

THE REPORT OF MY DEATH

Was an Exaggeration

Obituaries can open doors for any family historian. You can find dates, names, relationships, and residences. But what do you do with the obituary that was written before a person's death?



BEFORE THE END: William T. "Pa" Greer's eulogy was penned long before Pa departed.

BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

Obituaries. Like heirlooms, they grow more valuable with time. The object of many a genealogical treasure hunt, they're one of the first sources we go scurrying for when we discover a new ancestor. If we are unlucky, we find nothing, or just a date of death and time and place of the funeral.

But if we're lucky, we get the full arc of a human life. My great-grandfather Abe's obit covered 18 column-inches (for comparison, that's about five inches shy of one full column, top to bottom, of today's *New York Times*). It described his landing in America as a teen, peddling furniture from a cart he pulled himself because he couldn't afford a horse, and working his way toward his dream of owning a furniture store for each of his seven sons. (He almost made it.)

Most often, our luck falls somewhere in the middle.

Then there are those obituaries that aren't really obituaries: the ones that come before the subject has actually died.

The idea of looking for what would normally be an obituary long before the date on the death certificate didn't occur to me until I met up with my husband's great-grandfather William Thomas Greer. Born in 1847, Pa Greer was a man of such exceptional character that the local

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— Mark Twain

newspaper felt compelled to run his obituary (more of a eulogy actually) while he was still alive.

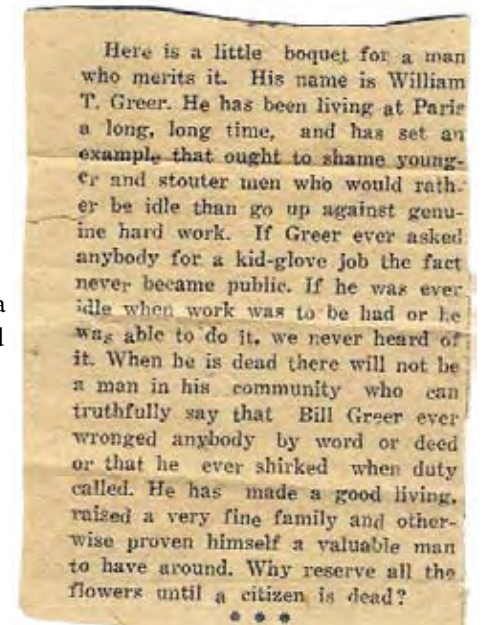
"Here is a little boquet (sic) for a man who merits it. His name is William T. Greer. He has been living at Paris (Missouri) a long, long time and has set an example that ought to shame younger and stouter men who would rather be idle than go up against genuine hard work. If Greer ever asked anybody for a kid-glove job, the fact never became public. If he was ever idle when work was to be had or he was able to do it, we never heard of it. When he is dead there will not be a man in his community who can truthfully say that Bill Greer ever wronged anybody by word or deed or that he ever shirked when duty called. He has made a good living, raised a very fine family and otherwise proven himself a valuable man to have around. Why reserve all the flowers until a citizen is dead?"

Lurking in a Trunk

I lucked out in finding Pa Greer's pre-posthumous eulogy. The clipping was stuck to the bottom of a trunk of family memorabilia collected over the lifetime of his reclusive granddaughter, Pauline. That trunk was every family historian's dream — sort of. It was overflowing with family photos and newspaper clippings, letters dating to the 1850s, a hand-drawn family tree going back to the Revolutionary

War (plus empty matchbooks and receipts from 60-year-old newspaper subscriptions). Pauline was a packrat — and a devoted but haphazard recorder of family history. For all her considerable effort, we are grateful.

But, for the times she was just too tired or careless, we are frustrated. The trunk also held its share of unidentifiable clippings and family photos with inscriptions on the back such as "The whole gang of us down by the lake last Sunday" or "I don't like this photo of me. I look old." No dates. No names. The tribute to Pa Greer? It was snipped from the paper with no identifying marks whatsoever. No date, no masthead, no page number. No nuthin'. And while Internet newspaper archives have come a long way in the last few years, there is as of yet no help for me in dating or identifying Pa Greer's "boquet."



Twain's Rumored Death and a Few Other Famous Faux Pas

Pa Greer's premature eulogy reminded me of the well-known but widely misquoted Mark Twain epitaph, "Rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated."

While the pre-death tribute to Pa Greer was intentional, instances of untimely obituaries are common enough to raise a yellow flag lest we take every old obituary or report of death we unearth as fact. In the famous Twain episode in 1897, a reporter was sent to investigate word of Twain's life-threatening illness. Afterward, Twain wrote, "James Ross Clemens, a cousin of mine, was seriously ill two or three weeks ago in London but is well now. The report of my illness grew out of his illness, the report of my death was an exaggeration."

Other famous premature obits had more sobering consequences. The name Nobel may be most often associated with international awards for intellectual achievement. But Alfred Nobel made his fortune as an explosives manufacturer. When his brother died in 1888, though, it was Alfred whom French newspapers reported dead ("*Le marchand de la mort est mort*" — the merchant of death is dead). It's been speculated that this published, premature glimpse into his own legacy might have convinced Alfred Nobel to use his wealth to perpetuate the pursuit of science, literature, and peace.

In the case of activist Marcus Garvey, a premature obituary may have caused his actual death. After Garvey was felled by a stroke in London in 1940 that left him partially paralyzed, the *Chicago Defender* published a piece denigrating Garvey as "broke, alone and unpopular," branding him a fool and a failure. Upon reading the condemnatory words of former colleagues and foes, Garvey suffered a second stroke and died days later.

Technology has greatly aided in the perpetration of pre-

mature obituaries, spreading misinformation worldwide at the touch of a button. And the longer a person lives, the more opportunities there are for a misreported death.

Bob Hope is a prime example. In 1998, the *oops!* release of a prewritten Associated Press obituary was picked up by an Arizona congressman, read on the floor of the House of Representatives, and broadcast on C-SPAN. Hope, king of the one-liners, quipped, "They were wrong, weren't they?"

Hope was also a victim of the embarrassing CNN slip in 2003 when a number of draft obituaries of celebrities and world figures came to light on a nonsecure section of the company's website. From a template that had been used to write the memorial for England's Queen Mother, net surfers got a chuckle out of descriptions of both Hope and then-Vice President Dick Cheney as "the UK's favorite grandmother," Fidel Castro's "Life as Queen Consort," Pope John Paul's "Childhood and marriage," and Nelson Mandela's achievements as "lifeguard, athlete, and movie star" (a mix-up with Ronald Reagan).

Separating Fact from Oops

Like death itself, premature obituaries cross all cultural and economic lines. Though we hear most often about celebrity mishaps, an untimely obituary can befall — and sometimes did — anyone, intentionally or otherwise, including our own folks.

But why? The reasons for publishing a premature obituary are as varied as the human condition. If you think you've found an untimely one for one of your ancestors, consider the following causes for its publication — and for your find:

Duplicate Names

James Smith Syndrome, or the duplication of names, especially common ones, and especially within a geographic area. How excited I was when I was able to track a great-great-grandparent to a county in Tennessee. I had her birth date and her full name; surely I was in for a gold mine of info, right? Wrong. Three-quarters of the county had the same surname, and there were at least 13 young ladies with

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her exact full name and birth year. Without other cross-referencing facts, you can't be sure the James Smith (or in this case, Mary Johnson) you find in the obit is the James Smith you're looking for.

Fakers

There's a fancy word for this — pseudocide. In the face of family, legal, or money problems, sometimes starting over can sound good. Feigning death provides the escape route. Be alert for this in cases where no body is found, such as drowning, and where your ancestor may have been facing criminal charges or insurmountable debt. Fleeing a marriage or love relationship is another possibility, especially if someone very like your ancestor shows up a few years later and miles away, married to someone other than his/her original spouse. The yellow flag may turn red if the hospital, cemetery, church or other identifying information in the obit doesn't exist. Or, if the obituary exists, but the hospital, cemetery, etc., has no record of your ancestor.

Questionable Identification

Victims in mass-death situations such as natural disasters, train wrecks, plane crashes, epidemics, and the like, may be misidentified. Checking death certificates may help you sort out a situation like this.

Almost, but Not Quite, Dead

Browsing microfilms of 100-year-old newspapers, I am always struck by how many accounts of accidents, illnesses, and similar close encounters with death pronounce that the victim "is not expected to recover" and then proceed with the life story, although the life isn't finished yet.

Sterling citizen, philanthropic pyrotechnic, hoaxster, or Houdini, no one gets off this planet alive, not even Pa Greer. But when he did go to his rest in 1927, the tribute continued. We found it in another unidentifiable newspaper clipping, but this time, it was the real deal:

"Everywhere and under all circumstances he was a shining example of industry, patience and Christian citizenship, his influence always being on the side of those things which tended to make his community a better place in which to live. The passing of this good man is a matter of genuine sorrow."

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Searching for Obituaries in All the Unusual Places

Ready to find an obituary? While there's no all-inclusive online obituary search resource, trying a few new search strategies can help.

- Start with Ancestry.com for historic newspapers and obituaries. Remember, a tree posted by another branch of the family could include a scanned obituary for your relative.
- Next, search the websites of newspapers that were considered local to the community in which your ancestor lived. Be sure to check newspapers in the hometown, birth town, and town of death, if different. And realize that small town residents may have considered a larger city's newspaper to be local, too.
- Newspaper not online and no longer in business? Inquire at a local library to see if it has a historical collection (they may even help you locate the obituary).
- Cast your net wider with Internet searches. Omit the words *obituary*, *obituaries*, and *memorial* at first. Enter the person's name, place of death, and year, if known.
- Narrow your search by enclosing names in quotation marks to make

an exact phrase. If that doesn't yield any results, enclose both the name and the word "obituary" in quotes. Search using all forms of the name, such as "W. C. Weatherly," "Walton C. Weatherly," and "W. Carey Weatherly."

- Visit sites where you can search for older obituaries and death notices, including Ancestor Hunt <www.ancestorhunt.com/obituary_search.htm>, which combs through resources held by libraries and other institutions in the United States.
- Want to add an old obituary to an online collection? You can build free obituaries or memorials at <www.gonetoosoon.org>, <www.theeternalportal.com/memorials/free-obituaries.asp>, and <www.obituariesfree.com>. Since these sites' contents are not included in search engine results, to locate obituaries other people posted on those sites, you'll need to conduct searches of each individual site yourself.
- And lastly, review archives of message boards and mailing lists. You never know what you'll find there.

— GEORGE G. MORGAN