ACTIVITY: Swimming  
CASES: GSAF 1916.07.12.a and b  
DATE: Wednesday July 12, 1916  
LOCATION: Matawan Creek, New Jersey, USA.

BACKGROUND  
WEATHER: It was a hot sultry day; by mid-morning the air temperature was approaching 90°F.  
MOON PHASE: Full Moon, July 14, 1916  
WATER CONDITIONS: Johnson Cartan said: “That creek was so muddy I'm surprised I even went in.”  
ENVIRONMENT: Matawan Creek is a narrow winding bayou 11 miles in length and no more than 40 feet wide at its widest point. It empties into Keyport Bay, two miles south of Raritan Bay, which in turn empties into the Atlantic Ocean. In times of drought, when river levels fall, seawater may intrude some distance up rivers at high tide, and especially spring tides which occur during the full and new moon. Sharks and other marine species may follow the seawater intrusion for a considerable distance up river, so although they are in a river or creek they will still be in salty or semi-saline water.

NARRATIVE: During the morning, Thomas Cottrell, a retired sailor, was walking across Matawan’s new trolley drawbridge when he spotted a large dark-grey shark, about eight feet in length swimming west down Matawan Creek. Cottrell quickly warned many townspeople of the shark’s presence, but most, though aware of the two shark attacks along the New Jersey shore, refused to take him seriously. They apparently could not believe that a large shark would ever enter such a small body of water.

At 2 p.m. [14h00], 11-year-old Lester Stillwell and four friends (Johnson Cartan, Frank Clowes, Albert O’Hara and Charles Van Brunt) were swimming in a deep portion of the creek when O’Hara, swimming with Stillwell closer to shore, felt something “like sandpaper” rub...
against him. Cartan then saw what he first thought was an “old black weather-beaten board” attack Stillwell, and drag him under the surface. The boys ran screaming through town for help.

Stanley Fisher, a 24-year-old Matawan tailor, heard the boys’ cries and ran to the creek. He joined 51-year-old Arthur Smith and 20-year-old George Burlew on the river bank about 30 minutes after Stillwell disappeared. The men did not believe that Stillwell had been taken by a shark; the boy was an epileptic and they thought he had had a seizure. The men first used a rowboat for the search. Then each man donned a pair of tights and began to swim and search for the boy. Fisher and Burlew continued to dive for 30 minutes even though both men realized the boy was dead (50 or 60 minutes had passed since Stillwell vanished). While both men were resting in the shallows on the side of the creek opposite the old dock pilings, they spotted the faint shadow of the shark in the water, turned to each other, and decided to abandon their search.

Just as the men re-entered the creek, the shark veered around Burlew, then Fisher yelled out, “Oh my God!” At that instant Fisher was forcibly struck on the right thigh. According to George Burlew, “Fisher never got a chance to take a stroke toward the opposite bank,” and said of himself. “when I saw that shark I went for that dock fast, then I saw the struggle; oh, it was terrible!” Burlew also said that Fisher used every ounce of strength in his 210-pound body to punch and kick the shark in an attempt to get free. During the struggle Fisher was brought down two or three times but eventually the shark released him. Until the shark released him, Fisher did not realize he had been severely injured.

Some witnesses quoted in the newspapers claimed they saw the body of Stillwell in Fisher’s arms during the struggle, but most onlookers merely saw Fisher yelling and throwing his arms in the air. Burlew doubts this, however; he said the creek water was “thick” and murky and thought Fisher would have told him he had found the boy’s body before they attempted to leave the water.

Arthur Van Buskirk, the Keyport town recorder, spotted Fisher laboring and directed a motorboat to his aid. By the time the boat approached Fisher, he had already reached shallow water, but to drive the shark away from the area, the men in the boat began to shout and strike the water with oars. Fisher was pulled up onto the dock.

**INJURY:** Fatal. Fisher had sustained a massive wound to his right thigh. Dr. George C. © Richard Fernicola, M.D., 2000. All rights reserved. This report may not be abridged or reproduced in any form without written permission of the author.
Reynolds of Matawan tended to Fisher on the dock and described the injury as a wide, jagged laceration that measured about 18 inches (later determined to be 14 inches) stretching from below the hip to just above the knee. Dr. Reynolds estimated that seven to 10 pounds of flesh were removed, while the remaining flesh appeared to have been raked with “dull knives”. It was also said that the femoral artery had been severed and the femur was scratched but not penetrated.

**FIRST AID / TREATMENT:** On the dock, Fisher asked for something to alleviate some of the pain and said he had seen Stillwell’s body on the bottom and ripped it from the jaws of the shark. Fisher had to wait two long hours in Matawan before being placed on the 5:06 train bound for Long Branch and the Monmouth Memorial hospital. Although the train skipped several stops, Fisher only reached the operating room at 7:45 that evening—far too late to reverse the onset of uncompensated hemorrhagic shock. Just before Fisher lost consciousness, he supposedly repeated the story that he had pulled Stillwell’s boy from the mouth of the shark.

In the operating room it was noted that blue blotches and streaks appeared on several areas of Fisher’s body and it was therefore speculated that the shark may have released some type of toxin with its bite. The blue marks, however, may have simply been the result of thrombosis (intravascular clotting) which appears in the progressive stages of shock when blood flow becomes sluggish and the end products of metabolism accumulated.

Both Stillwell and Fisher were buried in Matawan.

**SPECIES:** Eyewitnesses described the shark as having a black dorsal surface, white belly, and about nine feet in length. Captain Burlew, who spent most of his life as one of the East Coast’s most renowned big game fishing guides, believed the shark was a 300-pound white shark. He surmised the shark entered the creek at high tide from Keyport Bay and could not get out at low tide.

**AFTERMATH:** Following the attacks in Matawan Creek, many continued to search for Stillwell’s body. At 5:30 A.M. on July 14, 1916, presumably aided by a heavy rainstorm of the evening before, Stillwell’s body floated to the surface under the New York and Long Branch trestle (about 150 west of the attack site) where it was spotted by Harry Van Cleaf, a local fireman. Coroner Fay of Red Bank reported that the boy’s left ankle, his right hip, abdomen, right chest muscle, left shoulder, as well as several fleshy areas, had been torn away. His face was untouched.
Many large sharks were spotted along the New Jersey coast following the attacks. Two seem especially relevant:

On July 14, 1916 — two days after the attacks — an 8.5-foot, 250-pound white shark was caught in a drift net and bludgeoned to death by taxidermist Michael Schleisser of East 132nd Street, New York. Other sources report the shark was 7.5 feet in length and caught in Raritan Bay off South Amboy, four miles northwest of the mouth of Matawan Creek. When the shark’s stomach was opened it was found to contain 15 pounds of flesh (identified by physicians and Dr. F.A. Lucas as human), an 11-inch bone (identified by physicians as the shinbone of a boy but identified by Dr. Lucas as part of the left forearm of a robust man), and a small bone (identified by physicians as a fragment of human rib but specifically identified by Dr. Lucas as part of the left upper rib of a robust man).

Another shark was allegedly caught by Captain Cottrell six days after the attacks. This shark was said to have been caught in Matawan Creek about 400 yards from the mouth. The shark measured seven feet and weighed 230 pounds. However, 12-year-old Bill Burlew worked in the fishery in Monmouth Beach and remembers that he found John Cottrell, Captain Cottrell’s son, purchasing a large shark for $5. Cottrell informed Burlew that he was going to bring the shark back to Matawan and put it on display as the creek monster. (It cost 10 cents to view the “killer” and, according to Burlew, many New Yorkers traveled to view the display). Burlew felt this very shark could be “the shark caught in the creek.”

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Richard Fernicola, M.D.
VISITORS ARE WHITE SHARKS.

Dr. Nichols Says Those Caught Off Jersey Are Most Vicious Type.

Dr. A. T. Nichols, Assistant Curator of Recent Fishes at the American Museum of Natural History, said yesterday that he had proofs that the New Jersey coast is infested by white, sharks, the most voracious type, that attain a length of forty to fifty feet. So far only small ones, eight to ten feet long, have been found in these waters.

"There is no record," Mr. Nichols said, "of a shark of this kind having been taken within fifty miles of New York City before. I believe that this species of shark is responsible for the recent casualties on the Jersey coast. It is probable that the seven and a half-foot shark caught by Michael Schlessier off South Amboy on July 14, in which it was said human bones were found, is the one which entered Matawan Creek and killed two boys."

When the Schlessier shark was cut open on Friday two bones were found. One was eleven inches long and the other a small piece. Surgeons said the long one had probably been a boy's shin bone and the small one a fragment from a rib.
Head of Man-Eating Shark
Captured at Belford, N. J., To-Day

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