# “SIX FOR THE HANGMAN”

Strange and Intriguing Murder Cases From The New Brunswick Past
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Chapter Two

## “LIGHTS OUT”

They found her under a hummock of moss in a field by the Harbour Road. The moss thereabouts was peculiar, a kind having long stems and feathery heads. It grew everywhere and one mound covered what looked much like any other. But one was different and “you wouldn’t have noticed it unless you were looking for it.” a policeman said later. Its difference was that a human foot protruded from it. “There she is!” a girl shrieked, and then fled.

The girl who almost stepped on the mossy “grave” was one of the four who went to the lonely field that afternoon looking for traces of their friend. Moments before Cpl. Dunn had found a girl’s shoe, the mate to another Thomas Gaudet picked up a few hours earlier on Deadman’s Harbour Road nearby.

Gaudet spotted the show as he and Oscar Craig walked along the road about 4:00 pm that Sunday in 1942. It was a good shoe and a new one. Not all women in Blacks Harbour had such expensive footwear as this. News travels fast in a small town. He’d heard that day that one of the Connors girls was missing and suspicion made him take the shoe home. One of the Gaudet children was almost certain: it belong to Bernice Connors.

Bernice, one of a family of 12 children, lived with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Connors, a little over a mile away. The field lay just outside the town’s limits, beyond where pavement then ran and where the last street light stood; and between it and her home was the Community Hall, for many years a centre of Blacks Harbour’s social life. It was wartime, and each Friday evening, the Hall was the scene of a dance that drew a good crowd, mainly from among the younger set of “Black’s” and from the men stationed at the R.A.F.’s Operational Training Base at Pennfield. On the Friday night of June 5th Bernice went to the Hall as usual. Bust from this dance, she never returned.

No one worried when she didn’t come home after the dance, for her family regarded the pretty 19-year-old as an adult and able to take care of herself. She earned her own living working at the fish-canning plant founded by her grandfather, Lewis Connors, that was the mainstay of the town’s economy; and though she continued to live at home, she was treated as being on her own. Often Bernice stayed overnight and sometime for a few days together with her closest friend, Cavell Bradford; her family had no cause for concern when Saturday passed and still no word came fro her. Bernice, a popular, vivacious, and fun-loving girl, had plenty of boy friends but no “steady”; it was the weekend and she’d be off somewhere with some of her friends; she’d be all right.

It was Gaudet’s phone call Sunday afternoon that first upset her parents. Quick calls went out to the Bradfords, then to the homes of other friends and acquaintances, then to the police.

Blacks Harbour Police Chief Denis P. Guptill took the call at 6:45 pm, and after a few preliminaries called in Const. Duncan Dunn from the St. George detachment of the R.C.M.P. Chief Guptill was Chief of Police in a small town, but he was a long way from being the small-town cop so often the butt of jokes. The Chief had come to Black’s to serve out his working years, but only after being a career man with the R.C.M.P. and a former Chief of the Saint John City force. Long ago he’d won the respect of every policeman in eastern Canada, not to mention that of an untold number of malefactors of every stripe.

He and the Mountie spent only a few minutes at the place on the road where Gaudet found the first shoe before the corporal located its mate at the edge of the field. They ran the few steps to the mossy heap where the girl screamed and uncovered the almost naked body of Bernice Connors.

The office commanding the R.C.M.P.’s J. Division, Superintendent R. E. Mercer, put Detective Staff Sgt. Frank W. Davis in charge of the case. The sergeant arrived at Blacks Harbour a few minutes after midnight that same Sunday night, and just eight hours and 45 minutes later, he sat down to interview the man who’d later be convicted of the crime. Coroner J. B. Mehan of St. Stephen summoned a jury that met briefly, then adjourned to the following Tuesday, and the body was taken to St. George where pathologist Dr. Arnold Branch did the autopsy.

Even before the coroner's jury could give a verdict, Cpl. A. F. C. Tudor, in charge of St. Stephen detachment of the R.C.M.P., went to the Air Force base at Pennfield on Thursday, June 11th, and arrested the man Sgt. Davis had interviewed. It was almost a textbook example of policemanship, and it was so quick that news reporters, always ready to embellish a story of this sort with suspenseful language, were never once able to use the word "mystery."

The man the corporal brought before the magistrate at Blacks Harbour that Thursday was another sergeant; this one belonged to the Royal Air Force. Sgt. Thomas Roland Hutchings was a good looking man of sturdy build, dark complexion, and somewhat above average height whose moustache and quiet, stiffish bearing made him appear considerably older than his 21 years. He was of what the British call "good family" and his family had a military background. Even before war broke out, he'd enlisted in the R.A.F. in May of 1939 at his native Peterborough, England, became an armourer, and was one of the many skilled personnel sent to Canada to train Commonwealth airmen. The young sergeant's military record was unblemished yet now after two months in this country, he found himself in a small New Brunswick fishing community charged with murdering a daughter of one its leading families. He plead "Not Guilty" Magistrate E. A. Nason remanded "Tom" Hutchings to jail at St. Andrews.

Ultimately it may have been the coroner's inquest that convicted the young Englishman of murder.

After two adjournments, the court got down to business one week after Hutchings' arraignment and decided that Bernice Connors' death was caused by "injuries received as a result of a brutal attack inflicted by some person or persons undisclosed." They said "undisclosed," not "unknown." That decision, in turn, was largely influenced by the somewhat garbled testimony Dr. Branch gave during the inquest. Said he, in summarizing: "I would say that girl came to her death as a result of shock following injuries to the head and neck, and hemorrhage, and the as corollary evidence, alcohol in the stomach and blood, and rape."

The last word was the one that stuck.

Most newspapers overlooked or chose to overlook the next item, a question that Clerk of the Peace, Harry Groom, put to Dr. Branch, but the St. Croix Courier printed it:

"Was there evidence of lacerations in the vagina?"

"Yes" replied the pathologist.

Twenty-seven days after "Necie" Connors last went to the Community Hall, the place where she laughed and danced became a courtroom where a capacity crowd came to hear if the Crown had enough evidence to try a man for her murder. The preliminary hearing opened before Magistrate Nason on the morning of Thursday, July 2nd, and the long train of witnesses began each to play his part in one of New Brunswick's most unusual murder trials.

The Crown's case was entirely circumstantial, and while it called nearly everyone knowing the whereabouts of Thomas Hutchings and Bernice Connors on the night of the murder, only comparatively few witnesses had testimony that closely linked the accused with the crime.

Those whose information touched only lightly on the unfortunate pair included Stanley A. Dungay and Samuel Blakely, two of the English airmen who came with Tim Hutchings to Blacks Harbour that night. The former came to the dance with one of the Bradford girls and the latter walked home with Bernice's sister Etta when it was over. Her girl friends, Cavell Bradford and Athenia Hanley, together with Harry Watson, told of having last seen Bernice when she left the doorway of the Hall about 11:25 pm and began walking up Deadman's Harbour Road with an airman. The Hanley girl added that the airman Bernice was with was a sergeant – and not the one she'd come to the dance with. Alonzo Hall, Donald Adams, and Foster and Gilbert Eldridge were standing on the same road beyond the range of the street light and enjoying a "brightener" about 11:30 pm when they were approached by Bernice and an airman. She and her companion stopped, Foster Eldridge said, when she recongized the four, and she introduced her friend to the group: "Meet Mr. White," she said. First, the four treat to the beer they were drinking, then "He [the airforce man] produced a bottle… that was the last time I saw Bernice Connors."

In addition to finding a shoe, Thomas Gaudet, caretaker of the Community Hall, noticed marks on the gravel road by the field as if a scuffle had taken place there. Sgt. Davis also told of seeing such scratch marks and later described the appearance of the body, how it had been completely stripped except for the arms still being in the sleeves of a blouse. A knotted and blood-stained brassiere lay across the corpse throat, he said, and there was a skirt beside the body and a slip beneath it.

Other such as Airman William T. Prothero had testimony that might be tied more closely to the crime. He told of being in the Hall when the dance was about to end and seeing Tom Hutchings coming to the door. There was blood on one side of Hutchings face, he said. He wiped some of it off with a handkerchief but the rest was dried. When he asked Sgt. Hutchings if he'd been in a fight, he received no reply. A few moments later, another airman, David S. Christie, took Hutchings across the road, wetted a handkerchief in a ditch, and tried to wipe away the rest of the caked blood. Vincent Bradford of Blacks Harbour said he watched the airman trying to clean the blood away.

Foot-traffic on Deadman's Harbour Road was fairly heavy on dance nights, especially during intermissions after 11:00 pm. It served as a promenade for hand-holding couples, and the dark, tree-lined stretch beyond the last street light doubled as a kind a alfresco "bar" where pints of "Demmy" and the like were tipped New Brunswick style, their tops wiped with a bare hand, then passed on.

Various people recognized either Tom Hutchings or Bernice Connors on the Road that night, but just one couple out for a walk saw the accused there together. Sgt. Pilot Thomas C. Edwards, who'd taken Mildred Justason to the dance, walked with her up Deadman's Harbour Road about 11:30 pm and on the way, they met Tom Hutchings and Bernice, each of them identifying one of the other couple; and on their return, they encountered the unfortunate pair once more, this time walking away from the scene of the dance.

At least one other story making the rounds involved the accused with Bernice Connors in the going-on along Deadman's Harbour Road that night. It appears to have no effect upon the outcome of the case; and it was the accounts of one Blacks Harbour girl and three R.A.F. men, more than any others that sent Thomas Hutchings to his end.

The set of coincidences that marked Tom Hutchings' association with one of these airmen was so striking, so statistically improbable, that it set those given to wondering about such things to believing that an ill star had brought together the accused and his nearest friend.

Both were young Englishmen. Both joined the R.A.F. Both became armourers and both rose to the rank of sergeant. Each was married and the father of one child. These parallels alone wouldn't be too remarkable. Both men were sent to Canada. They were drawn in the same draught and sailed on the same boat. They were assigned to the same airbases in succession, first Moncton, then Yarmouth, and then Pennfield. Both men got a pass on the night of June 5th and both decided to attend the dance at Blacks Harbour. Almost incredibly the coincidences go on.

Each man that night followed a young girl down Deadman's Harbour Road, and both had returned along when each of the girls disappeared into her home. And at the trial, one Hutchings had to testify against another, for the pair bore the same surnames – yet there was absolutely no real relation between the two – none expect what the superstitious claimed must have been written in the stars.

Sgt. Edward Hutchings didn't single-handedly incriminate the man fate seemed to have bound him to. He told only of how on that Friday night the two Hutchings and two of their friends bough some booze from a bootlegger at Pennfield, more from another named Earl at Blacks Harbour, and of going to the dance. Tom, he said, disappeared some time between 11:15 pm and 11:30 pm and didn't reappear till about 1:00 am. "When I first met him after the dance," the witness said, "he seemed excited and complained of not felling good." It was then that they followed the two girls. When that didn't "pan out," the men returned and sat for a time on the steps of the café, then shared a taxi to the airbase. The following day, he said Tim Hutchings cleaned and pressed his uniform, the "dress blues" that he had worn to the dance, and washed his underclothing.

Late Sunday afternoon, Sgt. Edward Hutchings said, he and Tim again visited Blacks Harbour where they met tow young women who told them that a girl had been murdered. Walking up Deadman's Harbour Road, they saw a crowd of people and fell in with a number of their fellow airmen, one of who told them it was rumoured that the last man seen with the victim was an airman, a sergeant who wore a moustache. As they were walking away, the witness said, he remarked to the accused that "We had better make sure where we were Friday night." Said Tom Hutchings. "Maybe I better shave my moustache off."

Only two people ever knew exactly all that happened in the lonely Blacks Harbour field that night and they both died in 1942. But the person who knows that police were searching for a clasp knife, the kind of jack-knife issued to British servicemen; who paid close attention to attention to the pathologist's report; who knows about a curious physiological phenomenon that, fortunately, is rare among human beings; and who heard the testimony of Airman Gerald Humphreys – such a person would know what common rumour "knew'" of what happened there, and he'd probably be very handy to the truth.

Aircraftman Humphreys and Sylva Gaudet were one of the couple who walked along Deadman's Harbour Road. It was just about midnight when they reached the last street light. The intermission was over, the dance had resumed, and now the Road was quiet and all but deserted. As they sauntered slowly on beyond the end of the pavement about 300 yards from the Hall, a sound from the edge of the field broke the stillness of the night. It sounded, they said, rather like someone trying to vomit. At first, they walked on by; but then, in response to Sylvia's worries, Humphreys returned to investigate:

> *I went over to the field to see what the trouble was. I saw on woman on the ground and an airman. I did not see the face of either. It was quite dark. A man's voice asked: 'what do you want?' The man spoke with an English accent. I did not answer, but the young lady and I came directly back to the hall. I talked with L.A.C. Robert Moore and he and I went back. The fellow and the girl were in the same position when we got there… the man's voice said 'Buzz off and mind your own business' or words to that effect.*

To Humphreys' story, Robert Moore added that he saw two persons lying a few feet off the Road and although he couldn't identify the man, it was one wearing an airforce uniform, and "a person's leg bare from the hip down [was] beneath him. I said to the airman 'Come on chum, you'd better break it up in case the police get here,' and the man replied 'O.K.' … and I [and Humphreys] came back to the dance hall."

The Hutchings trial brought back two familiar faces, man who'd not seen one another for six years, and with them, came echoes of another gruesome murder, the Bannister affair. Once again Peter J. Hughes of Fredericton was in his familiar role as Crown Prosecutor and Dr. John M. Roussel of Montreal was that of witness, an expert in criminology. This time, however, Dr. Roussel could offer little help. He'd been asked to test the strains found on Tom Hutchings' uniform, the one he was though to have worn on the night of Friday, June 5th. There were stains aplenty, the doctor found, probably those of human blood, but the cloth had been subject to heat a process that makes a blood type impossible to determine.

As unusual as were the circumstances that apparently led to the crime, and as odd as were the coincidences that marked the Hutchings men, the affair's most remarkable aspect was the behaviour of the man punished for committing it. At his two-day preliminary hearing, Tom Hutchings said he had nothing to say; he offered no evidence, questioned no witnesses, and made no move to engage anyone to defend him.

When Sheriff Charles Mallory led him into court at the start of his trial on September 29, "Still possessed of the claim that has characterized his behaviour since the time of his arrest, Hutchings displayed no emotion… and replied 'not guilty' in a clear voice… he displayed little interest and … gazed calming into space." Even then, he still hadn't sought a lawyer, and the Crown assigned him an able one, Ben R. Guss of Saint John. And even after seven days of the trial (during which lawyer Guss called no witnesses), "the almost expressionless Hutchings" still sat, his face and bearing registering nothing.

The trial brought to light little not already known. The weight of attention went to witnesses who attended the fatal dance, and each who knew either Tom Hutchings or Bernice Connors first accounted for his own actions, then described what he knew of the pair. Question of who was where and when were vital. Six sergeants were at the dance, and one by one, five could explain their whereabouts in the critical time between 11:30 pm and 1:00 am. The sixth never attempted to explain.

Only Dr. Branch elaborated somewhat on earlier testimony. First, he described the condition of the victim's body when discovered, the bluish, puffy face smeared with blood that someone apparently had tried to wipe away, the swollen and purple tongue, the cuts on the head, inside the mouth, under the chin, and down one thigh. The skull wasn't fractured, he said; and when cross examined by Mr. Guss on the actual cause of death, he admitted that "shock," the words used earlier, is a vague term in pathology and that in this case "There was no definite anatomical cause of death." He went on to tell of evidence that sexual intercourse had occurred before she died. "In this case, he said, from the appearance of lacerations, sexual assault must have occurred sometime, he would say, within days rather than weeks."

With the last of 35 witnesses being heard on October 5th, the Crown announced that its case was complete, and the rest, all but the hanging, happened in one long day.

Peter Hughes' accusatory powers were as sharp as reputation promised. He emphasized that six airforce sergeants were at the dance, that Tom Hutchings was the last to be seen with the slain girl, and that suspicion was removed from the other five. Then holding aloft for the jury's benefit the bloody clothing of Bernice Connors, he said "Would any logical person come to any conclusion other than the girl had been taken and raped and murdered?"

Even after taking three and one-half hours to charge the jury, Mr. Justice C. D. Richards left the 12 men a great deal to decide. Thomas Roland Hutchings was on trial for murder; but here again, in his charge, the operative word was “rape.” He reminded them that “The Crown alleged that the accused criminally attacked this girl and that her death followed as a result… The specific matter… in this case, is rape, as alleged by the Crown.” He pointed out that if the jury returned a verdict of manslaughter, it would have to exclude the idea of rape, for to accept rape as a fact would mean only a verdict of murder. The judge, therefore, left the panel to decide two weightily matters: whether Tom Hutchings were indeed the person who inflicted Bernice Connors’ injuries; and if he were that person, whether he inflicted them in order to facilitate rape. The jury filed out.

The court waited patiently through the late hours that evening, and midnight had just passed when the 12 returned. Jury foreman W. W. Quartermain of St. Stephen rose and delivered the finding. A reporter was watching the accused: “One arm resting on the rail of the prisoners’ dock, eyes intent on the jury foreman, Hutchings heard the fatal word ‘Guilty’ pronounced without a trace of emotion.” To the word “Guilty,” the jury attached the recommendation “that mercy be shown on the accused.”

As is usual before sentencing, the judge asked the prisoner if he had anything to say. The 21-year-old sergeant snapped to rigid attention and made his longest speech in the entire proceedings. Said he, “My Lord, I have been asked by my counsel not to make any remark at all.”

The court ignored the jury’s recommendation. It sentenced Thomas Roland Hutchings to hang at St. Andrews on Wednesday, the 16th day of December.

In Tom Hutchings’ case, extraordinary measures were take to “shoot the prisoner into eternity” as a favourite phase used to have it. The scaffold, erected in the jail yard at St. Andrews, was carefully covered in, both top and sides, and a sturdy fence surrounded it. Only a small “official party” actually witnesses the hanging; and for several hours earlier R.C.M.P. patrolled the jail area, allowing no one to loiter.

Tom Hutchings maintained his imperturbable calm to the bitter end, a calm that, whether sustained by iron will, indifference, or resignation, none could determine. Even on the last evening but one of his life, the whistled notes of a popular song issued from his cell. And on the last night of all and only minutes before he was to die, he did an even more astonishing thing. His last visitors, an R.A.F. chaplain and a doctor, were with him when at 1:46 am there arrived the two guards assigned to accompany him on his last walk. The little party set off, Hutchings dressed in uniform. It had gone only a short way when, suddenly, Hutchings stopped, turned abruptly, went back to his cell and switched off the light, the rejoined the group and carried on the grim march to the gallows. There, Camille Blanchard, Quebec’s official hangman, was waiting. As later reported, “He looked straight ahead to the scaffold and never hesitated, walking steadily up the [18] steps and on to the trap… he stood very still… titled his chin high as the black hood was placed over him, and seconds later dropped to his death.”

In the dark hours of that early morning, a simple funeral procession moved from the Charlotte County Court House to the nearby Rural Cemetery where the coffin of Tom Hutchings was lowered into the ground.

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Cited references: The Croix Courier, June-December 1942 & The Telegraphy Journal, June-December 1942.
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