

The Mystery of Tillie Smith Contributed by Donna Brock

In the early hours of April 9, 1886, Tillie Smith, an 18 year old domestic who lived and worked at Centenary Collegiate Institute, was raped and strangled. Her assaulted body was left in an open field in plain view.

The murder of Tille Smith not only shocked Victorian Hackettstown, it quickly became a sensational, closely followed trial covered by many major market newspapers, including New York City, Trenton and Philadelphia. The papers carried the details of the story as it unfolded, and it was this sensational



journalism that fueled public outcry and pressured the local authorities and police to find someone guilty of committing the crime.

On April 28, 1886, James Titus, the man responsible for maintenace at the college, was arrested at his home and formally accused of Tillie's murder. Titus was a local resident, described by many as quiet, industrious and of exellent character.

The trial of James Titus began on September 28, 1886 in Belvidere, New Jersey. Nearly 100 subpoenas were issued. And while the evidence against him was circumstantial, after a trial that endured for nearly a month, James Titus was convicted and sentenced to hang for the crime. His appeal and request for a new trial was denied.

Titus escaped the hangman's noose, suddenly signing a 'confession' of guilt several months after his conviction. Although he was allowed to live, James Titus never saw his wife again. She died in November, 1904.

James Titus served 19 years for the 1886 murder of Tillie Smith before he was paroled by the Court of Pardons and released from prision on December 27, 1904. For the nearly fifty years that followed, he lived ironically, in Hackettstown, amongst the same neighbors and townsfolk who championed his conviction. James Titus died in June 1952 and is buried in Union Cemetery, Hackettstown. Unfortunately, no one will ever really know the truth about happened that fateful night or if justice was truly served.

Remembering Tillie Today

The story of Tillie Smith lives on today, more than 120 years after her brutal demise. A monument to her memory stands in Hackettstown's Union Cemetery, constructed with the generous donations from local and national benefactors. Unveiled on November 24, 1887, it is a lasting tribute to the young woman who died 'in defence of her honor'.

In addition to the monument in Union Cemetery, 'Tillie', a play commissioned by the Centenary Theatre and written by Jeanne Walker, recalled the events of the scandalous incident. Walker did extensive research, reading the local and national newspaper articles about the case and the 1,500 pages of the transcript of the trial. Denis Sullivan, author of a book about Tillie, 'In Defense of Her Honor', assisted Walker in locating sources. In addition to the production, Centenary Theatre sponsored Tillie Walks, featuring actors and actresses following her trail through town the night she was murdered.

And of course, there are the reported sightings of Tillie's ghost by staff and students at the college...

Information for this article was found in issues of 'The Trenton Times' and 'The New York Times', dated April 10, 1886 through November 25, 1887. Denis Sullivan's book, 'In Defense of Her Honor' was also used as a reference. Mr.Sullivan's book is on file at the Hackettstown Historical Museum.