

## The Man Court Ordered to Leave Columbia County at Age 83

By Kay Stahl

You have heard the saying that a leopard can't change its spots. Well apparently, one man, Philip Swisher, had a similar problem changing his habits throughout his lifetime. Philip appears to be quite a character and known for misdeeds in Sullivan, Columbia, and Montour Counties. Philip was born March 16, 1849, the son of Jacob Lloyd Swisher and Mary Frances Yeager in Madison Township, Columbia County. If I dare to claim, Philip is my 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin, 3X removed and his great-grandparents, Abraham Philip and Jane Burgess Swisher, are my 4<sup>th</sup> great-grandparents. Around the age of twenty, Philip married his first wife, Margaret Ellen Woodside, daughter of Samuel and Letitia McCarty Woodside. By 1893, the couple had thirteen children.

Philip's first run-in with the law occurred when he was 42 years old and also involved his 21-year-old son, William. Apparently, a fight occurred on the Swisher Farm about one-half mile from Muncy Valley. The participants were: William H. Ellis and a posse of three other men versus Philip and son, William. Ellis pressed charges and Constable Hoffer apprehended Philip and William Swisher and headed for the county jail. While at Sonestown, Philip requested to go into the Lorah Hotel thinking perhaps he could get the bail money of \$200 each from relatives there. Swisher remained inside so long that Constable Hoffer became anxious and inquired inside. Hoffer discovered that Philip had slipped out the back door of the building and escaped. The constable continued his trip with the younger man, William Swisher. According to the newspaper account, William felt badly about the affair and could not cease from sobbing. A follow-up article states that the assault and battery case was amicably settled.

Next, we find an unusual story in the Montrose Democrat, 12 June 1901. A sensational rumor startled the town when Philip Swisher declared that he had plowed up a human skeleton on his farm. This was the site of an old Hungarian shanty where it had been said that a man had been robbed and murdered several years ago by a Hungarian. The bones were supposed to be those of the victim. People came from miles around to see the remains. Dr. C. P. Voorchase examined the bones and found them to be those of a yearling calf. Philip appears to have made up a hoax!

By 1906, Philip and William Swisher were involved in a different unsolved murder that had plagued Muncy Valley for years. A widow, Sarah Whitmore, was brutally murdered in her home with a large stick of kindling wood. One of the primary suspects was Willis Crawford but Philip and William gave him an alibi. In a newspaper account, Philip, a lumberman, and son William said that Crawford slept at Philip's lumber camp, near Laporte, the night Mrs. Whitmire was murdered. The widow Whitmore's unsolved murder case is another intriguing tale but with the Swishers' alibi, the main suspect was released due to lack of sufficient evidence.

By 1907, Margaret, Philip's first wife had died. Two years later Philip remarried to a much younger woman, Alice Craft, which made newspaper headlines for the vast age difference in the couple. Philip was 59 and Alice was 28 years old. It appears that all the children from the previous

marriage were out of the home by the 1910 Federal Census. Two stepchildren, Harry and Emma Craft, lived in the home until their mother died in 1920. After the death of his second wife, Philip seemed to run into the law quite often and had various troubles.

In 1921, at the age of 72, Philip filed charges against neighbors, William Sadar, his wife, and daughter Blanche of Pine Township, Columbia County. They are accused of the theft of household goods, dishes, tools, 8 bushels of corn ears and 150 pounds of buckwheat flour, among other things, while Swisher was away. It was alleged that Sadar had visited the Swisher home and threatened Swisher's sister, who was age 78, with a gun. Sadar returned the next day and took the items. Sadar claimed that Philip had taken a cow that belonged to him, and that in payment for the cow, Sadar took the articles. A deed for land near Crystal Lake bought by Sadar from Swisher was also involved in the tangled case. Sadar declared that the ground called for in the deed cannot be found. State Trooper Blatz, who went to serve the warrants, effected a settlement and Sadar returned the goods. Nothing more regarding this account can be found.

A month later, Philip was in the news again. The Bloomsburg Morning Press reported this interesting headline story: "Chicken Thief in Pine (Township) was Shot – Swisher Received Charge in Back When Caught by Hartman – Was Lodged in Jail." Philip, age 72, along with Bruce Whitmoyer, were caught stealing chickens by Earl Hartman. At midnight, Hartman heard something about the barn and found Swisher and Whitmoyer. He fired a shotgun, hitting Swisher in the back, but not seriously wounding him. The two men fled into the woods and Hartman called neighbors who rounded up the two men and took them to the Justice of the Peace in Millville. By catching the two men, people in that part of the county believed the epidemic of thievery in which chickens, grain, and harnesses were stolen, had been put to a stop. It was reported that, "Judge Whitehead said he was moved to mercy by the defendant's age, but that it was his duty to protect the community from depredations of Swisher's caliber." Philip was fined \$150 and sent to the Eastern Penitentiary for a term of 14 months to two years. He was sentenced Feb. 2, 1922, and later transferred back to Columbia County Prison and then released Feb. 6, 1924. Due to Whitmoyer's previous criminal records, he was sentenced to two to three years. The Convict Reception Register gave a few interesting details regarding Philip Swisher. It stated that he was unable to read or write and attended public school for only 1-2 years. He left home at age 16 and he smoked and used profanity.

After Philip's release from prison in 1924, things were quiet for a bit. He married his third wife by 1930. Philip was found in Jordan Township, Lycoming in a rented home and listed as an invalid supported by the township. He was age 81 and his wife, Ethelyn was age 29, showing another huge age difference. She was born in Easton and was the daughter of Arthur Stewart, who was born in England, and Emma Laubach from Bloomsburg. She had a stepfather, Daniel Laubaugh.

In April 1931, Philip, age 82, and son William, age 61, found themselves locked up in the Columbia County jail again. Philip had charged William with assault and neighbors of Philip had charged him with threatening to kill them and burn their buildings down. Philip was charged and

pled guilty of surety of peace and was told to leave the jurisdiction of the court (Columbia County). The district attorney informed the court that the cases grew out of some family troubles. The court agreed to suspend their sentences if they agreed to leave the county within thirty days. Philip's response was that it would only require two days to make his affairs ready to leave the county and added that he would never forget the judge for what he had done for him. It is unclear if Philip left the county because in May 1932, an article in the Shamokin News Dispatch claims that Philip spent the winter in jail and refused to obey a court order. The articles stated that "Philip Swisher has been giving the Columbia County court considerable to think about during the past several years." It reported that Philip had lived in Pine Township, Columbia County for some years and married a woman who is now an inmate of the Danville Hospital. In the autumn of 1931, Philip had given the poor directors of the township all sorts of trouble. The directors appealed to the court and Philip was arrested and sent to jail for the winter. The article stated that although he had been released and promised to leave the county, Philip "instead returned to his old practices." Philip's case was heard again in the court, and he promised Judge Evans to be good. On this promise, the judge freed him. After the court dismissed Philip, he "donned his hat, walked back thru the court room and as he neared the door, turned and waved and said "So Long" to Judge Evans."

According to this court account, Philip's third wife, Ethel, was already in the Danville State Hospital by 1932. In the obituary of Ethel Swisher found in the Bloomsburg Morning Press, April 16, 1941, it stated she died April 14, 1941, at the Danville State Hospital where she had been a patient for the past ten years. That would place her committed to the hospital around 1931. Ethel was buried in Bethel, Luzerne County, PA.

Little is known of Philip after his release from jail in May 1932 until his death December 17, 1939, at the age of 90. He was a resident in Locust Township, RD#3 Catawissa, PA at the time of his passing. It appears that he may have been under the care of Russell Eveland, the caretaker of the Farm of Poor Board. Philip's burial was at the Old Sonestown Cemetery, Sullivan County with his first wife, Margaret Ellen Swisher. Although he had been ordered to leave Columbia County several times, it seems that due to his advanced age and his continued promises to "be good," he never did leave or at least for only brief periods of time and continued to "return to his old practices" time and again!