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Looking Back

at

The Story of Elmer Billings

My great-grandfather William Elmer Billings was born on April 11, 1902 in Alleghany Co, NC. He was the fourth of seven children and the first son. He had four sisters and one brother Floyd who was born in 1907. His parents were Samuel M. Billings and Laura Ellen Irwin. Times were probably tough for his family in the rural Blue Ridge Mountains. His father died in 1908 when he was only six years old. His mother would later remarry, but not until 1924 after Elmer had already left home.



Irwin Family Photo, 1908. Of the two boys in front wearing overalls, Elmer Billings is the one on the left. This picture was taken at his father's funeral. Elmer's mother is standing at the far right holding Elmer's brother Floyd. His grandparents are standing in the back, behind and to the right of Elmer.

In 1913 Elmer's oldest sister Effie married Mack Brooks. Then, in 1917 his sister Margie married Bryan McBride, and within a year or two they had moved north to Coatesville in Chester Co, PA, where they were listed in the 1920 census. Elmer isn't listed with his mother and younger siblings in the 1920 Alleghany Co census, so he must have already left home. After not being able to find him for many years, I recently found an "Elmer Billing" age 19 living in Harford Co, Maryland, working as a hired man on a farm in the town of Dublin. This man is listed as

lure of a job was likely enough to convince Elmer to move. Maybe his sister had moved first and soon convinced him to follow. Or, maybe Elmer moved with the Edwards family with the plan to help him on his farm. Either way, Elmer wouldn't be a farmhand for very long.

The town of Dublin, MD, is about five miles south of the Pennsylvania border. It's also only 40 miles southwest of Coatesville, PA, where his sister Margie lived. Sometime between the 1920 census and 1924, Elmer moved to Coatesville where he found work at

88	90	Edwards William	Head	10	M	M	W	37	M					Yes	Yes	North Carolina
		Pearle	Wife				W	31	M					Yes	Yes	North Carolina
		Addie	Daughter				W	10	S					Yes	Yes	North Carolina
		Vera	Daughter				W	9	S					Yes	Yes	North Carolina
		Elmer	Hired man				M	19	S					Yes	Yes	North Carolina
90	91	William	Head	10	M	M	W	40	S					Yes	Yes	North Carolina

1920 Census for Dublin, Harford Co, MD. "Elmer Billing" is listed as a 19-year old hired man working on the farm of William Edwards. They had all recently arrived from Alleghany Co, NC.

having been born in North Carolina as were his parents. Alone, this isn't much justification to conclude he is my great-grandfather, but an important clue comes from the family he is living with. He is included in the household of William Edwards (age 37), his wife Pearl (age 31), and their daughters Addie (age 10) and Vera (age 9). They were also from North Carolina according to the census, and after a quick check through other records, I found that they were in Alleghany Co as late as 1918. This must be my Elmer Billings who had left home in hopes of finding better work than he could get in Alleghany Co.

A lot of families moved from the northwestern mountains of North Carolina up to Maryland and Pennsylvania. I've heard that many northern factories would advertise in southern newspapers that high paying jobs were available. There was very little industry in Alleghany Co at that time, and the

Lukens Steel Company. It was a huge factory that employed thousands of people. The company was – and still is – the oldest continuously operating steel mill in the country with its roots going back to 1793 when a small operation was begun on a stream a few miles outside of Coatesville. At the time when Elmer worked there, Lukens was the largest plate mill in the world.



Lukens Steel Company advertisement from the National Iron & Steel Heritage Museum brochure.

I've pieced together what I can about Elmer in the 1920s from information provided by family members, censuses, and courthouse records. It's not clear when Elmer started at Lukens, but he was almost certainly working there when he met Isabelle B. Thomas. I've seen her name spelled Isabel, Isabell, and Isabelle, but for consistency, I'll use the latter spelling. Isabelle was born on March 18, 1907 and was one of eleven children. They were a poor family, and her father Augustus Thomas was unable to work due to a back injury. In 1910, his occupation was listed as a plasterer. However, the 1920 census lists his occupation as "none" suggesting that his injury might have occurred in the 1910s. The 1930 census lists him at age 57 and retired.

Isabelle was 17 years old when she met Elmer in 1924. Her parents wouldn't allow her to date, but from what she had seen of Elmer, she knew that he was handsome and he seemed like a good worker. She thought he could provide a better life for her than what she had at home, and so they eloped.

As I was told when I visited the Archives in Chester Co, PA, in 2015, many couples from that part of Pennsylvania went south to Elkton, MD, to get married. I'm not sure about the exact laws at the time, but I assume couples had to be at least 18 years old to get married in Pennsylvania without parental consent. Perhaps Isabelle knew that parental consent wasn't going to happen, so they made the trip to Elkton where no questions would be asked. Today this is a 50 minute drive, but in 1924 I imagine it might have been an hour and a half. I wonder if Elmer had a car? Was there a bus that made the trip? Or, maybe one of Elmer's coworkers drove them down.



This badly damaged photo was identified as Elmer Billings and his first wife. Perhaps this was on their wedding day in 1924.

On Thursday, September 11, 1924, "Elmer Billings and Isabel B. Thomas" applied for a marriage license in Elkton, MD, and were married the same day by Rev. Ernest E. Weaver. In 2015 I was told at the Cecil County courthouse that they didn't have marriage certificates, but instead marriages at that time were recorded in a register. The clerk brought the register out from the vault where I could look at it and I wrote down what it said. The register states that they were both single, white, and from Coatesville, PA. He gave his age as 21, and she gave hers as 18.

As a married couple, Elmer and Isabelle returned to Coatesville where they lived at 347 South First Avenue. This street is on a hillside overlooking part

of Lukens Steel Company. From other records that I'll explain more about later, it appears that this is where Elmer was living before they were married, and so Isabelle moved in with him there. This location would have been very convenient for Elmer since he was within walking distance of his job. A picture in the September 10, 1948 issue of *Lukens Life*, the

company newsletter published by Lukens, shows Elmer Billings and his coworkers posing for a photo in front of the "old Universal Mill Loading Bank Building about 1928" when they were in the midst of working 12-hour shifts.

Elmer and Isabelle would not have a happy marriage. In September 1925, only a year after they were married, they separated and

Isabelle went back to Willowdale where she had lived before she was married. Willowdale is about 12 miles southeast of Coatesville, and it's not clear if her parents lived there or if she went to live with some other family member. After only three weeks, Isabelle decided she would give it another try, and she went back to live with Elmer on South First Ave, this time living in a house opposite #347 where they had lived before.

During this time, Isabelle was pregnant with their child. On January 5, 1926, their daughter Dolores E. Billings was born. In March, they moved back across the street to house #347. They stayed there for a year until



The above picture was taken in front of the old Universal Mill Loading Bank Building about 1928. These gay blades were healthy and happy even though they worked 12-hour shifts, about which they now like to boast. All but two of them are still employed here.

Front row, l. to r.: Charles Keim and Norman Smith.
Second row, l. to r.: S. Entriiken, Walter Faddis, Ray Fox.

Third row, l. to r.: Herbert Warner and E. Hudgeson.
Back row, l. to r.: Frank Reynolds, Elmer Billings, Huey Horrex. Hudgeson and Billings are no longer on our employment roster.

The September 10, 1948 issue of *Lukens Life* included a photo from 20 years earlier. Elmer Billings is in the center of the back row.



Dolores E. Billings at 3 years old.



South First Ave in Coatesville, PA, looking south. Elmer and Isabelle lived in house #347 and in the house across the street from it. Lukens Steel Company was behind the houses on the right.



Elmer Billings is on the left. I believe this photo was taken at one of the houses along South First Ave.

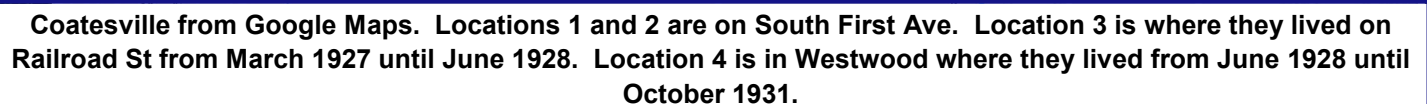
March 1927 when they moved to 216 Railroad St in Coatesville. According to the 1930 census map, Railroad St was only 0.7 miles north of where they had lived on South First Ave. Today it is called Fleetwood St. And, as its original name implies, it was only a few dozen feet from the railroad tracks. Both locations consist of a row of connected houses, and at the time I imagine they were all rented by people who worked at the mill. It's surprising that the houses still exist 90 years later.

But they weren't finished moving yet. The family of three stayed on Railroad St until June 1928 when they made another short move to Westwood which was about two miles west, just outside the city limits of Coatesville. I should mention that all of these moves are documented in

their divorce papers filed years later. I wonder why they moved so many times? They lived at two different places on South First Ave, then they moved to Railroad St, then to Westwood where the 1930 Chester County tax register shows that they lived on N. Park Ave. Maybe they heard about a place with lower rent. Or, maybe they shared a home with another small family at times. This seems to be the case in the 1930 census when they lived outside the city limits, presumably in Westwood, in household #496 on Gap Road. They

Billings Elmer	N. Park Ave.	Lab.	150	60
Billings Isabel		H.W.	100	40

1930 Chester County income tax register. Elmer and Isabelle were listed in Westwood living on N. Park Ave. He had an annual income of \$150 as a laborer. She had an annual income of \$100 doing housework. They owed \$0.60 and \$0.40 tax.



According to their divorce documents filed years later, Elmer and Isabelle lived together until October 31, 1931, when Isabelle went to live with her mother in Westwood and Elmer went back to 347 South First

Elmer had a drinking problem, and he used his paycheck to facilitate his bad habits even when money was in short supply. One story is that he came home one night after being out drinking and knocked something all over the floor where his wife had just spent the day cleaning. Things escalated, and she grabbed a heavy pan and hit him over the head with it. She left him because she was afraid that she would kill him if she continued to live with him.

Isabelle was known as “Nan” in later years, and

1930 Census for Valley Township, Chester Co, PA. The family of "Elmer Billing" is living with Isabelle's sister Ruth and her new husband Earl Smith. Earl and Ruth rented at \$5/mo, and Elmer and Isabelle rented at \$13/mo. Their ages are shown as are their ages when they married. Elmer was correctly shown as being born in North Carolina.

30 R.	5.00	No	Smith Earl	Head	M	W.	29	M	No	#.1
			— Ruth	Wife	F	W.	27	M	No	#.1
			— Earl	Son	M	W.	8	2	Apr	2
			— Richard	Son	F	W.	5	8	No	0
			Thomas Loretta	mother in law	F	W.	66	Wid	No	0
			Billings Doris	Niece	F	W.	14	2	Apr	7

The 1940 Chester Co, PA, census for Valley Twp shows Dolores Billings (age 14) living with her grandmother Loretta Thomas in the home of her aunt and uncle Ruth and Earl. Earl was a welder at the steel mill.



Dolores E. Billings.

family members recall that she never received any help from Elmer toward raising their daughter. Nan worked at a tie factory in Coatesville until it closed, and then she had to move to Philadelphia for work. That was 50 miles away, and she was forced to leave her daughter Dolores behind with her



Dolores E. Billings with her mother Isabelle (Nan) and Nan's second husband Pete.

mother. Nan rented a room for \$6 per week from a relative and was only able to afford to take the train back home every other weekend to see her daughter. Nan remarried when her daughter was 18.

As I mentioned before, a lot of this information is found in the divorce document where Isabelle Billings filed for divorce from Elmer Billings in the June 1943 term of Chester County court. Elmer had “committed a willful and malicious desertion and has been absent from the habitation of the injured and innocent spouse, the libellant, without reasonable cause for and during the term and space of eleven years”. It says that she had heard nothing of him until June 1942 and that he resided in Aberdeen, MD. Isabelle’s residence at the time was given as Westwood.

On December 14, 1943, the court stated that the respondent, Elmer, never replied to the court’s subpoena and that they were unable to locate him. On March 6, 1944, Isabelle was officially granted a divorce. I’m curious what the circumstances were when she heard from him in June 1942. Did he come to Coatesville? Did she receive a letter from someone who knew him? And I wonder what Elmer was doing in Aberdeen?

Back To North Carolina

While Isabelle waited for her divorce to be finalized before remarrying, Elmer apparently didn't see the need to do so. The next recorded sighting of Elmer Billings is in 1936 when he is back in Alleghany Co, NC. More specifically, on July 6, 1936 he and Carrie Williams went to neighboring Grayson Co, VA, to apply for a marriage license.

Elmer said he was 32 years old and single, and she said she was 30 and divorced. They both said they were from Alleghany Co. He was a laborer. However, this entry in the marriage register is marked "license returned, not executed". This generates several questions. Did Carrie know that he had been married before? Further, did she know that he was *still* married? He told the courthouse clerk that he was single, so it's possible that he told her the same thing. She correctly said that she was divorced since she had been married to Andy Brooks until their divorce was finalized on 9/25/1934 in Alleghany County court. Carrie and Andy had two children: Odis born in 1926 and Madge born in 1929. I also wonder why Carrie and Elmer applied for a marriage license, but didn't go through with it. Did she suddenly find out that Elmer was actually still married? Maybe Elmer left town again. Or, maybe they just decided they should wait.

One thing that wasn't going to wait was the birth of their daughter on November 16, 1936, in Alleghany Co. In a decision that continues to pique my curiosity, they named their daughter Opal Dolores



Elmer Billings with his second daughter Opal Dolores Billings in July 1939.

Billings. That means Elmer had two daughters born ten years apart, and both of them were named Dolores. Once again I wonder if Carrie knew that. It's also possible that Elmer had nothing to do with picking the name, and that Carrie selected it purely by coincidence. After all, between 1926 and 1936, Dolores was one of the most popular names for girls. During those ten years it ranked between the 13th and 49th most popular. Still yet, at its peak, only 1.1% of girls were being named Dolores.

As for Carrie and Elmer, they eventually married a year later on 10/30/1937 in Alleghany Co. In

July 6	(License returned not executed)	Elmer Billings	Carrie Williams	7	32	30	5	0
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The Grayson Co, VA, marriage register records that Elmer Billings and Carrie Williams applied for a marriage license on July 6, 1936. He said he was 32 and single. She was 30 and divorced.



Elmer's second wife Carrie Williams was born in 1904 in Alleghany Co, NC. They married in 1937.



Elmer's second daughter, Opal Dolores (Lois) Billings was born in 1936.

1940 Alleghany County census where he is listed with his wife, daughter, and step daughter living on Old Forge Rd. Carrie's son Odis was not listed with them because he was living nearby with her parents.

I've been told that during the Depression, Elmer worked for the WPA and participated in the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway which is within a mile or two of their home in Alleghany Co. I was also told that he worked at some time in the

addition to their marriage filed at the courthouse, *The Alleghany Times* reported on November 4, 1937, that they had been married at the home of the bride's parents. Carrie's father John M. Williams was a well known Baptist preacher in the area, but he didn't marry them. They were married by a Justice of the Peace.

actually around his new wife and daughter, but hopefully it wasn't very much. I've heard that he was cruel, violent, and often drunk when he was around Carrie. Unfortunately she had suffered through these same problems with her first husband, and she was certainly hoping for something better with her second.

I don't know how much Elmer was

The next record of Elmer is the

coal mines of West Virginia, but I haven't seen any evidence of that and it might not be correct.

In 1942, Elmer registered with the Selective Service. During the war, all men between the ages of 18 and 45 were required to fill out a draft card. He listed his employer as the WPA in Sparta, Alleghany Co. His birthdate is listed as April 11, 1904, even though his delayed

68 R	7	Billings Elmer	Head	0	M	W	37	M	7	6	6
		Carrie	Wife	1	F	W	35	M	7	7	7
		Anna Madge	Daughter	2	F	W	10	S	3	3	3
		Opal Lois	Daughter	2	F	W	3	S	7	6	6

The 1940 Alleghany Co, NC, census shows Elmer Billings living with his second wife Carrie Williams, his step daughter Anna Madge, and his daughter Opal Delores (Lois) Billings age 3. They were renting their home. Elmer's occupation was given as a laborer on the public roads. He had a 6th grade education, and Carry had attended school through the 7th grade.

birth certificate states that a Bible record showed that he was born two years earlier. Various records show his birth year as 1902, 1903, and 1904, but two of the most credible sources — the 1910 census and his delayed birth certificate — indicate that he was born in 1902.

Another interesting point on his draft card is that the name of the person who will always know his location is given as Mr. Glen Nichols of Sparta. Mr. Nichols was his aunt's husband. Normally this field has the name of the man's wife or parent. Since Carrie's name is not written here, it suggests that he was not living with her at that time. On the back of Elmer's registration card it says that he was 5 feet 7 inches tall and 150 pounds. He had brown eyes and black hair.

Under the section for "physical characteristics that will aid in identification", it says "ear part off". I wonder if he lost part of his ear when his wife hit him with the heavy pan? I suppose it's also possible that he lost part of his ear at some other point in his life, but it's interesting when two separate facts come together to possibly corroborate each other.

At some point in the 1940s or early 1950s, Carrie moved to Richmond, Virginia, to find work where her brother and sister lived. She may have worked for B&O Railroad there until she lost that job when the company moved to Atlanta, GA. I wonder if she worked in Richmond while she was still married to Elmer, or if it was sometime later?

I haven't found any record of Elmer between his 1942 draft card and his death in 1946. He died in

REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after February 17, 1897 and on or before December 31, 1921)

SERIAL NUMBER 260 1. NAME (Print) Elmer Billings ORDER NUMBER 10,046
 T. 260 (First) (Middle) (Last) T. 10,046

2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print) Wolf Branch Alleghany N.C.
 (Number and street) (Town, township, village, or city) (County) (State)

3. MAILING ADDRESS Sparta Rt 1 N.C.
 (Mailing address if other than place indicated on line 2. If same insert word same)

4. TELEPHONE None 5. AGE IN YEARS 38 6. PLACE OF BIRTH Stratford
 (Exchange) (Number) (Mo.) (Day) (Yr.) (Town or county) (State or country)

7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS Mr. Glen Nichols Sparta N.C.
 (Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)

8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS W. P. A.

9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS Sparta Alleghany N.C.
 (Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.

D. S. S. FORM 1 (Revised 1-1-42) (over) ☆ GPO 16-21630-1 Elmer Billings (Registrant's signature)

REGISTRAR'S REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF REGISTRANT

RACE	HEIGHT (Approx.)	WEIGHT (Approx.)	COMPLEXION
White	✓ 5ft 7in	150	Sallow
			Light
Negro	Blue	Blonde	Ruddy
	Gray	Red	Dark
Oriental	Hazel	Brown	Freckled
	Brown	Black	Light brown
Indian	Black	Gray	Dark brown
		Bald	Black
Filipino			

Other obvious physical characteristics that will aid in identification ear part off.

I certify that my answers are true; that the person registered has read or has had read to him his own answers; that I have witnessed his signature or mark and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows: no exceptions

Ella Edwards (Signature of registrar)
 Registrar for Local Board 1 Alleghany N.C.
 (Number) (City or county) (State)

Date of registration Local Board No. 161 4842

Alleghany County 005
001
County Courthouse
Sparta, N.C.
 (STAMP OF LOCAL BOARD)

(The stamp of the Local Board having jurisdiction of the registrant shall be placed in the above space)

16-21630-1

The 1942 draft card for Elmer Billings provides his birthdate, contact information, and physical characteristics. Front and back are shown.

Allegheny Co on May 12, 1946, as the result of a car wreck on Highway 21. An article in *The Allegheny Times* in 1946 attempts to explain what happened:

Billings Killed In Auto Mishap

Elmer Billings, 41, of Cherry Lane, was killed instantly when the automobile he was operating left Highway No. 21, five miles south of Sparta, at 6:00 o'clock, Sunday evening.

His automobile left the highway and while attempting to bring it back on the highway, it overturned on the right shoulder of the road, State Highway patrolmen reported.

Mr. Billings suffered a broken neck and his body was badly crushed when the accident occurred. The car was also badly damaged.

Funeral services were conducted Tuesday afternoon at New Salem church with Eld. Walter Evans, Eld. S. G. Caudill and Eld. Mack Brooks, officiating. Interment followed in the Irwin cemetery in the Wolf Branch section.

The deceased was the son of Mrs. Ellen Billings and the late Sam Billings. He had made his home with his mother for sometime.

Surviving in addition to his mother are two daughters, Lois Billings and Doris Billings, both of Pennsylvania.

The article has some errors. Elmer was 44 years old instead of 41 as the article stated. It lists his two daughters as both living in Pennsylvania, but only his older daughter did. It also misspells her name as Doris. Conspicuously missing is mention of Elmer's wife Carrie. Perhaps it was during this time that Carrie was working in Richmond. She might have been separated from Elmer even if it wasn't an official divorce. If she was in Richmond, it's likely



Elmer Billings is on the right. The other man is unknown.

that her daughter Lois was living with her, and as far as the newspaper reporter was concerned, it was close enough to say that both daughters lived in Pennsylvania.

I've been able to talk to two people who say they actually saw the aftermath of the car wreck. They both said it wasn't simply an "auto mishap" as headlined in the newspaper.

The other car was driven by Don Ray Gentry who was born on May 29, 1929. That means he was two weeks away from turning 17. It wasn't uncommon for young men to pull a prank on someone else that they knew by driving full speed ahead at them. Usually the driver pulling the prank would steer away before any damage was done, but not this time.

Elmer made a hard right to avoid the oncoming car and his car went across a ditch and possibly into a tree or some other immovable object. He might have survived if he hadn't been driving a car with a cut off top. I imagine his car as a homemade convertible where the top had been removed leaving

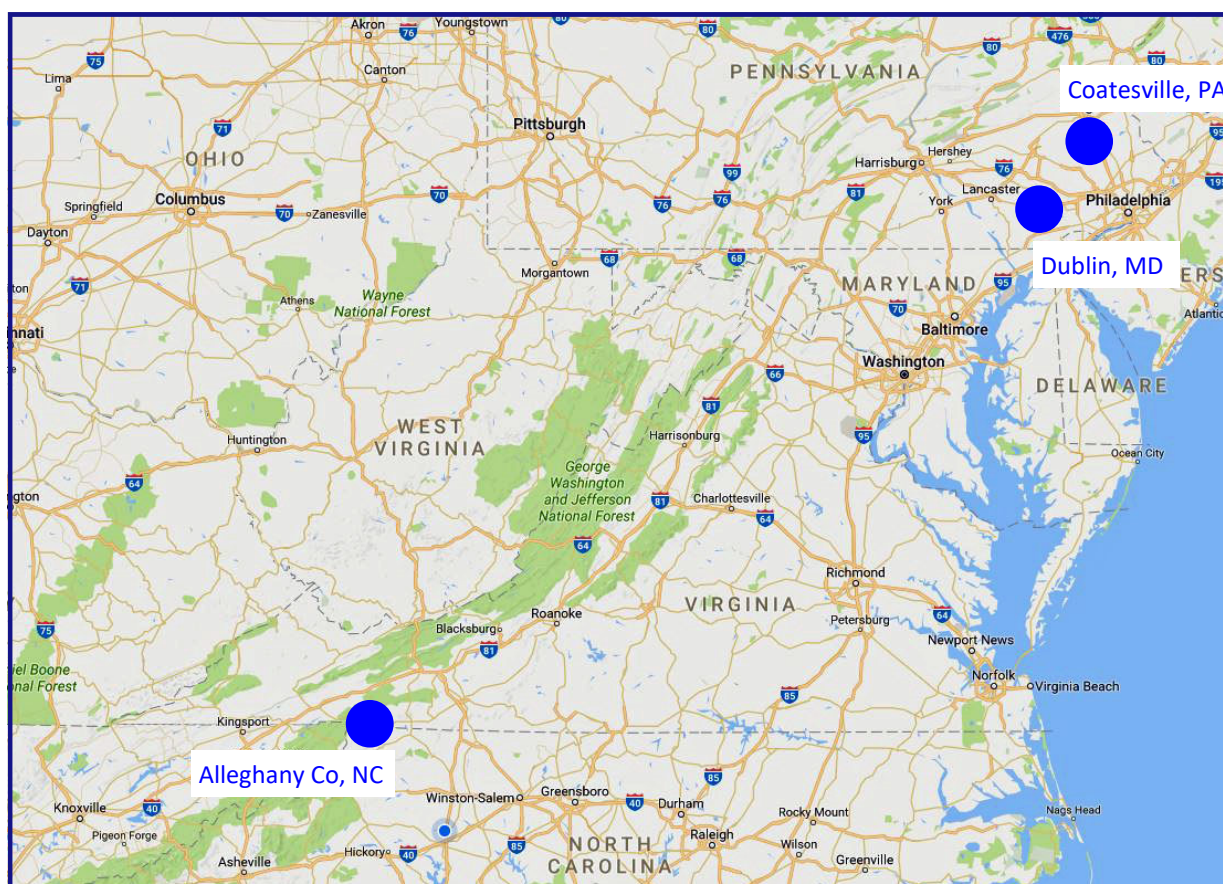
a jagged edge where the car's frame was left in place. Without being too gruesome, his body was thrown into this jagged edge, and he died immediately.

He was buried in the nearby Irwin family cemetery where his parents and grandparents were buried. I certainly realize that Elmer's story isn't a happy one, and in fact it's rather depressing. So I try to look at his life more with curiosity than with an emotional attachment. That's easier for me to do than for many others since I never knew most of the people directly involved with him. Even my grandmother Lois probably didn't know her father very well.

I wonder what my great grandmother Carrie thought of Elmer. Their marriage wasn't a spur of the moment thing since they originally considered it at

least fifteen months before they actually got married. Was Elmer at all a part of her life at the time of his death? When was the last time she saw him? Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Carrie spent most of her time in Alleghany Co. although at times she would spend a few months living with other relatives including her daughter. In the late 1970s, she developed Alzheimer's and went to live with her daughter in Massillon, OH. She died in 1986.

I continue to look for more information on Elmer Billings including pictures. I've included a few pictures of him here, but they are usually either small or blurred. I've been told that someone in his aunt's family used to have a large, clear portrait of him. I don't know how long ago this picture was last seen, but maybe it's been passed down to children or grandchildren who might not even know who he is. For now, I'll keep looking.



Elmer Billings was born and died in Alleghany Co, NC. In 1920 he was living in Dublin, MD. From about 1921 until 1932 he lived in Coatesville, PA.