

A Peek into *The Columbia County Chronicles of Morbid Curiosity*
by Rachel Shaffer

I'm no expert, but I've done enough genealogy research to know that causes of death are occasionally a gold mine of information and insight into how the people who came before us lived. I have spent four years collecting, transcribing, and researching stories of death in Columbia County and surrounding communities. Before anyone calls for some type of psych evaluation, let's face it, we all read obituaries with that one question in mind—how did they die? I found that newspapers of the past often described deaths without any hesitation in a level of detail that would cause the 30 Seconds page to spontaneously combust today. However, in order to try to be respectful and provide some distance from the deaths in this book, I stopped researching at the year 1920. I did not want to include a tragedy that anyone who would read this book directly experienced.

The chapters in the book categorize the causes of death. The chapters include everyday accidents, industrial accidents, deaths of children, unusual or noteworthy, and then suicides.

One area in which I think CCH&GS's publications seem to lack is the experience of women in Columbia County. I really have learned a lot about the dangers women faced in their daily lives. For example, Mary Ann Mauger was the wife of the proprietor of the Forks Hotel. This hotel was located where the intersection of Lightstreet Road, East Street, and Main Street in Bloomsburg is today. She went into the out-kitchen of the hotel to fetch a bucket of water, slipped on ice, or got lightheaded, and tipped head first into the barrel of water and drowned. Lillian Kauffman, of Elysburg, died in a similar way. She went into the basement of her home to get water, and fell into the spring that ran through the basement, and unable to extricate herself, she also drowned. Her death affected her husband so greatly that a group of men had to watch Mr. Kauffman because he threatened to commit suicide so he could be buried by her side. The newspaper called him "violently insane" and reported there were fears he wouldn't live to see her funeral.

On quite literally the opposite end of the spectrum, women caught fire pretty regularly. Their drooping sleeves and large dresses were dangerous around open flames. Mary Reed, who lived just north of the Columbia County line, was quilting at the fire when her clothing ignited. She was so totally burned that no clothing remained on her body, but because she was in shock, she managed to sweep the floor and clean up the charred remains of the rug she tried to use to put out the fire. She was alive when her husband returned, but died the next day. One of the earliest unusual occurrences in this book is an article about a dog that got caught in a woman's hooped dress in Danville. Both she and the dog panicked, and no one could figure out a way to respectfully remove the dog from the dress in public so they waited until they could get the woman home to remove the dog. They did, but the dog did not survive. Speaking of Danville, Abigail Geisinger makes an appearance in the book when her driver hit a young boy while driving Mrs. Geisinger and a friend. The boy was driven to Geisinger, but died when he got to the hospital.

The deaths of children in this book are sometimes particularly hard to read. This is the only category that I specifically removed a story from for being too much for even me. I later removed murders to be included in another book, but there was a murder of an infant so gruesome and violent in the Watsonstown-Washingtonville area that I just wanted to forget I read it. Fires, accidents, accidental poisonings, and a particularly dangerous stretch of the Susquehanna River in Berwick called the “Pike Hole” all cause multiple deaths of children in the book. Shockingly (sorry) there are several deaths from lightning in the book. Twelve-year-old Rhoda Albertson, of Benton, was upstairs in her house when lightning crashed through the house and killed her instantly. No one in her house realized she was upstairs until her brother came up to investigate the smoke. Nine-year-old Mary Gangham, of Centralia, also died in the second floor of her home from lightning. Seventeen-year-old Robert Diltz, of Sugarloaf Township, died from a lightning strike after running to a barn to put away some ducks during a storm. Two young girls, Dorothy Crum and Mary Young, died at the Ashland Country Club when lightning struck while they were swimming. Their friend, Katharine Price, survived with burns on her face. She tried to remove Mary from the water before she ran for help, but it was already too late.

There are countless occasions of bystanders jumping in to save others. In fact, Caleb Barton, of the Barton House, was saved by one of these bystanders. He was digging a well on his property (yes, the fairgrounds property) and was overcome by gas while trying to exit. He made it up to a platform ten feet below ground when he was unable to go any further. A bystander, Daniel Folmer, of Bloomsburg, was one of the men who jumped in to save Caleb. Caleb was rescued, but Daniel was also overcome and fell further into the well. They were unable to rescue him until the gas cleared, but by then it was too late. Mrs. Rieck, of Danville also tried to rescue someone in danger. She was standing along the railroad tracks waiting for a train when Timothy Barrett, also of Danville, threw himself onto the tracks. She desperately tried to wave her red handkerchief to get the train to stop while she and her young son both tried to pull him up and off the tracks. They had to jump to save themselves and the train ran over Timothy Barrett right in front of them.

The trains were a big cause of death in the area—big to the point that I had to research how so many people could possibly get hit by trains continuously throughout the years. There is a theory that because up until that point, people lived at the pace of a trot, they just could not comprehend how fast a train was moving. Walking on the train tracks while deaf like Catherine Zarr, of Catawissa, and Hiram “Dummy” Albertson, of Fishing Creek Township, certainly did not help the statistics. Brakemen on the trains were particularly at risk of death. Mr. Smead, an employee of the Lackawanna and Bloomsburg Railroad was killed while riding on top of a freight train when his head struck the edge of a bridge at Lime Ridge. He was reading at the time. Another dangerous occupation for men in our area was anything to do with the A. C. & F. This was before the safety regulations that came in later years, but there are numerous men in this book who died on the job at both the Bloomsburg, and larger and longer lasting, Berwick locations. Many of the men who died in Berwick were recent immigrants from Eastern European countries and translators were

occasionally called in to help gather facts. The newspapers were sure to state in which ways the company could not possibly be to blame in these accidents.

There are so many of these incidents in every corner of the county. A steamboat explosion in Berwick, a mystery of a dead Civil War soldier in Orangeville, the collapse of the Mifflinville Bridge, a couple killed by their bull, bodies just appearing in the Susquehanna, and deaths from the Danville State Hospital all appear in this book.

It's sometimes difficult for me to picture people from the past as real people who are perhaps more similar to us than we realize. We read about parents who have multiple children die, and have a hard time imagining their experiences in a real way. We know death was more common in the past, but I don't think it was ever less traumatic.

I have done as much research as I could on each death in this 200-page book. I have researched the people and listed additional information including burial location for as many people as possible. The book is available for sale currently and would make a good Christmas gift if you have any morbidly curious people to buy for. The price is \$20 if you make arrangements to pick the book up, and \$25 if you would like it shipped. You can order online at <https://tinyurl.com/4em7yrdc>, or by the order form on page 11, by emailing danigenie@verizon.net, or by calling Rachel at 570-204-5042.