

2015

03 The Scandalous Life of Edwin Everhart

James Jones

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, JJONES@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest



Part of the [Public History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, J. (2015). 03 The Scandalous Life of Edwin Everhart. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest/73

This The Everhart Tract is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of West Chester, Pennsylvania by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.

The Scandalous Life of Edwin Everhart

By Jim Jones

The chapter entitled West Chester's Everhart Park: A Century of Recreation includes a reference note that refers to a clause from the will of Isaiah Everhart. Isaiah was a Scranton cousin of the West Chester Everharts who inherited 128 properties when the last of them (Benjamin) died in 1904. The footnote quotes the beginning of a provision from Isaiah's will which reads "My son, Edwin E. Everhart, having conducted himself in a manner which meets with my disapproval" On February 4, 2008, a reader from Scranton, Pennsylvania wrote "I was wondering if you know exactly what it is that Edwin Everhart did that caused Isaiah to be so disapproving." A subsequent exchange of emails enabled researchers from Scranton and West Chester to piece together the following story ...

Isaiah Everhart was the youngest brother of William Everhart, a Chester County shopkeeper who became the wealthiest man in West Chester after he bought the Wollerton farm southwest of town in 1829 and subdivided it into building lots. That triggered the Borough's first major expansion since it was founded in 1799, and enabled Everhart to invest in a railroad, hotel, and grocery store, lay out Market Street, and run for Borough Council and the state legislature. It also started the fortune that passed on to his five children, but since none of them married, it remained intact until the last one, Benjamin, left it to Isaiah.

Isaiah was born in Berks County in 1840, but settled in Scranton after serving as a doctor during the Civil War. His main activity was practicing medicine, but he also helped to manage the family's coal fields, invested in other businesses, and created an extensive collection of Pennsylvania flora and fauna. He also married Annie Victoria Ubil, the daughter of one of his neighbors, in 1871, and she produced a single child, Edwin Ellsworth Everhart, before she died in 1898.

EDWIN EVERHART ACCUSED OF CONSPIRING TO MURDER HIS FATHER

According to the *Scranton Times* of June 23, 1900, Edwin was "... the idol of his parents. The only child, sole heir to his father's wealth. The sun rose and set in him. Everything that he desired was at his command. Education and travel, luxury, all could be had for the asking." The *Times* also reported that in the mid-1890s, Edwin received close to \$100,000 when his uncle James died, and proceeded to throw it away: "... the young man, who was wild enough before, became absolutely dissolute. The money went fast, much of it was given in the form of loans to his companions who are numerous and who stuck to him through thick and thin, while the money held out."

Things went downhill after his mother died. Edwin began to consort with May Rinsland, the wife of one of Scranton's tax assessors, and in early 1900, her husband sued for divorce. He also filed a separate lawsuit against Edwin for "alienating the affections" of his wife. The case, involving

the son of one of Scranton's wealthiest families and the wife of a public official, appeared prominently in Scranton newspapers for the first part of the year. Then in June, Edwin delivered the kind of story that turned him into a national figure. He tried to hire someone to kill his father Isaiah.

Since his father ultimately refused to press charges, and the local district attorney agreed to let the case die, the world was deprived of Edwin's explanation for his behavior. The newspapers speculated freely, however, and most seemed to think that he had done it so that he could inherit his father's fortune. Whatever the reason, the man he chose to carry out the deed, a drinking buddy named Frank Lewis, was well-known around Scranton. He was also honest enough (or smart enough) to reject the plan, which would have paid him \$5000 to shoot Isaiah with a 38-caliber revolver. Instead, Lewis informed the authorities and they arrested Edwin on the night that the murder was scheduled to take place.

Isaiah was not pleased, to say the least. He refused to post Edwin's \$5,000 bail, and since the first court session was not scheduled until September, Edwin spent three months in the Lackawanna County Jail. The court didn't actually get underway until early October, by which time his father had relented enough to drop the charges and pay his son's penalty from the Rinsland lawsuit. Edwin's troubles continued, however, when May Rinsland filed a breach-of-promise lawsuit against him because he failed to go away with her after her husband divorced her. Edwin eventually won that case thanks to a technicality -- Pennsylvania law didn't recognize the validity of the promise because she was still married to Rinsland at the time -- but his reputation was destroyed and his father wanted to get him out of the state.

According to Michael Wisneski of the Everhart Museum in Scranton, Edwin couldn't handle his alcohol, and at one point he wrote a will that left all of his money to the destruction of the Catholic Church. During his prison stay in 1900, the prison doctors kept him away from alcohol and cigarettes, which his friends claimed had made him insane. Although the *Scranton Times* reported that he left jail "quite a new man, with a clear brain, and resolutions to live a new life in some healthy spot at a respectful distance from Scranton," in 1913 he was judged insane in San Francisco and then declared mentally incompetent four months later in New York after spending time under observation at Bellevue mental hospital. By that time, he had also married a woman from New York City who left him in 1912, but who "wept bitterly" when he was institutionalized in 1913. Isaiah's estate remained under the control of his lawyers, and most of it went to the construction of the natural history museum which still bears his name in Scranton's Nay Aug Park.

Edwin appeared in West Chester on several occasions between the time of his father's death and his own institutionalization. Once was in 1911, shortly after his father Isaiah died, when he came to see John Gheen, the lawyer who managed Isaiah's West Chester properties. Edwin returned the following year for the same purpose, claiming that he was home on vacation from his mining business in Nevada where he had "struck it rich." But a year after that, the *Daily Local News* reported that juries in both California and New York had found Edwin incompetent.

The last connection to West Chester was through the person of Benjamin H. Warren, a local man who studied medicine but never practiced. Instead, he learned about birds from Benjamin, one of

the West Chester Everharts, and wound up serving as the Pennsylvania State ornithologist in the 1890s and the Dairy and Food Commissioner from 1903 to 1907. In the former position, he became friends with Isaiah Everhart, and after Everhart suffered a stroke in 1907, Warren took over as the superintendent of his museum until World War I. During that period, he also handled some of the details associated with Edwin's legal troubles.

Upon Edwin's death in 1934, the last of the Everhart fortune passed into the hands of six first and second cousins from various places in Pennsylvania. None of them were from West Chester however. Edwin was buried in Dunmore Pennsylvania, about five miles northeast of Scranton, beneath an \$85 stone marker.