

Nettie May Cummins

(- 10 Nov 1895)

The Evening Star, November 11, 1895

Mrs. Cummins' Death

Coroner Hammett Will Investigate It This Afternoon

The Drowning in the James Creek Canal --

Members of the Family Think There Was Foul Play

The dead body of Mrs. Nettie May Cummins, an attractive woman, twenty-six years of age, was dragged from the foul waters of the James Creek canal, directly beneath the K street bridge, about 1:30 yesterday morning. Whether Mrs. Cummins' death was the result of murder, suicide or accident Coroner Hammett will endeavor to ascertain at an inquest to be held at 4 o'clock this afternoon at the fourth precinct police station.

Mrs. Cummins was the divorced wife of Charles F. Cummins, a clerk in the sixth auditor's office, and was the daughter of James G. Thompson, a well-known carpenter of South Washington. She married Cummins six years ago, but secured a divorce at the end of three years, and since that time had been living with her parents, 4 L street southeast.

The last person who saw Mrs. Cummins alive was Herman J. Martin, a printer, whose office is at 407 7th street northwest, but who resides at 702 T street northwest. For the past seven months Martin has been very attentive to Mrs. Cummins, and he often expressed himself as intending to make her his wife. According to the family of the deceased, about 6 o'clock Saturday Mrs. Cummins announced to her mother and two sisters that she was going to the theater that evening with Martin. She left the house, the family thought, to go to the theater, but the next time they saw her she was dead.

Went for a Walk

According to the story told the police by Martin, he went out with Mrs. Cummins for a walk. Several saloons were visited and a quantity of beer imbibed. Shortly before 12 o'clock the couple left Dugan's saloon, at 1st and K streets southwest, and were walking in the direction of Mrs. Cummins' home. As they were crossing the K street bridge, so Martin says, his companion requested that she have one more drink of beer. Martin replied that he would hurry back to Dugan's after a bottle. He had almost reached to door of the saloon when he heard Mrs. Cummins call out, "Good-bye, Herman." Turning back, Martin says, he saw the woman jump into the canal. He saw he could not save her without assistance, so he ran to her home.

On reaching the house Martin aroused the family with the startling announcement, "Nettie is overboard." Accompanied by the father of the girl and a boarder named Cobb, Martin hastened back to the bridge and arrived in time to see the dead body carried up the bank by the police.

What Was Heard at the Saloon

John D. Dugan, the proprietor of the saloon at 1st and K street southwest, states that shortly after midnight he heard queer sounds coming from the direction of the bridge. The sounds were also heard by his barkeeper, and it seemed to them as though they were uttered by someone in agony. Dugan and the bartender hurried to the bridge and found Martin there alone in the middle of the span. He excitedly informed them that Nettie Cummins had fallen overboard. Dugan leaned over the rail and saw the body in the water. The bartender went in search of the police, and soon returned with several officers. Martin then departed for the house of the parents of the girl.

The body was taken to the house, and when it was carried into the parlor Mrs. Thompson, the aged mother of the deceased, was overcome with grief.

Members of the Family Suspicious

It was said that a bag of fruit, crushed as though in a scuffle, was found on the bridge. There was a slight scratch over the woman's right eye. Mr. Spindler, the undertaker who prepared the body for burial, told a Star reporter that he discovered no marks of violence upon it. The family of the dead woman are quoted as not believing the suicide or accident theory, and her brother, William Thompson, says: "I know that Nettie didn't kill herself, and I firmly believe that she didn't fall into the canal by accident. Her death is a mystery I can't explain." Mr. Thompson expressed himself to the effect that his sister was not in the habit of drinking, and that he did not think many men would leave a young woman alone on a bridge in the middle of the night while he went off to a saloon.

Since telling his story to the police Martin has refused to say anything regarding the affair, acting, he says, on the advice of his attorney, Mr. T.K. deGraffenried. However, he is said to have told Mrs. Thompson that he had taken Mrs. Cummins to the theater, and returning home on an electric car he asked her when she would marry him, as promised. She replied that she could not be his wife, but would always be a good friend to him. Then he repeated the story about going back to Dugan's after beer and leaving her on the bridge.

No Motive for Suicide

The family declare that Mrs. Cummins had no known motive for ending her life. In contradiction of this idea they state that she had made an engagement to meet her sister, Mrs. Bessie Hodges, Sunday morning at 9 o'clock. The deceased had earned a good reputation as a dressmaker. Martin was not placed under arrest. As stated, an inquest will be held this afternoon. The funeral is to be held tomorrow afternoon.

The Evening Star, November 12, 1895

Death Accidental

Coroner's Inquest Over the Body of Nettie Cummins

Fell In a Death Trap

She and Martin Had Been Drinking Some

Several Witnesses

James Whitmore, John Lucas, James E. Crump, Burton Vernon, John Thomas and Alfred T. Monroe composed the coroner's jury in the case of Nettie May Cummins, the young woman whose body was taken from the James Creek canal early Sunday morning as published in yesterday's Star. The inquest was held at the fourth police station yesterday afternoon at 3:30 o'clock. There had not been much of a police investigation made previous to the inquest except what the officers in uniform had made about the canal and at the home of the dead woman. Detective Boyd had been detailed on the case, but his work did not commence until he appeared before the coroner's jury and listened to the testimony of the witnesses, who had been summoned by the precinct officers. Those who had been summoned to pass upon the facts in the case reached the police station at 3 o'clock, and Deputy Coroner Glazebrook went with them to the house of the deceased, where they were sworn over the body to make diligent inquiry and render a true verdict as to the time, place and manner of the young woman's sad death.

When the members of the jury returned to the police station and were ready to take the testimony, there were several persons about the building, attracted there by the idle curiosity, evidently expecting to see the woman's body, but in this they were disappointed. Herman J. Martin, who was the last

person with the woman before she was drowned, was there, as was the mother of the dead woman, and also her brother.

Two lawyers interested in both Martin and the deceased's mother were also present at the inquest.

In the Water

George Chapman, a colored man, who lives at No. 90 I street southeast, was the first witness called, and he testified that Saturday night about 12 o'clock he was at Mrs. Sweeney's. He went there with Della Washington. Witness said that when he went over the bridge to Mrs. Sweeney's he did not see anybody, but on his way back he heard a man say: "Oh, Nettie, why did you do this?"

The man said to witness: "For God's sake come and help me."

Witness said that the man was standing on the wall, and he saw a dark object (the woman) in the water. She was on the south side of the bridge and about four or five feet from the wall.

"Was the woman alive?" he was asked by the coroner.

Witness said he did not hear her say anything. He could see her floating on the water. The man called for witness to come down and help him. "But," said witness, "I was alone, and when he came towards me I backed."

The man (Martin) left and went for the woman's mother, and witness told two policemen of what had happened. The man came back and was there when the body was taken from the canal and put on a stretcher.

Witness went as far as the house, and there he saw the man (Martin), who was crying.

"Did the man say anything about swimming?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, sir," answered witness, "the man said he couldn't swim, and I told him I could not swim either."

Witness said he was afraid to go down on the wall, because he feared he might be pushed in the water.

No Marks

Deputy Coroner Glazebrook made an external examination of the woman's body, and while he could not give the cause of death positively, he thought, from the appearance of the body and the history of the case, that she was drowned.

Witness said there was no evidence of violence about the body. He did not make an autopsy. Dr. Glazebrook was questioned about the "death trap," as the canal is known, and he said it was the easiest matter in the world for a person, whether sober or not, to walk into the canal from this plain bridge.

John F. Dugan, who keeps a drinking saloon at No. 83 K street, was next sworn. He had just closed his place of business when he heard that there was trouble at the canal, and he went down to the bridge. Herman Martin was there crying, and was saying something about Nettie drowning. Witness looked in the canal and saw what appeared to him to be a raised umbrella floating on the water. He got in a boat and followed the floating object as far as the bridge, and when he reached out from the boat he felt the clothing and then he discovered from the length of the hair, that the object was the body of the woman. There was a rope in the boat which he tied about her body, and then towed her ashore.

Witness told of the dangerous condition of the bridge, and said that that locality was poorly lighted. The parties in the case, he said, had not been in his place for more than a week.

Mother and Lover

Mrs. Maggie V. Thompson, mother of the deceased, was sworn, and she said, while not positive of her daughter's age, she thought she was about twenty-eight years old. Her daughter lived with her husband, Mr. Cummins, until she was deserted three years ago, and about five months ago she got a divorce.

"Since then," said the coroner, "has your daughter been receiving company?"

"Only friends of the family," said the mother, "and she's been going with Mr. Martin."

"Was he regarded as her beau?"

"Well, I guess so."

She said she knew of no difficulty that Mr. Martin and her daughter ever had.

Herman J. Martin, who is a printer at 407 7th street southwest, who seemed deeply affected over the sad occurrence, was sworn. He said he had known the young woman for about six months. Friday night, he said, he made an engagement with her, and she was to meet him at his office Saturday evening. When she came in some joking remarks passed, and Nettie sat on his knee and kissed him. Then he sent out and got a kettle of beer, as Nettie had said she would like to have a glass of beer.

Witness told of their separation, with the understanding that they were to meet at 7th and D streets. In the meantime he had several drinks, and when he reached 7th and D streets he stepped up from behind her and, tapping her on the shoulder, said: "Hello, hun."

He told of the movements he made with the young woman, going to several saloons. She drank several glasses and bottles of beer and he drank whisky. Then he bought some pears and peanuts, and about 12 o'clock they got on a car and started for home. The got off the car at K street, and on the way over home she kissed him several times, and when they neared the bridge she sent him ahead to get a bottle of whisky. The last thing he heard her say was, "Goodbye Herm."

He then described the awful scene in the canal. Nettie Cummins was in the canal, and he knelt on the wall and asked her: "For God's sake, speak to me."

He offered the colored man all he had in the world if he would save the girl. He told him he would give him \$500 if he saved her.

When questioned, Martin said he could not account for her getting in the canal. She appeared perfectly sober, although he said, she had drank about six glasses of beer and three bottles.

Witness was then questioned about the woman's statements, and he said she told him that she had met her husband that evening, and she also told him that her brother had quarreled with a man in the neighborhood and the man had threatened to shoot. He had been with Nettie every night for weeks with the exception of Sunday night and they had never quarreled.

"Did you see her fall?" the witness was asked.

"No, sir," he answered.

"Did she say anything about committing suicide?"

"No, sir; if she had I would not have left her."

Coroner Hammett questioned witness about the pears he had bought, and it was stated that the remnants of a partly eaten pear were found on the bridge.

"That doesn't seem as if she was very despondent," remarked the coroner, "eating a pear."

"No, sir," said Martin. "We were in the best of spirits."

The bag of pears, it was stated, was found on the wall.

Mrs. Thompson explained the neighborhood quarrel, and said that her daughter's life was threatened by a boy named Nolan, who had a pistol.

The Verdict

Other evidence was heard, and the jury returned a verdict finding that the woman's death was accidental.

"We do not hold anybody responsible for her death," says the verdict, "but we recommend that lights and guard rails be placed at the approaches to the bridge for the protection of citizens crossing the bridge at night."

The young woman's funeral took place from her late home on L street, today.