

The Horse Dealer

By Chris Sanders

Sensational headlines. We love them. They grab our attention. They make us gasp. They make us want to read more...who, what, WHERE? They also sell more newspapers, which I'm sure is the editors' intent!

One such *Morning Press* headline dated February 23, 1903, stopped me in my tracks as I skimmed through old microfilmed newspapers. In bold, black letters—front page—it read, “HIS LIFE IN THE BALANCE. Elmer Shaffer, of Briar Creek, Took Horse Medicine Instead of his Own, Was Almost Killed. Vomiting Alone Saved Him.”

Wow, I thought. I've got to read this and find out what happened! Yes, it was as sensational to me as I'm sure it was to readers 116 years ago.

The article began, “Taking the wrong medicine almost cost Elmer Shaffer his life, and that he is living today is only because of a mere chance.” Elmer had gone to the drug store and purchased horse medicine and medicine for himself (can you imagine today getting animal and human medicine in the same pharmacy?). He was in such a hurry that he wouldn't wait until the two packages were divided or labeled. The medicine for the animal was, however, marked, “For the Horse.” The horse medicine which contained potassium nitrate for which there is no known antidote, was to be made up into twelve doses.

Getting them mixed Elmer took the twelve doses of poisonous horse medicine. It soon began eating the lining of his stomach, causing intense pain. Elmer started vomiting, however, which saved his life. Suffering excruciating agony his cries could be heard for a considerable distance.

For a time it was thought he would surely die, for nothing could save or help him. Finally the doctor arrived and succeeded in stimulating further vomiting.

The article ends: “His condition is yet serious but he will recover.”

Whew! Elmer had a close call there! I wanted to know more about this man. Did he escape the calamity to go on and live a long life? I was surprised at the story which unfolded!

Elmer, a native of Briar Creek, born November 12, 1877, was the son of Wesley and Harriet (Croop) Shaffer, and a grandson of William Shaffer (died 1902 in Bloomsburg), a leading farmer of the county, a county commissioner and a member of the executive board of the Columbia County Fair Association. Elmer was a well-known horse dealer who conducted business for many decades. Per his 1947 obituary, “He became known to thousands of people in this area through his transactions in horses, having started business in 1900 (he was 23). He was probably the most known horse dealer in Central Pennsylvania, his building at Briar Creek a landmark throughout the years.” In addition, he also ran a slaughter house and had dog kennels.

Elmer was frequently in the news and I was able to piece some of his story together from 1904 through 1916 through microfilmed articles in the *Democratic Sentinel*. Let's just say Elmer's life was NOT dull!

Headlines for November 15, 1904 show "SLIGHT ACCIDENT. Butcher Wagon and Trolley Car Collide at Briar Creek." Yep, that would be Elmer's butcher wagon. The wagon and a trolley car of the Columbia and Montour line collided and as a result of the accident the wagon was laid up for repairs. Elmer unexpectedly drove out from behind his barn upon the track. The car was already on the spot and it was impossible to stop it in time. It slowed down, however, so that in the collision which followed the wagon only received a slight bump, which caused no damage.

In Elmer's effort to escape, however, he turned too short, and upset his wagon breaking one of the wheels, which was the full extent of the damage.

Bad luck for Elmer. On May 19, 1905, the newspaper reported that one of the black horses belonging to a team recently bought by Elmer, died at the St. Elmo stables. The horse weighed 1600 pounds. Elmer "was offered \$250.00 for it but a short time ago" the paper lamented. (What about the poor horse!?)

Elmer again made the news on October 6, 1905. Headlines stated, "ROBBERY AT BRIAR CREEK. Tools, Hardware, etc., Stolen From Empty House." The article related that Elmer's residence was undergoing extensive alterations and repairs, and that part of the building was untenanted, and not kept locked.

Marauders paid the premises a visit and carried off a quantity of the tools, hardware and other articles which were lying about. Parties in West Berwick who were familiar with the premises were suspected and Elmer had a search warrant issued for a house on Mercer Street, but no trace of the missing articles could be found. Further searches with probable arrests were to be expected. Elmer was NOT dropping this matter!

March 20, 1906, finds Elmer highlighted in the news with this unusual headline: "JEWISH RABBI HIT BY TRAIN." A Jewish Rabbi, Levi Pinchinski of Wilkes-Barre, who had come to Briar Creek to butcher cattle at Elmer Shaffer's slaughter house, was struck by a D. L. & W. train at that place.

According to the orthodox Jewish religion, the article explained, all meat must be killed by an appointed Rabbi. Mr. Pinchinski was preparing the meat for a dealer of such meat in Wilkes-Barre and was very anxious to return home on the 3 o'clock train that afternoon. When he heard the train whistle as it approached the station, the Rabbi grasped his tools and ran. He had to cross the tracks to reach the station and attempted to do so in front of the approaching train, but the cow catcher caught him midway on the track and flung him about fifteen feet upon the bank at the side of the track. Onlookers were spellbound and many ran to the spot expecting the man might be dead, but before aid arrived, the Rabbi picked himself up and crawled upon the train, which had now stopped at the station. The man was badly bruised and shaken up, but no bones appeared to be broken and he was able to return home.

The following headline only warranted page seven for Elmer on November 6, 1908. It read: "ASSAULTED AN ELECTION OFFICER. Elmer Shaffer, of Briar Creek, Alleged to Have Attacked George W. Sterner." A warrant for Elmer's arrest for assault and battery was issued and he was brought to Bloomsburg where he was given \$500 bail.

Sterner, a member of the election board in Briar Creek, was on his way to the polls about 6 o'clock in the morning. He had his overcoat on and was carrying an oil stove in one hand when he walked out in the road from his house to board the trolley. He stood there waiting for the car to stop when the motorman motioned him to get on the other side of the car on account of the wind. He stepped across the tracks and was about to get on the car when Shaffer rushed out from his house, which was directly across the road from Sterner, crying, "I'll show you where to get on." Shaffer then grabbed Sterner and beat his head and face unmercifully, causing his face to bruise and swell up badly, as well as the back of his head.

Sterner did not try to hit him back but tried to get away from him and with the help of the motorman and conductor finally did.

The trolley line ran close to the edge of the road in front of Shaffer's home and Shaffer had placed sod close up to the edge of it. It was here that Sterner stepped when he crossed the track. Shaffer claimed that Sterner stepped on his land, although in reality, was still on the public road where Shaffer had sodded it. It looks like Elmer needed some serious anger management! There was no follow-up article available, but I'm sure he was found g-u-i-l-t-y!

On November 13, 1908, Elmer makes the news again. The headlines announce, "ALLEGED BRIAR CREEK IS BEING POLLUTED. State Health Department is After Slaughter Houses Along that Stream. WILL THOROUGHLY INVESTIGATE. Say That Any Source of Pollution Will at Once Stop." Briar Creek, a stream running through Briar Creek township and emptying into the Susquehanna River, was polluted the Pennsylvania Health Department stated because slaughter houses along the creek—Elmer's included—were dumping large quantities of waste matter from the butcherings into the creek. Because of this typhoid and other diseases were bred not only in the creek, but further down the river. The Health Department advised reforms were being undertaken with all streams in the state and all pollution would be stopped within the next few years. It was expected that no polluted matter would be dumped into the streams at any place. Boy, I bet this made Elmer hoppin' mad! But more on this to come.

Two months later, January 15, 1908, finds Elmer in trouble once again with the law. He was arrested by the State Trooper on a charge of cruelty to animals. It was claimed he shamefully beat a horse. Elmer immediately paid the \$500 bail. Again we don't know the outcome, but it appears Elmer failed his anger management classes.

On November 19, 1909, it was reported Elmer was "hurt in an ugly runaway" in West Berwick. He was unloading some meat at the Benscoter meat market when a part on the wagon came loose, dropped to the ground and scared the horses which started to run away.

In an effort to stop the horses, Elmer jumped and sustained a fracture of one of the bones of the left ankle. The horses continued running to Orange Street, when attempting to turn up Orange, upset the wagonload of meat and the wagon. The team then stopped. Sounds like a little horse karma to me!

This little blurb made page two on the newspaper on March 29, 1910: **BITTEN BY HIS OWN DOG.** Elmer Shaffer of Briar Creek was bitten in the left hand by his own dog. The injury was cauterized by a physician. It was very painful. I don't think I would want to be in that dog's paw at that moment!

Sometimes things don't just happen "to" Elmer, they happen to those "around" him. For example, on page 5 of the newspaper of May 27, 1910, a Mr. Clark Utt fell in front of a street car in the afternoon at Elmer Shaffer's horse sale. The front wheels of the car pushed Mr. Utt's legs off the track and the motorman stopped the car so quickly that the rear wheels did not reach him. Mr. Utt miraculously escaped from losing both legs or his life!

Remember the article dated November 13, 1908 regarding Elmer's involvement in the pollution of Briar Creek? New headlines finally emerged over three years later, on February 9, 1912 stating **"HARD FIGHT ON IN SHAFFER CASE. Defendant Charged With Polluting Briar Creek."** Elmer was accused of depositing refuse from his slaughter house—"after he had been notified not to do so."

The Commonwealth's evidence was all in and witnesses were called for the defense to prove that Elmer DID NOT deposit refuse or in any way pollute the stream; that any refuse thrown into the stream was first treated with chemicals so that germs were destroyed.



Shaffer's Horse Barn and Dog Kennel

One of the most important witnesses was a representative of the State Board Livestock Sanitary Department who testified that he had frequently visited Mr. Shaffer's slaughter house and had found everything "in first class shape." Well, I bet Elmer was gloating over that one! And guess what? On February 13, 1912, the newspaper announced, **"JURY ACQUITTED ELMER SHAFFER."** Furthermore, the costs were placed upon the prosecutor, S. B. Arment, agent for the State Board of Health! Thus the case of Commonwealth vs. Elmer Shaffer finally came to an end. I bet Elmer was in a good mood that day!

Another incident of one associated with Elmer, was that of Arthur Yohe, an employee. The paper related on May 29, 1912 (page 7) that Mr. Yohe was seriously injured shortly after starting for Catawissa one evening when the bronco he was riding threw him off his back. As the animal whirled around, Mr. Yohe was hurled against a telegraph pole and became unconscious.

The accident happened at 6 o'clock and was witnessed by the passengers of the trolley car from Berwick to Bloomsburg. The car stopped and the injured man was taken to a nearby residence where the doctor was immediately summoned. Mr. Yohe was badly bruised about the body and was unconscious for several hours. He received no broken bones but may have had internal injuries. Talk about a bad night!

The *Democratic Sentinel* also kept the public apprised of Elmer's sales, with the articles being quite descriptive. For example, an April 1, 1910 article reads, "SUCCESSFUL HORSE SALE. Hundreds of people were in attendance and 65 horses were sold. The scene was like that at the fair. There were at least 1500 people with carriages by the score. Free lunch was served by Mr. Shaffer." Wow, free lunch? Who can beat that for an afternoon outing?!



*Big crowd at Elmer Shaffer's horse sale
February 22, 1927.*

Another eye-catching headline on September 1, 1911: "RECORD CROWD AT SHAFFER'S SALE. There is always a large crowd at one of Elmer Shaffer's horse sales, but the one held on Wednesday had all records broken. The large grandstand at the stock yards was not half large enough to accommodate the crowds. Around the fences the crowd was packed while the bidding was spirited. At 11:30 o'clock a free lunch was served by Mr. Shaffer." Hmmm, free lunch again. That's always good for business!

Again, on April 9, 1912, "ELMER SHAFFER'S SALE WAS A BIG SUCCESS. The horse sale was largely attended and two car loads of horses and cows were sold. The sale resembled a county fair. Mr. Shaffer served a free dinner at 11:30, farmers from many miles around being present."

Not only did Elmer sell horses, he raced them. June of 1912 finds Elmer racing his horse, Dredger, at the Saturday race meet. The paper states the races were "hard fought and the crowds

thoroughly enjoyed each event. The race meet was a success in every particular.” Elmer was in a “half mile running race.” The time was 55 1-2 sec. Dredger placed first.

Elmer got around. In addition to his own sales, he also conducted sales in other local areas, such as Washingtonville. Elmer got his stock in many ways. Farmers would bring stock to him (horses, mules, hogs), or Elmer would go to them. The last mention of Elmer in the Democratic Sentinel was in 1916 when he went “out west” to get some horses.

We also have a picture at the Society of one of his sales dated 1927, so we know his business was thriving (he was 60), even though automobiles and tractors were slowly starting to take over horse power.

Elmer did have a life besides horses however. He married Jennie Kostenbender in 1900. They had one son, Raymond (1901-1967). This marriage ended in divorce. In 1921 Elmer married a second time to Edith Sult. They had a son, Leroy Elmer (1922-2003). This marriage also ended in divorce.

Elmer’s 1918 draft card shows he was 40 years old, living in Briar Creek, occupation, “horse dealer.” Ray Shaffer (son) is listed as nearest relative. Elmer is tall, medium build, with grey eyes, dark brown hair and bald (I guess he had a little hair and the rest was “bald”). The WWII 1942 draft card shows he is 64, resides in Berwick, is 5’10”, 145 pounds, blue eyes, blond hair (white?) and light complected. He also had a “scar from Appendectomy.” Dorothea Shaffer is listed as the “person who will always know your address.” Elmer did give love another chance, for the 1930 and 1940 censuses show him “married” and living with Dorothea. His death certificate shows him as “divorced,” however.

Elmer made his will September 20, 1947 and it is a little surprising for reasons we will never know. He left his son, Leroy Shaffer, by his second wife, \$1.00, and Leroy was not mentioned in Elmer’s obituary. Whoa, that was a cut! His son by his first wife, Raymond, got “the desk, desk chair, safe, corner cupboard, one genuine leather chair, the horn rack, all pictures in the house and all veterinary books.” Then there were very specific directions for the remainder of his estate (the farm in Nescopeck and property in Berwick) to be put in trust and distributed to his son Raymond.

Although granddaughter (Edith S. Holmquist) was recognized in Elmer’s obituary, she (like her father Leroy Elmer) got nothing. Leroy Elmer died in Norwich, NY in 2003.

Elmer died at Geisinger Memorial Hospital, Danville, PA, on December 20, 1947, at age 70, after being in ill health for over a year. He was confined to bed for the last six weeks prior to his death, suffering from inoperable stomach cancer. Elmer Henry Shaffer was buried in Rose Lawn Cemetery, Berwick, and his son Ray, who died in 1967, rests beside him. Nobody can say that Elmer had a boring life!