

Citizens – William “Bill” Prill

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Bill with his first car in the early years – date unknown

Much of this article was originally written by Helen Panzl, Observer-News Staff writer in 1977. Since then, some additional historical information has been found and added.

While doctors the world over are trying to determine the formula for longevity, Bill Prill of Water Street in Montague walks about town quite unconcerned over the 95 years he has already spent on this earth.

“I guess it was just meant to be,” he observes. I’ve never been blessed with good health, in fact I’ve had just about every ailment they’ve got in the books – tuberculosis, diabetes, arthritis, sinus trouble, a bad rupture – you name it.”

About a year ago he fell backwards down the stairs at the Franklin House and twisted a bone in his neck. Although he was treated by a chiropractor for about two years it never got any better.

“I spent most of my life dodging nursing homes,” he laughs. “They always wanted to put me back in a sanitarium, even sent the police after me, but I kept changing my address so they never quite caught up to me.”

He has also experienced near-calamities which certainly would have ended his life at an early age if that had been his destiny.

While working in Chicago at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant in 1915 he was one of the 7,000 employees scheduled to take part in an excursion to Michigan City on the ill-fated "Eastland", one of the three boats chartered for the trip which made headlines when it turned over in the Chicago River resulting in the death of 1,516 passengers.

But Bill Prill's name was not on the casualty list because he had over-slept that morning and missed the boat.

That alone should have convinced people that he was scheduled for a long life but they kept trying to doctor him and because tests showed he had TB they insisted he stay in a sanitarium in Chicago where he whiled away two years of his life.

He hated it there and sometimes crawled out of his window at night to walk over the frozen river which ran past the place so he could visit his sister in Chicago and see what was going on in the outside world.

"I used to tell the doctors about the canary I had in my apartment. It quit singing when frightened during a bad storm, and I'm like that canary – if I stay here much longer I'll quit singing, too."

After he had regained his strength during his two year convalescence, although he was not yet completely cured, a doctor signed his release so he could go back home to Montague to stay with his father who had been recently widowed. The sanitarium, however, didn't approve of this procedure and insisted that he stay a while longer.

"So I just walked out of that place," he explains. "But I took something of theirs with me – one of the nurses whom I married."

For a while his health was quite stable and he was even drafted into the army during World War I, but was given a 4-F rating.

In time, however, because he had not completed his cure, he had to undergo further treatment, this time entering the sanitarium in North Muskegon where he remained for a year and a half.

Returning to Montague he worked for farmers and later at the painting trade, outside work in the fresh air, and relied upon a variety of prescriptions and pills to keep him healthy.

"I spent a lot of money on medicines," he recalls, "but about a year ago they went up so in price that I decided to quit taking anything and got the surprise of my life when I started to feel better than I ever had before. Since then I've stayed away from doctors and medicine and feel so well that I'm ready for anything now. Might even get me a new girl friend."

William Prill is a well-known figure in Montague as he walks to and from his favorite haunts or sits on his front porch and watches the world go by.

Usually in good spirits, he has many an interesting tale to tell about the early days in Montague when 16 lumber mills dotted the lakeshore and folks made their living working in the mills, supplementing their income by farming.

He has witnessed the rise and decline of the population and now its come-back, all of which was reflected in the number of businesses in downtown Montague.

Born in the year of 1882 in Maple Grove, then called Heald Town, he was one of seven children, four boys and three girls. Three of his brothers are still living.

He attended the little German school on North Hill for three years during which the teacher taught in the German language half of each day and in English the other half.

As most young people in the vicinity did in those days, he went to Chicago when he was 18. He worked in machine shops there for 20 years.

He was married four times, but at present is living alone.

He has no theory or advice to give on how to reach a ripe old age excepting perhaps to behave yourself and live moderately, taking things as they come.

All in all, life still holds much interest for Bill Prill, and he intends to enjoy it while he can.

William Paul Prill was born on 28 March 1882 in an area of Montague sometimes referred to as "Heald Town", due to the mill that was located there, and is now Maple Grove. His parents were Charles "Carl" Prill (1842-1934) and Amelia Herbst (1858-1891). They were married on 15 December 1877 in Muskegon and had eight children, one dying in infancy: Lena (1878-1947), Emma (1880-1934), Eda (1881-1881), William P. (1882-1978), Ida (1886-1958), Charles A. (1888-1982), Theodore F. (1889-1925) and Henry R. (1890-1984).

While working in Chicago, William married Bessie May Bright on 5 September 1907. He was 25 years old at the time and she was 18. By the 1910 census, however, he was listed as divorced and still in Chicago.

On 24 December 1910, he married Bertha Berg in Chicago. Her name appeared on his WW I Draft Registration card as his nearest relative. It was dated 12 September 1918 and indicated he was a stockkeeper for Benjamin Electric Company.

The 1920 census showed he was still living in Chicago, but he was listed as single.

As all three of his sisters lived in Chicago, it's unknown which one he crossed the river to visit, as mentioned in the original article.

On 30 July 1928, he married for the third time to Mabel Westcott in Muskegon. He was 46 years old and she was 35 at the time. The 1930 census showed him as married and living on U.S. 31 in Montague, but no wife's name was among those listed. He was working as a machinist at the Iron Works.

In 1940 he was listed as single once again and working in Government work. His highest level of education was listed as the 6th grade. On his WWII Draft Registration card which he filled out on 27 April 1942, he listed his brother Charles as someone who would always know his address.

By 1950 he was listed as living on Water Street and divorced. Not sure who this fourth wife was.

Bill Prill died at his home on Sunday, 20 August 1978, about a year after the original article was written. He was 96 years 4 months and 23 days old. He is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery along with his parents and several of his siblings.