James Alexander Miller—How He Became the Other Strand of the Miller Double Helix

James Alexander Miller’s parents, John Herman Miller, Jr. and Emma Anna Stenger Miller, were both reared in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Although neither of them went beyond the eighth grade in school, their limited education did not in any way minimize their great respect for higher education. It was probably due to the economic times that only one of their six sons graduated from college. John and Emma were married in 1900 in Pittsburgh. The Millers were Methodists and the Stengers were Catholic. James rarely saw his paternal grandparents, probably due to the difficulty of James’ grandmother Miller interacting with the Catholic Stenger family.

John Herman Miller held the position of prothonotary (chief clerk) in the courts system of Pennsylvania. Later he worked for the Pittsburgh Press.1 “Black Tuesday”, October 29th, 1929, a day that is marked by many historians as the start of the Great Depression, preceded by only a few months the loss of John Miller’s job in 1930. Job loss so soon after the great stock market crash of 1929 was clearly catastrophic, but John Miller’s loss of employment was further complicated by a persistent and serious illness which was thought to have caused episodes of peculiar behavior. He never returned to the Pittsburgh Press. James’s father moved in with his son Robert and his daughter-in-law Columbia for a few months, after which he was homeless. Later, with the return of his health, John Miller took a job in Washington, Pennsylvania (about 30 miles southwest of Pittsburgh) and eventually returned to Pittsburgh. James A. Miller never became close to his father who was gone much of the time while he was growing up. However, John Miller showed up, unexpectedly, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison commencement when Jim received his Ph.D. It is thought by the Miller family that this was the first and only time Elizabeth Cavert Miller ever met her father-in-law.

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1 The Pittsburgh Press, now defunct, was at one time the second largest newspaper in Pennsylvania. Mr. Miller had been head of the circulation department.
James’ Birth and Growing Up

James,² (Jim to all who knew him), was born to John and Emma on May 27, 1915³ in Dormont, Pennsylvania. A suburban community with a 2010 census population of 8,593, Dormont is about five miles southwest of what is now Gateway Center, Pittsburgh. The Miller family lived on Pioneer Avenue near the crossing of that street with West Liberty Avenue (Figure 7.1). The Miller family had a large two-story home, suggesting that the occupants were, if not prosperous, certainly comfortable.

James was the fifth of six sons. While three older brothers completed only one or two years of high school and then sought jobs, James and one older

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² Some of the Miller history is from notes taken by Helen Miller Alexander from talks with her father. The notes The Miller Family are unpublished and undated. Other information was taken from Miller, Elizabeth and James. Interview by Laura Smail. 1985. Compact disc. University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin. Roberta A. Williams, a niece of James A. Miller, was generous with her time and memories during a meeting with me in 2008.

³ James Alexander Miller died on December 24, 2000.