

*In July 2015, Daien Ide, reference historian at the North Vancouver Museum and Archives, came into the possession of a photo album with the name Miss J. Conroy inscribed inside the front cover. The photos, which were dated up to 1942, were carefully placed in the album and the people in them identified by their first names. Daien discovered that the owner of the album—twenty-four-year-old Jennie Eldon Conroy—was murdered in 1944. Digging a little deeper, she discovered that Jennie’s murder was never solved. The album began to take on a life of its own.*



## CHAPTER 1

### War Worker Murdered near West Vancouver Cemetery

Jennie Conroy finished her shift as a grain loader at Midland and Pacific Elevator in North Vancouver at 5:00 p.m. on December 27, 1944. She hurried back to the little house where she lived with Winnifred Richards on East Eighth Street. She was meeting her father John Conroy and her sister Eva at her brother’s West Vancouver house for Christmas dinner, and she didn’t want to be late. Jennie put on a mauve and grey dress, her tan coat, black shoes, and gloves. She decided not to wear a hat and left her long brown hair loose. She dashed out of the house and reached the North Vancouver Ferry ticket office at 6:10 p.m., where she discovered that she had missed the bus to West Vancouver by less than a minute.



Courtesy North Vancouver Museum and Archives

Jennie Conroy,  
North Vancouver,  
1941.

George Malloch, the ticket seller, recognized Jennie and sent her to check the schedule for the next bus. “She was alone when she came to my wicket and seemed quite happy,” Malloch told a reporter. “I told her to ask Albert Webber at the turnstile.” Webber did not know Jennie, but later told reporters that he had given a West Vancouver timetable to a “tall, good-looking girl.”

Jennie discovered she had a forty-five minute wait for the next bus.

The Conroys waited for Jennie until 8:00 p.m. When she still hadn’t arrived, they ate their Christmas dinner. John and Eva left for their North Vancouver home around 10:00 p.m.

At 2:00 a.m. a worried Winnifred Richards phoned to tell them that Jennie had not come home.



Photo: Eve Lazarus, 2015

Winnifred Richards' house on East 8th Street in North Vancouver, where Jennie Conroy lived at the time of her murder in December 1944.

### **Slain Girl Battled Attacker, Say Police**

Shortly after 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, December 28, Dave Chapman, a foreman for the West Vancouver Board of Works, and James Elliott, a municipal truck driver, were returning from the city dump. They discovered Jennie's body on a gravel road off Third Street, in an uninhabited area near the Capilano View Cemetery in West Vancouver.

She had been badly beaten, and the back of her head was smashed in by a claw hammer. Her jaw and nose were broken. There was a cut on her left hand. A spot of blood found on Third Street and gouge marks on the road indicated that she had been dragged roughly forty-seven feet (14.3 m) along the dead-end street. Vancouver police inspector John F.C.B. Vance found gravel in the ball of one of her feet and noted that the soles of her stockings were wet. He thought that this indicated that she had tried to run from her attacker, likely by jumping out of his vehicle. Coroner Dr Harold Dyer put her time of death at around 4:00 a.m. on December 27. He was unable to determine where the actual crime took place.

Police found only one of her shoes, lying near Third Street. They also found an empty whiskey bottle nearby that was soaked with Jennie's blood, her identification papers, and a West Vancouver bus time table.



Photo: Eve Lazarus, 2015

The Capilano View Cemetery, near where Jennie was murdered in December 1944.

### **Rendezvous with Death Suspected in North Vancouver Slaying**

Early in the investigation, police learned that Jennie had given birth to an illegitimate child less than three months before. The police leaked this information to the press, and the day after Jennie's body was found the newspapers reported that Jennie was an unmarried mother who had turned her baby over to the welfare authorities. One newspaper added that "a former sweetheart"

was questioned by police and released when he proved he had no connection to Jennie's murder.

The news further traumatized her family, who were unaware of her pregnancy, and by portraying Jennie as an unwed mother, the investigation misled both police and the public with statements such as this one reported in the *Vancouver Sun* that: "Police have learned that the girl's activities have become 'obscure' during the past year, and believe she may have met questionable companions although her father said he did not know of any."

Police told reporters that they felt Jennie must have "met her assailant by a prearranged plan" and went with him in a car. They theorized that she had spent the night with him, and that an empty bottle of whiskey by the road indicated that they were drinking before her murder. The sub-text was that somehow Jennie deserved this.

When the truth came out, there was no apology or retraction. But her former landlady Winnifred Richards was quoted as saying: "She was a wonderful person. Everybody loved her." She told the reporter that Jennie had left the house that day in a happy mood.

When evidence emerged to prove that Jennie was not the architect of her own murder, police started to look at other theories. They found that she had bought a bus ticket to West Vancouver, had missed the bus, and was seen walking away from the terminal. They believe that she might have started walking to the next stop, but accepted a lift along the way.

"Revenge, jealousy, anger, or some such emotion may have prompted the unknown killer to beat Jennie to death," police told the media.

### **Police Conduct Exhaustive Search for Slayer of Miss Conroy**

This was the first murder in West Vancouver since it had been incorporated as a municipality in 1912. Working on the case was West Vancouver Police Chief Charles Hailstone, assisted by Vancouver City Police Superintendent of the Criminal Bureau of Investigation, Walter Mulligan. The newspapers called it "the most intensive man-hunt in the municipality's history."

RCMP loaned their tracker dog Cliff to scour the bush around the crime scene. The dog found a clot of blood-stained excelsior (a material used for packing) two blocks from where the body was found. The dog also found bits of excelsior stuck to Jennie's coat.

On the day after Jennie's murder, police found her missing left shoe, an open-toed black pump, lying on the lawn at the corner of Pender and Beatty Streets in downtown Vancouver. It suggested that the killer could have come across

the inlet after dumping Jennie's body in West Vancouver, then discovered the shoe in his car and tossed it out onto the street.

Police searched for a green Chevrolet coupe that a bus driver had seen in the vicinity near the time of the murder. They appealed to laundries all over Metro Vancouver to report any blood-stained clothing brought in for cleaning, and garages were asked to be on the lookout for cars or trucks seen with traces of blood on their exterior or upholstery.



Courtesy: North Vancouver Museum and Archives

The Conroy family ca. 1925, 475 Crescent Street, North Vancouver. Jennie is second from right, front row.

### **Jennie Eldon Conroy**

Jennie was born in North Vancouver on July 9, 1920 to Minnie and John Cecil Conroy. That year the family lived in a house on the Crescent, a North Vancouver street that no longer exists, and they stayed there until Minnie's death from cancer six years later. John, a deckhand with North Vancouver Ferry, moved his family—Mabel, fifteen, Sid, twelve, Jennie, six, and Eva, four, to a house on East 17th Street.

By 1934, Jennie was five-foot-eight and slim, with brown curly hair and blue eyes. She attended Ridgeway Elementary but left school after grade seven to take care of the house and of her younger sister Eva. Her father was now a night watchman for North Vancouver Ferries. Sid had already left home, and Mabel had recently married and moved to Victoria.

During the war, Jennie worked as a pipefitter's helper at North Vancouver Ship Repairs, earning \$100 a month. She moved out of her father's house and

boarded with Winnifred Richards on East Eight Street. Winnifred's older sister Josephine worked with Jennie at the Shipyards, and Winnifred's husband was away fighting in the war. Jennie's co-workers described her as a "cheery, popular girl" who was "always smiling and joking." She loved music, and she played the Hawaiian guitar. They all said that, to their knowledge, Jennie had only ever had one boyfriend. She worked at the shipyards until April 30, 1944, about the same time that her pregnancy would have started to show.

Jennie met Graham Wainright (name changed) through her job at the shipyards. The handsome twenty-three-year-old was over six feet tall, with dark hair and dark brown eyes. He was Jennie's first boyfriend. They started going out to dance or see a show once a week. When Jennie told him she was pregnant in February 1944, Wainright told her that the baby wasn't his and that she must have been "running around" with someone else. Wainright moved to Victoria, and they didn't see each other again.

In some respects North Vancouver is still very much a small town. In 1944 it was tiny. Everyone knew each other, and even though Victorian sensibilities may have softened during the war years, being an unmarried mother was still considered scandalous. Jennie had managed to save up enough money from her job at the shipyards to support herself during the pregnancy, hide her condition, protect her family from scandal, and arrange for the adoption of her baby.

Jennie's baby was born on October 10, 1944. She registered her baby's birth on November 23, placed her in foster care, and shortly after went to work as a grain loader.

There is a note on the adoption file dated November 13, 1944 from a child-welfare worker stating that Jennie was determined that her baby be adopted. Wainright still denied paternity, which initially held up the adoption process. He eventually signed a paternity admission to enable the adoption, but later said that he had only done so under duress.

The child welfare worker's impressions of Jennie were included in the adoption file: "She has blue eyes, and



Courtesy North Vancouver Museum and Archives

Jennie and Eva Conroy, early 1940s.

is neatly dressed. She appears to have a pleasant personality, and has a particularly attractive smile. Worker feels that the mother is within the normal group of general intelligence. She was quite embarrassed throughout the interview, and has a rather appealing shyness about her. She seems truthful and is most sincere in her desire that the baby should be adopted so that she would have 'a regular home with a father and mother.' She does not feel that she has enough to offer the baby, and is particularly afraid that when Cherry reaches school age she might be teased unmercifully by her school mates if she remained with the unmarried mother."

Jennie would have been well aware that unmarried mothers were not accepted in polite society. In the early 1940s, unmarried women were viewed as "fallen women" and their children identified as illegitimate. "It was considered very shameful, and certainly for middle-class and working-class women, it would have been seen as a tremendous threat to the respectabilities of their families," says feminist historian Dr Veronica Strong-Boag.

A doctor who attended the birth noted that Jennie was of "average intelligence," and that the baby also seemed "normally intelligent." As Strong-Boag explains, an unmarried mother was seen as socially contaminated or questionable. "The assumption was that only morally promiscuous women would become pregnant, and certainly the psychologists of the day would suggest that this was commonly a product of low intelligence," she says. In other words, adoption was not considered safe because it was thought that the mother's probable low IQ and loose morals could be passed along to her baby.

### **Cherry Lynn Conroy**

When Cherry was nine months old she was adopted by the Ward family in Chilliwack and her name was changed to Mary Elizabeth Catherine.

"I always knew I was adopted, and I knew the name of my mother because my adopted mother had saved the newspaper article with a picture of her in it," says Mary. "When I was eighteen, I went to the University of Victoria and while I was there, I went to the BC Archives and got a copy of my birth certificate."

Mary finished university, married Brian Monckton, and the couple moved to New Zealand where they raised five sons.

In the late 1990s, following the death of her adoptive mother, Mary decided to find her biological family. The Ministry of Children and Family Development provided Mary with a thick file of notes pertaining to her adoption, but they blacked out the name of her father. In 1944 the practice was to leave the father's name off the birth certificate if the parents weren't married. But with

help from Joan Vanstone, the founder of a search organization called Parent Finders, Mary managed to track him down to an address in North Vancouver. He admitted to knowing Jennie, but denied that he was the father of her baby, refused to take a DNA test, and asked her to never contact him again. She learned that he had married but never had children.

In 2004 Mary travelled to Canada to meet her mother’s family. Sid’s wife Lorraine told Mary how much she had liked her mother. “Lorraine was fond of Jennie. She told me that she was quiet like Sid, not one to be outgoing but friendly and warm,” says Mary. Lorraine told Mary that Jennie had had no training and had kept the house for her father for some years. “The children brought themselves up,” Lorraine told her.

Sid and Lorraine’s daughter Debbie says Mary’s visit was good for her father, who died in 2012. “When my family met Mary, it was quite healing in a way,” says Debbie. “She’s a lovely person and she was quite open about all of this.”



Courtesy North Vancouver Museum and Archives

Jennie Conroy, seated second from end above “Extra trip 7:00 p.m. sign,” 1942.

## The Conroys

Debbie Conroy was born in 1957, thirteen years after her aunt’s murder. She was the youngest of Sid and Lorraine’s three daughters. Debbie found out about her aunt when she was going through the family’s photo album as a child. “I asked my dad who it was and he told me her name and my mum filled me in on the rest of the story,” says Debbie. “It came up again when I was in my late teens when the newspaper published something about unsolved murder mysteries and I saw the name Conroy in the paper. My dad and I talked about it again, but he was not forthcoming with details.”

It wasn’t until 2004, when Mary came to Canada to meet her family, that Debbie discovered that she had a cousin. “When I found out about Mary, I was



a little bit surprised. I thought, Dad, couldn't you have said something about that? It was almost like he'd closed that off."

Shortly after his sister's murder, Sid sold the house he'd built on Inglewood Avenue in West Vancouver and moved his family to BC's Interior. Partly it was to try his hand at ranching, partly it was to get away from the media attacks on his sister and her horrific death. "I don't know why my dad kept so quiet, whether he felt shame," says Debbie. "I thought, How dare the press imply that it was her fault? Women were blamed for so many things."

### **Police Rapped in Conroy Case**

A small consolation for the family came in March 10, 1945 when the *Vancouver Sun* reported that police were given a good verbal spanking by the legislature thanks to women's groups who were outraged that police would provide private details of Jennie's life as grist for the media. "Tendency on the Part of Police Departments to Compete with Each Other for Glory in Solving Crime," read the headline. The Attorney General was urged to set policy for police to stop them from giving out details that were "sordid" and "unnecessary" in the investigation of a crime.

After making headlines for a week, Jennie's murder disappeared from the papers. Then on February 2, 1945 Attorney General Maitland announced that the provincial government was offering a \$1,000 reward for information that would help arrest Jennie's murderer. And while much had been made of the blood-soaked pad of excelsior found near the crime scene, nothing more was said about it until January 1952 when the *Province* ran an interview with Sergeant Don Matheson.

### **He Would Stake Life on Case**

Matheson said he had first heard of Jennie's murder when he was overseas with the Royal Canadian Air Force. When he returned from the war, he joined the West Vancouver police and was put to work on the investigation. He told the *Province* reporter that he had continued to be obsessed with the case even after he had left the police force.

Matheson decided to take a closer look at the excelsior. He discovered that it was a type of padding that was made partly from newspapers and was manufactured in San Francisco. There were only a handful of importers of the product in Canada. His investigation honed in on a North Vancouver grocer who sold fruit and vegetables door-to-door. Although the man's name never appeared in a police report, Matheson said he had actually asked about the

progress of the murder investigation during the course of two visits to the police station in the weeks that followed the murder.

Matheson followed the green grocer as he went out on deliveries in his truck and found that he made frequent crossings across the Lions Gate Bridge down Pender Street past Beatty, and could have easily tossed the shoe from his truck window.

It's possible that Jennie could have known the grocer, at least by sight. He lived in the area, visited dozens of houses through his work, and may have been someone that she wasn't threatened by, making it possible that she would have accepted a ride with him after missing her bus. Matheson speculated that the grocer, who was thirty-three and married when Jennie was killed, made a pass at her once he had her in the truck and became angry when she started to struggle with him.

"I believe he hit her on the face and ... her head hit hard against something that inflicted the injury on the back of her head and knocked her out—maybe a large bolt head on a partition behind the truck seat," Matheson told the reporter, adding that he believed that the grocer then stretched her out in the back of the truck, putting her head on the excelsior padding.

In a follow-up story a few days later, the reporter interviewed West Vancouver Police Chief Charles Hailstone and Vancouver's Chief Constable Walter Mulligan—both of whom had worked on the case in 1944. Both denied seeing Matheson's evidence.

"There were many many leads, but it was by far the most baffling case of my experience," said Chief Mulligan, who three years later would flee to California in the middle of a Royal Commission into bribery and corruption charges at the Vancouver Police Department.

When Mary contacted the West Vancouver police in 2004 for an update on her mother's murder file, she was told that the department had lost the file in 1980. Debbie says that in the more than seventy years that have gone by since her aunt's murder, police have never once contacted the family. "I believe that the police brushed it under the carpet because it was a woman who was murdered. They were a family without much means, and there was shame and blame," says Debbie. "I think her investigation was probably bungled and dropped, and I feel she is owed some justice for that."

**Sources:**

*North Shore Press*: December 29, 1944; February 2, 1945

*Vancouver Sun*: December 29, 30, 1944; March 10, 1945

*Vancouver News-Herald*: December 29, 1944; January 2, 3, 4, 1945

*Vancouver Daily Province*: December 28, 29, 30, 1944; January 4, 1945; January 7, 1952