

Edward R. Saalbach

(- 24 Jun 1906)

Saalbach. On June 24, 1906, Edward Richard Saalbach. Interment from William H. Lee's undertaking establishment, on Pennsylvania avenue, Friday, June 29, at 4 o'clock p.m. His classmates of the National University law school invited to be present.

The Evening Star, June 25, 1906, p. 1

Three Lives Lost in Potomac River

Mr. & Mrs. E.R. Saalbach and Robert Purcell Drowned

One Body Found Today

Canoes Overturned in Swift Current in Upper River

Young Men Try Experiment

Upset Their Boat in Deep Water and Practice

Life-Saving, With Unfortunate Results

Three persons lost their lives while canoeing in the Potomac river near this city yesterday, and a fourth was rescued after a desperate battle with treacherous currents. The dead are Edward L. Saalbach, a clerk in the War Department; Mrs. Edward L. Saalbach, his wife, and Robert Purcell, a graduate of the Central High School. Dr. Richard Dear, who recently graduated in medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and who has a record as a college sprinter, had a narrow escape from death. Bruised, battered and almost exhausted, he succeeded in reaching a rock after a struggle of nearly an hour's duration in the water, and was removed to the shore in a canoe.

The body of Mr. Saalbach was recovered some distance below the scene of the drowning about noon today. It was found by W.T. Reynolds, captain of the volunteer life saving crew, whose boat house is at the foot of 34th street and from the place where it was discovered it was conveyed in the launch Viola, owned by T.B. Lipscomb, to the boat house, where it was held, pending the order of the coroner.

The bodies of Mrs. Saalback and young Purcell had not been recovered up to a late hour this afternoon, although search was made both yesterday and today in the vicinity of the drowning.

Where the Accident Occurred

Mr. Saalbach and his wife lost their lives near Dixie Landing, while young Purcell was drowned a short distance from High Island, above the Chain bridge. In both places the strength of the current and the nature of the river bed, the latter, covered with jagged rocks, many of which reached above the surface of the stream, made the effort to find the bodies almost hopeless from the first. A crew from the harbor-master's headquarters was dispatched to the scenes of both accidents, but it was found that practically nothing could be done in the way of dragging. The boat was several times in danger of becoming a prey to the swollen stream. The search, however, was actively continued by parties in canoes. Several of these were overturned, but fortunately their occupants were experienced swimmers and no further fatalities resulted.

The death of Mr. Saalbach and his young wife was tragic in the extreme. They were drowned closer to the shore and while assistance was almost within reach. The accident, too, was strange and unexpected. Though the water at that point ran swiftly, with a strong undertow, no particular danger was apprehended to persons of skill and experience in canoe navigation, as it is believed that neither Mr. Saalbach nor his wife gave any serious thought to the probability of disaster.

After proceeding some distance above Dixie Landing, Mr. Saalbach pushed his little craft to a large rock, where he and his wife landed. It is thought they had intended to return from that point, having found it difficult to stem the swiftly flowing stream. Mrs. Saalbach had stepped into the canoe and her husband was in the act of following her when he either stumbled, or his foot slipped on the wet rock. He fell forward into the boat, which was at once overturned; precipitating both into the water, which is very deep at that point.

Presumed to Have Been Stunned

Mr. Saalbach, it is surmised, struck his head as he fell, for, though he was an expert swimmer, he was not seen again above the surface of the water. J.H. Boyden and James F. Drysdale, who were in a canoe not more than 100 yards away, saw at once that Mr. and Mrs. Saalbach were in a terrible plight, and Mr. Boyden and Mr. Drysdale paddled with all their might toward the couple in the water. When near the place where the canoe capsized Mr. Drysdale, who was in his bathing suit, sprang into the river in the hope of rescuing one of the unfortunate couple, but his effort was fruitless. He saw Mrs. Saalbach rise to the surface when he was a few yards away, but though he redoubled his efforts, he was unable to reach her in time.

A few minutes later Mr. C.E. Engle, who was at Dixie Landing, and who was attracted by the shouts, joined the two men at the scene of the accident. They watched the water for some time, but neither Mr. Saalbach nor his wife came to the surface.

Later Lieutenant Sutton, assisted by a score of canoeists of the Washington Canoe Club, of which the drowned man was also a member, dragged the river for several hundred yards, but without result.

Was an Expert Canoeist

Mr. Saalbach was an all-round athlete and an expert canoeist. He was regarded as one of the most skillful of the members of the canoe club. Until recently he was accustomed to making his excursions on the water in a tiny and frail canoe, but after his marriage he secured a larger boat with a view of safety when he went out with his wife. He was a graduate of Heidelberg University in Germany, and a few weeks ago received his diploma in the National University Law School. He had been employed in the War Department for several years and was forty-six years of age.

His wife came to this country but a short time before their marriage, which occurred in this city last October. No relatives of either of them are at present in Washington. Mr. John Metzgeroth, a brother of Mrs. Saalbach, is out of the city with his family.

Swept Over Dam

Purcell lost his life after being swept over the dam opposite High Island. He and Dr. "Dick" Dear had gone out in the afternoon about a third of a mile above High Island for the purpose of experimenting with the canoe. Leaving their clothes on a rock they paddled out in midstream, where they upset the boat and attempted the task of pushing it ashore. They were not long, however, in discovering that they were unable to battle successfully with the current, which was much stronger than they had anticipated. With Purcell at the bow and Dear at the stern the boat was rapidly swept toward the dam. Even then the young men had little thought of danger for they were under the impression that the downward sweep would be arrested at the dam. This opinion was based upon the experiences of former years when the water was not so high. But as the two men and the little craft swept nearer to the dam both Purcell and Dear saw that they were in a desperate situation. Though they attempted to catch hold of something to stay their progress, they were swept over into a cataract, in which both were dashed against jagged rocks and badly cut and bruised.

As the two swept over the dam they were separated. Dear managed to regain his hold on the canoe, but Purcell was washed away in the current far to one side. It was impossible for them to get

together again, but they called to each other as they were borne along. It was about a third of a mile below the dam that Dear lost sight of his companion. At that time the latter was heading for a clump of small bushes growing out of the water, which was also at that place studded with rocks. Dear heard Purcell call "Dick," but the latter, looking back was unable to catch another glimpse of his form.

Dr. Dears Recital

Speaking of the tragic affair today Dr. Dear said: "Sometime after I lost sight of Purcell I was compelled to part with the boat, as I thought I saw an opportunity of reaching a high rock and of thereby avoiding what appeared to be certain death if I was swept down the cataract setting toward the Virginia shore just above the Chain bridge. I made a superhuman effort and swam to the rock, where I clung for nearly three-quarters of an hour, while Mr. Andrew P. Tallmadge, Mr. W. Roy Garrett and Mr. Hunter Tennant, all of the Highland Canoe Club, and Mr. Eugene Clough procured a skiff, and Tallmadge and Garrett yelling to me to hang on, came to my assistance."

The rescue it is said, was a daring and hazardous undertaking. Messrs. Tallmadge and Garrett were compelled to row with all their might and skill in an oblique direction against the current. With Dear in the boat they retracted their course reaching the island without mishap. Dr. Dear was suffering from severe cuts and bruises. He was conveyed to the residence of Dr. Joseph Rogers, 721 8th street, where his wounds were dressed. He was resting comfortably today.

Statement by Eyewitness

Mr. Gene Gough, who was an eyewitness of the unfortunate tragedy, said today.

"The two young men, Dear and Purcell, came up the feeder in a canoe, passed the dam and landed on a little rock near Snake Island, where they left their canoe, preparatory to going in swimming. They then took the canoe out and upset it in the river, which was more than ordinarily high by reason of recent rains and was very swift. The current swept them down past Snake Island and over the dam. Dear had hold of the canoe nearly all the time, and continually called on Purcell to catch hold of the boat also for protection; but Purcell, swept onward by the current, was unable to do this. After they had passed over the dam it appeared that they both might be saved as they were both excellent swimmers and at that time showed no signs of exhaustion.

"Some few minutes later, however, as the mad rush of waters carried them in the direction of Little Falls and they had reached a point between High Island and the Virginia shore it was observed that Dear lost his hold on the boat and was looking around for Purcell and calling for "Bob" (Purcell), whose body now could no longer be seen. Every moment Dear's danger became greater and his body was flung about mercilessly among the sharp projecting rocks as he struggled to maintain himself above the waves and foam which momentarily threatened to engulf him utterly. He was approaching the most dangerous portion of the rapids.

"Mearifime Tallmadge and I had been running along the banking yelling encouraging words to the boys with all our might, telling them to hold up and that we would come to help them.

"Soon after the disappearance of Purcell, who had, as it seemed to us, been thrown violently against a rock and stunned so that he could struggle no longer. Dear managed by an extraordinary effort to retain a hold on one of the larger rocks, crawled upon it and eventually stood upright. We continued to call loudly to him and telling him to remain where he was till we could secure a canoe. Dear then called out, asking: "Is Bob all right" and we answered: 'Yes he is saved.' We were afraid to alarm Dear, who, on hearing this, gave hearty evidence of satisfaction, clapping his hands to show his pleasure.

"A canoe was secured by Hunter Tennent and myself, and we carried it across High Island on our shoulders as quick as possible, and W. Ray Garrett and Andrew J. Tallmadge got in the canoe, went out to the rock and rescued Dear.

Covered With Bruises

"When Dear was brought to the shore his body was covered with bruises, and he was bleeding in a dozen places, having evidently suffered terribly from being crushed violently against the rocks by the raging current and eddies. I asked Dear soon after he reached the shore how it happened, and he explained simply that Purcell and I were plaining at rescue and purposely upset the canoe, but before we knew it the current had us and we were whirled over the dam.

"Dear further said to me that he had asked Purcell before they went in whether he could swim, and Purcell declared he could take care of himself with all safety, and that they could overturn the boat without danger."

Robert Purcell resided with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Mahlon Purcell, at 415 Florida Avenue. He was well known as a high school athlete, having played several seasons on the football and baseball teams of the Central High School. He was about twenty-five years of age.

Inquest Unnecessary

The body of Mr. Saalbach was removed in an ambulance to the morgue. It is understood that the coroner regards an inquest as unnecessary. Bruises were discovered on the head and side of the body.

Inquest Unnecessary

Whenever the water is high in the river as the result of the melting of snow on the upper stretches in the early spring or after continued heavy rains, as at present, the spot just above Dixie Landing where Mr. and Mrs. Saalbach were drowned yesterday is one of the most dangerous in this vicinity, barring, of course places where the water actually falls over the rocks as it does above Chain bridge.

After tumbling over Little Falls, the waters of the river rush onward in a narrow bed of extreme depth, which does not widen to any considerable extent until Dixie Landing is reached. Near the exact point at which Mr. Saalbach's canoe was upset a ledge of rocks projects from the bottom without reaching the surface. This is practically at the foot of the gorge referred to and the effect is to cast the swiftly flowing water into many swirls and increase the velocity of the current for a short distance.

At low water, such as was noted only a few weeks ago, this condition practically disappears, and at times any sort of a boat may proceed nearly to the foot of Little Falls without the slightest danger. The Potomac is one of those rivers that rise and fall very suddenly, and on such occasions the entire chart of the currents is apt to be altered, so that a boatman experienced in the waters at one time may find himself an entire stranger to them at another.

It is because of these facts, it is believed, that a number of fatal accidents have occurred in the portion of the river in question. Recognizing that the spot, so frequently devoid of danger, was very treacherous as a result of the recent heavy and continuous rains, the officers of the Washington Canoe Club, from whose house Mr. and Mrs. Saalbach started yesterday, had posted a notice warning its members from venturing beyond Dixie Landing.

Where Current Is Always Strong

Canoeists frequently paddle at low water on "the Broadwater" above High Island and venture with safety very close to the edge of the feeder dam over which Purcell and Dear's upturned canoe drifted. The dam is about a mile above Chain bridge, and between it and Little Falls, farther down the river, the current is always quite strong, and on occasions exceptionally so. "The Broadwater," upon which the annual regatta of the Interclub Canoe Association was held a few weeks ago, is also transformed into a dangerous stretch when the waters are high.

Being in the water with an upturned canoe, which at the best is hard to move, the two young men probably found themselves swept relentlessly over the dam and into the lower stretches before they

could do anything to prevent it. Only an effort of almost superhuman strength could prevent a headlong rush over Little Falls from the place in question when the river is swollen.