

# Meeting my grandfather

I Googled him and found a Pittsburgh motorman who died in good health, writes journalist **MARK HOLAN**



Photo courtesy of Mark Holan

William Diggins in a photo probably taken around the time of his marriage in 1924. In the obit below, his name was misspelled and his age was wrong.

My mother said there were no stories in the newspapers when her father died in December 1941. He was just a common man, she said.

I had no reason to doubt her. But I couldn't resist checking when a few months ago I learned that dozens of newspaper archives are available through Google. Within minutes I was scanning 67-year-old pages of the Post-Gazette from my home in Tampa.

And there it was: "Motorman Dies In Car." The 45-word brief was near the bottom of an inside page. It reported that motorman William Diggins died of a heart attack the previous day after stopping his trolley at the corner of Third Avenue and Ferry (now Stanwix) Street, near the entrance of St. Mary of Mercy Church.

"Traffic was tied up for nearly 15 minutes," the story said.

The brief was tucked amid bold headlines about the expanding world war and news that Joe DiMaggio was athlete of the year for his 56-game hitting streak that summer.

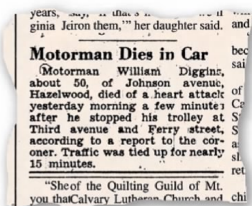
An archive search through Carnegie Library revealed similar same-day stories about my grandfather in the afternoon Pittsburgh Press and Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph, which are not available online.

Who could blame my mother for not noticing the coverage? She was 11 at the time, one of six daughters. Her father's death was 10 days after Pearl Harbor and eight days before Christmas.

"We thought the world was coming to an end," she said.

My heart sank a little reading the brief because as a reporter I've written dozens of similar items about the abrupt public deaths of men and women not usually in the news. Get a few details in the paper, but keep it short.

You always know there's more to people's lives than the circumstances of their death.



My grandfather died a month before his 48th birthday and nearly 18 years before I was born. I never thought much about him growing up. But finding the clips inspired me to learn more about the man.

I tracked down records of his 1894 birth in Ireland and his 1913 immigration to Pittsburgh. I found his naturalization papers from 1922 and his marriage record from 1924. I got details of the house he bought in 1925 for \$13,000 and paid off in 1936.

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## Willie, part 1

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