



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Lest we think the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the government actions taken for the sake of public health, are new to the American experience or unconstitutional or somehow opposed to notions of liberty, on October 28, 1918, this message from A.E. Hornbeck of the Greenville Board of Health, was published on the front page of that town's newspaper:

It appears some of the citizens of Greenville misunderstand the closing order or underestimate the seriousness of the situation when they make arrangements for birthday or Hallowe'en parties. The order from the State Department of Health as well as the local closing order reads: 'Meetings of every description.' I cannot believe that anyone would purposely violate a ruling of the Department of Health which means too much to every citizen.

While the number of new cases is not so great per day as it was still many persons are seriously ill and there have been a number of deaths. Great care should still be exercised as the situation is yet serious. Compliance with this request is expected on the part of all loyal citizens.

Those who have been affected and in some instances greatly inconvenienced by the direct order are everywhere willingly and cheerfully obeying its requirements.

We will not allow parties or gatherings arranged simply for pleasure. If anyone should disregard the welfare of others, to say nothing of their own, and arrange for such gatherings, we shall certainly take action against them.

As part of the local influenza news round-up within that same article, the report from Youngstown reads: "With the influenza situation unchanged, it is likely the quarantine of picture theaters, churches, lodges, etc. will not be lifted for several weeks yet."

Two weeks prior Greenville shut down their schools and churches despite having only three deaths from the flu. There were, however, 300 cases, though this included colds and "grippe." School and church closures were under the direction of local officials; earlier, "all places of public entertainment, including theatres, moving picture establishments, saloons and dance halls" and "meetings of every description" were closed state-wide.

Like today, a century ago unproven cures were grasped at, though these took the form of advertisements for patent medications. Hill's Cascara Quinine Bromide, Pleasant Purgative Pellets, and Bulgarian Blood Tea were suggested remedies. While the flu virus was not identified, the U.S. Surgeon General correctly noted that transmission of the germs was via very small droplets of mucus, expelled by coughing or sneezing, and forceful talking. Besides strengthening one's constitution with a wholesome diet, public health authorities relied on common-sense hygiene and the centuries-old measure of quarantine.

While some, like the mayor of Pittsburgh, urged more local control over quarantine restrictions, contemporary newspaper reports made no reference to the pandemic being a hoax, or the infection and death statistics being overblown.

Items for Sale

We have partnered with Mickman Brothers who offers a variety of evergreen Christmas wreaths, sprays, and tabletop trees.



Whether in your own home, or as a gift that can be shipped to a friend or relative, brighten the holidays with this festive décor.

Visit GiftItForward.com to see all the available products and to order.

Enter Fundraising Code

SHARPSA001

and the Historical Society will receive a portion of the sales

A Look Back

The Postmaster's Suicide

Mike Clary, a veteran reporter for The Miami Herald, The South Florida Sun-Sentinel, The Los Angeles Times, and other papers, has contributed this article about his grandfather Franklin Clary—a larger-than-life figure in 1920s Sharpsville—and his tragic end.

Minutes before the fatal gunshot, Franklin Clary leaned on the counter at the stamp window of the Sharpsville post office and smiled wanly at the man who would take his place. “Well, Karl, there’s no hard feelings,” he said to Karl Smith. “There’s no one I’d rather see get it than you.”

Witness accounts vary slightly as to what happened next. Smith reported no more words were exchanged between the two men, and that he, the incoming postmaster, walked away, toward the front of the office. Smith said he did not see Franklin pull the .45-calibre revolver from the holster fastened to the wall near the cash drawer.

Assistant postmaster Harry Morinier also denied seeing Franklin pick up the gun, but he did remember that the postmaster moved away from the stamp window without the aid of the cane he normally used.

Everyone heard the shot.

Mercer County coroner Dr. William A. Applegate, along with Dr. Nelson J. Bailey, were summoned to the scene. “The bullet went clear through his body, landing in a mail distributing case a few feet away,” *The Sharon Herald* reported. “Death was instantaneous.”

My grandfather’s grave is dug into a grassy slope in Sharpsville’s Riverside Cemetery, near a thick stand of maple and box elder trees that marks the northeast edge of the burial ground. Beyond the trees the slope falls away steeply into a gorge. At the bottom runs the Shenango River. A tributary of the Beaver River, the Shenango is about 100 miles long, flows south, and the river, along with the abundant forests and the rich deposits of iron ore and coal found in this hilly region of Western Pennsylvania, are the principle reasons the town of Sharpsville came to be.

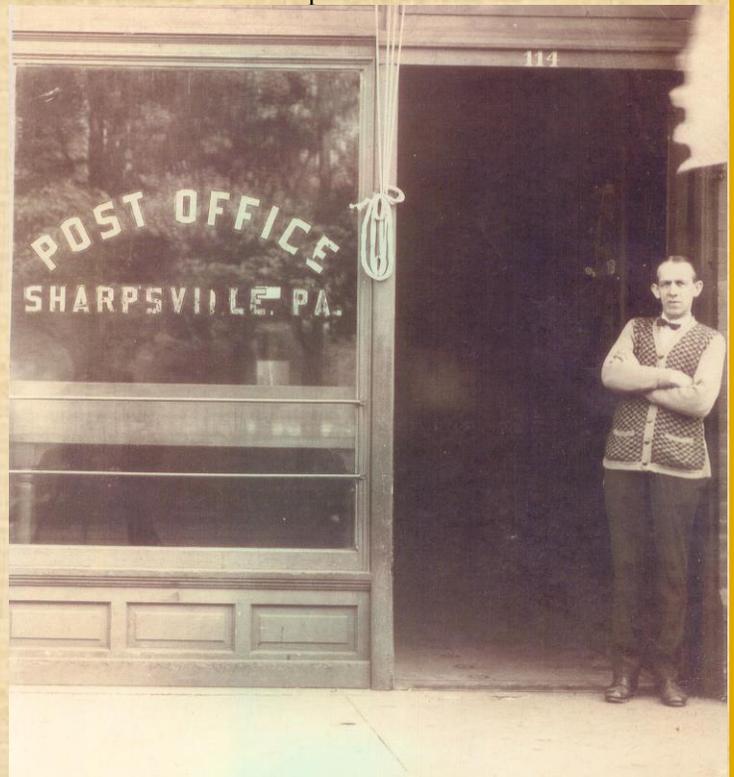
I visited the cemetery recently with my brother, Steve. We did not know our grandfather. He died in 1934, years before we were born. But his death—or more precisely the way he died, from a self-inflicted gunshot—caused a sensation in Sharpsville, a small town that like so many in Depression-era America was struggling to regain its economic footing after years of hardship. “Franklin Clary Commits Suicide,” read the banner headline in the April 17 edition of *The Sharon Herald*, the daily newspaper published in the larger adjacent town. “Ill Health, Loss of Postmastership Are Blamed for his Act,” said the subhead.

The article recounts some of what happened that morning in the post office, in the center of town on Sharpsville’s main street. “Mr. Clary was held in high regard by the entire community,” the *Herald* said. “His death comes as a sincere shock.”

Franklin Clary has long been a person of fascination and mystery to me. He wasn’t talked about by my father or any of his brothers and sisters when I, my siblings and our cousins were kids. Since none of us knew him, we didn’t ask about him or how he died. Then, years ago, when as an adult I became interested in family history, I did begin to inquire. I asked my father about his father, and I wrote to the only two of his siblings who were still alive. But even then, decades after his death, information about one of the most prominent figures in Sharpsville history was scant, and my informants, I know now, were not completely forthcoming. They did not want to talk about their father, or the colorful and troubling legacy he left them.

Now, thanks to documents stored in the National Archives at St. Louis, from family scrapbooks and from newspaper accounts collected by the Sharpsville Area Historical Society,

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Franklin Clary, in a snazzy sweater-vest, is seen here, around 1925, standing outside the Post Office, then on Mercer Avenue.



Here we see the interior of C.D. Shaner's Jewelry Store in 1924. Located at 12 N. Walnut Street, the layout is typical of small shops here. This was also a time when a small town like Sharpsville could support various types of its own merchants. If you enlarge the image on your browser, you can see the various items for sale: Pearls and pocket watches in the cases to the right; what appears to be silver cutlery in the floor case to the left, and silver serving pieces in the wall cases to the left. Behind Mr. Shaner are some trays, candlesticks and vases in what appear to be interesting art nouveau or art deco designs. By far, the most arresting images in this photo are the radios directly in the back. The 1920s saw a huge boom in radio sales and Shaner sought to capitalize on the trend, including dealing in models that reflected the era's outlandishly large cone speakers.

Commemorative Bricks

Please consider an "In Memory of" or "In Honor of" brick for a loved one. Maybe they worked at the Shenango, maybe they are a service member stationed overseas, maybe you want to honor your parents who contributed to the town in their quiet way, maybe you want to recognize a civic organization or High School Class, or maybe you want to memorialize a Sharpsville family name.

4" x 8" bricks with three lines of inscription—\$75

8" x 8" bricks with six lines of inscription—\$125

The bricks would be placed around the Shenango Furnace Ingot Mould in the town park.

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or email sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com**

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Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm at our headquarters. Social distancing is facilitated and remote participation is available.

The Postmaster's Suicide, cont'd.

we have a clearer picture of the surprising events that led up to a public suicide that rocked the Shenango Valley.

Through Franklin Clary's story, we also gain a better understanding of the important role postmasters played in small-town America. The position was often filled as an act of political patronage, a reward for party loyalty, and those appointed to the office were expected to be enthusiastic boosters of both the town and the policies of his benefactors. A background in newspapering, and experience in generating publicity and getting stories into print, was a decided plus.

Yes, Franklin took his own life. And yes, he was about to lose the prominent position he had held for more than 11 years, and perhaps a big piece of his identity. But was he really guilty of the improprieties he was accused of, and did the threat of impending scandal trigger his final act?

A dandy and a showman

Just who was Franklin Clary?

From pictures, we know he was a tall, thin, angular man with large, protruding ears. From the newspaper clippings he left behind, we know he was a community and political activist, something of a dandy in dress and manner, a storyteller, a self-aggrandizer and bon vivant. He launched his public persona as a newspaper columnist, often writing under the pen name Uncle Dudley, an opinionated, self-appointed conscience of the community, a scold who urging his fellow citizens to get involved in civic affairs, keep their property tidy, attend church. He also freelanced articles about circuses and show business to national publications, including *Grit* and *Billboard*.

Franklin was a showman and often acted in local theater. He served as an advance man for various circuses and traveling shows, and when a tent show or carnival came to town, Franklin often knew the performers, the trapeze artists and the sideshow freaks, and would entertain them at his home. He counted lion tamer Clyde Beatty and Tom Mix, the Western movie star, as acquaintances.

Because of his love of aviation, and going up in small planes at every opportunity, he became known as "The Flying Postmaster." After being named to the Sharpsville post in 1922, he became an enthusiastic champion of the fledgling air mail service, and lobbied the town to build an airfield.

He had a knack for showing up, of being there at the right time, and then getting news featuring his involvement printed in the local press. When an airplane went down in a Mercer County farmer's field – and that seemed to happen often in those days of open cockpit planes and unreliable weather reports – he was often first on the scene. And he made sure that his activities, his meetings with celebrities and his enthusiasms, got plenty of coverage. Indeed, he often wrote the news stories himself.

The kid journalist

Born on Dec. 25, 1872, Franklin Allen Clary may have been named for the town of his birth, Franklin, in Venango County, Pa. His father, Benjamin S. Clary had several jobs, including bridge builder, traveling salesman, and factory foreman. Early on in their marriage he and his wife Mary ran a hotel in the resort village of Sandy Lake.

But the biggest influence on the career path that Franklin would follow may have been his uncle, James "Kit" Clary, who grew up in Sandy Lake, where he served as an apprentice at the local newspaper, was named deputy postmaster of the village, and later settled in Jamestown, New York, where he became a prominent newspaperman, an elected city official and a Republican leader.

In a biographical profile – unsigned, but clearly written by Franklin himself – he said that he launched his career as a writer when still a child, becoming a newspaper correspondent at the age of 10. Whatever he wrote as a child does not survive. The earliest writings believed to be his date from 1910—when he was in his 30s—and appeared in *The Mercer Dispatch*. The subjects were often his family: visits from out-of-town, vacation trips, minor injuries suffered by his children.

Those early reports were followed dozens of signed weekly columns Franklin wrote from Stoneboro for the *Venango Citizen-Press*, beginning in February 1912, and running through July 1914. These columns were packed with news and commentary: who was in town visiting, prominent deaths, the fortunes of the Stoneboro baseball team, and who suffered an injury in a mine accident, for example. The columns also offer a look at small town life in the early days of the 20th century, while highlighting the interests and passions of the writer, the man who was always ready to promote his community, took a keen interest in local politics and would one day become the postmaster of nearby Sharpsville.

In 1912 Republican William Howard Taft of Ohio was in the White House, his predecessor Theodore Roosevelt was heading up the opposition Bull Moose party, and Congress was debating a national income tax. That year the Titanic hit

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The Postmaster's Suicide, cont'd.

an iceberg and sank, condemning 1,503 lives to a watery grave; cars and airplanes were becoming more common; and in Stoneboro and many towns across the U.S. people were talking about what to do about the growing use and abuse of alcohol.

Franklin turned 40 years old in 1912. He had a job with Mercer Iron & Coal Co., one of the area's largest employers, but the work that sustained him was writing his weekly column. As Uncle Dudley he styled himself as a hometown booster, adopting a folksy, familiar prose style to express his opinions on everything from the value of religious observance to the civic irresponsibility of a homeowner who neglected to cut his grass.

At a time when there were no paved roads, few cars and no street lights in the area, he urged local officials to install more lighting as a way to cut down on crime and rowdiness. He pleaded with the "city dads" to do something about "village youths loafing around the streets at late hours of the night.

"If the parents do not have enough gray matter in their craniums to keep their boys off the streets at night, then it's up to the borough officials to do their duty," he wrote. He railed against drunkenness and debauchery, and advocated hiring two police officers just to patrol on Saturday nights, when many alcohol-fueled fights broke out. He named people who were drunk and disorderly, as well as men accused of beating their wives.

His Stoneboro column was well-read in Venango and Mercer counties, but in an apparent test of his popular reach, he announced on Feb. 19, 1913, that he would quit writing unless at least 12 people in Venango County wrote in. The result: 220 letters, including some from out of state.

On the move

In the spring of 1915, Franklin moved his family from Stoneboro to Sharpsville. He and his wife Mary Edna, called Mame, had been married for 10 years and had five children. In addition to Agnes, they had four sons, Frank, James, John and Benjamin. Within a year of their move to Sharpsville, Mame became pregnant with a sixth child.

As the decade of the 1920s began, the U.S. economy was humming, and Americans were riding a wave of optimism generated in part by the victory over Germany and the end of World War I. Mass production was churning out consumer goods—radios, vacuum cleaners, beauty products, clothing—available to households all across the land, and the growth of the automobile and airline industries promised jobs and the possibility of travel.

To support his big family, Franklin landed a better job, as a clerk for a local mill, and picked up a few extra dollars by freelancing to local newspapers and cranking out publicity for traveling shows that came Sharpsville's way. But the most important thing he did to prepare for his economic future was to stay active in local Republican politics.

In 1920 Warren Harding succeeded Democrat Woodrow Wilson as U.S. President. Along with signaling a change in national politics—ushering in an era of conservative, pro-business policies to a war-weary nation that had no appetite for more international engagement—the change in administrations also opened the door for changes at the local level. And among the most important of those local level changes began with the privilege of patronage wielded by locally-elected politicians.

In December 1922, Franklin's years of hard work and fealty to the GOP were rewarded when U.S. Rep. Harris J. Bixler, a Republican who rode into office with the Harding landslide, appointed him postmaster of Sharpsville. He would replace Karl Smith, who had held the position since 1914. The annual salary was \$2,300.

A self-described progressive, Franklin was not just a loyal GOP committeeman, but a newspaperman who was well-connected and well-known, a charismatic local celebrity who loved being the center of attention. At times he dressed formally, in a long, black button-up topcoat, and wore a top hat that added several inches to his already tall frame. He carried a cane, and although he complained of suffering from rheumatism, his children said the cane was more affectation than necessity. For a while he spelled his given name as Franklyn, fancifying it with the letter Y, and in letters and notes he wrote in a left-leaning backhand style, often in green ink. Even though he had no schooling beyond high school, he spoke with erudition, his children said. When his wife complained that the children could not comprehend his vocabulary, he dismissed her concerns, saying he would not talk down to them.

A local newspaper account—unsigned—of his appointment as postmaster called him "a former well-known newspaper man [who] wrote the cheerful Uncle Dudley letters for many papers. Mr. Clary is now employed with the Valley Mold and Iron Co. He is well qualified to fill the position and his friends feel he will have a successful administration."

Postal progress

During his term in office, postal service improved markedly, thanks in part to the growing use of electricity, inventive machinery, and better roads and transportation. In a newspaper story reporting Franklin's reappointment as postmaster—

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The Postmaster's Suicide, cont'd.

an article that he himself may have written, perhaps in 1928 during the presidency of Calvin Coolidge—he is credited with a new lighting system in a remodeled post office building, "a new electric canceling machine with a capacity of over four hundred letters a minute," and the acquisition of typewriters and adding machines. He also established city mail delivery in 1926.

As postmaster Franklin also continued to generate publicity for two of his other abiding interests, show business and aviation. For an article published in in November 2014 edition of this newsletter various newspaper accounts tell the story of how Franklin managed to bring to town Harry Gardiner, a/k/a The Human Fly, to perform in a fundraiser for the local American Legion post.

On another occasion Franklin arranged for an appearance by Mike and Ike, the "celebrated midgets" with the Zeidman & Pollie circus, after they played a date in Sharon. The diminutive duo "paid an 'official visit' to Clary at the Sharpsville Post Office, arranged by Mr. [Henry] Pollie, a lifelong friend of Clary's." "For more than an hour they shook hands and answered questions from the crowd of more than 800—regarded as one of the largest reception committees ever gathered in Sharpsville."

Franklin, who relished his renown as "The Flying Postmaster," was no less enthusiastic when he urged civic and political leaders to make Sharpsville a hub in the fast-expanding world of aviation. Soon after the postal service began flying mail between New York and Chicago, and daredevil pilots pushed the boundaries of flight and set distance records, small planes seem to fall from the skies over the Shenango Valley with uncanny regularity. Weather was often a factor in unscheduled landings, exacerbated by the area's geographic location just west of the Allegheny Mountains, some theorized. "The Air Mail Service pilots would have to cross a section of the Allegheny Mountains in Pennsylvania that they called Hell's Stretch," wrote Devin Leonard in *Neither Snow Nor Rain: a History of the United States Postal Service*. "Fog often shrouded the Allegheny peaks and there was virtually no place to land safely if aviators had engine trouble."

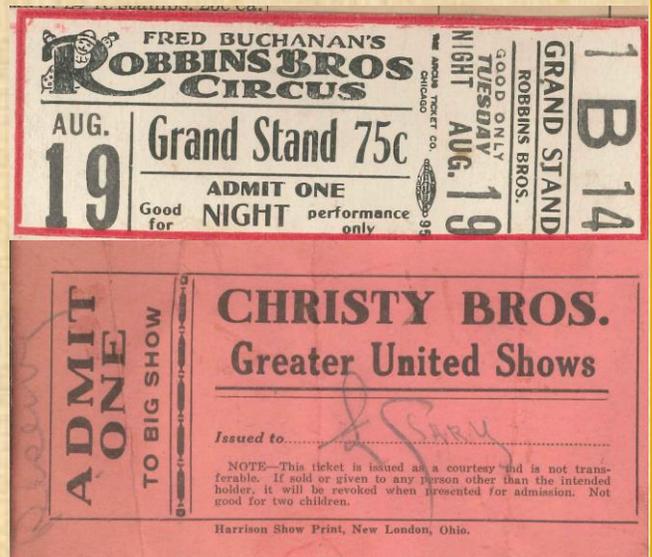
When planes did make surprise landings near Sharpsville, the postmaster was usually quick to the scene. In one remarkable incident, two French pilots, Dieudonné Costes and Joseph LeBrix, flying from New York to Detroit in March 1928 on a leg of a round-the-world tour, collided with blizzard conditions that forced the pilots to land their Breguet 19GR open cockpit biplane at John Maciejewski's farm in South Pymatuning.

"The pair were soon treated to a stifling measure of small-town hospitality," as recounted in the March 2014 edition of this newsletter. First, a local resident who had been a French war bride was summoned to serve as interpreter as local mechanics tried to make repairs to the plane. In the meantime, Franklin whisked the fliers off to his home, where he placed a long-distance call on their behalf to the French Consul in New York. "The pair were then taken to the Post Office and able to behold such local wonders as the automatic letter cancelling machine (450 mailing pieces per minute!)."

For the next three days, while waiting for the aircraft's engine maker to arrive from New York, the pilots continued to be celebrated, and it is unlikely that Franklin was far from the center of the hoopla. When their plane finally did take off from Maciejewski's field, more than 1,000 people were there to wave goodbye. The farmer charged a 25¢ admission.

Just two weeks after that hullabaloo, Franklin was again on the scene within minutes when a large Fairchild's airplane owned by the Weeks Aircraft Corp. of Milwaukee made a forced landing on the Vernon farm. "Twenty years before that, Prof. Alex Thurston, aeronaut of a hot air balloon, landed at the farm of Fleming Perrine in Worth Township, and Clary was on the scene with alacrity. Whether it was these chance encounters or something else that awakened within Postmaster Clary an interest in aviation, he dove in head-first with his typical intensity."

At the very least, Franklin argued, Sharpsville needed an emergency landing strip. In letters to the local newspapers, Clary noted that in the prior two years eight planes had landed at the Vernon or Maciejewski farms in South Pymatuning, with much of his argument based on a claim of unusual meteorological conditions in the vicinity which caused the forced



Circus tickets kept in Franklin Clary's scrapbook. Long after any professional association with circuses, he still managed to attend about ten a year.

The Postmaster's Suicide, cont'd.

landings. He also noted that Sharpsville was in the path of a heavily-frequented air-mail route.

Calling on his newspaper connections, Franklin enlisted the editor of *The Sharon Herald* to lobby in editorials for building an airstrip as a joint project of Sharpsville, Sharon and Farrell, another adjacent town. The Sharon Chamber of Commerce sought a construction grant. Franklin convinced Cleveland investors to come to the area to inspect possible sites. But "local governments remained resistant to Clary's lobbying for a municipal airport." (As Franklin put it, their "lethargy" and lack of an "aviation vision" stood in marked contrast with "wide-awake Greenville," which would soon build its own municipal airport.)

Yet Franklin did succeed in having placed on the roof of the Sharpsville High School the word "Sharpsville"—spelled in bright chrome yellow letters 12 feet high and one foot wide. An arrow, 65 feet long, pointed to the emergency field at Hartford, Ohio, and gave the distance. The Sharpsville sign followed on the heels of a similar one erected on the roof of the News-Telegraph building in Sharon. Both were recognized by the Daniel Guggenheim Fund for the Promotion of Aeronautics.

"Since Clary applied himself to his position of Sharpsville Postmaster with an above-average earnestness, it is of little surprise to find he was a keen advocate of air mail. Besides his frequent reference to mileage and poundage of air mail cargos when promoting a local airport, Clary also sponsored an Air Mail Day, on May 10, 1928. For stamp collectors, it featured a special postmark from the Sharpsville post office, and for Clary it was a way to publicize the town. While it appears that Washington sent late word that the special postmark was disallowed, it arrived only after over 5,000 self-addressed envelopes had poured in from across the country."

Sharpsville's town pet

Deep into his second term as at postmaster, in the waning years of the 1920s, Franklin should have been riding high. His four sons garnered plenty of press as three-sport stars at Sharpsville High School. Franklin himself was a respected and visible man-about-town, a nattily-dressed activist and occasional thespian with political and community clout. His salary had increased to \$2,400 a year, double what the average worker made.

Franklin even had a high-profile mail-carrying dog named Black Tiger who had his own fan club as Sharpsville's town pet. From newspaper accounts we learn that Black Tiger would accompany his master most afternoons from the post office to Reichard's Drug Store, where the postmaster usually ordered a coffee stir—a drink for which the store became famous—and the little dog would get a scoop of ice cream. "Now, from time to time, when postal duties would prevent Clary making it to the soda fountain, the dog of course thought it unfair that he should be denied his treat," as recounted in the May 2014 edition of this newsletter. "So, at the usual hour, he'd wait until someone would open the Post Office door, and dash over to Reichard's. There the soda jerk would give the pooch his ice cream. He was said to be the only dog to run a tab."

Alas, Black Tiger met a sad end. In an undated clip headlined "Kiddies Mourn for Black Tiger": "Black Tiger, famous mail-carrying dog, owned by Postmaster Clary, was killed yesterday afternoon when struck by a street car on Main street."

"Besides the Clary family, many children mourn the loss of this dog of dogs. 'Tiger' was a familiar figure in front of the post office when the children, of whom he was a great pet, were going and coming from school. 'Black Tiger' was perhaps the most intelligent dog in town and carried many special delivery letters and other pieces of mail.

"Postmaster Clary was on the streetcar, going to Sharon, and 'Tiger' saw him and followed the car. The dog ran from behind the one car in front of another on the switch at Main and First streets."

In hindsight, Black Tiger's tragic death may have presaged what was to come. In public, Franklin kept up appearances. But there were problems in the office, and at home. While preaching the virtues of moral rectitude consistent with his teetotaling Baptist faith, his drinking increased. He and his wife Mary fought, and as his sons left high school, he seemed to lose interest in making public appearances. Then, in October 1929, came the stock market crash and the Great Depression. And no one in the Shenango Valley escaped the economic and spiritual fallout from that.

Nonetheless, in February 1931, with Herbert Hoover bracing for what would be a resounding defeat the following year, Franklin was named to a third term as postmaster. After a routine inspection conducted in June 1930, the office was rated as "good," with two irregularities noted. "PM (postmaster) devotes 8 and more hours daily to the office, satisfactory service rendered patrons, his standing in the community is excellent," the inspector noted. His reappointment was recommended by U.S. Rep. Thomas C. Cochran, a Republican lawyer from Mercer.

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The Postmaster's Suicide, cont'd.

'Number of irregularities'

By the fall of 1932, after Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president, and Democrats took the reins of local patronage, Franklin Clary may have suspected that his time in office was nearing an end.

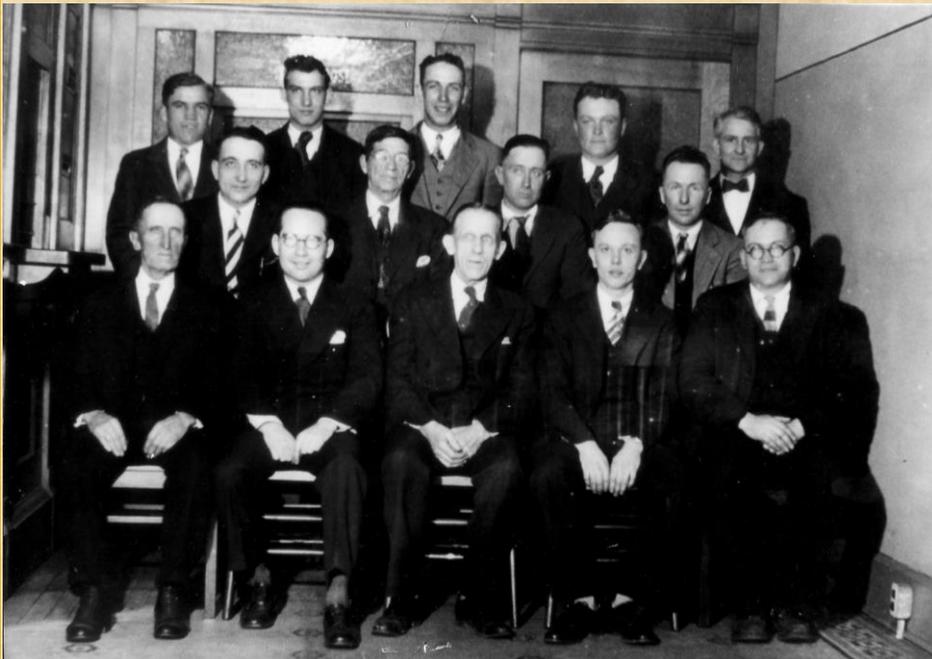
Late in 1933, the Post Office Department began an investigation into what was called an "unusual number of irregularities" into the Sharpsville post office. According to the Sharpsville, Pa., Briefs -- the post office files stored in the National Archives at St. Louis—those irregularities include neglect of duty and misappropriation of funds. The probe was formally begun in January 1934—a year after FDR took office for his first term—and was conducted by E. J. Gallagher, a post office inspector based in Erie, Pa. In a report dated March 7, 1934, Gallagher found that box rent receipts were not properly kept, and some receipts could not be accounted for. Franklin told Gallagher that many of the record books in which box rent receipts were recorded had been destroyed after a 1929 fire in the post office building that resulted in the books being soaked with water. "A personal search of records was made by me," wrote Gallagher. "Some were located prior to the time this postmaster took office. I do not content [sic] that the postmaster made away with the missing books." Nonetheless, comparing the box rent collections with the monies, due for from March 1930 to December 1933, Gallagher came up with a shortage of \$172.45.

After interviewing post office employees, including assistant postmaster Harry Morinier, clerk Harold W. Reichart, substitute clerk Stanley H. Bronson and Franklin, Gallagher did not conclude that the postmaster was taking the money. He wrote, "I am not prepared to state that I suspect one employee more than another, but if the postmaster is guilty of extracting money from the credits it seems that he is the most likely suspect. He could account for all collections he made with assurances that shortages he caused otherwise would have to be made up by the subordinates. They claim that shortages amounting to one to three dollars were quite frequent in credits and they had to make these good, especially Mr. Reichert and Mr. Bronson. One accounting to \$8.28 was disclosed in the recent audit of the credit of the latter. In summary respecting accountability, the postmaster must be held as owing the United States the sum found due."

With that initial report, submitted on Jan. 24, 1934, the inspector rated Franklin at 67 percent and made no judgement on his suitability to be postmaster. But, Gallagher said, he would return to Sharpsville to investigate further allegations, including those from employees who said Franklin spent less time than required on duty in the post office, that he often seemed to be under the influence of intoxicants, and that he had been taking money from their credits.

In February Gallagher took sworn statements from the others in the office. Bronson said, "On a number of occasions I have seen the postmaster in the office under the influence of liquor to a noticeable extent, this having occurred during the last two years." Bronson added that he suspected the postmaster of pilfering from his stamp drawer, but had never caught him in the act.

Morinier said, "I have seen the postmaster frequently on duty under the influence of liquor when he was noticeably incapable of handling patrons." This had been going on for about two years, Morinier said, although "it has been less noticeable and frequent of late."



Sharpsville Post Office workers, ca. 1930

Reichert also cited problems with money, sobriety and time on the job. "I am satisfied that the postmaster devoted less than eight hours a day during the business hours of the day, to the duties of his position, but he has been doing better recently," Reichert told the inspector. "I believe that the postmaster, during certain weeks and months, would not average more than six hours a day.

"I have observed the postmaster on duty when I knew he had been drinking intoxicants and at such times only would he bother money in the tills. I do not believe that he would do this when entirely sober. I have seen him here in such condition that I do not believe he should

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The Postmaster's Suicide, cont'd.

have waited on patrons, although he did so. This covered practically all the time that I have been in the office as a clerk.”

Gallagher wrote, “Mr. Clary referred to his personal condition of health as being cause for failing to assume duties which he should. It is known to the employees that he has had trouble with his health, also, that his wife and children have suffered similarly. He admits being in poor circumstances financially. More than usual misfortune has visited his family.

“His present term will expire Feb. 16, 1935,” Gallagher wrote.

‘No misuse of funds’

Franklin was offered a chance to respond to the second round of charges. In a letter dated Feb 25, 1934, he explained that for the preceding four years he had paid little attention to the box receipts, having delegated that responsibility to his deputies. “I have not given the matter of box rent collections any particular attention since about 1928, at which time I turned over the handling of accounts to Mr. Morinier, after I had been ill for six months,” he wrote. I have accounted for all box rent collections made by me, to the best of my knowledge, by turning in the sums to one employer or another. I have not misused any funds in this relation.”

Franklin was ordered to pay the \$172.45 shortage.

On April 12, 1934, the Post Office Department issued an order removing Franklin Clary from his office, appointing as his successor Karl Smith. Smith had served two terms as Sharpsville postmaster before Franklin replaced him in 1922, and, according to *The Sharon Herald*, was the owner of a Sharpsville tin shop. [Smith had also served as Sharpsville's Burgess.]

Franklin received notice that he was being replaced on Monday, April 16, according to the Herald. He called Smith, and the two men agreed to meet the next day for the transfer of the office.

We will never know what was going through Franklin Clary's mind as he arrived at the post office that spring morning. Did he plan to take his life? Did he really harbor no hard feelings, as he said to Karl Smith? Did he act on a sudden, deadly impulse?

There are some clues. Franklin's daughter Agnes Clary Stewart, in a Dec. 17, 1975, conversation with me, remembered that on the day Franklin died, he did not take with him to the office any of the many pens and pencils he normally carried in his vest pocket. She said he had been drinking heavily for some time.

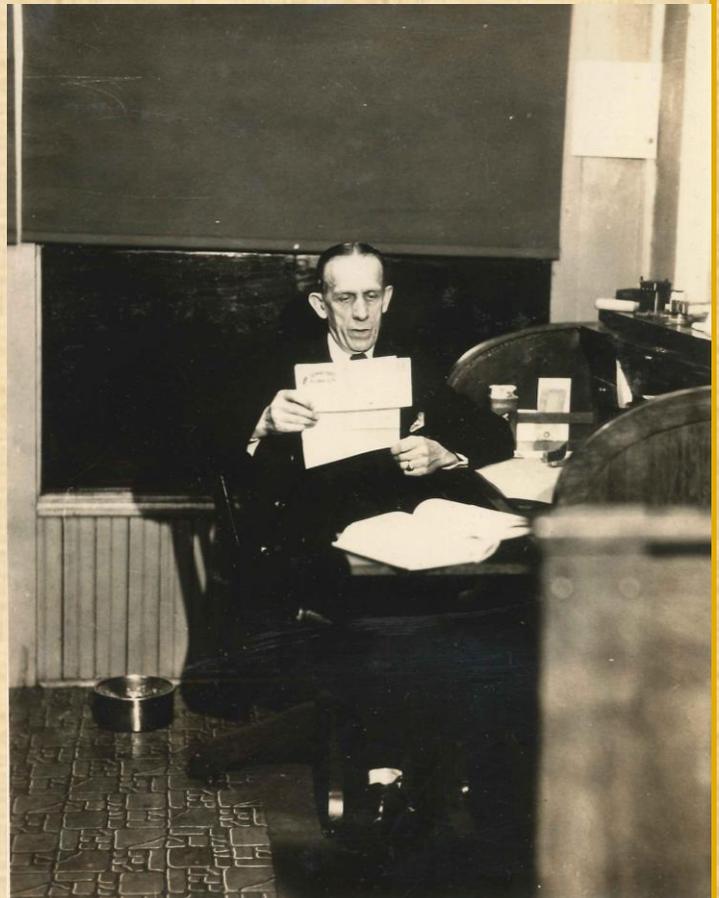
My father, Ben, was not far away when the gunshot rang out that Tuesday morning. During a visit with my father in 1976, I asked him what he remembered. Though reluctant to talk, he did recall that he had been in a park near the post office that day when he heard people shouting. “Mister Clary's shot himself!” they cried.

My father said he ran into the post office, and, before others could cover the body with a mail sack, he saw his father on the floor. From there Ben Clary ran home and broke the news to his mother.

Like my grandfather, I also became a journalist, working as a staff writer for several newspapers, including *The Miami Herald* and *The Los Angeles Times*. For more than 50 years I got paid to ask questions. But when handed one of the most intriguing stories of my life—trying to nail down the identity of my grandfather, and my own—I did not ask enough. All the primary sources now are gone.

The summary of the investigation into the Sharpsville, Pa., post office is terse. “During the transfer of office, PM committed suicide, April 17, 1934,” reads a Post Office Department memo that wraps up Franklin Clary's federal career.

The death certificate, signed by Dr. Applegate, the coroner, states as the cause of death: “Suicidal gunshot wound through the heart.” No autopsy was conducted.



Franklin Clary at his postmaster's desk.