

2009 Ghost Walk

The Story of Dr. Eldridge

As told by a Victorian Era Woman played by Amy Lange

It was the biggest funeral I've ever seen. It seemed like everyone in Elmira was there. Businesses shut down, the Court was adjourned and the streets were so empty it might have been a ghost town. It's not surprising I suppose; the man had his hand in *everything*, from medicine and railroads, to banks and steel mills. And he was generous too, donating land for the Home for the Aged, sponsoring a fire company and just lending a hand to anyone who needed it. Was it any wonder all of Elmira mourned Dr. Edwin Eldridge like that?

These days, when most people think of Dr. Eldridge they think of the park of the same name, and I suppose that's how he would have wanted it. In 1860 he purchased a lake surrounded mostly by about 300 acres of swamp land. No one quite knew what motivated that or what Dr. Eldridge planned to do with it. Well, he knew *exactly* what to do with it; he would build a park. The Civil War interfered with his plans, but after the war, he got to work. The lake was enlarged and lined with willow trees, thousands of loads of dirt and gravel were hauled in, drains were cut into the hills, slopes graded, flowers and plants planted, and statues selected. And Dr. Eldridge used his own money to fund the entire project.

In 1870 the park opened. Goodness, it was lovely [laughs fondly] and lively too. I can remember picnicking there with my family, listening to music at the bandstand, attending dances at the pavilions, and watching the races at the track. There were beautiful flower gardens and there was always some mischievous little child trying to dig something up. And there were statues, lots of statues. My favorite was the mermaid. It rose like magic from the center of the lake. I found out later there was a hidden cord in the Casino you could pull to make it come up, but it was magic back then. And the Casino. I'm not sure why they called it that since there was no gambling, but there was always plenty of ice cream, not to mention an amazing view of the lake from the observation deck. There was Chapel Grove too. During the summer months when it was too warm to hold services indoors, I can remember going to hear Rev. Thomas K. Beecher, the pastor of the Park Church, give his sermons there.

It seemed Dr. Eldridge was always at the park. We'd see him showing visitors around, riding in his carriage and waving to people as they passed, or just sitting on a bench. He died quite unexpectedly on December 16, 1876, and, come spring, the park seemed empty without him. In 1889 the city of Elmira purchased the park and named Eldridge Lake in his honor. The park became quite the tourist attraction with people coming from all over the world to enjoy what has been called the beauty spot of the Southern Tier. One newspaper reporter compared the park to Central Park in New York City which, I think, Dr. Eldridge would have appreciated.

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The Story of Harriet Maxwell Converse

As told by a Seneca Woman played by Sarah Schleuter-Eisman

Who will tell *your* story? Who will tell *your* history? Keep *your* heritage? It takes the work of many, but one of the most important people in the saving of *our* story lies here behind me. In her time, many White Men despised us, called us savages, but *she* honored our ways and spoke for us when no one else would. My people called her Ya-ie-wa-noh, She-who-watches-over-us, but yours knew her as Harriet Maxwell Converse. She was born in this city in 1838 to Thomas and Maria Maxwell. Her family were wealthy merchants that had long been friends with the Iroquois people, and she learned her love for us on her father's knee.

Harriet was, by the white man's standards, a highly accomplished woman. At the age of 25, she married Frank Converse, a wealthy musician, and the two traveled all across the United States and the world. When she wasn't traveling, she was writing. She wrote poetry and stories for magazines under the pen names "Musidora" and "Salome" and was quite popular. In 1885, she published *Sheaves*, a collection of poems she had written over the years.

The thing that she is most honored and remembered for, however, was her tireless work on behalf of my people. The old stories and ways of our people had been dying out with our elders, but Harriet began to collect them so that they would not be lost. The Iroquois had long been forced onto reservations, but during the 1880s there was a plan in Albany to take what little lands we had left. Harriet made such speeches and wrote such things in newspapers that the State of New York was shamed into abandoning its plans. She lobbied for our rights as citizens and fought against those who would cheat us. In 1884, she was formally adopted by the Seneca as a member of the Snipe Clan. In 1891, she became the first white woman to be named as a Chief of the Six Nations. As chief, she sat on our council, gave her wisdom to those who needed it and acted as an attorney for Seneca who found themselves in the white man's courts.

She died on November 18, 1903 in New York City, just a few months after her husband, and the whole Iroquois Nation mourned. At her funeral a few days later, Chief Cornplanter, one of the great orators of our nation, was so overcome with grief he could barely speak. There were delegates from each of the Six Nations, but also many other tribes including the Hurons, the Sioux, the Algonquins and even the Aztec out of Mexico. There were eulogies from many great men and she was truly buried as befitted a chief.

Even after her death, her legacy lived on. Five years later, in 1908, a family friend completed and published Harriet's great work, *Myths and Legends of the New York State Iroquois*. Her book took the fading words of our elders and pinned them to the page for generations to come. During her life she had amassed a great collection of wampum, ceremonial clothing and many other artifacts which have since gone to the New York State Museum where they form the core of their Iroquois collection. Yes, Harriet Converse's bones may be dust beneath our feet but her legacy lives on in her works, in the causes she championed, and in the hearts of the Iroquois people.

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The story of the Owens

As told by a Police Officer played by Joe Edkin

I've been walking the beat here in Elmira going on 15 years now, but I've never seen anything quite like the Owens. By all accounts they were fairly typical as couples go; late 40s, happily married, two grown children. They lived at 360 Columbia Street on the west side in one of those nice neighborhoods filled with upper middle-class types just shy of real money. Wilmot Owen was the head of the Western Union here in Elmira and Emma was just an ordinary housewife. They were perfectly normal - right up until the time she shot him.

It happened on the night of Tuesday, June 28, 1903 some time around eleven o'clock. Mr. Owen had tucked himself in and gone to sleep when his wife put a bullet in his head just before shooting herself. The neighbors were quite shocked. Of course, neighbors always *say* they're shocked, but I think this time they really were. Everyone, friends, family, folks in her husband's office, knew Mrs. Owen hadn't exactly been herself for a while, but no one thought she'd do something like that. She'd been depressed and a might unbalanced since her mother had passed and there was talk that, ah, female troubles from the change of life had unsettled her mind. Everyone who knew the Owens knew the missus was madder than a hatter, they just didn't think she'd hurt anyone.

The thing was, no one would have known it happened if it wasn't for the smell. Oh, I can see it on your face; how can anyone miss a shooting in a neighborhood like that? Timing and coincidence I suppose. Children had been playing with fireworks all week in anticipation of the holiday, so no one paid any mind to the shots. Mr. Owen wasn't even missed at work; his co-workers knew he had been planning to take his wife up to their summer cottage at Far Rockaway on the river. The postman rang twice on Wednesday and just slid the mail under the door since Mrs. Owen had complained of being ill when he saw her on the day before.

In the end, the deed was discovered by the couple's son-in-law, Harry Walker, when he went to call on them Thursday morning. The house was all shut up like they had gone to the cottage, but there was this smell about the place, you see, rather like rotting meat. Well, after knocking on the door a bit and making some inquiries of the neighbors, Walker got worried. Mrs. Owen had been over at his house on Tuesday afternoon and his revolver had since gone missing. That, with the smell, had him plenty worried when it turned out no one had seen his in-laws in a few days. He went to the neighbors and telephoned the police.

I suspect you can imagine the sight when Captain Reid kicked the door down, but, in truth, there was nothing amiss on the first floor. The place was spick and span with Mr. Owen's coat and hat on the rack by the door but the smell was, well, it was awful. The bodies were on the second floor in the master bedroom, him tucked in bed and her by the door in her night clothes. She'd left a night lamp burning just beside her and it was some strange luck she didn't fall on it and burn the house down.

Mr. Walker's missing gun was in her hand and that's what really gets me. The neighbors and the Owens' children all say the couple had a wonderful relationship filled with cordial civility and gentle concern and this had to have been nothing but a fit of insanity, but the gun says different. She snuck into her daughter's home when no one was about, removed the gun from the drawer



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where it was stored and smuggled it back to her own home. Seems fairly premeditated if you ask me. It was quite a thing. Over twenty years of marriage and she killed him in his sleep. Kind of makes you wonder. Kind of makes you want to go home and be extra nice to your wife.



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The Story of Roy Rutan

As told by a co-worker at the Explosives Manufacturing Company played by Steven Hovis

I should have made him come with me. He lived on my street and we always left the factory together. We would walk home together, complain about work and talk about girls, but not that night. I should have made him come home with me. Maybe then he'd still be alive.

Joveite was supposed to be the safest explosive ever. The factory said they tested it for four years. They said it was supposed to be safe, but what happened that night says different. We worked at the Explosives Manufacturing Company's joveite plant, just south of the city lines, near Miller's Grove. He and I worked in the screening room where we packed the powdered explosive. Usually at 5 o'clock, when the plant shut down, we'd all start making our way home. But it wasn't uncommon for some of the men to stay late until a job was complete and on that day, June 1, 1903, my buddy Roy Rutan was one of the workers who stayed behind.

He was the most ambitious person I ever knew. He was only 14, yet eager to work and help with the family finances. He wouldn't leave with a job half done, but I couldn't get out of there fast enough. On this particular day, I grabbed my lunch pail, said goodbye, and headed out the door. That was the last time I saw Roy alive.

The explosion happened just 10 minutes after closing. It was just enough time for me to get about a quarter of a mile away from the plant, which was enough to save my life, but not enough to keep me from being thrown to the ground. Later we found out that the shock of the explosion was felt five miles away in all directions and shattered windows within two miles of the plant. Not a shop on Water Street was spared their windows and all over the city you could see the white and green funnel cloud stretching 200 feet into the air.

I ran back to the plant as fast as I could to see what I could do to help. The explosion demolished the entire plant, six buildings in all, and I was truly amazed to find that anyone survived. When I arrived at the plant the scene was radiating with heat and it was nearly impossible to get close to the wreckage. Many more people showed up to help and we all began searching for the people we knew were closest to the point of explosion, Earl Davis, Lee Fuller and Roy. Earl and Lee were found rather quickly because their bodies had been thrown from the scene. But nobody knew where Roy was.

The fire department, police and ambulance wagons were on the scene within minutes, and with their help, we were slowly able to start sifting through the masses of debris. Even the president of the company, Mr. Pratt, was right there with us. It was about 7:30 at night when someone shouted that they found another body. Gathering around what was left of the boiler room, we all stood around the charred and blackened body of a young man. We all held our breath as Roy's father, Archie, moved in on the body to see if he could identify the unrecognizable remains. Then, poor Mr. Rutan just broke down and we knew we'd found Roy. I swear, the sound of his anguished cries will haunt me the rest of my life.

There were half a dozen other men injured in that explosion, but no one could give a clear account. Of course, everyone was confused about why there was even an explosion to begin with. Four years of testing said the joveite couldn't have blown without a detonator cap. Mr.



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Pratt issued a statement to the newspapers saying there was no way of knowing what caused the explosion. They even brought in the country's leading expert on explosives to survey the damage.

I don't think there will ever be any answers. It was an explosion that should not have happened by all accounts. They tell us we're lucky and that we should be thankful that the explosion happened after work hours or the rest of us would have been victims too. It's hard to think that way though when three people died, especially not when one of them was my good friend Roy.