Many twelve- to fourteen-year-olds go missing. Surely Lynne would be like most and show up tired and hungry a day or two later.

Wouldn't she?