

MAHANOEY CITY CHRONICLES

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NATIVE SON BURIED AT WEST POINT

HOW MANY Mahanoy City folks are aware that one of their town's native sons is buried in the historic cemetery at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y.?

NOt even State Representative Ed Lucyk, himself a West Point graduate, had been aware until recently that another of the town's native sons was a member of the storied Long Grey Line some 40 years before Ed earned his own gold bars there in the 1960s.

The forgotten hero was "William B. Wren, first lieutenant, U.S. Cavalry," a member of one of the town's real pioneer families.

Lt. Wren was 24 years old with a long career ahead of him, and there's no way of knowing how far he would have risen in the army command or what key role he might have played among the military masterminds of the nation's wars to come, had fate not taken his life in a peacetime accident 61 years ago.

Undoubtedly there are some oldtimes still around who attended school with Bill Wren back in the World War I years, but how many remember him or his fate?

Here's the story told in the Record-American on Jan. 18, 1927:

"FIRST LIEUTENANT William Bellemere Wren, son of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas B. Wren, 216 W. Mahanoy St., was instantly killed at 2:30 Monday afternoon (Jan. 17) in an accident at Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

"The very sad news of the death of one of the finest young men this town has ever claimed as his own came by wire late yesterday afternoon from the young lieutenant's colonel.

"Lieutenant Wren met his death when his horse, which he was training for exhibition at the Los Angeles Horse Show, stumbled while making a hurdle. The officer was killed instantly in the fall.

"The report of Bill Wren's sudden passing spread swiftly through the town last evening and on every side there was deep and sincere regret and sympathy, for in his school days here and during his brief furloughs from duty later he had won many friends.

"Born in Mahanoy City in 1903, he was graduated from the local high school in 1920 and was appointed a cadet at West Point Military Academy that same year. In 1924 he finished his course high up on the roll of his class.

"He had chosen the cavalry branch of service and was commissioned a second lieutenant. After a brief visit home, his last, he left for the West to begin his duty as an officer in the Tenth Regiment at Fort Huachuca.

"Last February he was slightly injured in a fall from a horse. For the last several months he had been serving as squadron adjutant of the regiment.

"His father, Thonas Wren, was to have met him at the Army-Navy game in Chicago last November 28 but army duties kept the lieutenant at his post.

"On June 8 last year he was united in marriage to Miss Jean DeWees, a member of one of the most prominent families in Denver, Colorado. After their honeymoon, the couple began housekeeping at the Arizona army post. The widow survives with his parents and a brother, Edward Wren, Mahanoy City."

THE BODY CAME home to Mahanoy City on Jan. 24, the flag-draped casket arriving on the 10:43 a.m. Lehigh Valley train, escorted by a fellow officer, Lieutenant Jordan Thies.

The coffin was taken to the home on West Mahanoy street where the young soldier was born and lived the first 18 years of his life. Rev. R. J. Lockhart of the First Presbyterian Church conducted an afternoon service, and townsfolk flocked to view the young soldier's body in the evening.

The following morning the casket was returned to the Lehigh Valley Depot at the north end of Main Street and placed on another train for the last leg of the journey to its final resting place along the Hudson River where he had spent four years becoming one of the nation's finest.

Since that January day in 1924, each time the cadets of West Point assemble in official formation to pay tribute to those who filled the ranks before them, the name of First Lt. William Wren takes its place on the roll of the honored. And Mahanoy City can look on with pride in the knowledge that it gave the corps one of its finest.

THE WREN FAMILY contributions to Mahanoy City have been covered in previous chronicles in this space. Three generations of the family had their homestead at 216 W. Mahanoy St.

The family history in Mahanoy City began in 1863 when Thomas Wren built the Grant Iron Works at Foundry Row. His son, George, built the homestead at 216 W. Mahanoy St. and took over the foundry after the Civil War in partnership with Ralph Lee. The partnership of Lee & Wren opened the Elmwood Colliery at Foundry Row in 1871 and the Diamond Colliery at Park Place about the same time. Lee left the partnership in the late 1870s and returned to Pottsville while Wren remained in Mahanoy City.

George's son, Thomas Wren, the lieutenant's father, was born and raised in the homestead and was affiliated with the foundry business until it was phased out during the years prior to World War I. It was about that same time that young Bill Wren was attending Mahanoy City High School to secure the education that prepared him to distinguish himself as an honor student at the United States Military Academy.

THE SPIRIT OF patriotism that was fostered by World War I no doubt had some influence on the decision of young Bill Wren to attend West Point and devote his life to service to his country.

This same patriotic proclivity prevailed at the local Elks Lodge on March 17, 1925, when a memorial was dedicated to the 29 lodge members who served in the great war.

You may recognize some of the names as old friends or neighbors. According to the Record-American story at the time, the heroes memorialized were: James H. O'Conner, Dr. I.D. Fenton, Dr. Joseph H. Wyatt, Wilber A. Becker, Joseph G. Noonan, Thomas J. Noonan, Frank C. Timm. A.G. Timm, C. C. Hagenbuch, D. James J. Comerford, David G. Thomas, George C. Whitaker, James Conahan. R. J. Goldberger, David J. Graham, N.B. Davey, Joseph A. Adam, William Rosser, Joseph Friedberg, H.C. Schmidt, Peter J. Shovlin, Charles H. Becker, Thomas J. Kalligan, Norman A. Fisher, William Cooper, W. P. Fisher, John E. Conrey, William W. Coombe and Sidney J. Brown.

Probably unknown to most members of the lodge in this 1988 quasiquicentennial year, that old plaque still hangs on the wall on the second floor of the lodge. There's been a slight change since the plaque was dedicated 63 years ago: the tablet now contains 31 names. That's how many were counted this week by Dave Jarrett, immediate past exalted ruler, who checked to verify that the tablet is still building.

Those 31 doughboys of '17 no doubt have all answered their final "taps" by now. And though the tablet honoring their sacrifice and their patriotism is still in place, how many Elks pass by without noticing it and contemplating its words:

"As lasting as the bronze on which these names are enrolled will be our appreciation of the services of our brothers of Mahanoy City Lodge No. 695, B.P.O.E, who offered their all for our country in its honor of need."

Lest we forget.



SHOWING ITS COLORS - Mahanoy City was never ashamed of its patriotism, as this long-ago view of the old Mansion Hotel illustrates. Straw hats on spectators date the picture around the turn of the century. The sign on pole at the street corner carries the warning, perhaps for trolley car operators, "Danger run slow." The photo is from the Elwood Young collection, provided by George Barlow.