

He is Demented!

By Dani Crossley

I wrote about Emma Rose Spargo Alexander and her tragic life in a previous newsletter. She was my great-great-grandmother. The family was always shrouded in mystery. I remember my happy genealogy dance when I found out who her mother was (Orlinda Martha Hurd Alexander—whom I cannot trace past about 1880). I never knew what happened to Emma Rose's father, my 3rd great-grandfather, Edward Spargo/Sparger, Jr. He and Orlinda had three children: Almina A. Spargo, b. 1859 in Taylor, Cortland, NY; Emma Rose Spargo, b. 1861 same place; and Emery Spargo, b. 1865 in PA. They all seemed to slink into the ether after 1880.

And now I know why. I was exploring a new collection of newspapers from Lycoming County, PA where the Alexanders lived for some time. I put in Emery Spargo's name and was shocked to see an article appear in the June 8, 1897 Williamsport Sun and Banner with the headline: *He is Demented.*

HE IS DEMENTED

Emory Spargo from Cammal had J. B. Embick, Esq. assigned to represent him on his trial for assault and battery with intent to commit rape. Eli Campbell the hotel keeper at Cammal at whose place the affair took place related the particulars, which plainly indicated mental trouble on the part of the offender. Further investigation confirmed this indication and resulted in the acquittal of the defendant on the ground of insanity. He is given to hallucinations, and frequently becomes violent in his efforts to rid himself of imaginary foes. At one time last year he returned to Cammal from a trip in the woods with seven cuts on both sides of his throat and over his heart, which he explained by saying that he found the woods full of men who were trying to kill him and he decided to kill himself. No effort could induce him to utter a word and he was returned to jail pending final determination of his case.

Since it is difficult to read, I have transcribed the article below:

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Another surprising detail in a subsequent article indicated he would be joining his father, Edward Sparger, Jr., at Danville State Hospital! Well, now I knew what had happened to my 3x great-grandfather.

Sheriff Rothfuss told of his mad fits in the jail. Spargo's father is in the Danville asylum and he has two children at Oregon Hill. During all this time the defendant sat stupidly at his table, displaying no intelligence as to the proceedings, and no efforts on the part of the Court could induce him to speak a word. A verdict of not guilty, on the ground of insanity, was ordered and rendered.

~ Cammal and Oregon Hill are in Lycoming Co. – Ed.

Right around the time I was discovering these eye-opening events, I read an article by Valerie Bieber in the Lycoming County Genealogical Society's March-April 2022 newsletter. She described in much detail how to obtain patient records from Danville State Hospital. I quickly followed her steps and sent away for the records for Emery Spargo and his father, Edward Spargo/Sparger, It was less than two weeks before they arrived. *See the article addendum for instructions on how to access State Hospital records.*

I was keenly interested in reading about my 3x great-grandfather as he had disappeared from the face of the earth. From the patient records, I learned of his sad story. Edward Sparger was a patient at Danville State Hospital from 4/29/1885 until he was transferred to Wernersville State Hospital 7/5/1893. He died there of heat exhaustion on 6/28/1897. He was in the care of the Overseers of the Poor for Pine Twp., Lycoming Co. It said he was married with two children. **He was diagnosed with mania caused by draft during war.** He was 30 years old at the first attack and had been in this condition for 20 years. He was at Danville State 8 years, 2 months and 6 days. His intake record confirms he was born in New York. *“He was originally industrious but is now a common tramp. Subject to periods of excitement, during which he is guilty of many strange actions.”*

From the Danville State records:

"Age 50, born in New York, resident of Lycoming Co., PA, married. Farmer and indigent. Height 5'10" - rather stout, and fairly nourished- blue eyes, dark brown hair, sandy beard, florid complexion, nose scarred, looks as though at one time split, scar on forehead, pulse 96, tongue clear, functions normal. Originally quiet and industrious possessing average mental ability, always temperate. Insanity is thought to be hereditary on father's side, but nothing positive known. Since accession of insanity, 20 years ago - has been a tramp. His family being afraid of him would have nothing to do with him. Is a case of chronic mania with varied delusions and subject to spells of excitement. Went about the fields digging holes in search, as he alleged, of Indian remains and treasure, and many other such acts. On one occasion built a fire upon the kitchen floor of a neighbor who had taken him in overnight. Is getting worse and the neighbors are afraid of him. Was confined in jail four weeks prior to admission - assigned to excited ward #8. Chronic Mania."

It was agonizing reading. What went wrong with this man? The insanity is thought to be hereditary? What was especially appalling as I read through both men's notes, was the variety of diagnoses in the asylum that were a little suspect—more for women than men. Edward was indeed drafted in August of 1863 while living in Lycoming County, PA. I doubt he ever served. That notice seemed to send him right round the bend and he never recovered.

STATE ASYLUM FOR THE CHRONIC INSANE OF PENNA.
Form K—NOTICE OF DEATH.

No. 58

I hereby give notice to the Committee on Lunacy, that Edward Sparger
an indigent patient, received into this Hospital on the 5th day of July 1898
died therein on the 28th day of June 1897.

And I further Certify, that A. Martin was present at the
death of the said Edward Sparger and that the apparent cause of death of the
said Edward Sparger was Heat exhaustion.

(Signed) H. Brown Esq. 1898

Dated this 1st day of July one thousand eight hundred and ninety eight.

Saddened by Edward's story, I moved on to his son, Emery. I had known that Emery didn't die in the asylum, as I had found him later in upstate NY in a death register. He died in 1931 in Long Lake, Hamilton County, NY. He had the two children originally mentioned at his arrest: Nellie and Jesse James Spargo. They lived with relatives growing up and seemed to have a relatively normal life after their father left them. Son Jesse's obituary stated he was 84 when he died in Schoharie County, NY. He had five children, five grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.

Emery's stay at Danville State was uneventful according to his patient notes. He was committed to Danville State Hospital on 7/16/1897 after trying to break/enter and attack a young woman early in June. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity. His diagnosis was mania, or alcoholic insanity/melancholia. He was there 2 years and 4 months, having **eloped** on 11/16/1899!?! Upon further digging, I realized that term was used in that era to mean escaped or run away, and is still used that way in some instances today. He eventually made his way to upstate New York and no more is heard of him until his death in 1931.

Interestingly enough, his father had been transferred to Wernersville on July 5th, 1893, so he was no longer at Danville State as mentioned in the newspaper article about his son's arrest. No reason is known for the transfer. Wernersville is in Berks County, PA and at that time only served residents of that and neighboring counties. By the time Emery was committed, his father had died about three weeks earlier. It is unknown where either father or son is buried.

Addendum – instructions from one of the PA Archives archivists on how to locate the State Hospital records:

Go to

<https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/default.aspx> and click on “Browse or Search Our New Catalog.” Next, click on “Advanced Search.” Enter RG-023 in the Keyword field and select “Collection” in the Level of Description Field and “Government Records” in the Material Type field and click “Search.” Click on Department of Human Service and select “Office of Mental Health.” Once you get to that page, scroll down for the list of each institution. Click on the institution which will bring up a list of all the records they have. You may need to click through each link to find more specific info on what each one is. To order, use this form:

<https://www.phc.pa.gov/Archives/Documents/Pennsylvania-State-Archives-Mail-Reference-Order-Form.pdf>. They will search the entire record collection and send you everything pertaining to your request for \$15. Be sure to include any possible different spellings.