

Donated letter window into family tragedy

Death came for John W. Puett on the afternoon of Jan. 12, 1917. The Bloomington grain dealer was at his Twin Grove elevator, located some five miles west of the city along the parallel rail lines of the Illinois Traction System and Big Four Railroad, just south of Old Peoria Road.

According Park Enlow, who was the only other person at the elevator, Puett's overcoat caught the exposed shafting from the flywheel of the engine powering the elevator. With the flywheel moving at around 150 revolutions per minute, John Puett never had a chance.

Occupied elsewhere, Enlow heard a sickening thud and "looked and saw the unfortunate man as he was being whirled through space," reported The Pantagraph. "Mr. Enlow rushed over and stopped the engine, but before the wheel had stopped some of Mr. Puett's clothing gave away and he fell to the floor."

Puett's right arm was pulled from the socket, mangled and crushed; his left arm lacerated, and his head horribly beaten about. The right side of his chest was crushed.

Enlow telephoned for help, and twenty minutes later Bloomington Drs. A.E. Behrendt and J.P. Noble reached the scene by auto. Behrendt then brought Puett back on the 2:50 p.m. Illinois Traction interurban, and once in Bloomington he was taken by ambulance to St. Joseph's Hospital (then located on South Morris Avenue on the city's west side).

Puett's wife, Meda Ray Puett, was spending the afternoon at the Bob Jones revival, held at a temporary wooden tabernacle erected downtown. A search was undertaken to find her, and after being spotted by Chief of Police John J. Jones, Meda was rushed to the hospital, where she had time enough to say her goodbyes. John Puett passed away at 4:45 p.m., 2 hours and 50 minutes after the accident.

This tragic story was dutifully recounted in the pages of the next day's Pantagraph. But daily journalism can only do so much when it comes to giving voice or agency to the grieving loved ones left behind. With Puett's death, The Pantagraph tells us what happened and to whom, and where it happened and when, but what's missing, of course, is a deeper window into the human condition, and our world of suffering, love and faith.

As a not-for-profit institution, the McLean County Museum of History depends on donations of objects and papers to help preserve the stories of our community's past. This summer, the museum was contacted by a Stillwater, Okla. resident, who had come into possession of a letter written by Meda Puett to several of her cousins. In this 640-word letter, dated Jan. 26, 1917—

two weeks after her husband's death—Puett struggles with the immensity of her loss. How does one, after all, express the inexpressible?

This letter was discovered tucked inside an old book that the donor's brother-in-law had bought from a bookseller in southern Oklahoma. How it ended up there remains a mystery.

Upon receipt of the donated letter, the museum set about to have it transcribed, which was done by museum volunteer JoAnna Mink. The original letter will then be cataloged and placed in the museum's climate-controlled archives, where it will be available to genealogists, students, and others for generations to come. And as the museum learns more of the Puett story, items may be added to the file.

"Dear Cousins: I have thought of you people so much since this terrible sorrow came into our home but haven't been so I could write," begins Meda's letter. "I hope you people wont feel bad at me for not sending a telegram at the time for I was in such a dazed condition I really couldn't think of your town."

As Puett relates, she was at the Bob Jones revival, which was in its third week in Bloomington. Jones, the namesake of the university in South Carolina, won fame first on the revival circuit and then with the new mass medium of radio.

"I was called away from meeting at the tabernacle to the hospital and in less than half an hour John was dead. He knew me but that was all and couldn't talk but very little ... Oh folks you don't know how heart broken I am and from little Russell was the worst brokenhearted child you ever saw. Little did we think when John left us at noon that would be our last dinner together."

Meda Ray and John Pruett were both born in Colfax, and that's where they married in 1905. They had two children at the time of the tragedy, Geraldine, age 11, and Russell, age 9. The family lived in Bloomington.

"I have only pleasant memories to think of, he was so good to me," Meda wrote of her husband. "I am glad he was such a good man and I believe he is in a better world than this."

The letter speaks to the mysteries of grief and faith—and how they are inexorably entwined.

"We had been attending the Bob Jones meeting at the tabernacle and John was so helped by them, and some of the songs were so wonderful, it would have been a hard heart not to be stirred," Meda told her cousins. "And I'm so glad John knew the right way for how soon he was hurled into Eternity."

"I'm sure if God had not come with comfort to my poor soul I never could have stood it," she added.

Puett's death also meant attending to his personal and financial affairs. "I have been appointed administratrix and I have my heart, hands & brains full," Meda wrote. "I am trying to run the elevator and get that big bin of oats off hand. But we are having such a time getting [rail] cars ... About all I can do it is to trust to Providence that I'll come out all right."

She did manage to sell the elevator, for that summer it was reopened and in new hands. "Farmers are glad to know that some one has charge of the Twin Grove elevator," reported the Aug. 11, 1917 Pantagraph. "as it takes two or four teams more [of horses] to haul grain to distant elevators."

By 1930, Meda Ray Puett had remarried, and she and her husband George Charles Garlock, along with her two children, a son-in-law and a boarder were living at the former Puett home on South Main Street. Meda passed away in 1944 at the age of 65. She was living in Joliet at the time.