

His 'Other Mother' Mourns for Convict

By Stephen Cook

Helen Marsh watched as they buried her "Johnnie the Blue Shirt" last week.

The quiet Southern California services marked the end of one of the most meaningful and improbable personal relationships in Mrs. Marsh's 58 years.

She is certain she will never have another friend quite like John Lynn.

Lynn, 26, died a week ago Saturday in the Adjustment Center at San Quentin Prison.

Refusal

He was one of two white convicts whose throats were slit when they refused to join the escape attempt which also ended in death for three guards and Soledad Brother George Jackson.

Mrs. Marsh and her husband, Grant, retired dean of

students at San Francisco City College, learned of his death that night when Associate Warden James Park phoned their residence.

They were shocked by the savagery which took Lynn's life, grief stricken at the loss of a young man they thought of as a son and angered by subsequent news reports which dismissed the man with such labels as "convicted robber, escapist and murderer."

Mrs. Marsh said it was "like kicking a man when he's down" for the papers to report Lynn's boyhood arrests for burglary and car theft, his prison sentence at age 18 for his service station robbery and his subsequent conviction for the killing of a

Lake County bailiff during what authorities labeled an escape attempt by Lynn and two others in 1967.

Warm and Kind

"He was a warm, kind man. I couldn't have loved him more had he been my own son," said Mrs. Marsh. "I wish you would tell what he was really like."

This is the story of the John Lynn the Marches knew.

They met because of Grant Marsh's curiosity about the courts.

It was in May, 1969, and Mrs. Marsh was on a jury in a civil case being tried in San Francisco's Hall of Justice. Her husband accompanied her and sat in court throughout the dull trial.

"When the case was turned over to the jury, I decided I'd look around for an interesting trial," Marsh recalled. "I walked into the courtroom where John Lynn and his friends were being tried for various things that happened up in Lake County."

He became absorbed in the trial and, when his wife's jury returned a verdict the next day, he brought Mrs. Marsh back to court with him.

Six Weeks

"And we went back every day. We sat through the last six weeks of an eight-week trial and I became convinced of Johnnie's innocence," recalled Mrs. Marsh.

"We met his mother and father," Marsh said. "They were up from Southern California and all alone, sitting in court every day. We decided. 'Let's meet these people

and show them the hospitality of San Francisco.'"

The jury found Lynn guilty of second-degree murder. But several from the panel told Mrs. Marsh they would have acquitted him if the judge had not instructed them such a finding was impossible because of Lynn's presence at the scene of the killing.

Lynn insisted the killing was accidental and not the result of any escape attempt, Mrs. Marsh said.

Letter

After the trial, Lynn was placed in San Quentin's Adjustment Center. He got the Marshes' address from his parents and wrote them.

"He thanked us for what we had done for his parents and said 'For what you've done, I love you both,'" Mrs. Marsh said.

On Aug. 4, 1969, the Marshes met Lynn for the first time, in the visiting room at San Quentin.

"Johnnie greeted me with a kiss. He took both of my hands in his, and with tears in his eyes, asked 'Where did you come from and why to me?'" Mrs. Marsh recalled.

To the Marshes it seemed obvious that Lynn was in his current predicament because he lacked two things — affection and education.

They offered him both.

Visits

They wrote him daily and visited him as often as prison rules allow — twice a month.

Mrs. Marsh, who has long kept her mind active with creative writing, succeeded in interesting Lynn in reading good books and writing poetry.

He wrote poems for her. Sometimes they wrote poetry together. He would write a stanza and mail it to her. She would add a stanza and mail it back, and so on.

Today, she has a drawer



JOHN LYNN
"Warm, kind . . ."

full of Lynn's poems, which are remarkably artful for a man who until two years ago had less than an eighth grade education.

The Marshes did something about that, too.

Diploma

"We helped him along in his education and inspired him to get his high school diploma," Marsh said. "He graduated just two months ago. He worked hard to get that diploma and he had asked the counselor to plan a program of further education for him."

Lynn and the Marshes had developed a relationship of mutual caring. They asked him to be their godson. He referred to them as "his other mom and dad." Today, the Marshes cannot think of Lynn as a criminal dangerous enough to have been confined in the Adjustment Center.