

Alma Bartles: 'A Woman's Sad History'

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

"A Woman's Sad History" was the headline in the March 24, 1885, Carthage (New York) Republican.

The article detailed "the troubles of a poor unfortunate woman who ... died after years of suffering and neglect." A similar story, "A Dead Woman's Wrongs," had appeared in the New York Herald one week earlier.

The sad story was about Alma Bartles, a woman who lived on Millionaires' Row during the lumber era. It is a story we might not have known about except for an inquiry to the Lycoming County Genealogical Society by Dr. Patricia Cline Cohen, professor of history at the University of California Santa Barbara.

Cohen requested and

received the 1883 divorce papers of Alma and Joseph Bartles. The reason for the divorce became a scandal called the biggest source of gossip in Philadelphia in decades. It involved illness, sex, betrayal, power and a woman's descent into madness.

Born in 1845 in New York City, Alma Cecelia Shew was the daughter of Dr. Joel Shew and Marie Louise Barney. Both were medical practitioners, authors of the treatise Hydrotherapy: or, the Water Cure (1851). Alma was born in the family bathtub.

Alma's parents divorced when she was 5. Her mother's second husband

was physician Roland S. Houghton. Among the friends of the family, was the Rev. John Henry Hopkins, author of "We Three Kings of Orient Are." He became the rector of Christ Episcopal Church on East Third Street, serving at the same time that Alma and her husband, Joseph, were living in Williamsport.

Alma's mother had nursed Virginia, the wife of Edgar Allan Poe, in her final illness — Poe, too, remained a close friend.

Much of what we know about Alma comes from Shew family genealogist Pete Shew, who has posted some of his research on the Internet (www.God

freyShew.com).

Alma studied at a female seminary in upstate New York and also in New York City. On May 14, 1868, at age 23, she married Joseph Bartles at the Brooklyn home of her cousin Lucy Sinclaire. Joseph had grown up in Flemington, New Jersey, in a wealthy family. He and Alma moved to Williamsport, where his brother Charles and Charles's wife, Mary Bell, already lived.

Alma and Joseph's home, Stonehurst, at 299 W. Fourth St., is a Greek revival brownstone with Italianate details, built the year they married. I have always found its

exterior gloomy and forbidding. Charles and Mary Bartles lived next door. Joseph was the owner of Bartles Glue and Soap Plant; Charles was a lawyer.

Alma herself was said to be a popular personage on Millionaires' Row. The New York Herald reported that her beauty was "a popular craze." Alma and Joseph had three children: Charles, Elizabeth, and Lucy. After Lucy's birth, Alma's life seemed to disintegrate.

According to the Herald, Alma became seriously ill and sought medical treatment in Philadelphia from the

(See ALMA, Page E-3)

Alma Bartles: 'A Woman's Sad History'

(From Page E-1)

city's best physician. When she came back to Williamsport — presumably cured — she gave birth to a fourth child, Stephen.

But she must have still been ill because, according to the Herald, "One evening when a number of her neighbors had called at her house and were seated in her parlor, she suddenly sprang to her feet and said impulsively, 'My Philadelphia physician is the father of my last child.' Everybody present saw that the poor woman was hysterical and they put her to bed, not believing a word of what they heard."

Joseph Bartles, however, apparently believed it, because he filed for divorce, citing that his wife had been "unfaithful to her marital vows."

Her Williamsport physician, Edward Lyon, testified that Alma had acknowledged to him that she had had "illicit intercourse." Both men were asked the identity of the man involved, and each said that he "preferred not to say unless the court would compel me."

The court did not do so and no question was asked about whether the "illicit intercourse" was voluntary. When the divorce was granted in October 1883, Joseph took the oldest three children and moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. That same year, he married Mabel True, a singer from Washington, D.C.

Alma was left on her own with her son Stephen. Her mother, father and stepfather had all died. I wonder if she had any friends to help her: Did she seek out Rev. Hopkins?

After spending some time with cousin Lucy Sinclaire,



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in a photo from the collection of Joel Shew, taken in 1928, is Stephen Sinclaire in Paris, France.

Alma and 2-year-old Stephen moved to Philadelphia.

Either Alma, the injured husband, or cousin Lucy must have sought "justice," because a man, never identified by name in the newspapers, was reported to have made a settlement of \$25,000 (the equivalent of about \$600,000 today) on Stephen and \$5,000 on Alma "to buy the silence of her tongue."

Speculation as to the identity of the father has focused on Dr. William Pepper, a physician from a wealthy and socially prominent family who later became provost of the University of Pennsylvania. A recently discovered entry in the diary of eminent Philadelphia banker Cornelius N. Weygandt, held in the University of Pennsylvania Archives, also



PHOTO PROVIDED

In this photo, courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society, is Stonehurst, the home of Alma and Joseph Bartles, 299 W. Fourth St.

points to Dr. Pepper. Weygandt's diary entry for June 7, 1886, reads:

"In talking of Dr. Pepper today, our chief (Joseph Patterson) told me that it is generally believed that the Doctor was obliged to pay the woman with whom he was said to have been criminally intimate \$25,000; and J.P. thinks that Pepper got off easily, as he no doubt, was guilty. Had the case gone to trial Pepper would, as a result of conviction, have probably lost his place as Provost of the University, and the larger part of his medical practice; to say nothing of the social consequences. He looks like a sneak!"

Despite her settlement, Alma did not do well. According to newspaper stories, "Alma was living in seclusion in West Philadelphia, where she

became known as the 'veiled woman' and lived on her income of \$15 a week from the trust company and making flowers." Meanwhile Dr. Pepper continued to summer at his family "cottage" in Newport, Rhode Island.

Alma died on Feb. 25, 1885, in Philadelphia. She was 39; the cause of death was albuminuria, a kidney disease. She died alone except for her son ("a pretty little fellow who cried bitterly"), her cousin and her maid. Alma is buried in Jefferson County, New York, next to her Shew grandparents.

Although Joseph and Mabel separated in 1887, the Bartles family seem to have gone on to lead successful lives "out west," where Joseph was involved in the oil industry. The oldest three Bartles children married and prospered, and Joseph

married a third time later in life. Stephen was raised by Lucy Sinclaire and her husband. He lived well on his trust fund, traveling all over the world despite never seeming to have a job. Sometimes he used the name Stephen Bartles and other times Stephen Sinclaire. He was 73 when he died in 1954.

As for me, I will never look at Stonehurst the same way — and wish I could have been a fly on the wall when Alma made the announcement that changed her world.

Sieminski is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection.

Her column is published the second Sunday of each month and she can be reached at lcwhcmanager@gmail.com.