

The south end of Waterdown's fairgrounds, showing the James house at the left. Photographer unknown.
(Author's collection)

THE BANG JOLTED SARAH JAMES AWAKE. The family's house was on the southern edge of the Waterdown Fairgrounds, so they were used to hearing strange sounds at odd times—even at 4:30 a.m. It could have been a window slamming shut or a car's backfire—Sarah couldn't be sure, so she called out to the far bedroom, which her daughter Gustie shared with her husband John Miller. She had bid them goodnight a few hours earlier and had left them talking, apparently quite normally, John in bed and Gustie lying beside him, still clothed, on top of the quilt. For a long time, Sarah heard nothing—then a chilling response.

"John has shot himself."

Sarah and Gus James were in the room in an instant. It was a gruesome sight. John Miller lay in bed, blood flowing from a ghastly wound in his head and oozing from his mouth and nose. A deep red stain was spreading across the bedclothes. Remarkably, he was fully conscious.

"I'm going to fetch Dr. Hopper," Gustie announced, and before anyone could speak she was out the back door and into the churchyard. She picked her way between the headstones and then walked south on Mill Street. She was approaching the Presbyterian Church when she heard footsteps behind her. It was her eighteen-year-old brother Storman.

"Gustie, where are you going?" he asked. "Doc Hopper's house is the other way. I'll go with you." But they had gone only a few steps when Gustie stopped.

"I'm not right, brother. I'm feeling so faint," she stammered. Her breathing was quick and shallow and even in the darkness, Storman could see that all the colour had drained from her face.

"You go back home, Gustie," he said. "I'll get the doctor. You go home—we'll be there soon." He turned and ran along Church Street, towards the Hopper house. It was only a few blocks, and it was no more than fifteen minutes before Dr. Hopper was in the James house, standing beside John Miller.

It took him just a moment to see that John's condition was beyond his abilities. The bullet had entered near the temple and come out of his eye socket, close to the bridge of his nose. Storman was despatched to the nearest telephone, in the Anglican church rectory, to call for an ambulance from Hamilton. Incredibly, John remained conscious and lucid. Hopper's first question was obvious.

"Who shot you, John?"

"I don't have any idea. I was asleep and got woke up by a real bad stinging in the side of my head. I put my hand up and there was blood all over it. I looked for Gustie but I couldn't see anything—still can't."

Hopper was troubled. Sarah James had relayed Gustie's first words to her—"John has shot himself"—but Miller's version of events was totally different. By that time the village constable, George Potts, had reached the house, so he and Hopper made a quick search of the room. What they found did nothing to ease the doctor's concerns.

At the bottom of the bed was a spent cartridge, almost certainly from the round that hit Miller. The bullet itself couldn't be found. In the folds of the quilt, Potts found three more cartridges, unused. And then, under Gustie's

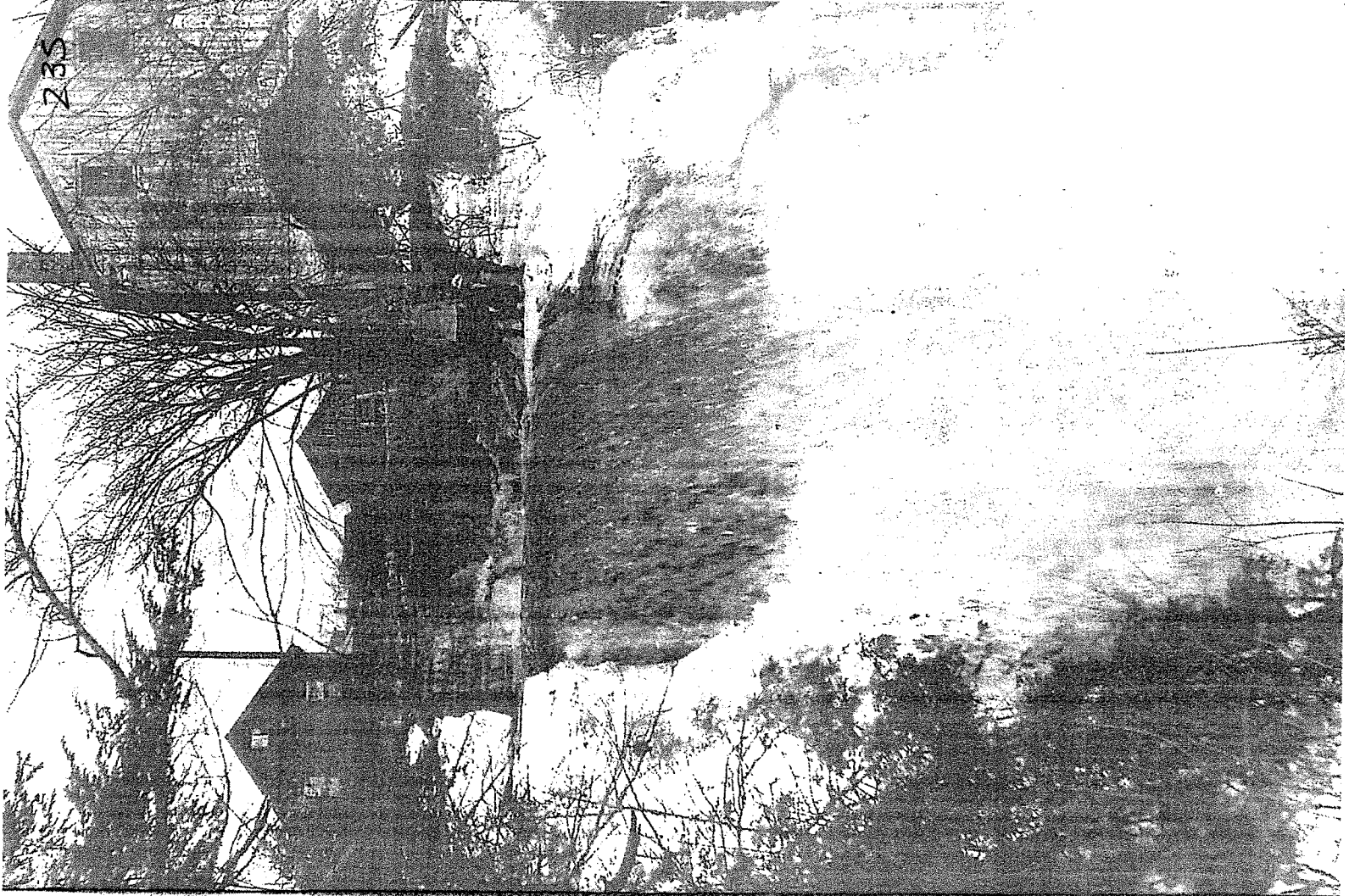
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pillow, Hopper found a gun. Miller thought it was probably the same gun they had borrowed from a friend to go shooting a few days earlier. They had kept it because they planned to go again in a day or two. Hopper looked more closely at it. What he discovered stunned him. The gun had been reloaded with a new cartridge and had been cocked, ready to fire again.

Hopper was no detective, but he knew that Miller, blinded and bleeding freely from a gunshot wound to the head, would not have been able to eject the spent cartridge, locate a new one in the folds of the quilt, load and cock the gun, and place it under Gustie's pillow. It simply wasn't possible. The doctor turned to ask Gustie for an explanation. She wasn't there. In the confusion, no one had noticed her absence and Storman, sent right back out to call for an ambulance, had forgotten to say that he had met up with Gustie near the Presbyterian Church and had told her to go home. Obviously she had gone somewhere else. But where?

Once again, Storman was sent out, this time with Constable Potts, to make a search. They began in front of the Presbyterian Church, the last place she had been seen, and worked their way in all directions from there. Back up Mill Street to the 4th Concession road, east to the mills at the foot of Victoria Street, along John Street to the west. By now, it was dawn and there were a few people around to take up the search, poking around in their gardens and sheds. Storman and Potts continued south on Mill Street, crossed Dundas, and followed Waterdown Road down towards the creek. Just beyond the railway bridge, they came to the Palmer property beside the Great Falls. It was a beautiful August morning, warm and calm, and the sun sparkled on the water as it plunged over the lip of the falls to the pool below. There, doubled over in ten feet of water, was the body of Gustie Miller.

No one will ever know Gustie's agonies, both before and after the shooting, but over the next twenty-four hours, details emerged to suggest why she might have attempted to kill her husband, and then succeeded in killing herself. They seemed to be, as the *Spectator* said, a most affectionate young couple, but the war years had been tough on them. They had only three months together after their marriage in March 1915; John had gone overseas in June to be posted to the staff at Shorncliffe, where he became



Facing page: The Great Falls in Waterdown, where Gustie Miller's life ended. Photo by Will Reid. (Author's collection)

the sergeant in charge of the stables and grooms. In the spring of 1916, he came down with severe bronchitis and tonsillitis and had to be confined to Westcliffe Canadian Eye and Ear Hospital, where his tonsils were removed. The surgery seemed to affect John more deeply and he had a nervous collapse while convalescing. The army decided to send him for a month's furlough in Canada; it was later extended by another month and when he returned to England in September, he was posted to the Canadian hospital at Taplow. Another month in hospital in January 1917, and in June he was back in hospital with appendicitis. In December, John was before a medical board. He complained of a steady dull pain in his right hip that under strain became sharp and disabled him for a few minutes; the doctors put this down to a fall from a horse in June 1916 which caused bursitis and partial loss of function in the hip joint. The board also determined that he was of a "nervous temperament" and recommended that he be returned to Canada as category B3. He sailed home on the *Olympic* in February 1918 and went before another medical board at Ravina Barracks in Toronto in March. That board judged John to be category E, unfit for service. He was officially discharged on 14 March 1918.⁶⁷ Curiously, upon his return, the *Spectator* reported that he had been with the field artillery in the First Contingent and had been wounded at Sanctuary Wood, none of which was true. He got a job with Hamilton Bridge Works and he and Gustie moved into a house at 90 Birch Avenue in Hamilton, but in August 1918 they moved back to Watertown, to live in the James house.

Gustie Miller had been pregnant when John went overseas, but miscarried at six months. The loss of the child seems to have started a downward spiral in her health, both physical and mental. She was in and out of hospital and doctors' offices and had two operations, neither of which improved her condition. The couple had moved back to Watertown largely because Gustie's health had worsened, but a return to familiar surroundings didn't seem to help. "The past week," reported the *Spectator*, "she had been in exceptionally poor health." She had already attempted suicide once and the family came to the conclusion that Gustie, tortured by seemingly endless health problems and convinced that John too was suffering, decided to end both of their lives. She shot him in the head and reloaded the gun to shoot herself, but was prevented from carrying it out by the alarm raised in the house. Leaving the house, she probably never intended to go to Dr. Hopper's house but instead headed in a different direction—when Storman met her at the Presbyterian

Church, it was only a minor hitch in her plan—and threw herself over the falls in her despair.⁶⁸

Two days later, villagers gathered at the James home for Gustie's funeral. Out front, John Vance's ornate horse-drawn hearse was waiting to take her on her final journey. Leaving the house, it turned down John Street and then south on Mill, the same way that Gustie had gone in the hours after the shooting. East on Dundas Street, the hearse clopped across the bridge over Grindstone Creek and climbed up Vinegar Hill. It turned down George Street and pulled into the Union Cemetery, where six pallbearers tenderly carried her coffin to the grave. As the minister read the rites of committal, Gustie Miller was lowered to a rest that she seems not to have enjoyed in life. No headstone marks the place.

Was Gustie a casualty of the war? Would she and John have had a long and happy life together if they had lived in a peaceful world, or would some other tragedy have befallen them? On 17 October, a young farm labourer named Leonard Gravelle jumped from the back of a moving automobile on Highway 6 to catch a rabbit. But as his brother watched from his buggy behind, Leonard struck his head and fractured his skull. Within hours he was dead.⁶⁹ Ironically, Leonard had been conscripted in May but was almost immediately discharged as "Erroneously Ordered to Report" because he was too poor a physical specimen to be of use to Canada's army—so far, at least.⁷⁰ If he had gone into uniform, would he have lived to inherit the family farm and grow old with the land? Or would he have fallen victim to something else?