

OPINION

A place at the bottom of the lake

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

Chester Gillette had it all worked out. Cashing in on his uncle's lofty position in town, Chester mingled with some of the area's loveliest ladies. He was also seeing Grace Brown on the side. Everything was perfect.

Until Grace got pregnant.

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Born on March 20, 1886, to a farm couple in the bucolic New York town of South Otselic, Grace Brown was a simple and respectful young lady.

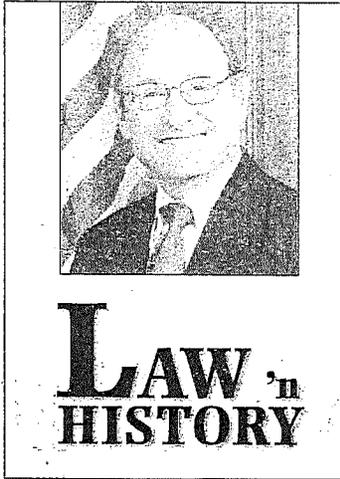
After attending school, she sought greener pastures away from home and moved to Cortland, N.Y., in 1904. She soon found employment in the Gillette skirt factory, where she eventually met Chester.

Harkening from Montana, Chester Gillette came from a missionary family and attended Oberlin College in Ohio, from which he flunked out. After working some odd jobs, he made his way to Cortland and his uncle's factory.

Relying on his good looks and charm, as well as his uncle's reputation, in short time Chester was partying with the town's most desirable young women. On the side, he clandestinely was seeing Grace.

When Grace announced in mid-May that she was pregnant, a shocked Chester convinced her to leave town and return to the family farm. Upon arriving back home, she kept her pregnancy a secret. She also started writing Chester daily letters, expressing her

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love and beseeching him to take responsibility for his actions.

For months, her pleading missives went unanswered, until the day Chester wrote and announced that they should meet and travel to the Adirondacks. She was intoxicated at the thought of finally being with her beloved Chester.

She packed her entire wardrobe. Chester, meanwhile, packed but a small suitcase. He knew his stay with her would be a short one.

They departed on Monday, July 9, traveling by train. En route, Chester unexpectedly ran into two female acquaintances from Cortland, whom he promised to join by the end of the week.

The journey was a long one, taking a few days. After registering at the hotel — she as Grace Brown of South Otselic, and he, ominously, as Carl Graham of Albany — they sauntered down to the mighty Big Moose Lake and rented a rowboat for a casual cruise on its gentle waters.

Oddly, Chester brought along his suitcase, which had a tennis racket attached to its side. Later, numerous people would recall seeing it.

Although no one is exactly sure what happened on the lake, prosecutors claimed that Chester rowed to a secluded cove, unstrapped the tennis racket, smashed Grace over the head, and tossed her overboard. It was of little concern to him whether she was rendered unconscious as he knew she could not swim. Either way, once she went in, she wasn't coming out.

The deed done, Chester rowed to shore and hustled through the woods, joyful at the notion that he was now a free man, no longer burdened by Grace. On his short journey, he had not anticipated encountering three hikers — who distinctly remembered the rare sight of the man hauling lug-



CHESTER GILLETTE



GRACE BROWN

gage through the wilderness.

Within a day, Grace's body was discovered. When the police could not locate her companion, "Carl Graham of Albany," they started asking questions. It quickly became apparent that they had more than a tragic drowning on their hands.

Three days later, Chester was arrested near Eagle Bay where he had joined his two female vacationing friends. In addition to Chester, the police also had his tennis racket, Grace's letters to him, and witnesses placing them together.

They also had a suspect who denied even knowing the deceased.

The charges brought a firestorm of attention: a handsome young man accused of murdering his pregnant girlfriend who had written him a fistful of love letters.

The prosecutor methodically laid out the evidence before the jury. He even read many of the letters Grace had sent Chester, which showcased her devotion, love, doubt, anger, fear and shame. Many in court were brought to tears, hearing the tale of a naive young woman disastrously falling in love with the wrong man.

Countering the cry of murder, Chester's attorney argued that a highly distraught Grace, unable to cope with her fragile condition, had committed suicide. When Chester told her marriage was out of the question, she jumped from the boat, hysterical, and quickly sunk to the lake's murky bottom.

Some of her letters even supported the premise. In one, written just six days prior to her death, she penned a notion of dying.

The jury didn't buy it; neither did the judge. Chester was found guilty and given the death penalty.

Epilogue

Prior to his electrocution on March 30, 1908, Chester met with his mother and a priest. While the substance of their conversation was never revealed, both mother and priest later expressed the belief that the jury had spoken correctly. Indeed, some of Chester's last letters indicated the same.

The tale was so famous that books and movies grew from its legacy. The most well-known: a 1951 movie, "A Place in the Sun," starring Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift and Shelley Winters.