

From the Star-Gazette

August 1, 2008

How Elmira got its name -- maybe

As one story goes, city's moniker may have originated during judge's visit to tavern.

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We've all heard urban legends, from albino alligators prowling New York City sewers to horrified people waking up in hotel bathtubs of ice only to discover that someone had stolen one of their kidneys.

Urban legends make life entertaining and give cities something to boast about. So it does me proud to know that my hometown, Elmira, has its own urban legend.

It has to do with the name of our city. But this legend is part truth and part fiction.

First the facts: Elmira was officially named on Aug. 1, 1808, -- 200 years ago today.

The Chemung Valley History Museum plans to commemorate that day by unveiling a historic plaque next month on the northeast corner of Lake and East Water streets.

Before Elmira took its name, it was known as the village of Newtown, and was settled in 1792.

The name, while not very original, was self-explanatory -- it was a new town in a new frontier of a new nation.

Problem was, there were several municipalities in the state with the same name. This caused much confusion for travelers, mail delivery and state legislative decisions.

This confusion especially bothered a well-known and influential man named Emanuel Coryell, a judge and New York state assemblyman who lived on the Susquehanna River in Nichols.

As was a custom of the time, Coryell often traveled to Newtown to meet with his constituents and find out what was on their minds.

One of his favorite meeting places was a tavern, located somewhere near today's St. Joseph's Hospital on Elmira's Eastside.

Now the myths: Legend has it that the tavern was called the Black Horse. Yes, there was a tavern called the Black Horse, but that's not the one Coryell liked to frequent.

The name and location of that tavern are not known, says Amy Wilson, director of the Chemung Valley History Museum.

That's why the commemorative plaque will be placed on the corner of Lake and Water streets, the general vicinity of the tavern, Wilson explains.

"People back then didn't always keep good records, and the story gets passed down and mixed up and fuzzy, and people repeat the story and it becomes legend," says Rachel Dworkin, archivist at the history museum who did extensive research on the history of Elmira's name.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, taverns were popular meeting places where food and drink were served and lodging was available.

The typical tavern of the time possessed a mixed aroma of old buffalo robes, horses, tobacco smoke and old whiskey.

Men gathered at these taverns and "gossiped, told stories, discussed the public and private affairs of the neighborhood, smoked and doubtlessly lowered the contents of the bottles that stood on the shelf behind the bar," read documents at the history museum.

One such tavern was owned by Nathan Teall, whose family emigrated to America from Switzerland.

The Tealls lived in the area of Sullivan Street, then called Dewittsburg, and owned several plots of nearby land. In 1794, Teall got a license to sell liquor in his tavern.

Nathan also was a local deputy sheriff and coroner, and he and his wife, Polly, had several children.

One of those kids was named Phoebe Elmira Teall.

The story goes that Coryell was at Teall's tavern discussing the need for Newtown to change its name. Suddenly, little Phoebe, who was 5 or 6 at the time, came running into the room and jumped onto Coryell's lap, as her mother yelled after her "Elmira! Elmira!"

The dark-eyed and raven-haired child paid no mind to her mother, and instead snuggled down into the judge's lap and fell asleep.

The judge then noted to his audience that the tot was one of the first children born and raised in Newtown, and her life was almost coexistent with the town itself.

It made sense to name the town Elmira.

"This suggestion was met with no opposition and the town was so named," reads a May 22, 1955, Sunday Telegram story about the incident.

The girl's name, Elmira, is Moorish in origin and was probably written as "El Mira," and meant "a fair outlook."

There is a river in Spain, where the Moors settled, that is called El Mira, and there is another river in Spanish South America with the same name.

A late 18th-century novelist named one of his female characters "El Mira" because he liked the sound of it. It was common practice at the time for mothers to name their kids after characters in fiction, reads the newspaper story.

"I agree that it's a cute story," Dworkin says. "It has a lot of great human qualities, especially since she was one of the earliest children to be born here."

The name change was submitted to the state Legislature in 1808, Dworkin says. But the people in Elmira had been calling their town Elmira since 1800.

In 1800, the Teall family bought land in Horseheads and moved there. Some of that property is now the site of Teal Park (note that name contains only one "l") and the former Teal School, says Chemung County Historian Archie Kieffer.

Teall also donated some of his Elmira property to build St. Joseph's Hospital.

The Teall family fell into debt and was forced to leave Horseheads and move to Geneva in 1810, where Nathan died in 1841, according to historic documents.

Phoebe Elmira Teall married John Madden. They lived in Waterloo, and the couple had a daughter. It's not known when Elmira died or where she is buried.

But the tale of the little black-haired sweetie lives on in legend and provides Elmira with a wonderful story of how it got its name.



JASON WHONG/Star-Gazette

Rachel Dworkin, archivist at Chemung County Historical Society, stands in an area along Sullivan Street that was once known as Dewittsburg. The area is the approximate location of a tavern where Elmira may have gotten its name 200 years ago.

CELEBRATION

- When: 11 a.m. Sept. 27.
- Where: Northeast corner of Lake and Water streets, near Elmira Savings Bank.
- What: Unveiling of historic sign commemorating the naming of Elmira.
- Notables: Elmira Mayor John Tonello, New York state Sen. George H. Winner Jr. and Assemblyman Tom O'Mara are expected to attend.
- Who can attend: Anyone, and it's free.
- Information: Contact the Chemung Valley History Museum, (607) 734-4167.