

Dr. Edwin L. Detwiler: A Fascinating Life and Tragic Death

By Barbara Glakas

Dr. Edwin Landis Detwiler (1860-1916) was a prominent Herndon resident and doctor, who had a fascinating life and a tragic death.

According to the book, "Fairfax County Medical Society, 1884-1934: Early years and early leaders," by Peter R. Henriques, the Detwiler family was a poor farming family from Pennsylvania. They moved to the Union Mills area of Fairfax County in 1859, where Edwin was born in 1860. During the Civil War the family moved to Alexandria. Near the end of the Civil War, they moved to Chantilly. Then in 1874 they moved to Willard, a community that was near the present-day location of Dulles Airport.

Edwin was fascinated by medicine. He got an apprenticeship with a local doctor and then entered Jefferson Medical College in Pennsylvania, graduating in 1886. According to Herndon land records, Detwiler started buying land in downtown Herndon that same year. By 1887 he permanently moved to Herndon and started practicing medicine there.

Detwiler married his first wife, Elvira Lawrence, in Pennsylvania in 1892. They went on to have five children. It is believed their first home was located on Monroe Street. His medical office was located at 711 Pine Street, a building which still stands today and is currently occupied by Brush Strokes Hair Salon and Boutique. He was one of the earliest doctors to have an office outside of his home. By 1911 he built an impressively large home at 800 Third Street, which was called "The Summit." All the while, he continued to practice medicine out of his Pine Street office. Much later, The Summit became the Herndon-Reston Medical Clinic and is now a professional building.

Henriques described Detwiler to be "typical of the self-made man." He went on to describe Detwiler's complicated personality, saying,

"Surviving grandchildren remember him as a man with a fine sense of humor, a ringing laugh and a pleasant personality. Undoubtedly, this was true, especially among friends and family. Yet, at least three elderly Fairfax residents who knew Dr. Detwiler personally remember him as headstrong and someone with whom you disagreed at your peril. One recalled, 'It was known all over the county that Dr. Detwiler had a reputation for being mean as hell.' Physically strong and sure of himself, Dr. Detwiler had a kind of personality which was bound to make enemies, while at the same time he had such manifest ability and did so much good that he was bound to have even more admirers."

In addition to being a physician, Detwiler was a prominent civic leader and businessman, becoming a very successful and wealthy doctor. Early on he became a member of the Fairfax County Medical Society, publishing medical papers. He was one of the organizers of the first telephone company in Herndon. Uniquely, Detwiler had a telephone installed on the front porch of his Pine Street office so patients who could not find him at his office could pick up the phone on his porch and ring up to his home on Third Street. In the early 1900s he was also instrumental in starting the Herndon Gas Company, which provided the town's first acetylene gas house for Herndon's first downtown street lights. In 1909 he served as a Master Mason with Herndon's Masonic Lodge.

Detwiler was also the first Herndon resident to own an automobile. He served both on Herndon's Town Council and School Board. At Herndon's St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, he was elected a vestryman, and also served as a senior warden and registrar. Church records indicate that Detwiler was baptized at St. Timothy's in 1887, the year he moved to Herndon, and was an "outstanding member" of the church. A brass alter cross was later given to the church by the Detwiler family in his memory.

In 1910 Detwiler was appointed as Fairfax County's Coroner. This was a lucrative position for Detwiler. Henriquez noted that Detwiler charged outrageously high fees. For example, while his successor, Dr. William I. Robey Jr., charged \$5.00 for an autopsy, Detwiler charged \$25.00.

Detwiler's first wife, Elvira, died in 1911. The following year he remarried a woman named Imogen Moore (born c. 1883).

A precursor to Detwiler's untimely death came about when Detwiler met up with members of the Roeser family. A widow in her 70s, Mrs. Chloe Roeser and her son, Carl Roeser, lived alone on a small farm in the Herndon area, in the vicinity of what is now the north end of Stuart Road. A court had found Chloe to be "non compos mentis," or "insane," and unable to take care of herself. Unfortunately, according to Henriques, Carl was not much better off, describing him as suffering with "severe mental instability and extreme hyperactivity... known for his stubborn nature and irascible temper which often flared up."

In 1912 Carl shot his mother in the arm for picking berries that he wanted to use to make wine. Carl was brought before the Lunacy Commission, on which Detwiler served. Carl was found to be insane and was sent to the state asylum in Staunton, Virginia. But after testimony from his mother and another doctor, Carl was ultimately released. After being released, he threatened the lives of those who served on the Lunacy Commission.

Fast forward to 1916. There were many stories about how Mrs. Roeser had been living in very "privative and filthy conditions," and had reportedly been in ill health for a while. According to Henriques, Mrs. Roeser,

"...used the corner of her room to defecate and urinate, and Carl would throw smoke ashes over it in an effort to at least partially control the odor. The neighbors wanted Dr. Detwiler to investigate and minister to the poor soul if necessary."

Detwiler indicated that he had no authority to make the house call. However, George Harrison, a prominent Herndon resident and member of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, told Detwiler that he would authorize the visit and the county would pay for the house call.

Detwiler made the house call on February 29, 1916. Unwisely, he made the call alone. As far as Henriques can determine, Detwiler and Carl Roeser got into a serious argument, with Detwiler berating Roeser for allowing his mother to live in such filthy conditions. One *Warrenton Times* newspaper reported that Detwiler said the mother would have to go to the hospital and at one point in the conversation had told Carl to "shut up." Roeser left the room, got his double barrel shotgun, and fired one shot at Detwiler, which hit Detwiler's femoral artery in his leg, resulting in Detwiler's quick death at the age of 56.

According to a newspaper obituary,

“According to Sheriff Allison, of Fairfax County, who investigated the shooting, Dr. Detwiler was called to the Rosier farmhouse Tuesday morning about 10 o’clock to attend Mrs. Rosier, the aged mother of the accused. Dr. Detwiler recommended that the patient be sent to a hospital, and in a conversation which followed, Rosier objected to the manner in which the doctor addressed his mother. Before the doctor left the house, Rosier went upstairs and returned with a shot gun which he pointed at Dr. Detwiler and fired.”

Henriques said that Carl immediately went for help, later explaining in a statement that he “might save his miserable life.” By the time Dr. William I. Robey Jr. arrived, Detwiler was beyond help. Roeser was taken into custody peacefully, with his hands up, emphasizing that he shot Detwiler in self-defense.

Word of Detwiler’s death spread quickly. A large crowd formed by the Herndon railroad station and there was talk of lynching Roeser. Roeser was taken by train to Fairfax. He never stood trial but a lunacy commission found him to be insane and Roeser was sent to the Asylum for the Criminally Insane in Marion, Virginia.

Roeser did not go to the asylum voluntarily and never accepted the argument that he intended to kill Detwiler. A few months later, Roeser wrote a letter to his half-brother, urging him to take care of their mother and blaming his troubles on Supervisor George Harrison. Roeser wrote,

“It was that same Harrison who sent that Ruffian Fool of Doctor to our home to take my poor mother away from her home against her will. They are all set of degraded people who are so low that they do not have to stoop to the foulest crime. I am proud that I helped my mother, and I am glad that Carl Roeser [written in 3rd person] prevented that crazy Detwiler from taking the poor invalid from her home. I would be ashamed to refuse a poor sick person my protection, and were such a person a stranger to me.”

Detwiler was buried in Herndon’s Chestnut Grove Cemetery by his first wife, Elvira. Roeser spent 42 years in the state hospital and was released in 1958.

Henriques concluded:

“Thus ends a sad but revealing story, a tragedy that should have been avoided and could have been avoided. The personalities of these two men helped draw them to their fateful encounter. Certainly, Carl was sick, and his actions were absolutely reprehensible, and indefensible. Still, common sense would indicate such a person should not be provoked. Dr. Detwiler displayed foolhardy courage rather than good judgement. It led to his untimely death and the Fairfax community lost one of its most capable physicians and productive citizens.”