

Even before cars, life once was precarious for people in town

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff Correspondent

Death by motor vehicle accidents seems to be an unfortunate way of life today, but what about death by accidents prior to the motor car era?

Decades ago when farming was the principal occupation in Westford, farmers were subject to many hazards, some of which took the lives of the unwary. A line on an old slate grave marker in Fairview Cemetery tells of an accident that took the life of a young man. He was "killed by a stick falling on his shoulder."

The "stick" was a large log which fell on this person, probably while cutting a large tree while clearing land or seeking lumber for a new building.

A person could be crushed to death by an enraged bull. A frightened, runaway horse, particularly if it were hitched to a wagon, could maim a person, perhaps fatally. Hazards riding horseback were common.

Eighty-five years ago, a prominent young Westford businessman suf-

fered an unusual accident which shook the town and stirred the sympathies of the community.

It was about noon early in August when Amos R. Leighton was returning from the Boston market with horse and team. The previous night he had loaded his vehicle with local produce, mostly berries, and headed for Faneuil Hall Market in Boston, 30 miles distance and a

Commentary

ten-hour journey over dirt roads. Some of the produce was his own, and the remainder that of neighbors.

On the return trip, Leighton stopped in East Lexington for rest, lunch and to feed the horse. As usual, he had slipped the bridle from the horse's head to attach its feed bag. He then sat in front of the animal to keep it quiet. Here is where he made a fatal mistake.

Apparently a brisk breeze whipped the tarpaulin from the wagon toward the animal. According to the *Lexington Minuteman* newspaper that week, "The frightened animal started off on a run.

Mr. Leighton seized the harness and tried to check its flight, when in some way the reins got tangled up in the horse's feet and he fell down, rolling on the top of Capt. Leighton.

"The animal struggled to its feet, and in doing so, trampled on the prostrate man, who had probably been rendered unconscious by the fall."

The account goes on to say 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."

Leighton was 40 years old and had a wife and daughter. He operated a small farm opposite the town hall as well as a coal and wood yard in Lowell.

"He was always interested in every activity in town and closely associated with its various organizations," according to the newspaper account.

He also was a captain in Troop F. Cavalry, Mass. Volunteer Militia, a popular military organization in the area at the time.

Gordon Seavey is a native of Westford and former newspaper publisher.