Genealogy Moment – Ernest Victor Clark

The story of a boy who started out in life wanting to see things fly.

Digging deeper into my maternal grandmother's story I couldn't help but find many newspaper articles about her biological parents. Looking at many of the newspapers back in the early 1900's that isn't really a good thing. If you were in the paper frequently that most likely meant you played in sports, were a celebrity of some kind, or in the case of my great-grandfather in trouble with the law.

I never met him personally – he died 2 years before I was born. My grandmother didn't really talk about him at all – and I knew she was adopted – other than to tell me he was less than "stellar" of an individual. She spoke a little more highly of her birth mother – Violet than of her father Ernest. I'm not sure how much she knew about her father's past – other than what her adopted father may have told her, or what she found out on her own. Anyhow, here is what I could find that is public knowledge, and I'll fill in some of the blanks and make some assumptions as well.

Ernest Victor Clark was born on January 30th 1899 son of David Clark and Etta May Kelley of Huntingonville (Watertown), NY. His father ran an ice delivery company. For most youth of the early 1900's life was much harder than today, but apparently one of his friends and him decided they were bored one day and ventured out to see what they could do to alleviate that boredom.

So, this is the first time that I could find that any mention of young Ernest in the news, and it's a doozy. The headline in the January 18th, 1913, Utica Herald-Dispatch read – *"Boys Wanted to See Things Fly". The article went on to say: "Lads charged with attempted train wrecking at Watertown said to have admitted guilt. (Special to the Herald-Dispatch). Ernest Clark and John Dressar, two 13-year-old boys living where attempts were made to wreck trains on the New York Central Railroad as related in an earlier dispatch, were arrested this morning and have confirmed they wanted "to see things fly."*

Obviously, they were caught, the trains did not fly but this was the first of many "infractions" young Ernest would commit over time. Although this could have ended badly for the boys trying to wreck a locomotive, a minor fine was most likely the extent of their punishment with the law. No one knows what their parents did, however.

In his obituary it listed that Ernest was married twice. Once to my great-grandmother Violet Hawley in 1919, that their divorce was finalized in 1927, and the 2nd time to Bertha Kendrew in 1925 (yes, 1925), which ended when he passed in 1960. Another reference says they

were married in 1927, but his obituary lists his marriage to Bertha in 1925. However, the May 27, 1927 Watertown Daily Standard shows the divorce petition (not yet executed) between Violet and Ernest.

However, it gets more interesting for young Ernest, as an article from the February 3rd 1917 Watertown Daily Times lists a case of Grace M. Clark by guardian against Ernest V. Clark. Judge Emerson granted an interlocutory decree of annulment. *"The parties were married in the city last year and lived together about three months, separating in August. Fred Sprague of this city, father and guardian of the plaintiff, who resides with him, testified that she was but of 15 years of age when married. The plaintiff testified that her husband was serving a term in the Onondaga County Penitentiary. There was no defense."*

Eventually the marriage was annulled by the Judge in June of 1918.

It seems that young Ernest was married around the age of 18 or so to a minor and the marriage was annulled. It is unknown as to why he was in prison at this time, unless it was related to the Train incident. However, since he was a juvenile at that time, it's unlikely that would have been the punishment.

In June of 2018 young Ernest enlisted in the Army. He was discharged in December of that year – due to the end of World War I – however it's unclear if that was the real reason or not. Perhaps the enlistment was to avoid more prison time (or in lieu of?) No one knows other than young Ernest.

Things start to get interesting from this point forward from what I can find. In July of 2019 there is a marriage announcement in the Watertown Daily Times that he and Violet Hawley are married by the Rev. Thomas Husk of Hope Presbyterian Church.

In 1920 their son, also named Ernest is born. Things must have been tight for the Clark family then as an article from the May 3rd, 1920, Watertown Daily Times states: *"SENTENCE DEFERRED – Ernest Clark, Aged 21, Pleads Guilty to Larceny. Ernest Clark 21, of this city, indicted for petit larceny, second offense for stealing a blanket April 1 belonging to George Lane changed his plea from not guilty to guilty Wednesday afternoon before Justice William Ross just before the adjournment of this trial term of supreme court without date. District Attorney Cooper favored placing the young man on probation instead of sending him to prison for years. Attorney Ray W. Merrill, who appeared for him, also took this attitude and Justice Ross deferred sentence during good behavior, directing Clark to report to Probation Office E. B. Nichols. In 1917 Clark stole two dresses from the express company, their value being about $30. He was sentenced to the Monroe county penitentiary at that time."*

So far, two rounds of prison and he was barely 21. On June 17th, 1921 their 2nd child Shirley was born. It's at this point in his life that things really go south, especially for my grandmother and her mother.

In the October 16th, 1922, edition of the Watertown Daily Times is this article: "GOES TO MONTREAL TO SEEK DAUGHTER, Roy Dailey, Carthage, Will Stop at all Villages in Effort to get Clue. Vivian Daily, 15-year-old daughter of Roy Dailey, lunch cart proprietor of Carthage, who disappeared from her home last Tuesday night is still missing, despite thorough search made of the county and Northern New York by her father during the past several days. This afternoon the father left by automobile for Ogdensburg, Potsdam and Morristown. He expects to go as far as Montreal. He will stop at villages and towns on the journey. Before leaving he made a plea through the columns of the Times for the girl to return home for her absence is causing him much worry he said. Everything will be alright if Vivian comes home he promised. He has also offered a substantial reward for any information leading to finding the girl. While the father is trying to find his daughter, the police are seeking Ernest V. Clark, aged 23 years of 508 Burchard Street an intimate friend of the girl. There is a warrant for his arrest charging for the abandonment of his two children. The father of the girl says he has information leading him to believe that his daughter left with Clark. Both disappeared the same night. On Sunday he received information that the girl was seen in an automobile at Richville but upon investigation failed to find any trace of her."

But as they say, "wait there is more."

In the Oct 20th edition of the Watertown Daily Times there is another article: "ELOPERS FOUND IN ROCHESTER, Ernest Clark 23 held there for abandoning wife, Carthage Girl Detained, Watertown Man 23, and Vivian Dailey disappeared Oct. 10 are located – will be brought here.

Rochester Oct. 20. Leaving his young wife and two children in Watertown, Ernest V. Clark, 23, a chauffeur of that city, with Miss Vivian Dailey 15, of Carthage eloped to Rochester on Oct. 10 and have been living there as man and wife at 7 Lasalle street since that time. Abrupt ending came to the affair this morning when Detectives Norman and Rupert went to the Lasalle Street house with the girl's father and arrested Clark on the charge of disorderly conduct, also taking the girl into custody. She is being detained at the shelter. A more serious charge is likely to be made against her. All the wrath that the indignant father could muster poured out in vitriolic language by Roy Dailey, the father, when he caught sight of the man who had betrayed his daughter.

Please let me get my hands on him he pleaded after he tried to strike Clark, but the detectives restrained him and told him he must allow the law to take its course in this case.

Taken to police headquarters there was another scene when Clark kissed the girl before parting from her. I am entirely to blame said Clark – the girl is not to blame at all. I met her at a dance at Watertown and told her that I was single and asked her to come to Rochester with me. We had only been acquainted but a little time. It was a case of love at first sight and we would have been married later.

The father said that he had never met Clark before, but he learned that he met his daughter at a dance on Oct. 10 and withing an hour after their introduction he asker her to elope with him. The girl took only the clothing she had with her for she was visiting friends in Watertown. Her father conducts a restaurant at Carthage. Miss Dailey wrote to a girl friend at Carthage and said that she was living in Rochester now. She gave her street address.

Detective Sergeant Walter G. Barnet communicated with the chief of the Watertown police and he said that disorderly conduct warrant had already been issued and it was expected that another one would result. Mrs. Clark had been given no intimation as what had happened to her husband but she had reported him missing not thinking that he had eloped. When Clark and the girl went to Lasalle street house he said they were married, but stated they had lost their baggage while on a wedding trip and this accounted for the fact that they had but little luggage with them.

An office of the Watertown Police force will go to Rochester on Saturday morning to bring Clark back to this city. Chief of Police E.J. Singleton said this afternoon Clark will be arraigned in police court on Monday Morning. Just what charge will be preferred against Clark is not yet known. There is a warrant at the present for his arrest sworn out by his wife charging him with being a disorderly person for failing to provide for her support. This warrant may be withdrawn, however, and the wife may swear out one charging her husband with the abandonment of his two children, Ernest Jr, aged two years and Shirley aged one year.

There is a possibility, however, that Clark will be forced to face a new warrant charging him with the abduction of the 15-year-old bobbed haired Carthage High School girl. Whether such a warrant will be issued rests entirely with the father of the girl, Roy Dailey, a lunch cart proprietor of Carthage. Dailey may seek such a warrant, it is said today, as he is anxious to make Clark suffer for the alleged wrong that he has done to his daughter.

This is not the first time that Clark has been arrested, according to police records. Several months ago the chauffeur, who lives at 508 Burchard street left his wife and family and this led to his arrest. He was placed on probation following his arraignment before City Judge John Mcconnell at that time. The Clark couple were married in this city on July 7, 1919. The

wife declared when she obtained the recent warrant for her husband that she would not go back to live with him.

The finding of Clark and the Carthage girl brings to an end a long and tiresome search that has been conducted by the father for the past ten days. He has motored to almost every town and village in the county and his hunt took him to many places in northern New York."

I couldn't resist a chuckle at the line in this article: "*All the wrath that the indignant father could muster poured out in vitriolic language".* All I could think of was the father in the 'Christmas Story' when his major award was damaged beyond repair.

At this point it seems it can't get much worse for young Ernest, however maybe he is partially left off the hook by this October 23rd 1922 article in the Watertown Daily Times.

"DECLARES CLARK IS NOT TO BLAME, Vivian Daily, Child Eloper, Tells Story. Carthage Girl Back Home. Claims that she left home because of her Step-Mother – Still likes Watertown Man.

(Special to the Times)

Carthage, Oct. 23 – Vivian Daily, 15-year-old daughter of Roy Dailey of this village, who eloped to Rochester on Oct. 10 with Ernest V. Clark of Watertown, aged 23 years, a married man with two children, arrived home last night in charge of her father. Clark is in the county jail in Watertown, held for the grand jury on a charge of abandonment. "I met Clark at a dance in Watertown three weeks ago," said Vivian this morning. "I had never met him before. I immediately fell in love with him after being introduced by a lady friend. Yes, I knew that he was married, because I was introduced to his wife. "Why did I run away?" Because I wanted to get away from my step-mother and because I was too closely watched at home. I didn't care with whom I went. I simply wanted to get away. I couldn't get out with my friends in Carthage and I wanted excitement.

"Clark and I made arrangements that night to leave. He said he was going away in about a week and asked me to go with him. He did not force me to go, however, We did not set a date to got but it was understood that it would be within a week and that he would call for me that night.

"He arrived in Carthage on Tuesday night Oct. 10 and came to father's lunch room about 2. He sad down and I made an excuse to father about going next door to take a chance on a punch board. After I got out Clark followed and we left right away in his car. We remained to Herrings for four or five hours and then went to Watertown, going from there to Oswego where we remained the night. From there we went to Rochester."

"In Rochester we secured a room in Lasalle street on the second floor of a house owned by an Italian. He occupied the downstairs part. I was perfectly happy and had much rather remain there."

"Why did I call my step-aunt and tell her were we where? I knew sooner or later father would find out any way and that I might as well tell our whereabouts."

"Clark said nothing about marrying me. I knew we couldn't get married because Clark already had a wife. Nothing was even said about divorce. I ran away to get away from my step-mother. If some other man had offered I would have gone just the same. Clark said that he was going to make good money in Rochester and after he got enough together he would send me back."

"I liked Clark when I first met him, I am not sure that I like him quite as well now, but I do like him. It is not true that father told the detectives to put the handcuffs on me after they had found Clark and me in a room in the house together. I had my choice of going to a shelter or to my step-aunt's and I chose the shelter house. Father got me Saturday afternoon."

The girl will probably remain there for a time and then be taken to Potsdam to live with her aunt with whom she has previously made her home. Dailey left for Watertown this afternoon. He declared that if Clark's wife drops her charges against her husband, he will have a warrant sworn out for the man's arrest. Detectives had to restrain him from harming Clark in Rochester."

Now it is worth noting that both stories don't line up. The first article after they were originally caught young Ernest said he was to blame, while in her story to the press she was to blame and not Ernest. Somewhere in the middle I'm sure the true story is to be found, but all of the parties have long since passed so there isn't any way to find out for sure. It seems to me that this was more planned than presented. I find it hard to believe that after an hour at a dance (why was he at a dance in the first place – especially one with teenagers?), he was going to leave behind his job and family and run off with a 15-year-old minor to a city he had no friends or relatives? And getting around Northern NY in 1922 was not as easy as it is today either. Seems really suspect to me at least.

Now were his problems over? I could not find out what punishment he was given for this infraction – I would surmise that in today's world it most likely would have been much stricter. But it wasn't long and he was out and about causing trouble once again.

As I wrote in the mini-biography of my grandmother Shirley, her mother tried to get her back in 1924. This was a year after her older brother Ernest Jr. passed away. Ernest wasn't mentioned anywhere in that story, so he had obviously moved on with his life leaving Violet to fend for herself.

Their divorce would be final in 1927, and depending on which document you believe he married his second wife Bertha Kendrew either in 1925 (illegally) or in 1927 on December 3rd. One article also stated they were married in 1928 – and the parents of Bertha made this statement in the wedding announcement – *"Miss Bertha Kendrew and Ernest Clark were married at Kingston, Ont. Dec 3 according to announcement made this morning by Miss Kendrew's mother, Mrs. George Kendrew. The announcement of marriage comes as a surprise to the friends of the young couple. It was known that Mr. Clark and Miss Kendrew were to be married but it was not expected that the ceremony was to be solemnized until after Christmas."* The article goes on about where they live and went to school and that they would be living with the brides parents on Bradley Street.

I haven't been able to conclusively confirm their marriage date, however a son and daughter were listed as being born before they were married (if the marriage year of 1927 is indeed the true date). Her obituary lists December 3rd, 1925 as her marriage to Ernest, not 1927 as what her parents stated – and the location is different in her obituary as well. Her obituary states Brockville Ontario, while her parents announcement was in Kingston.

If they were indeed married in 1925 and not 1927 as her parents stated, then you can add bigamy to Ernest's list of transgressions.

Reading between the lines I am going with 1925 as the actual date. Given that divorce and living together out of wedlock (let alone having two children) was verboten in that day and age her parents probably didn't want that negative news any more than it already was. I am sure his reputation must have been well known at the time.

So, would a 2nd (actually 3rd marriage) and two children calm young Ernest down? I think not.

In a July 13th, 1927 article of the Watertown Daily Times as the following article:

"PRISONER FLEES FROM WORK GANG, Takes to Heels at Fairgrounds and Escapes. Norman Clark, 23 AT LIBERTY.

Youth arrested for Assault in Clayton eludes Deputy Sheriff while working at Fair Grounds thought to have headed for Canada.

Norman Clark, 23, Huntingtonville who has been confined to the Jefferson county jail for the past two days, escaped this morning at 11:10 from a gang of prisoners who were working at the fair grounds.

Clark was put to work for the first time this morning Deputy Sheriff William D. Edghill took a gang of prisoners from the jail at 7:30 this morning to the fair grounds to lay a water pipe line. The pipe line is to be connected to the new horse barn across from the grandstand

near the race track and it was in this vicinity that Clark escaped. Deputy Sheriff Edghill was busy instructing the men in laying the pipe when Clark escaped.

The county officials were unable to learn in what direction Clark ran. There were ten prisoners in the gang and they all refused to talk. One of the prisoners declared that he saw him running, but he would not tell in what direction.

Clark was arrested Monday in Public Square by Chief of Police Arnold Knight of Clayton on a warrant charging him with assault in the third degree. The assault was committed on a young man in Clayton Saturday night when he was returning from a dance. Fred Lahey was also arrested and the police are looking for Ernest Clark, a brother of Norman who assisted in the assault it is charged."

The article goes on to say how much his bond is, how tall and what his build was and what he was wearing. It's not surprising that young Ernest was involved as well given his prior track record. I couldn't find any follow up what became of this charge and whether he was ultimately punished for it.

But, wait! There's more!

According to the December 5th 1926 Watertown Daily Times young Ernest and a co-hort were accused yet again for a crime – this time theft of alcohol.

"LOCAL MEN GET FINES OF $100"

(Special to the Times)

Utica, Dec. 5 – William T. Byrnes 36, truckman of 423 Arsenal street, Watertown and Ernest V. Clark, 27, truck driver, also of Watertown were fined $100 each in district court here yesterday by Judge F. H. Bryant for possessing and transporting beer in Watertown. They were represented by Attorney E. H. Bennett.

Byrnes and Clark were arrested in Watertown on Oct. 14, 1926 by federal agents after Byrne's truck was found to contain barrels of beer alleged to have been removed from the Watertown Consumers Brewing company, Poplar Street, Watertown. The two had a hearing and were held for federal court under bail. The truck and beer were seized at the time.

Prohibition was still in effect in 1926. In fact it wouldn't be terminated until 1933 when the 21st amendment to the Constitution went into effect. I guess that given his past, being a bootlegger would go on his extensive resume. Also note that a $100 fine then would be almost a $2,000 fine today. No small fee.

I did find another article that referenced Mr. Byrnes (the truckman in their bootlegging operation) to say that he was involved in an accident between his truck and a trolley on Court Street. The driver? You guessed it – young Ernest.

What is surprising is that after 1927/1928 there is extraordinarily little mention of any other crimes or articles for young Ernest. I have many theories, but none of them provable at this point. Did Bertha finally tame him? Did he finally smarten up and realize petty crimes just did not pay? Did he finally mature and realize he had responsibilities to his wife and family and keep his nose clean? All good theories. I am going with Bertha must have finally been the one able to control young Ernest. I am hoping he had an eventual epiphany and went on the straight and narrow the rest of his life.

According to his obituary he died from complications of surgery of multiple ulcers and a lung ailment in a Syracuse hospital on July 10th, 1960. He was only 61. His hard life finally catching up with him. After his death Bertha moved out of the area and died in 1971. Some of her family still lives in the area.

His obituary:

Ernest Clark, Aged 61, dies.

Ernest V. Clark, 61, of Adams, R.D. 1, a native of Watertown and a resident of this city until moving to Adams one year ago, died Sunday afternoon in the Syracuse Veteran's Adminstration hospital where he had been transferred from Mercy hospital here Sunday morning.

Mr. Clark had undergone surgery for stomach ulcers in the local hospital Thursday after being admitted July 5. He was recuperating here when it was discovered he also suffered a lung ailment. He was removed to the Syracuse hospital for chest surgery. He died shortly after 5 p.m. An autopsy was scheduled in Syracuse today.

The body will be brought here to the Cummings funeral home where friends may call Tuesday from 3 to 5 or 7 to 9 p.m. The funeral will be Wednesday at 2 p.m. at the funeral home. Burial will be in North Watertown cemetery.

He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Bertha Kendrew Clark; one son, John N. Clark of Holcomb; one daughter by his second marriage, Mrs. Raymond F. (Betty) Hollenbeck of Adams Center, R.D. 1 and a daughter by a first marriage, Mrs. Harold A. (Shirley) Simpson, Alexandria Bay; three brothers, George, Adams Center, Norman, Rochester and Roswell, Watertown; three sisters, Mrs. Beatrice Cratsenberg and Mrs. Arthur (Thelma) Files, both of Watertown, and Mrs. Hazel Bechill, Glen Park, and twelve grandchildren.

He was born Jan. 30, 1899, in this city, a son of David and Etta Kelley Clark. He was educated in local schools and later became a self-employed carpenter and mason, occupations which he pursued all his life.

Mr. Clark married twice. His first marriage to Miss Violet Hawley in 1918, ended in divorce. On Dec. 3, 1925, he married Miss Bertha Kendrew of Russell, in Brockville, Ont.

A veteran of Word War I, Mr. Clark served in the army from July 10, 1918, to Dec. 21, 1918 in a calvary unit. He was discharged as a private first class at the end of the war.

It goes without saying that my great-grandfather was a complicated person. As my grandmother said, "less than stellar". I doubt very highly she went to his funeral. I would bet a case of the best bourbon on that fact. Whether or not he became more of a contributing citizen that would have to be answered by his second family. I know that Grandma had lunches often when she came North after she retired with her half-sister Betty Hollenbeck (Ernest and Bertha's daughter). She never shared what they talked about at these lunches – I wish I had thought to ask. Maybe she wanted to learn more about her father, and what he was like after he married Bertha, or they just talked about what was going on in their family. Who knows?

Every family in their family tree probably has a young Ernest of some sort. The problems we face today are in many ways not much different than the ones they had 100 years ago – probably more so due to the complicated world we live in today.