

REAL JUSTICE:

Fourteen and Sentenced to Death

By Bill Swan

In 1959, a 14-year-old seventh grade student, Steven Truscott, was arrested and convicted of the rape and murder of his classmate, Lynne Harper.

He was sentenced to death.

Police and the courts missed an important point: he did not commit the crime.

REAL JUSTICE: Fourteen and Sentenced to Death, picks up the story the morning after Lynne Harper went missing. The chapters below – which do not appear in the book – provide the background to that fateful evening, where residents of the small-town like air base escaped unseasonal June heat by swimming, riding bikes and hunting turtles.

Lynne Harper:

June 9, 1959, 5:45 p.m.

Lynne Harper arrived home on the Clinton air base that afternoon at about 5:45 p.m. – and late for supper. She had played softball for her school team that afternoon. Her softball coach and health teacher, Helen Blair, had given her a ride home from the school diamond – a block and a half away.

Lynne lived on the Royal Canadian Air Force Base at Clinton, Ontario. Her father was an officer with the RCAF. They lived in PMQs: Permanent Married Quarters. She was twelve years old and in Grade 7.

By the time she came into the house, her parents had almost finished eating. Her father took his cup of tea into the living room. Her mother joined him.

Alone in the kitchen, Lynne ate: peas, carrots, some ham and perhaps chicken. She ate fast. She had other things on her mind.

A heat wave gripped Ontario that June. Temperatures reached 90 degrees Fahrenheit (33 degrees Celsius). Although summer was officially 12 days away, it was hot. Heat like this normally came in July.

When she finished her meal, Lynne had a request.

'Can I go swimming?' Lynne asked.

'At the base pool?' her mother asked. Swimming meant two possibilities: the swimming hole in the Bayfield River a mile down the road; and swimming at the pool on the base.

'Of course, the tank,' Lynne replied, as if that was obvious.

'You need an adult with you,' her father said gruffly, indicating that was not likely to happen.

'Not if I have a permit,' Lynne replied. 'I'll get one.'

Getting a permit involved a trip down the street to see Major Johnson, an officer who lived on the base and had authority over swimming passes. He lived down the street.

Lynne left. She returned in a few minutes. No pass. She needed an adult with her to go swimming.

Both parents said no. They had other plans for the evening.

Miffed – or worse – Lynne retreated to the bathroom. Her mother called her down to wash the supper dishes.

‘But Mom...’ She stomped her foot.

But no meant no. Parents must be obeyed. This was a military base. Discipline ruled. For kids, that meant: you do as you are told. Even when you are angry.

Period.

Lynne finished the dishes and then went out, stopping on the way to cuddle a neighbour’s baby in the back yard. “I’m angry with my mom,” she told Mrs. Macdougall. It was 6:30 p.m.

Going ‘Out’ meant hanging around the base. Lynne told neither of her parents where she was heading. Neither asked.

The air force base in Clinton was a small town of its own. It trained people in radio communications. It had offices; barracks; its own subdivision (PMQs); a swimming pool, a gymnasium. It even had its own school: Air Vice Marshal Hugh Campbell Public School had 12 rooms. This made it as large as many schools in the cities of Toronto or London at a time when one-room rural schools still dotted the countryside – many of them 100 years old.

AVM Hugh Campbell school was a gathering place even in a hot June evening. Most of the children on the base attended it.

Lynne headed for the school. She wore a light colour blouse, turquoise shorts, and shoes with low-cut socks. She arrived at the school minutes later.

The evening before, Lynne’s Girl Guide group had met there. Tonight, a group of Brownies met outside on the school grounds. These were a group for girls ages 7 to 11. Around the swings near a clump of trees some older kids hung out. On the nearby diamond, a group of boys played softball.

She liked people. She liked helping. Right away she jumped in to help Anne Nickerson. Mrs. Nickerson, 32 years old, was pack leader. Tonight’s activity was a scavenger hunt. Lynne helped divide the group of younger girls into groups of five. For her help, Lynne received a small, purple sucker. She played with a chain locket around her neck.

After the scavenger hunt was underway, Lynne and Mrs. Nickerson waited under a tree while the Brownies hunted for their treasure.

‘I don’t want to go home,’ Lynne said.

‘Why’s that?’ asked Mrs. Nickerson.

‘My mom’s mad at me,’ Lynne replied.

To Mrs. Nickerson, it seemed like a joke.

But Lynne’s attention soon shifted from the Brownies.

A tall, good-looking boy approached the school. He wore a light colour shirt, red jeans, and rode a green racing bicycle with multi-coloured tassels on the handlebar grips. The bike wobbled along the path. He obviously was not in a hurry.

‘Steve, Steve,’ she called out, and ran to him.

Steve Truscott was a classmate in Mr. Edgar’s class. They were both in Grade 7 in a room made up of Grade 7 and 8 students.

Just the evening before, Lynne had snapped at girl in their Girl Guide pack. The girl had told someone that Lynne liked Steven.

Some secrets are not to be shared. At the Guides meeting, Lynne was handing out prizes. To get even, Lynne withheld a red hairband and gave the girl a scribbler. She kept the hairband for herself.

At fourteen, Steven was older than his classmates. But even among the eighth grade boys, he stood out: good looking, and athletic. At a school field day he had won the most medals. He was quiet, almost shy. He was the kind of guy that younger students admired. Younger kids liked him. He didn't bully or pick on others. He kidded a lot.

Lynne bounded over and sat on the front wheel of Steven's bike.

'You going down to the river?' Lynne asked.

Steven Truscott

June 9, 1959, 5:30 p.m.

That same evening about 5:30 p.m. Steven Truscott arrived home to learn two things. First, it was his turn to babysit his younger brother and sister that evening. Drat. Oh, well. Second, his mother needed coffee. Could he go to the store to get some?

If his mother asked, the task was not an option.

'Hurry,' she told him. 'The base store closes at six.' It was then 5:50 p.m.

Steven jumped on his younger brother Billy's bike and raced to the store. He used Billy's bike because his older Brother, Ken, 15, had borrowed Steven's green English racing bike. He sped to the store and arrived just before it closed. He got the coffee and returned home.

When he returned with the coffee, Steven had some bad news: He had ripped the seat of his new red corduroy jeans.

'How did you do that?' his mother asked.

'On Billy's bike,' Steven replied.

She asked to see the rip. It was high on the right leg, near the seat.

'I also scratched myself,' Steven said.

'Oh, I think you will live.'

The rip in the jeans did not become a big deal until weeks later. The jeans were the only almost-new piece of clothing Steven wore that day.

"Your pants will do," his mother replied. "Go out and play for a few minutes. Supper will be ready."

The family ate that night while Mrs. Truscott dished up dinner and then dessert.

After supper, Steven excused himself and got up from the table.

'Be sure to be back by eight-thirty,' his mother said, 'we may be going out.'

Steven gave her a curious look.

'It is your turn to babysit,' said Mrs. Truscott. 'Your brother babysat last.'

That hadn't been his plan, but what can you do?

'Okay,' Steven replied.

He left the house about 6:30 p.m. This time, he rode his own green racing bicycle with the 24 centimetre long streamers on the handlegrips. He wore his well worn crepe soled shoes, a second hand shirt from a neighbour across the street, hand-me-down underwear from his father. And his red corduroy jeans with a brand-new rip in them.

Earlier that day, Steven had made plans with his friend Arnold "Butch" George to go swimming in the rock quarry five miles away. The babysitting duties made that a no-go. Instead, Steven rode around the base.

The air base was a small subdivision with three or four main streets with family homes. To ride from one side of the base to the other on a bike – a racing bike! – took three minutes if you wobbled on a hot June evening. From Steven's home to the school was less than a minute.

Near the school, Steven stopped for a moment. Gord Logan and Richard Gellatly came up behind him. They were riding double on Richard's bike. Gord had his fishing rod, swimming trunks.

Now, finding Steven, Gord asked, 'Are you still going to the gravel pits?'

That afternoon, Steven and Butch George had planned to go swimming in the gravel pits at Holmesville.

'I don't think I'll go,' Steven said. 'I have to babysit.' The gravel quarry was six kilometres (4 miles) away, a couple of kilometres west of Clinton. His babysitting chores had made that trip not practical.

'We're going down to the bridge,' Richard said.

'I might be down later,' Steven replied.

The bridge, about 1500 metres down the county road, was a popular spot in the late spring heat. Kids could hunt for turtles in the cooling, damp shade under the bridge. East of the bridge was the perfect swimming hole. Further east from the swimming hole the river bent south under the railway bridge. That second bridge was perfect for fishing.

Steven rode around aimlessly for a few more minutes. Eventually he headed toward the bridge. He biked north on the county road. He passed Lawson's woods. At the railway track he stopped. He scanned the road and the swimming hole.

He could see no friends.

Slowly, he turned the bike south again to return to the base.

He headed for home and then changed his mind. At the last minute, he headed west again to the school.

Later, he said this was about seven o'clock. At the time, it did not matter.

He approached the school by the small woods. He halted on the path, sitting on his bike. From here, he could see several groups scattered about. Brownies continued a meeting on the lawn near the school building. Some older kids, girls mostly, hung out by the swings. On the playground, a group of boys played softball.

On the path, Steven rested in the heat and watched. One girl, a classmate, Lynne Harper, broke away from the Brownie leader to approach him.

'Steve, Steve,' she called out.

Oh, no, Steve thought. Four days earlier, Steven had danced with Lynne at a party. He told another girl that he thought Lynne liked him, but it was not a feeling he was eager to return. At the time, he asked another girl to dance with him so he could avoid Lynne.

'She seems to be following me around,' Steven told a friend at the party adding that he didn't specially care for her.

But now in the school yard there was no avoiding her.

Always chatty, Lynne skipped over and sat on the front wheel of Steve's bike.

'You going down to the river?' Lynne asked.

'Yeah, why?' Steven replied. By the river she meant the bridge.

The bridge was on the County Road leading to Highway #8. Since it was a hot night, many, both adults and children, would be at the river.

The river was the Bayfield River, which met the County Road at the bridge. At the river kids, teens and adults could swim, hunt turtles, fish and escape the heat that clung to the mini-subdivision at the base.

'Give me a lift to the highway,' Lynne asked. 'I want to go to the white house on the highway to see the ponies.'

'I just came from the bridge,' Steven replied.

'Come on, give me a lift.'

'I have to be home by 8:30,' Steven said.

'Me, too,' Lynne replied. 'But first I want to see the ponies.'

Steven shrugged.

'Okay,' he agreed. 'But just to the highway.'

They left together. Steven pushed the bike and Lynne walked beside him.

As they passed the kindergarten classroom, Steven peeked at the clock inside. It was 7:25 p.m.

They walked out the school drive to a connector road. From there, they walked another 100 metres to the county road.

At the county road, Lynne hopped on the cross-bar of the bicycle. They biked north off the base.

The highway was less than two kilometres away. To get to it, they had to cross over the bridge on the Bayfield River.

The bicycle ride

June 9, 1959, 7:25 p.m.

When Steven and Lynne reached the county road in front of the school, Lynne got on the crossbar. Steven began to pedal.

The highway was less than two kilometres away. Alone, this would take Steven about four minutes. With a passenger, the ride would be six or seven minutes.

Plenty of time to get back and babysit, he thought.

They headed north. The County Road was paved, but it was a country road with a shallow ditch on either side. As they left the school, to the right was Bob Lawson's farm house and barn; to the left, O'Brien's farm.

Within a couple of hundred metres they met Richard Gellatly. Richard had been returning home on his bicycle to get his swimming trunks. He had left Gord Logan at the swimming hole.

Steven nodded at Richard.

Steven and Lynne continued past Lawson's woods on the right hand side for about 800 metres. A dark car was parked on the road by the woods. As the woods fell back along a laneway, they continued north.

'I'm mad at my father,' Lynne said.

'Why's that?'

'He wouldn't let me go swimming,' she replied.

'In the tank? You need an adult to swim in the tank,' Steven said.

'And he wouldn't go,' Lynne said.

'You could always go in the swimming hole,' Steve replied.

'Ewe, yuck. Cows waded in that,' Lynne replied. Then: 'Do you have a fishing pole? I mean at the river.'

'Yes,' Steven replied. He and his friend Leslie Spilsbury kept the pole at the bridge so they didn't have to cart it back and forth.

They rode across the railway tracks. To the right just past the tracks, the road widened to provide a parking lot. A hundred yards further on, they crossed the bridge over the Bayfield River.

The bridge, and the river beneath it, attracted both kids and adults in the hot weather. Under the bridge, some kids waded; others searched for turtles. Downstream, a couple of hundred metres away, several boys swam in the swimming hole. Beyond that, in a bend in the river, more boys fished from the railway bridge.

As they crossed the bridge, they could hear the sounds of summer, of swimmers splashing, of echoes from voices under the damp cool of the bridge.

As Steven and Lynne crossed over the bridge, Dougie Oates, 11, stood on the east side of the road. He stepped aside to watch them pass. Shyly, he looked at Lynne.

"Hi," he said, waving his one free hand.

Lynne waved back weakly, also with one hand. The other hand firmly gripped the handle bars. She smiled at him.

It was a smile Dougie Oates would never forget.

At the swimming hole, Gord Logan looked up. He saw Steven and Lynne cross the bridge heading north. He waved.

Steven and Lynne continued north. At the highway, Lynne jumped down from the crossbar.

'Thanks,' she said.

Steven shrugged. He didn't bother to ask how she would return home. Lynne stuck an arm to hitch a ride.

Steven turned to return to the home. He pedalled slowly back to the bridge. There, he turned once more to see Lynne with her arm thrust out as though she was hitch hiking. From the distance he could not see her thumb, but the gesture could only mean one thing.

She had told Steven she was going to the white house down the road where there were ponies. The house was

500 metres along the highway on the north side.

As he watched, a car pulled partly into the county road and then swerved right again onto the highway shoulder in front of Lynne. He saw Lynne get into the front passenger door of a new grey 1959 Chevrolet car with lots of chrome and a distinctive yellow licence plate or bumper sticker.

He was the last person – not counting the killer – to see her alive.

Chapter 4:

Babysitting

June 9, 1959, 8:30 p.m.

Steven hung around at the bridge for a few moments.

He watched some of his friends in the swimming hole a couple of hundred metres from the bridge. Swimming was tempting, but he had to be home in less than an hour, and he had not watch.

He turned his English racing bike south again, heading back to the schoolyard. returned to the schoolyard. Several young people were gathered around the swings. The boys playing on the softball diamond continued their game.

Steven stopped for a moment to watch the game.

“Hey, what did you do with Harper, feed her to the fishes?” asked one of the boys, joking.

The friends gathered around laughed. Steven joined in the laughter.

“No, I took her to the highway like she asked,” Truscott replied.

Yeah, right, someone joshed. Kidding about girls was common.

Steven continued on. He joined another group by the swings. Then he moved to a group of boys his own age, including his older brother, Ken.

Ken reminded Steven that it was his turn to babysit. They had a younger brother, Billy, 9, and a sister, Barbara, 7. As older siblings, Ken and Steven took turns babysitting.

“I’ll be there,” said Steven.

Ken then pulled rank on his younger brother. Since Steven was going to be babysitting, he would not need his bicycle, would he? So why don’t they trade bicycles for the rest of the evening?

Kenneth at the time was riding Billy’s bike. This was the same small-framed bike on which Steven had ridden to the store to get coffee. (This was the bike on which he had ripped his new jeans). Steven agreed to the swap of bicycles.

Steven then looked at his older brother. “What are you doing with my shoes on?” he asked.

“Well, if you want them you can have them,” Ken replied.

Ken at the time was wearing Steven’s boots; and Steven was wearing his own worn crepe sneakers with the crepe soles. Even if they swapped, Ken would still be wearing a pair of Steven’s shoes.

The family tradition with both clothes and bicycles seemed to be: first up, best dressed. No one seemed to recall where little brother Billy fit into the sharing. The small bike did belong to him but he didn’t seem to have

much say.

Following this exchange – by this time it was about 8:20 p.m. or so – Steven took little Billy's bike and headed home.

He arrived home at 8:25. "Well, I made it, Mom," he said as he barged in the back door.

Mrs. Truscott was pleased. She and Mr. Truscott were headed with another couple to the Sergeant's mess. She gave Steven his instructions on baby sitting. He was to make sure that Billy and Barbara got to bed before 10 p.m. The parents would not be late.

But it was shortly after 11 when Mr. And Mrs. Truscott arrived home. Mrs. Truscott checked on Billy and Barbie. Both were sound asleep.

She then checked on Steven. He was in bed, asleep, despite the heat in the upstairs bedroom.

Steven would spend only one more night at home in his own bed.

REAL JUSTICE: Fourteen and Sentenced to Death can be ordered from this website (autographed and personalized); from Lorimer (www.Lorimer.ca); or <http://blueheronbooks.com/>