

Before autos, deaths on the road took many bizarre, gory forms

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD—Deaths by auto accidents today unintentionally take our greatest toll of lives, but what about the era before the motor car?

Decades ago in this area where farming was the principal occupation, farmers were subject to many hazards caused by unruly or frightened animals. A man could be crushed or gored to death by a mad bull. A frightened, runaway horse, particularly if it were hitched to a wagon, could maim a person easily, or perhaps cause a death. Such a hazard always confronted a horseback rider.

Nearly 70 years ago, a prominent young Westford businessman suffered an unusual accident, which shook the town and stirred the sympathies of the community.

It was about noon on July 26, 1905, when Amos R. Leighton was returning from the Boston market with horse and team. The night before he had loaded his wagon with local produce,

mostly berries, and headed for the city, 30 miles away and a good nine hour drive.

Some of the produce was his own as he operated a berry farm. Other produce was on his wagon from neighboring farmers.

STOPPING AT the half-way mark, East Lexington, on the return trip for rest, lunch, and to feed the horse, he had removed the animal's bridle. Here is where he made a fatal mistake.

After slipping the feed bag over the animal's head, he sat in front of the beast to keep it quiet. Apparently a brisk breeze whipped the trapaulin in the back of the wagon toward the animal.

According to the Lexington Minuteman news paper of that week, "the frightened animal started off on a run. Mr. Leighton grabbed at the harness and tried to check the horse's flight when, in some way, the rein got tangled up in the horse's feet and he fell down, rolling on top of the man. The animal struggled to his feet and in doing so trampled on the prostrate man,

who had probably been rendered unconscious by the fall."

The account goes on that "the horse struck at the man in such a way that the right leg was broken and there was a terrible fracture at the base of the skull which had caused instant death."

JOHN S. GREIG, who has been a horseman most of his life and who just observed his 86th birthday, recalled the event very well. He furnished much of the details of this casualty.

Leighton was 40 years old at the time and had a wife and daughter. He operated a coal and wood yard in Lowell, but continued to live at the family homestead in Westford opposite the town hall. He was "always interested in all activities of the town and closely associated with its various organizations." He was also a captain in Troop F. Cavalry, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia.