

## Remembering the Phillips Family

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In the last issue of the newsletter, I highlighted a notable landmark no longer in existence, the First Federal Bank, so that residents of the county will remember what has been lost. Recently, I had the privilege of co-hosting tours of New Rosemont Cemetery with fellow Society member Rachel Shaffer. For the tour I selected individuals or families of note from local history who were interred in the cemetery. Having done the research for those who signed up for the cemetery tours, I felt it should be shared with a broader audience.



The focus of this article is the immediate family of Ralph Phillips, a longtime noted photographer and supporter of the community. Ralph Guest Phillips was born in Bloomsburg in 1872, the son of John Swisher Phillips and Mary Matilda (Gross) Phillips. During the tour I made no mention of John Swisher. Other than noting he was Ralph's father, I had no information on him, but knew he was not buried with the Phillips family in New Rosemont Cemetery.

*Ralph Phillips at age 50,  
from the 1923 Obiter yearbook*

Subsequent research has shown that John Swisher appears to have been as talented as Ralph, but unlike his son who engaged in one vocation for 50 years, his father never settled on a single profession and constantly changed occupations. At the time of his death, he was said to have been a printer by trade, having learned it in his youth, although that greatly understated his versatility.

From what I have been able to uncover, John Swisher most notably was a partner in the Columbia County *Republican* newspaper from 1871 to 1873, where he served as publisher. He continued in the newspaper business in the late 1870s as foreman with the *Columbian*, leaving in 1879 to join Wilkes-Barre's *Record of the Times*. He returned to the *Columbian* for a brief time, then was with the *Benton Argus* in 1893 and *Hughesville Mail* in 1894.

1892 Phillips Café Ad



**PHILLIPS'.**

THE SWEETS OF LIFE.

"Sweets to the Sweet" is a soulful motto. Who would be guilty of mixing bitter with the sweets offered to such charming creatures? Yet that is just what dishonest confectioners do. A specialty at Phillips' is the very best of pure candies. Sole agency for Tenney's celebrated New York Confectionery. The Bakery is always well-stocked, and the Cafe is always open.

**M. M. PHILLIPS & SON.**  
BLOOMSBURG, PA.

Yet this was just part of his working career, which included signing on as an engineer with the North and West Branch Railway Company and as assistant in the Register & Recorder's Office in 1882. Two years later in January 1884, John Swisher purchased what he called Phillips' Domestic Bakery, which was located on Main Street in Bloomsburg, there-by becoming both a baker and confectioner. The business expanded, adding a restaurant and ice cream parlor, and later on a bread wagon and soda fountain. In addition to bread, rolls, biscuits, and cakes, over the years it would also sell fruit (bananas, lemons, and oranges), candy, ice cream, oysters, Christmas ornaments, Easter decorations, and toys.

What is not clear is who actually ran the bakery and the restaurant, called Phillips Café. It appears John Swisher and Mary Matilda were in business together, but on June 12, 1885, the partnership was officially dissolved by mutual consent. John Swisher continued for at least a couple more years as a baker and confectioner, until finally the couple's personal relationship also ended and in February 1890 they divorced. Even with personal troubles, the bakery, café, and ice cream parlor continued and prospered. Mary would eventually have another family member helping her out. By April 1891, advertisements for Phillips Café listed the proprietors as M. M. Phillips and son. Since Frank, the younger brother, was only 12 that year, Ralph was the son helping

his mother out in the business.

Not only did the café offer sumptuous meals for only 50 cents, it also catered tea parties, weddings, lodges, and various suppers, served with dishes and silverware. Its motto was "A-1-Service always," and on several occasions was remodeled and enlarged. In 1894, the *Columbian* featured an article describing what the Phillips Café had to offer, which included "an attractive appearance," a "reputation for purity and wholesomeness of food," a "prominent location," on Main Street between Center and Iron, a lunch-room "ample for the accommodation of 60 persons, and a full corps of assistants and waiters."

Although there were notices in the paper over the years of Mary selling her food enterprise, Phillips Café did not close until the fall of 1895 after nearly 12 years of service to the residents of Bloomsburg. It had been located at 10-14 East Main Street in the Phillips building, which has been owned by the family since 1886 and still houses Phillips Emporium. Although briefly called a hotel, the Arlington, with a dining room and bar, in 1898 the rooms on the upper floors were rented out and the building became a boarding house, where Mary lived until her death in 1927. The

*Morning Press* obituary called her “one of Bloomsburg’s pioneer and most successful business women.”

Even while the café was still in operation Ralph was beginning his long career, having started to learn photography at the age of 14. Not wanting to continue making a living in the food profession, on the day he turned 21 on April 14, 1893, Ralph hosted a large party with about 80 guests to celebrate. Refreshments were served at the café and an orchestra provided music for dancing. Two days later, he left for Ridgway in Elk County, where he had accepted a position to manage a photograph gallery.

His time away from Bloomsburg appears to have been relatively short-lived, and in May 1895 Ralph G. Phillips, photographer, opened a studio of his own at 25 East Main Street. His first business was located across Main from the Central Hotel and just over and down from his mother’s café. Initially focusing on being a portrait photographer, he started his business with an attention-grabbing special deal: free baby pictures.

Three years later Ralph moved his studio to 124 East Main. Then, as he continued to build his business, in 1906 he converted a large space on the third floor of the recently-constructed addition to the First National Bank Building on Market Square into his new studio. He would remain there for 20 years in a highly visible position, with “Phillips Studio” in large letters on both the Main and Market Street sides of the building. For many years Ralph was the official photographer for the Bloomsburg State Normal School yearbook, the *Obiter*, and was hired to take many photos of the campus.

All this time his personal life was also going well. In 1896 he married 21-year-old Jesse Boyd Ent, who two years earlier had graduated from the Normal School. They had three children in the span of four years (1897-1900): sons Dreher Ent and Ralph Jr., plus daughter Marian (frequently spelled Marion) Louise. Then in 1907 and 1908 they had son Jesse Alonzo and daughter Mary Josephine. The family lived in a number of homes starting out,



*Daughters Marian Louise and Mary Josephine (in buggy) at their new home on West Fifth Street, probably the winter of 1910-11*

among them on East Street, the corner of East Third and Spruce streets, and 367 Lightstreet Road. Then in late 1909 Ralph purchased a plot at the corner of West Fifth and Jefferson streets, part of a large area of land acquired many years before by the late David Waller, Sr. This is where he wanted to build his own home and it was to be distinctive. Commissioned to design the house was a budding young architect, Verus T. Ritter, and he created a craftsman showpiece. The family moved into their new home at the end of March 1910.

Ralph was also not the only talented person in the family. His wife Jesse proved to be very adept at creating rag rugs, which she designed in many different and elaborate patterns. She was so renowned at this, an article featuring a number of her rugs (in full color!) was published in January 1911 by the Ladies' Home Journal.

Unfortunately, this was also a period in his life when Ralph experienced tragedy, the sudden, heartbreaking death of someone close to him. This would be a recurring theme.

The initial loss was his father. The first mention of John Swisher's employment after his 1894 newspaper job was in Berwick, as a painter in the paint shop at the American Car & Foundry. This was around 1902. He worked there for a year or so, then returned to Bloomsburg. On October 6, 1903, he visited the offices at the American School Furnishing Company factory, was hired in its finishing department, and scheduled to start work the next day. Upon leaving the factory (the brick part of the complex on Railroad Street currently owned by AGAPE), he walked along the D. L. & W. tracks which ran by the building. The 4:12 passenger train was approaching and somehow struck John Swisher, throwing him about 15 feet. Severely injured, he was taken up Market Street to the office of Dr. Bruner, in the house now serving as the parsonage of Wesley United Methodist Church. He was taken to the Mary Packer Hospital in Sunbury—Bloomsburg's hospital still two years away from opening—where John Swisher died at ten o'clock that evening.

Listed as 57 years old, his *Morning Press* obituary also stated he was survived by his wife, even though they had been divorced for 13 years. In fact, while Mary Matilda was shown to be divorced in the 1900 census, in the final two in which she appeared, Mary was now a widow. The *Press* said of John Swisher: "He was a man of considerable education and ability."

His funeral was held at the home of his elder son, Ralph. The *Press* stated he would be buried in new Rosemont Cemetery. This was not the current cemetery known by that name. When Rosemont cemetery first expanded in 1895, land was purchased where the University's upper campus is currently located. With too few burials, the property was sold for a golf course in 1916, then to the state college in 1962. The Berwick *Enterprise*, however, stated John Swisher was to be buried in the Phillips family plot in Rosemont Cemetery, alongside his parents. There are three tombstones in that plot. One clearly has his mother's name Sarah, while the one to her left, well-faded, seems to only say father, not Henry. The third grave marker is at the very front and is also essentially illegible, with nothing even remotely resembling John on it.



*Dreher Ent Phillips, 1897-1916*

Tragedy struck again twelve and a half years later. In the spring of 1916 the eldest Phillips child, Dreher, born in 1897 and now 18 years old, was about to graduate from the Normal School's commercial program. He was suddenly stricken with appendicitis and had seemingly recovered, ready to return home from the Bloomsburg Hospital, when he suffered a relapse. As the *Morning Press* reported on March 13, 1916, "After making a brave fight for his life and after physicians had battled untiringly in the hope of effecting a recovery, the death of Dreher Phillips, eldest child of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph G. Phillips, occurred about 7:30 o'clock last night in the Bloomsburg Hospital. Ever since Friday morning, when it became known that the young man's condition was critical, townspeople generally have hung upon every word of news regarding his condition. Well-liked and popular and just coming into young manhood, his death was one of the saddest that has occurred in town within recent years."

The funeral was held at his parents' home on West Fifth Street, and he was the first member of the family buried in the new family plot in the recently opened Rosemont Cemetery along Berwick Road between Bloomsburg and Espy. In one bit of sad irony, in 1927, when youngest child Mary was also 18, she too suffered from appendicitis. But she had no complications, recovered well, and lived to be nearly 90.

Although diminished, the family continued to enjoy life in Bloomsburg, as well as one other location during the summers. Ralph also had a studio in Eagles Mere, his work coinciding with the vacations the family spent there during the hot days of summer.



*1929 Phillips  
Studio Ad*

With his photography business growing and after having spent 20 years on the third floor of the addition to the First National Bank, Ralph decided to build his own studio. He did this in 1926 at 218 East Street, in a Spanish-style building with a tile roof. At the same time, his former studio in the bank was subdivided into a number of offices. The East Street location is where Ralph would remain until his retirement in 1943.

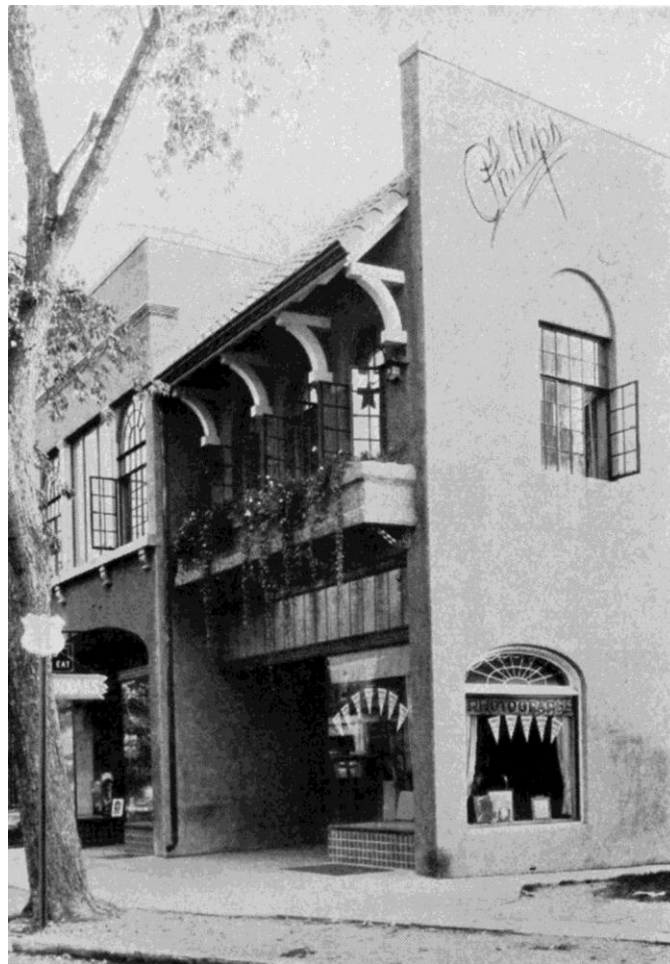
Then, just over a year later a third sudden tragedy hit the Phillips family. This one involved the youngest son, Jesse Alonzo, who was then 20. On the night of August 17, 1927, he drove his single seat Ford Roadster to Danville. He found out the friends he had come to see had gone to a park across the Susquehanna River at Riverside, so he went over there. After only a few minutes it started to rain, so he headed back to Danville with three friends in the seat alongside him, probably driving in haste to avoid the rain, being in an open car. After crossing the bridge, either due to a tire blow out or unable to properly steer the car due to the crowded seat, the vehicle veered into a tree. All four occupants were thrown out. The other three only had their clothes torn, but Jesse Alonzo suffered a severe head injury, having fractured his skull. Friends in other cars took him to Geisinger Hospital, but after desperate efforts there was nothing that could be done to save his life and he died early the next morning.

A viewing was held in the family home on West Fifth Street on Saturday, August 20. A constant procession of friends came through the house for two hours. This was followed by a funeral at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, which was filled with friends, relatives, and a huge number of floral tributes. After the funeral there was a private graveside service for members of the family. Jesse Alonzo was a student at Bucknell and called one of its most popular men.

There would be no further sudden losses for Ralph, although the three were enough. His daughters did well, both graduating with degrees in education from the Normal School/State Teachers

College. They also helped their father out in the studio by retouching photographs, and one December Marian sold gifts she and two of her friends made themselves. It was called the Tip-Top Gift Shop and located in the Phillips Studio reception room.

His wife Jesse passed away in 1940. Ralph died in May 1950, having lived in his house on West Fifth Street for 40 years, and was buried with the other members of his family in New Rosemont Cemetery. Always referred to most highly in the local newspaper for his 50 years of photographic work and commitment to the community, among the pall bearers at his funeral were Robert Eyerly and Paul Eyerly, Jr.



*The East Street studio of Phillips Photography, with his trademark signature on the side of the building, 1933*

As a postscript to Phillips Photography and the studio building, the business went on under Ralph's daughter Mary, assisted by Jean Mosier, who joined the studio in 1942. Jean, who just turned 101, bought the business with her husband in 1947 and kept the name. In 1949, however, it was sold once more and after 54 years, there was no longer a Phillips Studio in Bloomsburg. The building at 218 East Street lasted until 1995, when after nearly 70 years it was torn down to allow for the Columbia County Farmers National Bank next door to expand.

The story of the Phillips family in Bloomsburg was just one of many told on the cemetery walking tour and one of hundreds that can be told from the rich history of Bloomsburg and Columbia County.