

The Darker Side: Christmas Day Shooting

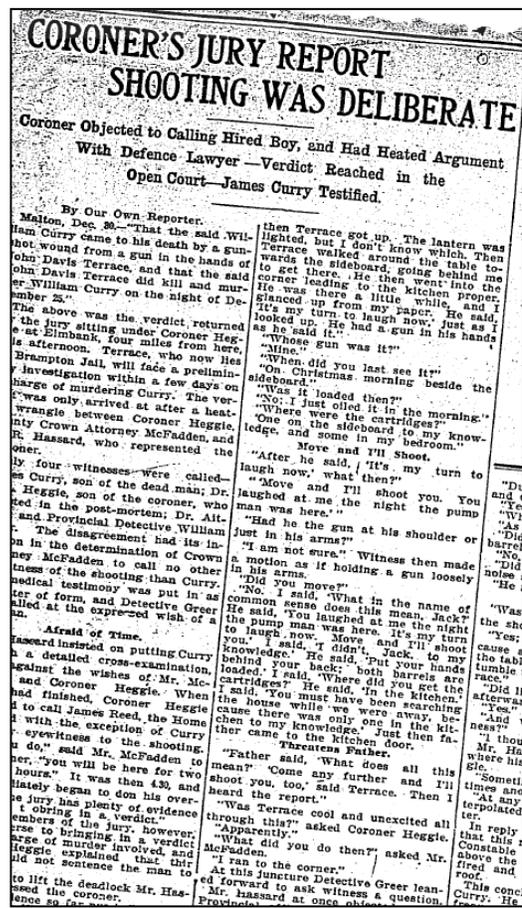
By Jenny Walker



The season of goodwill was found to be sadly lacking as John Davis Terrace shot a well-known farmer to death on Christmas day 1907, yet why he did so is a mystery to this day. Indeed Terrace, aged 25, had only been in the country a short time; having landed in Toronto on the "Manitoba" on the evening of December 4th. He began looking for work as a painter but instead found employment as a farmhand for which his small frame of 125pounds was poorly suited.

John Terrace's home town was in Wallsend on the River Tyne in the North East of England where he had left a wife and sister as he set sail for the new world. This area which marked the end of Hadrian's famous wall was one of heavy industry with coalmining and shipbuilding being the most prominent, accounting for much of the employment in the town. Shipyards like Swan Hunter, and Parsons Marine Steam Turbine Company, were famous for building the Mauritania in 1906, and the Turbinia of 1884 which revolutionised the shipping industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was not a time of high emigration and questions must be asked as to why Terrace came to Canada in a period of relative growth and prosperity in his home town, especially as the voyage was particularly hazardous at that time of year.

He was taken on as a farmhand on a month's trial by James Curry, ex-Reeve of Toronto Township. On Christmas day 1907, Mr Curry had been out for dinner at his sister's house with his father William aged about 80, and a 12 year old farm boy named Jimmy Reid. The party returned home around 8pm and Terrace helped James Curry and the boy to put the horses away for the night. They all returned to the kitchen and "played checkers and read the papers until the old man retired shortly before nine o'clock". At this point, the papers of the day reported that Terrace then stood up, and picked up a shotgun which was standing in the corner of the room. He pointed it at James Curry and said, "You _____, you laughed at me when we were fixing the pump the other day. It's my turn to laugh now". James was not unduly concerned as he believed the gun to be empty. William Curry reappeared and told the immigrant to "Put down



that gun! Don't make a fool of yourself". Unfortunately Terrace pointed the gun at him and fired, inflicting a mortal wound in his left breast. A struggle ensued between the younger Curry and the accused, and Terrace attacked the homeowner with a metal stove shaker which was used to shake the ash down into the lower catch pan and make the stove burn more efficiently. In the darkness and confusion, the gun was discharged again into the kitchen ceiling and eventually James Curry emerged as the victor and Terrace was bound with twine and the farm boy sent for help, but not before the accused was knocked unconscious to subdue him. A short time later, Dr Aikens arrived but there was little he could do for the victim, and William Curry died from his wounds a short while later. Crown Attorney McFayden and County Constable Broddy arrived the next morning and took the accused into custody.



Whilst there was much speculation at the time, the Toronto Star reported that the prisoner had never meant to hurt anyone and had only picked up the gun "for a bit of foolery", but the young Jimmy Reid later testified under oath that he had seen Terrace in James Curry's bedroom earlier in the day looking for something which was later assumed to be shotgun cartridges. However the defence did attempt to discredit the boy's testimony as he had previously been "whipped for telling falsehoods" but in this case he remained resolute that he had told the truth.

The public were keen to determine Terrace's motives; one theory was that the prisoner was annoyed at being discharged. Being of slight build, John Terrace had never measured up as a farm hand and James Curry had decided to let him go but had said he could stay until after the Christmas holidays. The second motive appears to have been robbery with Terrace passing comment a few days before on how much cash James Curry kept around the farm. The third and most prevailing theory was the belief that the prisoner was mad; supported by his complaint of a headache a few days before and the fact that his father, grandfather and grandmother had all died insane.

However how the court discovered this is unclear and the 19th century definition of insanity was often determined by prejudices and attitudes rather than by a clinical assessment. As the Toronto star reported on April 2nd 1908, the prisoner was "pronounced by medical experts as an imbecile of a most degenerate type [that] would escape the gallows on the grounds of insanity". It was therefore a shock when the court pronounced the prisoner guilty on April 1st and sentenced him to be "hanged by the neck until you are dead". Whether it was shock or real insanity is unclear, but Terrace did not seem to grasp the seriousness of the situation. After the verdict was given and the death sentenced passed, he was heard to reply "this puts a bit of romance into my life".

Yet sentence was not carried out as the defence council appealed to Ottawa for clemency and another theory put forward that epilepsy was the real cause of the gun being fired as Terrace was in the grip of a fit. Whatever the reason, the insanity issue was distorted enough to cast

doubt on the verdict, and the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment due to his mental state. The primary sources used for this story were newspaper articles from the Toronto Star dated between December 26th 1907 and April 11th 1908. Throughout that period, the prisoner's name changes constantly from John Davis Terrace to John David Tearse or Jack Terrace and it is unclear therefore if this is just a case of bad reporting or even if the same man originally arrested, was indeed the one sentenced. While allowances must be made for a basic lack of education by our standards, other questions remain such as why there is no trace of Terrace after he was sentenced, his period of incarceration or his eventual place of death. The mystery remains therefore of why he committed the crime in the first place and what became of him afterwards.