

## FROM WWI TO SMALL TOWN DOC

# MY FATHER'S QUEST FOR SERVICE ABOVE SELF

*Byron E.*

By B. Derek Shaw

In May 2016, as part of a historic village exhibit, a vintage medical office display was unveiled at the Allegheny-Kiski Valley Historical Society Museum in Tarentum, Pa. It showcased an examining table, office chairs, and medical books along with old medicine bottles and supplies. The exhibit also included a country kitchen, saw shop, barbershop, dentist's office, fire department, beauty shop, and clothing store — all designed to give visitors a tangible look at the way people lived in the early part of the 20th century.

The medical items were donated by residents of the region with deep roots—the Shaw family. My family. They belonged to my father, Byron Earl Shaw, a beloved local physician, and had remained nearly untouched for 46 years before we made them available to the museum.

More than mere artifacts, these hard-earned tools from Byron's profession represented a life of passion and personal commitment. He had grown up in rural Western Pennsylvania, learning at an early age that determination, hard work, and service to others were admirable qualities—qualities he himself exhibited throughout his life. Through those with whom he had contact, whether family, friends, classmates, medical associates, patients, or the community at large, he made the world a better place.



Byron in 1922, three years into his career as a doctor General Practitioner and Surgeon.





A display at the Alle-Kiski museum in Tarentum, after it had closed.





**DURING MOST OF HIS  
TIME GROWING UP,  
THE FAMILY LIVED  
ON A FARM NEAR  
HOLLIDAYSBURG ON  
WEST LOOP ROAD  
AT LOG CABIN LANE**

Byron, age 6.





Byron, a World War I veteran, was already 67 by the time I was born. I was the youngest of six children and the only male, part of a “yours, mine, and ours” set of kids. Everyone in the family was significantly older than me. My father was 32 years older than his second wife, my mother. And the next youngest sibling to me (from my mother’s first marriage) was 12 years my senior. By the time I started first grade, she had graduated high school.

I was an only child, of sorts. When I was 14, my father was involved in a car accident that left him bedridden the rest of his life. I knew so little about him; as an adolescent, the background questions that I could have asked never surfaced. It was only recently, decades later, that I endeavored to learn more about the man who brought me into this world: who he was, what he did, and why he did it.

Byron Earl Shaw was born in Puzzletown, Blair County, on October 21, 1888, to Oliver W. and Margaret Jane (Hanna). The family

was of Scotch-Irish descent; the Shaw lineage goes back to the 1100s in the Highlands of Scotland, then coming to America in the 1840s during the Irish Potato Famine. Byron was the oldest of five children, followed by Martha Irene (Haller), Thomas Charles, Verus Paul, and Larue S. (Loudon). During most of his time growing up, the family lived on a farm near Hollidaysburg on West Loop Road at Log Cabin Lane, near Loop Station. The home is still on the site and well preserved.

Byron attended Roaring Spring (now Central) High School in Roaring Spring, Pa. During 1908-1909, he attended Mercersburg Academy, a college preparatory school, in Mercersburg, Franklin County. On the campus of the latter institution, he was a member of the Irving Literacy Society and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). He waited on tables in the dining room to pay for his tuition, as he was attending on a scholarship.

How my father wound up attending

college on the opposite side of the country at the Academy of Idaho (now Idaho State University) is unclear. A later newspaper account provided an explanation in Byron’s own words: “I observed the beautiful new buildings at the Academy and went to look them over. I met a janitor who I remember only as Mr. Ackley. After talking with him I decided that if all the people at the school were only half as friendly, I definitely wanted to attend.” While there, he was president of the YMCA on campus and a cast member in his graduating class play, *Mr. Hicks Goes to Town*. He graduated in 1913, along with 25 other “special” students. A school bulletin lists this designation as “Persons of mature years who, for satisfactory reasons, desire to pursue a special line of study, may be admitted as special students, provided they give evidence of ability to do the work desired.”

Growing up in a large family with limited financial resources, Byron had to pay his own way through college and medical school. To

This watercolor painting of the Shaw family homestead in Hollidaysburg was done by Rev. C.W. Baker, Jr., pastor of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church in Springdale, 1922-1935, where Byron and his family attended.







Byron in his room at the Mercersburg Academy.



Byron served as Western manager of the Bullard Company that specialized in postcards and maps, seen here with samples in his room at the Academy of Idaho.

earn money, he sold maps, postcards, and other printed goods for the Bullard Company of Boston, serving as western manager of the operation. He started his journey toward a career in medicine in 1913 at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, graduating with 139 others in 1917. (Oddly, in the annual dinner program put out by the Alumni Association, my father was listed being from Idaho.) While on the JMC campus, Byron was president of the Graham Pediatric Society, treasurer of the Davis Obstetrical Society, and a member of the Hare Medical Society. He was also in the Phi Beta Pi fraternity, Eta chapter. Byron did his residency at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh (1917-1918), with postgraduate work somewhere in Chicago.

However, Uncle Sam beckoned, and on October 12, 1918, my father began serving in World War I. Byron was commissioned a first lieutenant Medical Corp, Second Army (today's equivalent of a MASH unit), and was stationed in Toul, a town in northeastern France, treating soldiers from both sides of the conflict. In fact, the German prisoners of war he treated were so grateful that, after the war, they sent him two decorative plates and two empty bomb shell casings, all gold-plated and inscribed—known as trench art. My father's time in the military was about helping people, not killing them. He was honorably discharged from Camp Dix, New Jersey, on October 29, 1919.

Immediately after exiting military service, Byron established a medical practice at 927 Pittsburgh Street in Springdale, about 15 miles northeast of Pittsburgh along the Allegheny River. Two years later, in 1921, he purchased 933 Pittsburgh Street, two doors east, which had two separate entrances that allowed him to use the property as both his residence (933) and his office (935). Byron was both a general practitioner (GP) and a surgeon. Before there were specialists, the GP took care of all of his patients' health concerns, from head to toe. My father was on the senior surgical



In 1918, Byron Shaw was stationed in Toul, France, where he served as a medic.







**First location of Byron's practice: 927  
Pittsburgh Street, Springdale.**

staff of Allegheny Valley Hospital in Natrona Heights beginning in June 1925, and Citizen's General Hospital in New Kensington. He also served as the sports medicine doctor for Springdale's junior and senior high school teams for a number of years. In addition, he was the company doctor for West Penn Power Company, taking care of employees, their families, and accident cases at the plant. At age 32, shortly after he began his practice, he had premature white hair that became his permanent look.

Byron held regular business hours in the morning (9-10 a.m.), afternoon (1-2:30 p.m.), and evening (6-8 p.m.) in three rooms of his home that served as his office: waiting room, consultation room, and x-ray room. Early on he had a pharmacy too in a small room within

a corner of the waiting room. My father had no receptionist; he would just stick his head out his door and say "Next!" Later, he scaled back to just afternoon and evening hours so he could make morning rounds at both hospitals. Toward the end of his practice years, he had just one set of hours in the afternoon.

Byron's first wife, Agnes Minnie (Smith), was a nurse he met while a resident physician at Allegheny General Hospital. They married June 15, 1921. He and Agnes had three daughters: Norma, Elleene, and Lois Ann. Agnes passed away in 1948 from complications after surgery.<sup>1</sup>

My father's second wife (my mother) was a patient of his. They both enjoyed each other's company so much that on Valentine's Day 1953 he married Elizabeth Ann "Betty"

Boharch (née Zurisko). They honeymooned at Bedford Springs Resort in Bedford, as he couldn't take much time away from his patients and hospital rounds. Shaw helped raise two stepdaughters, Patricia and Geraldine,<sup>2</sup> and they had a son together—your author, Byron Derek Shaw, in 1955—Byron was 67 and his wife 35.

Dr. Shaw practiced medicine for 51 years, retiring in 1970. At the time of his retirement, office visits cost just \$5, and house calls—made any time, day or night—were only slightly more. My father was never concerned if payment was made; sometimes patients paid in goods such as fruits, vegetables, pies, and desserts. Those who couldn't pay at the time of his services were told to pay what they could, when they could.





Byron with first wife, Agnes.

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Byron with his new 1929 Chevrolet Sport Coupe, purchased that September from Hebeler Automobile Co. in New Kensington. The bill shows it cost \$729.90 but he did get \$375 trade-in for his older Chevy coupe.

If patients neglected to follow his health-directed instructions, Dr. Shaw was known to advise, "Don't waste my time and your money if you are not going to do as I say." (My mother, surely to her consternation, was also given that advice before the two married.) My father would take me on his rounds at Citizen's General Hospital, where associates and others would ask me if he was my grandfather. I would proudly reply, "No, he's my father!" When I was in elementary school, classmates would ask what the "M.D." stood for following his name. "My Dad!" I responded.

The organizational meeting of what became Springdale Post #1437 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) was held in the waiting room of Byron's practice in 1930. Eight men were in attendance, and my father served as





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**MY FATHER  
WAS AN AVID  
FISHERMAN  
AND CAMPER, AND  
BECAME CAMP  
DIRECTOR OF THE  
KEYSTONE FISHING  
CLUB, INC.**

Keystone Camping Club letterhead.

Always the avid fisherman, here's Byron at  
Keystone Camping Club on Boland Lake in  
Ontario, Canada.





surgeon general of the Post for many years. It is now known as the Springdale Veterans Association, as American Legion Post #764 is also a part.

Byron also was a member of the American Medical Association, Allegheny County Medical Society, Pennsylvania Medical Society, and the Pollock Lodge #502 Free and Accepted Masons in Tarentum, as well as a three-year president of St. Mark's Lutheran Church Council in Springdale. He produced, as editor-in-chief, a newsletter for alumni of the Academy of Idaho who graduated around the same time he did. This came about after his first return visit to his alma mater in 1936. In a newspaper account at that time, my father said, "I found only three people I knew. It was disheartening, and I resolved the next time I returned I would know more people." Spending two years tracking down addresses proved fruitful, as the first reunion in 1947 yielded 100 attendees. By the third reunion in 1957, an impressive 175 people attended. Other reunions followed in 1962 and 1967.

My father was an avid fisherman and camper, and became camp director of the Keystone Fishing Club, Inc. In 1934, the club held its 50th anniversary outing at Boland Lake in Ontario, Canada, for 16 days. In 1949, recovering from the loss of his first wife and perhaps tired of traveling to go camping, Byron had a seven-room cabin with a wraparound porch on three sides built on 26 wooded acres he purchased on Jimtown Road in Bakersville, Somerset County. It was less than an hour from home and became his escape on weekends and days off from March through November. He named it Camp Elaganoby, which stood for Elleene, Agnes, Anita, Norma, and Byron. The structure was built by local Native Americans, more than likely from the Delaware tribe.

Grandson Mike Sprankle lamented in a 2000 letter to my mother, "Hearing from you brought back fond memories of a half-century ago, of those splendid summers at camp in the 1950s, of fresh buttermilk and baskets of ripe

Family picture at cabin in Bakersville, 1958, when the author was three.







Byron loved filming and showing 16-mm home movies of the family and the places they visited.

peaches, of grandpa looking for ‘real mountain corn.’ I can still see him sitting at the breakfast table on the rustic, wrap-around porch with the green leaves dappled by the morning sun; I remember him saying, ‘Who could ask for anything more than this?’ I remember how he loved your ‘gooey pies,’ and you.”

Darren Rachman, another grandson, had a fond cabin memory: “I remember him working as an apiarist. He would go out to the bee boxes and work. I would watch him from the screened-in porch which if memory serves

me went around the whole cabin. That was my favorite part of the cabin—the screened-in porch.”

My nephew Darren had a funny recollection: “One of my fondest memories of Grandpa was his perfect method of eating corn on the cob. My brother and I were perplexed as to how he had four perfectly square rows that resembled a rectangle. Unbeknownst to us he was using a knife to get these perfect edges! Mark and I would eat ear after ear of corn to try and achieve this but were unable to have

the same result!”

Byron also loved creating home movies, shooting his family and the places they visited on his 16-mm Eastman Kodak movie camera. The three-minute reels got edited into longer 25-minute-plus reels. These were shown whenever anyone who visited consented to view them, as the evening stretched longer when this proud amateur photographer showed off his latest travel ventures or family antics.

My father wore a coat and tie everywhere





The Shaw siblings at the family homestead in Hollidaysburg. From left: LaRue, Vere, Tom, Irene, Byron, and parents Margaret and Oliver.

he went, even for events that were more casual. Conversely, when he was at the cabin, he wore the most worn-out, tattered clothes while going about his tasks, complete with a Teddy Roosevelt "Rough Rider"-type hat. They were completely opposite wardrobes. Sunday afternoons at the cabin, after church, featured full meals with dessert. On many occasions, the relatives from the Altoona area stopped in for a hot, home-cooked meal, usually toting a peck of fresh-picked corn.

When he was asked about something that wasn't far away, many times he'd reply, "It's only a hop, skip and a jump." "If it's too good to be true, it probably is," was another remark I recall. I remember my father would say in disgust, after a car passed him at a speed way above the limit, "He's in a hurry to go

home and watch TV!" When I was a preteen, he always "got me" when traveling; he would point to a cemetery along the journey and ask, "How many people are dead there?" I would start counting. His response, "They are all dead!"

While he himself was a local celebrity of sorts, my father claimed to have associated with a couple of famous people. First, on a regional level, my father's uncle, Sam Hanna of Turtle Creek, was the father of the wife of Pittsburgh Pirate's legendary second baseman, Bill Mazeroski. In fact, just after the team won the 1960 World Series, "Maz" visited his cabin in Bakersville. (I was only 5, but I remember that day.)

The second is a rumored connection to the aviation pioneers Orville and Wilbur



One of Byron's daughters, likely Anita, sits in his doctors bag in the back yard.





The Shaw Homestead in Hollidaysburg is in an area once referred to as "Loop Station" — the home sits on West Loop Road at Log Cabin Road.





As Byron became more debilitated, he celebrated Christmas 1972 in his bedroom with his son Derek, the author. In the mirror at left is second wife Betty, who took care of him for seven years.

## DR. SHAW PRACTICED MEDICINE FOR 51 YEARS, RETIRING IN 1970.

Wright. How he was related is still a mystery to me., and unfortunately, the last Wright alive, Orville, died seven years before I was born. That connection to my father remains a subject of personal exploration.

On the home front, I can't recall a time when my parents argued. They may have raised their voices on occasion but it was never confrontational. My parents instilled in me two things that I have carried with me since I was a teenager: (1) If you can't afford it, you don't need it. You may want it; however, there's a big difference. (2) When your gasoline tank gets half empty, fill it up because you never know where you might have to go on a moment's notice.

My father's practice ended abruptly in May 1970, when he was involved in a small car accident in the middle of the night while on the way to a house call. As my mother described the incident in an Idaho State University Alumni Bulletin, "Byron had an auto accident the 4th of December. He is confined to the hospital with one broken rib, a concussion, and he

had eight stitches put in between his thumb and index finger. He was quite fortunate. It could have been a sad Christmas for me and Derek. We can really count our blessings." The accident created a downward health spiral, making him an invalid who had to be cared for in our home for the last six-and-a-half years of his life by my mother.

Byron died on October 24, 1976, of a heart attack, congestive heart failure, and complications from diabetes. He was 88. Recently, I looked at the nearly 150 condolence cards my mother saved from that time. While he was short in stature at only five-feet seven-inches, my father was a pillar of his community. He adhered to the Hippocratic Oath 100 percent. Most of all, Dr. Shaw practiced medicine, not the business of medicine; when he passed, more patients owed for past services than he was worth financially.

Byron Earl Shaw is interred in Allegheny County Memorial Park Cemetery in Allison Park with both of his wives. (Elizabeth passed on Christmas Day 2017, just six weeks short

of her 97th birthday.) While I have gained a great deal of knowledge about my father, I am continually unearthing bits and pieces of additional information that all contribute to an ongoing account of his life. This journey has just begun. 🌟

**B. Derek Shaw** is a freelance writer based in York, Pa. Prior to his retirement from full-time employment, he spent a significant portion of his time working for a nonprofit organizations such as Junior Achievement and the American Lung Association, fulfilling a trait of his father's by enriching the lives of others. When he is not writing, Shaw's hobbies include riding roller coasters, cruising in his 1967 Mercury Cougar, and collecting vinyl records.

<sup>1</sup> Norma Marie Sprinkle, May 10, 1922–July 5, 1995 (SHS '40); Elleene Bernice Wright Ortiz, Aug. 23, 1925–June 7, 2002 (SHS '43); and Lois Ann (Anita) Pratt Unger, December 20, 1932–April 5, 2018 (SHS '50). Agnes passed away August 14, 1948.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Boharch Rachman Cunningham, August 10, 1938 (SHS '56), and Geraldine Boharch Yanni, May 19, 1943–September 14, 2012 (SHS '61). Son Byron Derek Shaw was born October 4, 1955 (SHS '73).