

Preface to the Grace Brown story:

The history of Grace Brown is not merely of local interest. The story found its way into American culture when author Theodore Dreiser adapted it into his classic novel, [An American Tragedy](#). Years later, the novel was made into a successful film called [A Place in the Sun](#), starring Elizabeth Taylor and Raymond Burr.

The History of Grace Brown by Kristina Stiles (class of 1996)



The murder of Grace Brown in 1906 was an event that changed the lives of many people in the small village of South Otselic, New York. Her name is still whispered in households throughout America, and her memory shall live on forever in the hearts of the people in the small, farming community of Chenango County.

Grace "Billy" Brown was brought up on a farm in upstate New York. The small Brown farm was a typical, self-sufficient dairy farm operated by the family. "The barn was full of chickens and pigs, the garden full of vegetables and the orchard full of fruit" (Brandon 43). Grace's life was that of any farm girl at the turn of the century. She attended the Tallet Hill school just under a mile away. There she made many friends including her teacher, Maude Kenyon. Excerpts from a diary kept by Grace expresses feelings that she sometimes had of Miss Kenyon.

Miss Kenyon has been just awful cross of late. She thinks she is so smart. I can't bear her. . . Miss K got a letter from Doctor- guess that's what makes her so cross. I can stand it though. I have one consolation to console me. She's a Kenyon (Diary of Grace Brown 3/28/02, Murder on Big Moose?).

The village of South Otselic in western Chenango County was a small, quiet village with many different buildings, shops and stores to make the life easier for anyone living there.



The town had several three-story buildings, including the Cox Block and the Perkins Block, across the street. Both had general stores on the ground floor and living quarters on the second floor. The Cox Block had a Masonic Temple on the third floor and the Perkins Block had an opera house - a large hall which was used for public meetings, lectures and visiting entertainers more than operas (Brandon 46).

The small village also had a large employer, Gladding Fish Line Factory. There, 300 machines were run daily to make fishing line to be used in many different parts of the country. At the same time South Otselic had:

...a print shop, a weekly newspaper, a box factory, a large harness shop, the three-story Gothic House hotel next to the Cox Block, two hardware stores, a clothing and dry good store, several small shops, a tannery, a saw mill, several creameries and cheese factories, a bowling alley and billiard room (Brandon 46).

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South Otselic may have been isolated, but it still was a community dependent upon itself. The small village thrived on its own, and many people were content and happy to be living there. "South Otselic may have been isolated but it was not backward" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 34).

Grace seemed to be a girl who wanted to get out of the small town and off the farm to see and experience a different life in the city. Her way out was her sister, Ada Hawley. Ada had recently married and had moved to Cortland with her husband, Clarence.

She (Grace) was a very typical farm girl of the era, an era when farm girls were beginning to break away and be no longer just creatures on the farm, but to wear the same clothes as city girls. . . (J. Brownell, Murder on Big Moose?).

Soon Grace found herself amidst the business of the city. She must have found it is so much different from her old country farm. She quickly found employment in The Gillette Skirt Factory. "The pay was but a few dollars a week, but it was more money than she had ever seen on the farm" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 41). When Ada and Clarence left Cortland after their son, Robert, died, Grace had a decision to make. She could return home to South Otselic, or she could stay in Cortland, possibly as a boarder, and continue to work at the skirt factory. She chose to stay.



HOW IT LOOKED IN 1908 - In a photo of the skirt factory, the words GILLETTE SKIRT CO. are painted on the side toward the left, behind the tree.



THE SKIRT FACTORY TODAY - This is how the skirt factory building, now an appliance warehouse, looks today.

She moved from Fifth Avenue to the former Wheeler farmhouse on the edge of the city where Mrs. Wheeler took her as a boarder. Nothing could have been more proper and the walk to work was short - the factory could be seen from the front door (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 41).

This was just the beginning of a new life for Billy Brown. Soon she would become involved with Chester Gillette and discover she was pregnant with his child. "At the time, unwed mothers were outcasts. It was not uncommon for girls to commit suicide rather than face public shame" (Unsolved Mysteries 01/96). Grace had a huge problem on her hands. She had hoped that Chester would offer to marry her, yet he never brought up the subject.

"There is no indication that Chester offered. If Grace sought marriage as a way out, Chester failed to step into the breach and there was no spring wedding, or even a promise of one" (Brownell/ Wawrzaszek 63). Grace returned to the farm in South Otselic for awhile where she communicated with Chester by mail. A copy of part of a letter will illustrate her sadness:



My Dear Chester - I am writing to tell you that I am coming back to Cortland. I simply can't stay here any longer. Mamma worries and wonders why I cry so much and I am just about sick. Please come and take me away to some place, dear. I came up home this morning and I just can't help crying all the time just as I did that night. My headache is dreadful to-night. I am afraid you won't come and I am so frightened, dear. I know you will think it queer, but I can't help it. You have said you will come and sometimes I just know you will, but then I think of other things and I am just as certain you won't come. I want you to write me, dear, just as soon as you get this and tell me the exact day you can come. I will come back in a little while, I can't stay here, dear, and please don't ask me to much longer. . . (June 20, 1906 Grace's letter to Chester, The Letters).

This is one of many letters written by Grace to Chester while she was in South Otselic. Grace did receive a letter from Chester the very next day. It was not at all what she wanted to hear. "Chester's first letter arrived, but Grace was very disappointed about its length and tone after pouring her out to him all week" (Brandon 93).

At the same time Grace Brown was living in South Otselic, New York, Chester Gillette was traveling with his family in the Salvation Army. He traveled and lived in such places as Hawaii, Washington, Montana, Oregon, Wyoming, California, Ohio, and New York. He had worked many odd jobs growing up, but his family soon discovered that he needed proper schooling. "In the winter of 1900-1901 the family arranged for Chester's entry into Oberlin's academy, as the preparatory division was now called" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 48). Family embers had attended the academy earlier while living in Ohio. During his summer vacations, Chester went to Cortland to work for his uncle, Horace, in the Gillette Skirt Factory. His grades seemed to drop, however, and he opted not to return to Oberlin in the spring of his second year. He moved to Chicago in June of 1903 and took a job selling books and was a brakeman on the railroad. A summer before, Horace Gillette had made an offer for Chester to come to Cortland full time and work for him. He finally accepted and surprised his uncle by showing up in Cortland. "By the beginning of April he had arrived at his uncle's house in Cortland. Once again, Chester was starting a new life" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 52). His salary was ten dollars a week and it never changed. He stayed with his uncle and family until he found a place to stay. He quickly fit into the scene in Cortland. "By summer he was familiar with most of the streets in the small city and with the villages that lay just beyond" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 54).

It was within the Gillette Skirt Factory that Chester and Grace first met. "She cut sections of skirt material from bolts of cloth which were drawn from the stockroom" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 56). Chester seemed to be attracted to the petite figure of Grace Brown. "He discovered excuses to visit her table and what started off as small talk soon grew into friendship. The country girl and the boy from the West paired off" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 56). During that summer Chester called on Grace frequently. There were summer parties to attend, but it seems that most of their time together was spent in the parlor of her sister's home. "Left alone after the Hawleys had gone to sleep, Chester and Grace kissed and held each other on the couch in the parlor" (Brandon 67). He did not call every night as many nights were spent with relatives and close friends.

He frequently played tennis on weekends and went on group outings with other friends who owned bicycles. Most of all, however, he enjoyed swimming and boating on the nearby lakes and the parties with the young people he had met through friends at that factory and through Fred Gillette (Brandon 68).

This would suggest that Chester had other women on his arm in public at times. "There were other girls from the factory whom he saw occasionally, much to Billy's distress, and he soon discovered girls among the students at the Normal School" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 58). She still seemed to love and care for Chester very much even though he tended to neglect her. "She was in love probably for the first time in

her life, and she wanted to see this thing through no matter what" (C. Brandon Unsolved Mysteries). She continued to do her best to hold on to Chester despite many warnings from her friends and co-workers. "Her friends were warning her that he wasn't what he seemed to be, that he was something different. And I think she had no experience with that type of person" (C. Brandon Unsolved Mysteries). When she discovered her pregnancy she was terribly distraught and emotional. Her co-workers noticed a change in her spirit, and Chester acted the same as he had before; calling on Grace sometimes during the week while still attending parties with other women of the community.

When she returned home to South Otselic, several letters were written to Chester pleading and begging him to help her and take care of the problem. She spoke of death at times and her letters were sometimes threatening to Chester. Friends in Cortland had written to her of how he had been having a wonderful time with the ladies. Her letters sometimes implied that she would come to Cortland and expose him as a man who had gotten an unmarried girl pregnant. Suggestions about coming back to Cortland could be found in her letters. This made Chester uneasy and he quickly responded with a letter of his own. Two days later Grace received a letter from Chester telling her not to worry and to take a trip with her parents. This would not allow her to go to Cortland, and it was the last thing Chester wanted. His family name had been an upstanding one in the community for some time, and he did not wish to ruin that reputation. Words such as these were found in her letters:

If I die I hope then you can be happy. I hope I can die. The doctor says I will, and then you can do just as you like. . . Oh, dear, please come and take me away. . . I want you to-night and I am so blue (June 21, 1906 Grace's letter to Chester, The Letters).

It was soon arranged for Grace and Chester to get away to the Adirondacks to spend time together. This must have eased Grace's mind at least slightly. It was planned that they would meet in DeRuyter, a village much like South Otselic, a short distance away. From there they took the railroad where they finally arrived in the beautiful, scenic, Adirondack Mountains. Grace had told her parents that she was going back to work in Cortland again. While staying in different hotels alone and with Grace, Chester used names such as "Charles George or "Carl Graham." Soon after the couple arrived at the Glenmore Hotel on Big Moose Lake, the couple went sight-seeing in a small rowboat on the lake. An interesting point about this is the fact that Grace went out on the lake with Chester and could not swim. Also, Chester brought along a suitcase with his tennis racket. "Then, according to Chester, they just floated for a long period of time, reading magazines and enjoying the sunshine" (Brandon 133). After the couple did not return in the evening, the boatkeeper, Robert Morrison, sent people out to look for them. "By morning there was still no word of the missing boat" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 90).

They soon discovered the overturned boat, yet there was no sign of anyone around. A thirteen-year-old boy, Roy Higby discovered the tiny body of Grace Brown.

Peering over the side Higby spotted a white blob in the dark waters of the bay. Men in rowboats grappled for the sunken form and hauled on board the steamer the body of a dead girl. It was Grace Brown (Brownell/Wawrzaszek90).

They continued to search the area and found only a hat and a coat. Chester Gillette, a.k.a. Carl Graham, was no where to be found. Chester Gillette traveled around the lakes and ended up at Eagle Bay. He made plans to meet up with friends from Cortland that were also in the area. As he was spending time alone in the mountains the police were close behind him. The police quickly began to put the pieces together and met up with him in the dining area of the Arrowhead Hotel. He was arrested and taken to Herkimer to be held for the Grand Jury (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 101).

The proceedings for the trial began. The press seemed to become heavily involved in the case and spent much time in Herkimer, New York where Chester was in jail. "Curiosity about Chester mounted, but the

authorities decided to keep the prisoner from the public. He was to be allowed no visitors except for family and attorneys" (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 103). District Attorney Ward worked diligently on the case by sending people to Big Moose, and Cortland to find all the information he would need to prosecute Chester Gillette for the murder of Billy Brown.

In less than a week Ward had collected an impressive mass of evidence and was readying it for the courtroom. He was uncommonly generous with the men and women of the press and newspapers immediately printed every detail of Chester's vacation itinerary (Brownell/Wawrzaszek 105).

The outlook was not good for Gillette. He did claim innocence throughout the entire trial and received some sympathy from several females who wrote to him. Chester Gillette was tried and found guilty for the murder of Grace Brown. He was sentenced to death in the electric chair in the Auburn State Prison.

Many people have been fascinated with this story. Joseph W. Brownell and Patricia Wawrzaszek researched and wrote together *Adirondack Tragedy*, and Craig Brandon spent years of research and interviewing before he wrote *Murder in the Adirondacks*. Maude E. Gould wrote a song dedicated in the memory of Grace Brown entitled "Entreating." In a book, *Body, Boots, and Britches*, a ballad can be found: "The Ballad of Grace Brown and Chester Gillette." One powerful stanza stands out among the rest.

They were out of the view of the people, where no one could hear her last call
And nobody knows how it happened
But Gillette and God knows it all (Body, Boots and Britches 445).

Still today people ponder the events that took place ninety years ago. Some believe that Chester was innocent and that Grace Brown fell overboard in an epileptic seizure as she is rumored to have suffered from epilepsy. Others feel that Chester was guilty because even if she had fallen over the side on her own he made no attempt to save her or get help. People with different views of the outcome must agree that it is a tragedy. Grace Brown was a burden to Chester Gillette because he was determined to have fun and stay young while Grace was carrying his baby, a sign of maturity and adulthood. It was a constant reminder to him that his life was to change. A girl was killed at the age of twenty and for a reason that has left many still wondering why.

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