

The Mundane, Mayhem and Murder in Small Town Edwards

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August 19, 2002, updated October 14, 2010**

History can be pretty boring or it can be exciting. In small town Edwards it seems to be rather mundane or "business as usual" as a normal thing, but on occasion there is mayhem and/or murder.

Starting with the "mundane" - Karl French mentioned that anybody going through the local school when Miss Leah Noble taught here never got out of school without learning about our first settler, Asa Brayton, so this article will skip him and start with another of the early settlers, Guy Earle, who settled in Scotland district on the farm where William Bullock, Jr. lives.

His father, Esek Earle, had moved from Vermont to Champion and Guy joined him. In June 1806 Esek sent his son through the woods road to Dekalb and on to Ogdensburg to deliver two trunks for Thomas Ogden and Richard Cooper. He had his first look at Antwerp, which had only two or three houses, then his journey took him through Gouverneur, which also had only two or three little log houses. The letter this information comes from says the Gouverneur cabins were "near where the Academy now stands". Where was the Academy located?

In 1812 Guy Earle had occasion to take load of pork to Hopkinton and this time his trip took him through Edwards. While Asa Brayton had arrived and Guy must have passed the Brayton property, Guy stopped to water his horses at a cold brook near where later, "old Mr. Noble had his place". While the horses were drinking and resting Guy walked around and decided it looked like good farming land and in the succeeding fall he came back, and the letter says "took up the farm, cleared 10 acres and built a log house. (It sounds like a lot of work for just one man). Then he went back to Champion and got married.

Guy married Cynthia Smith on 19 Nov 1812, so he didn't linger on the homestead very long. Although the Earles settled in Edwards they had missed being the first settlers of Edwards by at least two other families - the Braytons and the Abel Bancroft, Sr.'s. As a rule, in those days, the bride became pregnant soon, but Cynthia's first known pregnancy wasn't until late in 1815. When it came close to her confinement she insisted that she be taken back to Champion where she had female family. Guy loaded her into the wagon and they trekked over the bumpy, winding, dirt road with Guy walking and carrying a stick to fend off the wolves, to Champion where their first child, Eliphalet Smith Earle, was born. Cynthia didn't become any more confident in her husband's ability to help her during childbirth and two more of their eight children were born over in Champion!

As has been written and talked about a number of times, Esek Earle was the one who discovered Trout Lake while looking for Guy's cows. He later took his daughter-in-law, Cynthia, to see the lake and it is believed that she was the first white woman to view this familiar recreational place.

Cynthia's father, Eliphalet Smith, was a Revolutionary War veteran who had wanderlust. He lived in a number of communities including what is now called Balmat. In fact he owned the farm on which the talc was later discovered but his itchy feet had gotten the best of him and he had sold it to the Balmat family so his descendants possibly missed out on the wealth from the mineral. Finally he did settle in Edwards where his daughter and son-in-law lived and is buried in Riverside Cemetery. His sandstone cemetery marker is shown at right.

Much later the Padgett family had a similar thing happen to them. The Padgetts lived in Redwood area, but Samuel Padgett had moved to Edwards. His son, George, was asked by his friend, F. W. Woolworth, to join him in his idea of opening a five and dime store. However, George decided he would rather join his father in Edwards. So Woolworth asked his cousin, Mr. Knox of Russell to go in with him. Knox ended up very wealthy and George became the owner of Padgett's Store on Main St., Edwards, so while he had a comfortable living, he never became "rich" like Woolworth and Knox.

Even an 1857 accounts book of a blacksmith shop/farm supply shop has an interesting history. This particular book was mystifying. The entries would list someone bringing in goods to sell then it was recorded that money was paid to someone else's account, so Mary Smallman, a very knowledgeable historian in Hermon, was asked to help. She explained that a number of businesses had their own barter system whereby a customer who owed someone else would ask to have his money earned credited to the account of the person to whom he owed money. That way he reduced his debt and the other person's debt to the shop was also lowered.



This picture of the log cabin on the William Watson homestead was on the road formerly named the Watson Road, but changed to the Spruce Road when the county wide rescue system was put in. The homestead was established in 1847 when William Watson and one of his older sons came to Edwards from Scarborough, England and cleared the land and built the cabin. Joseph, the son, then sailed back to England for the rest of the family in 1849. When they arrived at the port in New York, they were still on the wharf getting organized to travel north when the mother was approached by a lady stranger who made a strange request. She asked if she could adopt the 12 year old daughter, Nancy Jane. Nancy was a pert, pretty girl with long, red curls and obviously

attracted the attention of the stranger, but Mrs. Watson politely refused the offer. Nancy came to Edwards with her family and grew up to be the wife of Joseph Given and the ancestor of a number of present day Edwards residents, including Ruth "Tootie" Given Fuller, Kathryn Hurley Fletcher, and Sonny and Leland Bullock. There are many interesting stories about Nancy's life, but that's for another time.

Another picture was chosen that encompasses the familiar "Bend Farm" on the Brooklyn side of the village. The land that became known as the Bend Farm was first cleared by Alexander Kerr of the 1819 immigrants as part of his agreement with Joseph Pitcairn to pay off his indenture. This farm took in most of the area on the west side of the village to the Brodie farm (Fuller property now) and included the bend of the river, thereby the reason for its name. One of the later owners was Thomas Todd, a Scottish immigrant, who was a real land "Wheeler-dealer" in his time. He owned the farm when the railroad came to Edwards and gave the company right of way through his property. In return he understood that he would be given free passage on the train whenever he wanted to use it. However, the company did not grant him this privilege and he was very hurt by this decision.

The next owners of the Bend Farm were the Woodcock family who either gave or sold the land to the town for the Fairview Cemetery which was chartered Jan 16, 1915. Their request, in return for this transaction, was that their parents' bodies be moved from the old Riverside Cemetery, making Jason Woodcock and his two wives the first burials in the new Fairview Cemetery. The buildings on the farm are gone now with the cattle barn burning in the summer of 1955 and the house burning in August of 1991. The barn was on the property where Martha Lennox has her trailer and the house was on the site where Kevin and Chalaine Archer have their home now. This area of the village is commonly known as the "Brooklyn Side".

Edwards has had some inventors whose inventions aren't remembered anymore. One was Frank Barnes who invented a fly swatter to keep the flies off the cows when they were in the barn. Oswald Freeman let him install it in his barn to try the device. It appears that it was on the barn door and somehow the cows brushed through it as they came in to be milked and presumably left the flies outdoors!

Now to get into a little "mayhem", from the title of this article. We hear about a tremendous amount of child abuse, but it isn't a new problem. In March 1879 Nancy Brown wrote in her diary of an Edwards resident who "whipped his boy beastly and knocked down his wife twice. He has the name of being a hard cud." Then in September she wrote of a

neighbor who "gave her son two whippings today. She pounded him fearful the last time. It is no uncommon event." Nancy Brown's diaries were published by one of her descendants and are available to read in the History Center. The books do not circulate, however.

In earlier times it was common to "tell it like it is" in the newspapers and an old news item tells of a dead baby wrapped in a burlap bag and thrown into the Oswegatchie River and found on the river bank. There is no other information as to whether or not the person who disposed of the child was ever identified. It is assumed that the town gave the body a simple burial.

Rape is constantly in the news with the victims speaking up for themselves, as it should be. However, in the 19th and early 20th centuries the girls had no recourse. Many of the female teenagers of the times had no education to a living for themselves and usually when they were about 15 or 16 went to the neighboring homes to do housework until they married and had homes of their own. It was not an uncommon occurrence that the man of the household took advantage of the "hired girl", as she was referred to, and frequently it resulted in pregnancy and an illegitimate birth. Sometimes the man responsible gave the girl's parents money for their "trouble", but other times nothing was done and the baby simply became the oldest child in the family when the young mother married.

There was an adopted child in Edwards school, who frequently came to school with obvious signs of parental abuse. As teachers are required to report these signs to the proper authority, this was done each time. However, nothing was ever done to take care of the problem and when the boy was age sixteen, he shot and killed his adoptive father. Therefore, he is spending his life in State prison because nobody helped him.

Most of the people who live in Edwards have heard of the fire of July 4, 1894 which destroyed most of Main Street and two of the side streets. A common misconception of this event is that the town records were destroyed also, but they survived, intact, and are on file in the vault at the Town Hall. It is believed the reason they weren't burned is probably due to the fast thinking of the Town Clerk of the time, Charles Brown, who must have rescued them from the wooden Town Hall of that time. That Town Hall was on Maple Ave. on the site of the present Masonic Hall, and was new.

A fire that not so much is known about occurred April 21, 1913. On the riverbank behind the houses on Island Street that include Dr. Dodds' house was an old commercial building, apparently in poor shape, and this was the main structure that was the victim of the blaze. The Northern Tribune newspaper in Gouverneur wrote an account of the fire.

The headline says: "**Edwards Village Swept by Fire - Damage Estimated at \$12,000**" ... Monday - 21 April 1913

Fire broke out on the roof of an excelsior and planing mill owned by the Ann Rushton estate in Edwards Monday afternoon at 2:45 and when the flames were completely extinguished a damage which will approximate \$10,000 had resulted.

Although the origin of the fire is not definitely known it is supposed to have caught from sparks from a smokestack on a sawmill owned and operated by A. Negus, across the river. The excelsior and planing mill, which was the property of the Rushton estate, was an old wooden structure that had stood on the same site for many years and was one of the landmarks of Edwards. The roof was in a very poor condition and when once afire all efforts to extinguish or even check the flames were almost impossible. The fire spread rapidly to a huge pile of pulp logs directly east of the burning mills. A lumber shed in which many thousand board feet of lumber were stored was next in the path of the flames. The high wind which raged, soon caught a barn in connection with mill property and from this the sparks soon ignited the dwelling occupied by Henry Brown, which was also owned by the Rushton estate. The residence of John Cudlip was the next to suffer and after a heroic fight by the Edwards fire department the flames were confined to the west end, although the damage by smoke and water has almost ruined the structure.

Across the street from the burning mill a house owned by Dr. Murray and occupied by Edgar LaRock was destroyed and the flying cinders blew over the hill at the rear of the house and caught in the roof of a barn owned by George Morrow on Maple Street.

The high wind, which was apparently increasing in velocity at this time, caused the cinders to catch in many of the dwellings throughout the village. A cheese factory a quarter of a mile distant was discovered to be on fire and by the heroic work of a bucket brigade which had been formed of volunteers, the damage was confined to the roof, which was only slightly damaged. Every family in Edwards was watching their home and property carefully and at least a dozen families in the immediate vicinity of the conflagration moved their household furnishings into the street.

The machinery in the excelsior mill was owned by Attorney Earl Bancroft and a portion of it had been temporarily moved about the mill in preparation for a general overhauling and repairing. The value of the excelsior and planing mills and machinery is estimated at \$6,000, while the lumber shed, lumber and pulp wood in the near vicinity is approximately \$2,000. The homes of Henry Brown, John Cudlip, and the barn near the mill, all owned by the Rushton estate, is roughly estimated at \$1,800. The dwelling of Dr. Murray was valued at \$500 and the barn owned by George Morrow at \$300. The other damage throughout the village to the roofs which were caught from sparks will undoubtedly approximate \$100. Although it is not definitely known, it is understood that the Rushton property, which is managed by William Gardner of Edwards, was insured for about \$4,000. Mr. Bancroft, whose machinery and equipment was ruined, also carried a good amount of insurance. The other property about the village, which was damaged, was also insured and therefore the loss will be greatly diminished.

The work of the Edwards Fire Department has been highly commented on and their efforts, which at many times were apparently useless, finally proved successful. Fortunately no one was seriously injured, although Mrs. George Morrow received several bruises about the head and shoulders while attempting to extinguish the fire in the barn. The bartender of Hotel Edwards was on the roof with a pail of water when he slipped and fell to the ground, striking Mrs. Morrow on the head, inflicting a slight scalp wound and otherwise shaking her up. She was taken to the house and medical assistance summoned and will soon recover.

Shortly after the fire broke out in Edwards a telephone call was received here for assistance. The alarm was sounded with the result that all the local "fire laddies" assembled at the hose house. A company of fifteen men was selected to prepare for Edwards and go by special train. A hose cart with 2,000 feet of hose and three nozzles was prepared, together with other necessary equipment, including chemicals and suits. At their arrival at the station, however, the local company was halted by a telephone message stating that the fire was under control and thought to be in a position to be at last checked.

from Northern Tribune, Wednesday, 23 April 1913, published in Gouverneur, NY

Edwards also has had a number of tragic, accidental deaths that could be included under "mayhem". One happened December 17, 1896, just a week before Christmas, in Pond Settlement at Soft Water Pond, also known as Smith Pond, and involved Charles Jones, age 22 years. While knowledge of the basic accident is known by the family, a newspaper article makes it much more graphic. It reads - "One of the most shocking deaths that has transpired in this section in the last fifty years took place on the evening of the 17th inst. A party of young men and boys were assembled on Smith's Pond for the purpose of skating and playing goal, among whom was Charlie Jones, son of David A. Jones of the Pond Settlement. While playing goal he was pursued in hot haste by Silas Wood and Ed Whitford in order to "get his tag" which caused young Jones to run near the shore of the pond, when he tripped and fell, striking his neck upon a projecting snag, piercing the jugular vein. He sprang up quickly as Whitford was about to place his hands upon him, and said: "Boys, I am bleeding to death" while at the same time the blood was spurting profusely from his neck. He then turned and with the aid on either side by Whitford and Wood, succeeded in skating to the head of the pond, a distance of 30 rods, marking his course by a trail of his own life's blood. While on his way he said, "Take me home" three times, and then said, "Take me to Frank Smith's."



Charles M. Jones painted by Brigham Webb, local artist, in 1898

On arriving at the head of the pond he took off his hat placing it on the ground, then stooping, took off his boots and ran up the hill towards Smith's house with Whitford in pursuit, until he got near the fence when he staggered and would have fallen had not Whitford caught him and held him up the best he could until he got him over the fence where he fell to rise no more. Whitford and a young man by the name of Graham then carried him up to Smith's house and with the aid of Smith, put him in Graham's buggy and took him home a distance of about a mile, where he breathed but a few minutes. Charlie Jones was the pet of his father's family." Charles is buried in Gates Cemetery.

The river rapids near the Island have taken the lives of more than one child. Having read of the drowning of two young boys in 1914; back in 1979 an older gentleman who was a brother of these children was called. He related that on 10 July in 1914 the two oldest sons of Milton and Gertrude Beach decided to cool off in the river beside their house on the Island. The boys, Jay and Frank, (age 13 and 11) couldn't swim so they each got a board, or log, to use as a flotation device and began paddling around with some other boys. They were caught in the swift water and drawn into the rapids where the accident occurred. The family had no money to purchase cemetery stones, but these brothers are buried in Riverside Cemetery, believed to be on the plot with their grandmother, Mariette Price Beach.

Under accidental deaths, the very first death in the Freeman mine in Talcville was in 1893 being that of Hiram Heath (Said as rhyming with "death". Pronunciation of the name is known from Hazel Freeman who knew the family). Hiram lived with his family in Talcville hamlet where his father ran a store. Today he would probably be a 10th grade student with a summer job, but not underground at the mines. However, he was allowed to work in the mine and at 16 was the first casualty of the mining operation.

Remember Morris Rothenberg, commonly known as "Junkie"? There is a news article written when he was a young man that tells about the time he was hauled into court accused of rape. I couldn't find the actual article, but basically it said that Junkie denied the charge, claiming he was framed. The judge heard the case, believed Junkie's story and declared him innocent. However, Junkie had quite an exciting life during Prohibition. He owned more than one heavy car with adaptations to hide illegal booze as he transported it to sell. There is more than one story of his escapades as one of the local rumrunners. Possibly dealing in illegal whiskey made him more money than the buying and selling of junk, which earned him his nickname.

Another tale remembered by the contemporaries of Junkie is the time he was taken before a judge for some infraction of the law and the judge stated that Mr. Rothenberg would be fined a certain amount. Junkie replied, slapping his hip pocket, "That's OK, I've got that right here in my ass pocket!" The quick thinking judge came back with, "I am also sentencing you to ten days in jail, have you also got that right in your ass pocket?"

In March 1926 the unruly residents of the village got into trouble again. The headlines read "State Troopers Gather in the Slot Machines". The paragraph says, "State Troopers were in town Monday night and Tuesday. They gathered in the slot machines in operation. Those apprehended were John Milan and Moses Compo who were taken before D. Dulack and fined \$10 each. The machines were smashed. It is reported that several punch boards that have been doing business around town have disappeared."

The Green Tea Room, more familiarly known as the Tavern, was the frequent site of much excitement during Prohibition. Clarence "Tink" Allen was one of the proprietors at that time and Katheryn Freeman Fuller remembered walking by there after school and seeing the State Troopers tossing bottles of whiskey out the upstairs window onto the ground where the glass bottles smashed. Probably the name "The Green Tea Room" did not fool anyone!

Now all the action didn't take place in the village. Clarence Given told about the stills located in "secret" places in the Creek District. One man tended the still (it was a fellow known to many of the locals) and when it was ready to "draw off" Clarence and another man did that. Clarence wasn't involved in trafficking in the illegal booze. He only took enough to keep his grandmother (Nancy Jane Watson Given) in her daily evening refreshment!

During the winter of 1891- 92 Nancy Watson Given's husband, Joseph Given, age 55, had the flu and was very ill. He couldn't seem to get over it and by April had become extremely despondent because he still wasn't feeling well. On Wednesday, 20 April 1892, Joseph and his son, Robert, age 18, started walking from their home on the Given Road toward the Hugh McFerran farm on the Gaddis Road. He soon sent Robert back on some pretext and continued on alone. Somewhere on the McFerran farm he cut his throat deliberately. The news article written later said " his throat was cut from ear to ear".

The next day when he hadn't returned, a search party was organized, including William Grant who also wrote a short account in his diary. It rained some in the afternoon as the men hunted for Joseph, but they continued to look. Joseph came out on the high hill near Hugh McFerran's and called for help. The newspaper related "a team was provided by Jasper Ward and he was brought to Edwards and was under the care of Dr. Taylor and Dr. Murray". Grandson, Clarence Given told that it was thought animals had bothered him through the night because of the animal tracks in the blood on the ground. The doctors cared for him at Dan Noble's, Joseph's brother-in-law, for the remainder of Thursday, but on Friday he was taken home where he lived until the following Friday, 29 April 1892, having suffered nine days before his death. His funeral was on Sunday, May 1st, and he was buried in the Belleville Cemetery near his home.

Among the "Thou Shalt Nots" is taking another person's life - in other words - MURDER. Over the years Edwards has been included in this sin a few times. The story has been told before about the very first murder on December 12, 1817 when the community was just a budding town and situated on the Island. Jonathan Brown, a hotelkeeper, had discharged a worker who later came back and requested the loan of Brown's gun. Brown obliged. As he was leaving he asked Brown, a member of the militia; to give the gun commands to him. Brown ordered "Get Ready" and the man raised the gun; next he ordered "Aim" and the man pointed the gun at Brown, then at "Fire", the man shot at Brown striking him in the heart. Brown's last words were "I am a dead man" and he died, killed by his own gun.

Then in 1931 there was a very poor, young family by the name of Austin who lived on Eastman Hill. One morning the husband got up and went outside, probably to use the outhouse, when he said he heard a shot and ran back in to find his wife, age 26, dead - as the papers said, "with her head blown off". There was a 38-55 caliber Winchester rifle beside her, but coroner, Dr. Allen, said he did not believe the young woman had shot herself. The body was under the bed with her head and shoulders sticking out and the rifle parallel to the body with the butt of the weapon under the bed and the muzzle near the woman's head. Dr. Allen said there were "suspicious circumstances surrounding the case". The case ended when after an autopsy Dr. Allen decided she had committed suicide, so the husband went free. How someone could shoot herself between the eyes with a rifle and then get the gun placed parallel to her body while under the bed is beyond logical thinking. Shouldn't the incident be sent to TV's Cold Case Files for further review?!!

A few years later, in 1935, in Talcville, the Bart Clark family had taken in an older man because he had no home. One morning while the parents were in the barn, their daughter, Doris, later Doris Bishop, came running to the barn and couldn't say anything except "come to the house", and pull on her mother. When the mother got to the house she found another daughter had been killed by a gunshot and the man had shot himself fatally and lay beside her on the couch. He died shortly after, but had left a note that expressed his depression over his inability to earn a living for himself. He left no reason as to why he killed the 13 year old Ruth as well as himself.

The latest murder in Edwards took place 8 July 1983 when Jerry Weir shot Beverly McNerney 11 times, killing her, in the yard of the house next to Terry Holly's on east Main St. toward Russell. May Edwards never experience such violence again.

Even the eight local cemeteries have interesting stories to tell if one takes the time to browse. Among other things look for the grave of our only Civil War Veteran who was an Indian, Joseph Tarbell, or locate the stone of a Russian immigrant whose marker inscription reads "killed July 20, 1918", (killed how? - actually an accident in the mines), and visit the graves of the infant Brayton triplets who died in 1860 and only marked with common fieldstones. Find the cemetery stone purchased and erected by The Historical Association and the Town for our first settler, Asa Brayton, who had never had a grave marker, also see the adjacent stone of his wife that was repaired by interested locals.

There are so many more stories of general interest that they couldn't all be told here, but maybe another time, if you enjoyed these.

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