

Carroll Yesteryears
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A Family Tragedy and a Proper Memorial
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Living in the 21st century, we are so lucky to have access to powerful medicines, to hospitals with well-trained doctors, to ambulances, to medevac helicopters carrying medical technicians, and to other sources of help when emergencies arise at home, at work, or on the highways. Not so about a century ago as the following story illustrates.

On July 31, 1902, Edward Trite, the 20-year-old son of Peter Trite who lived about a mile from McKinstry's Mills in western Carroll County, began cleaning out the 60-foot-deep well on his family's property. Knowing poisonous fumes could be present in the well, he wisely first lowered a candle. When it continued burning, he descended in a large bucket which would also hold sediment. After one bucket-load of debris was hauled out, Edward called his helpers on the surface to quickly send the bucket back down as he felt himself being overcome by noxious fumes.

Although able to climb into the bucket, he must have lost consciousness as it was being raised and toppled nearly 25 feet back to the bottom of the well which contained four feet of standing water. Quickly, his 19-year-old twin brothers, Samuel and Joseph, were lowered into the well and succeeded in putting the injured Edward back in the bucket and having him hoisted to the surface. However, by the time the bucket was again lowered, "both brothers were so overcome by the gas that neither was able to get into it. No other help was at hand, and by the time assistance was summoned it was too late."

According to a report in the *American Sentinel*, "news of the accident spread rapidly over the country, and nearly a hundred and fifty persons assembled at the scene. It was some time, however, before anyone would venture to undertake to rescue the brothers in the event of their being alive, or recover their bodies if dead."

Ultimately, a brave soul in the crowd, identified only as "a Mr. Wilson," volunteered for the task and was lowered into the well. He was able to tie ropes around the lifeless bodies of the brothers so they could be brought to the surface and was successfully raised himself, apparently with no ill effects.

Pipe Creek Church of the Brethren Cemetery near Uniontown is the site of a monument which the Trites erected to their dead sons. It reads, "Joseph & Samuel, Children of Peter & Margaret Ann Trite, Born December 2, 1882, Died July 31, 1902, Aged 19 years, 7 months and 29 days. Lost their lives in the well. At rest." The Trite family had 13 children, but the loss in one day of two healthy, hearty sons, and the injury to a third son, brought deep sympathy from everyone in the surrounding area.

A physician who examined Edward Trite believed the gas he inhaled would not be fatal, but at the time the accident was reported in the newspaper, no one knew whether the young man would recover from the injuries he suffered as he fell out of the bucket and back down the well.

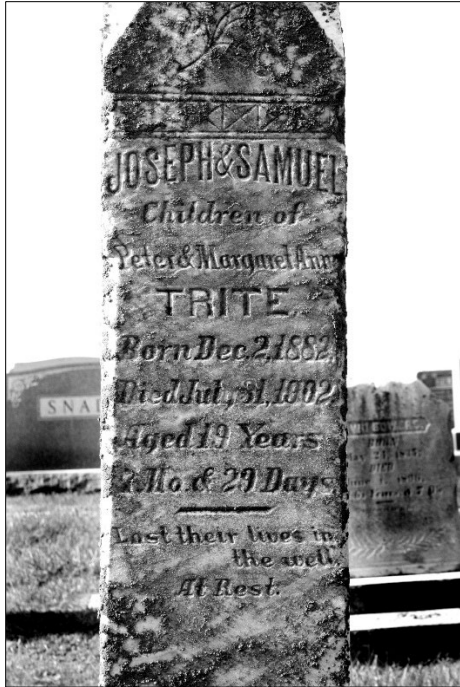
No death certificate appeared when searching for Edward's name at the Maryland State Archives during the years immediately after the well incident. What became of him?

About 1905 he married Ida Belle Ward, a young woman he may have met in Hagerstown, and by 1910 they were living near New Windsor, the parents of three children. Edward found work with one of the area's largest employers, the Western Maryland Railroad yard in Union Bridge. Soon a fourth child arrived and Ida was pregnant with a fifth in February 1917 when the family moved into housing available to employees at the Tidewater Portland Cement Company in Union Bridge where Edward was now working on the railroad cars coming and going from the plant.

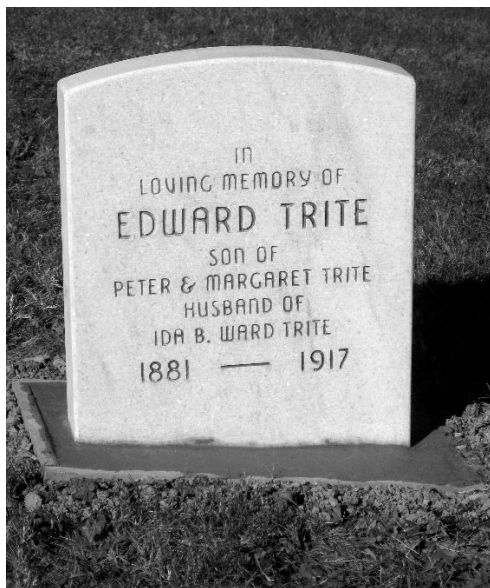
That month, a notice appeared in the *Union Bridge Pilot* that "a very serious accident" had occurred at Tidewater and Edward Trite "was caught between two cars and had his hip crushed." This time luck was not on his side. Although immediately sent to a hospital in Baltimore, he succumbed to his injury in June at Springfield Hospital in Sykesville and was buried at Pipe Creek Cemetery in an unmarked grave because the family had no money to spend on a memorial. Evicted from Tidewater housing, Ida and her four children went to live in Hagerstown where Ida had a sister. Soon another child arrived. Norman, Ida's oldest child, began working as a "winder" in a Hagerstown silk mill at age 13, apparently the only breadwinner for the fatherless family of six.

For the next 97 years, Edward Trite lay buried at Pipe Creek until John Sipes, the son of Edward's sister Grace, decided to locate and mark the grave. He contacted Kent Martin, then plant manager at Lehigh Portland Cement Company in Union Bridge to share Edward's tragic story. Lehigh had purchased the plant from Tidewater in 1925, and Kent recognized an opportunity to right a wrong that occurred long ago, the kind that occurred far too often to employees working in dangerous industries. Lehigh generously absorbed the cost of a memorial to Edward and its installation beside the graves of other Trite family members.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



The gravestone of Joseph and Samuel Trite at Pipe Creek Church of the Brethren Cemetery, erected by their parents, hints at the tragic deaths of the twin brothers in 1902. Submitted photo.



A memorial for Edward Trite at Pipe Creek Church of the Brethren Cemetery donated by Lehigh Portland Cement Company. Trite died as a result of an industrial accident in 1917 while working for Lehigh's predecessor, Tidewater Portland Cement. Submitted photo.