



Chapter 3

What Was Sol Like?

When I first met Edward Surkosky of the Windber Museum, and after telling him who I was and what I was interested in, the first words out of his mouth were, “The Roaches were eccentrics.” He launched right into stories about my family like he had first hand knowledge of them. This seemed unusual since Sol and his family were gone long before Ed was even a glimmer in his parent’s eyes. As it turns out, in the 1920s and 30s Ed’s family ran the W.J. Baer Funeral Home, located directly across Graham Avenue to the south from the Roach house and shop. His relatives observed the Roaches first hand.

Ed’s comments posed an interesting problem for me because my father had never spoken of the family as being eccentric. He did describe his aunts as being noisy. My father was raised in Sol and Margaret’s household with these four ladies around and this was often offered by my mother as an excuse for dad’s being very much to himself. He always spoke of his grandmother with reverence but rarely gave any details. In fact, he rarely spoke about his family in Windber at all. His references to Sol usually amounted to his being a gunsmith, an outdoorsman, a violin maker, a friend of Buffalo Bill and a drunk, with emphasis on the “drunk”. This was held over my head as a youth any time the question of alcohol came up. That’s really all I knew about this man when the project began in 2005. There wasn’t much there to go on.

However, after a serious examination of his work on the violins and getting professional reaction to them, it was obvious that there was more going on with Sol Roach than dad’s one liner anecdotes would suggest. What kind of a man could do this quality and quantity of highly skilled work, but yet be a knock-down drag-out drunk? What kind of man was the real Sol Roach? How would I find out? Passing in 1933, his contemporaries were all dead. His children were all gone. Many of his grandchildren have already passed, and those who would have been living in Windber before moving with their father to Tawas City, Michigan in 1924 were 6 years old and younger at the time. Those of that group that are still living remember him, but really have little to offer. The fact that he was unusual, either by virtue of his talent or his eccentricity, made him appealing to the local newspapers, both in Windber and Punxsutawney. The way outsiders saw him might provide a less biased perspective than immediate family members, given their penchant to either protect or condemn depending on their relationship with him.

Sol was noted for being an outdoorsman, a hunter and fisherman of great repute, and a sharpshooter. The following excerpts are taken from interviews and newspaper accounts.

John S. Roach told my cousin Jeff Davis, “*And I can remember, like I told you before, Grandpap Roach would anytime, he would just take off, go fishing, stay a couple of weeks. When he was good and tired he would come home. Or, he’d take off and go hunting. Never anything else. It was either fishing or hunting and that’s where your grandfather got all his fishing ability and hunting ability was from his father. And like I told you, Grandpap Roach was a trick shot. They would throw coins up and he would shoot them with a 22. He’d use a 22 rifle like a pistol, can you imagine that, and shoot coins out of the air.*” Jeff asked about the connection to Buffalo Bill and a shooting gallery Sol and Bill were alleged to have operated together in Atlantic City, New Jersey and Jack replied, “*They did this act at a shooting gallery to attract people. They would have this attraction at a certain time during the day and all the people would come to see them do it. And then while they were there they would shoot themselves at the shooting gallery. That’s how they would do the crowd. It was a come-on, you know.*”



Buffalo Bill and Sol Roach in 1909

The following articles are from the **Punxsutawney Spirit** newspaper courtesy of Terry Fye.

Punxsutawney Spirit July 2, 1890

Sol Roach of Horatio engaged in a shooting contest at the fairgrounds with John W. Frampton of Punxsutawney.

Punxsutawney Spirit October 28, 1891

S.E. Roach, of this place, while hunting near town one day last week, shot a pheasant, one wing of which was almost entirely white.

Punxsutawney Spirit February 17, 1892

S.E. Roach, of this place, during the hunting season just closed, killed 180 pheasants and five deer, besides rabbits and squirrels innumerable.

Punxsutawney Spirit December 21, 1892

Sol. Roach and Jim Brewer, who have been out in the mountains for the past five or six weeks on a hunting expedition, returned yesterday. The quarry slain by these worthy disciples of the great Nimrod is reported as follows. Twenty-seven deer, two bears, seven wildcats, fifty-nine coons, eighteen porcupines, seventy-nine pheasants and squirrels and rabbits by the score.

Punxsutawney Spirit August 30, 1893

Sol Roach Shot

One day last week Sol. Roach, of Adrian, and a man named Blair were out in the woods teaching a setter dog to retrieve- that is, to bring in birds that were shot. "Now," said Mr. Roach to Mr. Blair, "when you see any kind of bird, shoot at it, and make the dog bring it to you."

They separated, and in a few minutes, Blair saw a bird. He shot. Roach was in range, and eighty-four bird shot struck him, most of them burying themselves under the skin. The wounds are not at all dangerous but you can imagine that Mr. Roach has considerable soreness about his person.

Punxsutawney Spirit January 10, 1894

We are under obligation to Sol. Roach, of Anita, for a large hang of venison. It was juicy and tender, too, and adjusted itself to the palate with admirable felicity. Mr. Roach is the champion sportsman of this county.

The following excerpts were provided by Edward Surkosky of the Windber Museum and are taken from the **Windber Era** newspaper.

Windber Era November 12, 1903

Sol E. Roach and Frank Sherman returned Saturday from a week's hunting trip in the vicinity of Unionville, Center County. They bagged 2 wild turkeys, weighing 20 and 22 ½ pounds, and 15 squirrels.

Windber Era December 17, 1903

Sol Roach says: "C. J. Duncan and Francis Couperthwaite can eat more buckwheat cakes than four men." Sol was a cook on a recent hunting expedition and he ought to know.

Windber Era December 24, 1903

Big Shoot at Cresson

The Cresson Gun Club Will Hold Last Shoot of Season

The Cresson Gun Club will hold the last shoot of the season Tuesday, December 22 on its local grounds and it is expected that this will be the star of all its interesting previous events.

For the occasion 800 picked prairie birds have been secured to test the skill of the large corps of sportsman who will be present from other places.

The handicap committee will include Ed Kottman and F. M. Christy, of Altoona; Robert Tosh, South Fork; H. Mulhollen, Lloydell; W. L. Hicks, Tyrone; Sol Roach, Windber; Evan Evans, Dunlo, and C. Wendertoth, Cresson.

Windber Era April 28, 1904

Bring in a Nice Catch

Sol E. Roach and our erstwhile Principal of schools, W. M. Scott, spent Saturday along Shade Creek and their baskets revealed a total of sixty-five specimens of the finny tribe. The Professor says that while he caught only about one-fourth of the number he does not believe Sol uses anything but skill and endurance in “hauling” in his catches, emphasizing “endurance”, for this prince of sportsman fell in the stream and fished himself out, and his tenacity was not relinquished in the least. Mr. Roach caught fifteen speckled beauties on the opening day of the season.

Henry W. Shoemaker, in his 1993 book *Eldorado Found* on page 62 references the taking of wildcats in the Snow Shoe, Centre County area in 1917 saying, “...and in recent years Sol. Roach of Johnstown, has taken a number of wildcats from its rock fortresses.”

The Tyrone Herald May 21, 1914

Wild Cats Trapped in Centre County

The Windber Era notes the return of Sol Roach, a former Philipsburger, from the wilds of Centre county, who brought back with him six pelts of catamounts captured by him and his associates in the mountains. The Era continues: “One hide is fully 40 inches long from nose to tail. The pelts have been in display at Roach’s repair shop and many persons have satisfied themselves as to what the fur of a wild cat looks like.

“The trapping of these wild animals was no fun and Mr. Roach says it was necessary to beat their way through six feet of snow, where progress was made at the rate of a mile a day. Unmistakable evidence of the wholesale slaughter of deer and smaller game was found during the season. He was quite successful during the first week of the fishing season in Centre county.”

The Clearfield Progress December 12, 1914

Sol Roach Has Success in the Hunting Woods

Sol Roach, the famous hunter and wing shot of Windber, Pa., well known in this section, having lived at Morrisdale some years ago, came in from the woods Wednesday and will visit at the home of his father-in-law Grandpap George Trumble, at Morrisdale. Mr. Roach killed the limit of birds during the pheasant season and got one 180 pound buck. Last fall while hunting at Bear Rock, Centre county he killed twenty-two wild cats, two of them being of the catamount species, each of which measured almost five feet. He is an expert wing shot and is considered one of the best authorities in the country on the tactics of hunting big game.

The Clearfield Progress November 17, 1917

Hunting Bear

Mr. and Mrs. Sol Roach and their son Wilbur, and family, of Windber, are camping near Beaver Mills, where they are more particularly hunting for bear. Sol Roach is a former Clearfield county citizen, and one of the best known and most expert hunters that ever roamed these hills.

Ed Surkosky provided the following observation. *“My neighbor lived at 1104 Graham in the late 20’s and early 30’s. His dad had a radio repair shop on the other side of the McVicker building which was next to Sol’s place. He said a lot of guys who went fishing and camping with Sol wouldn’t drink his coffee. He took his sock off and put the coffee in it and then put it in a can of boiling water! Dried it out and put it back on his foot.”*

Sol’s obituary in 1933 stated that he had killed nearly 300 deer and over 40 bear in the Pennsylvania mountains in his lifetime and that he had made part of his living hunting and trapping while wild animal furs brought good prices.

The Roach family: John Roach talked about Sol and his immediate family with Jeff Davis in 1979. *“My grandfather Roach’s brothers lived mostly in the state of Maine and a few of them, one or two of them, lived in a town known as Houtzdale, Pennsylvania. I didn’t know them too well, but I did know that one of them was very emotional. In fact he was very easily off-set emotionally and he would become very angry and uncontrollable at times. Now, some would say maybe insanity but it wasn’t that. It washe was perfectly normal until he was aggravated in some way and he would fly off the handle and things would start to fly in all directions. He’d just lose control of himself. And, that was one of Grandpap Roach’s brothers. Now which one it was, I think it was Robert, but I’m not sure.”*(Charles Roach was institutionalized in 1932 and remained there to the end of his life in 1956 for issues related to anger)

Sol’s brother Charles received the following write-up in the Clearfield Progress of September 5, 1924:

Militant Squire Makes Big Hauls at Janesville and in Vicinity

‘Squire Charley Roach of Woodward township, official “dry cleaner” of the Houtzdale-Madura region, was in town yesterday as a witness before the Grand Jury in a number of liquor law violations in which he figured. This militant Justice of the Peace, who with a party of kindred souls, has embarked on a crusade to enforce the liquor laws in the region around Houtzdale, where the ‘Squire says, enforcement is badly needed, talked interestingly of his experiences to a group (held at) the Court House yesterday and showed how it is possible for local officers to aid greatly in making prohibition a fact as well as a name.

The activities of ‘Squire Roach and his friends have resulted in many liquor law violators being hauled before the Bar of Justice and given their deserts, and in this performance of a sworn duty the ‘Squire plays no inconsequential part. As a matter of fact he sets the stage by arranging for and assisting in the securing of the evidence and then not only issues the warrant for the arrest of the trapped mooshiner and bootlegger, but accompanies the Constables when they set out to make the arrests and thereby sees to

it that all legal technicalities are avoided and the whole transaction completed without let or hindrance of any kind.

In his latest raid which was staged Saturday last and extended as far south as Ramey and Janesville three alleged liquor law violators were run to earth and after being arrested and, as the picturesque Squire styles it, "caught with the goods", all were held in heavy bail by 'Squire Roach for their appearance at court.

Those taken into custody were Roy Fox of Janesville, Emil Johnson of Beccaria and Joe Lutz of Ramey. An officer is said to have visited these places on Friday and made a purchase of liquor at two of them at least and the search warrants upon which the arrests were made followed the securing of this evidence.

At the Fox home a haul of about 260 gallons of mash and about 15 gallons of finished liquor was secured. When taken before the Justice Fox was required to give \$10,000 bail for his appearance at court, the heaviest bail ever required of a liquor law violator in Clearfield county. Johnson, who runs a garage at Beccaria, and who is said to have sold the "dry cleaners" a quart, was held in \$1,500 bail, while Lutz, whose store was raided and a small quantity of liquor secured before all the evidence was "smashed and spilt", was required to put up \$1,000 bond.

The picturesque 'Squire who stands six feet two in his stockings, wears a long flowing moustache and affects a wide-brimmed sombrero, resembles somewhat pictures we have seen of Buffalo Bill, the old time plainsman and Indian fighter. He is a brother of Sol Roach, the hunter and crack shot, for many years a resident of Clearfield county. He fears no man, can take good care of himself in a scrap as he demonstrated on at least two occasions since starting his "dry" crusade, and says he is going to see that the liquor law is going to be enforced in this section of the county so long as it remains the law; that if the people don't like the law they should wipe it off the statute books, failing or neglecting to do that, all good citizens should obey the law and all others will be made to do so or keep out of the south-eastern end of Clearfield county even though he has been denied the use of the borough lock-up at Houtzdale in which to house his prisoners temporarily.

The officers who are assisting 'Squire Roach in the "dry cleaning" of the southeastern end of the county are Constables Harry Peterson, of Brisbin; Russell Kephart, of Decatur; Aaron Peacock, of Coalport and McCully, of Irvona.

The Roach brothers living in Houtzdale refers to a later period. The Roaches seemed to show up in many places around the state. Birth records at the Jefferson County Courthouse in Brookville from the 1890s, the period during which Sol lived in the Punxsutawney area, show several Roach families to be in the area. Not all were directly related. There was a Robert M. Roach who was raising a family in the Punxsutawney area and the records show births in 1893, 97, 99, and 1901. Robert McClellan Roach was the 8th of Sol's siblings, born in 1866. There is another Roach brother who does not show up in birth records, but in a less respectable record. From the Punxsutawney Spirit of September 23, 1891 we read the following:

SHERIFF YOUNG'S BOARDERS SKIP

Early on Wednesday evening of last week three prisoners confined in the jail at Brookville took leave of that institution without the formality of asking permission of any one. By some unknown means they had secured a key and succeeded in unlocking their cell doors, admitting them to the corridor. From this point it was an easy matter to mount to the top of the tier of cells, tear off the plastering of the ceiling, and gain admission to the attic of the jail. Along this they crawled until they reached the Sheriff's residence, attached to the jail, when they walked down stairs and out of the door to liberty.

William Roach, one of the escaped prisoners was from Beechtree, and at a previous term of court had been sentenced to the workhouse for illegal liquor selling. His time had almost expired when he was taken from that institution to Brookville on a writ of habeas corpus to testify in a case then pending before court. Robert Shirley, of Rose township, has been tried and convicted of larceny, and was awaiting sentence. And Roli Edmonds, another of the trio, was also from Rose township, and had been tried and convicted on the charges of burglary and arson.

Sheriff Young is making vigorous efforts to effect their capture. He has issued the following notice offering a reward for their apprehension: "Three prisoners, William Roach, Joe Shirley, and Roli Edmonds escaped from the Brookville jail on Wednesday night, Sept. 16, 1891. A reward of \$25 for each prisoner will be paid by me for their capture and return to said jail. Roach is about 23 years of age, about 5 feet and 6 inches in height, weighs perhaps 125 pounds, is dark complected and a fluent talker. Shirley is about 21 years of age, about 5 feet, 4 inches height, weighs perhaps 140 pounds, is light complected, has brown hair, and plays the violin. Edmonds is about 22 years of age, probably 5 feet 7 in height, weighs about 150 pounds, is dark complected, has black hair and wore a red slouch hat."

William Franklin Roach was sibling number 9 in Sol's family of 11. He was born on March 31, 1866. In September of 1891 he would have been 25 years old. But since all of Sheriff Young's descriptions appear to be guess-timates, it is possible that this William Roach, "about 23 years of age" and "about 5 feet and 6 inches in height" in the story, and 5' 6" from the proportional measurements, could be Sol's brother William. In later years William F. Roach was responsible for compiling a thorough record of family members, still used as the definitive authority on family members from this generation. He, along with his brother Robert McClellan, is buried at Brisbin, Pennsylvania near Houtzdale. Punxsutawney, Houtzdale, and Windber were all locations of Berwind White coal operations.

Sol's drinking had always been a big issue with my father John and his experiences with him bear this out. They also offer some insight into what type of drinker Sol was, that he was still able to do the meticulous craft work on the violins as well as shoot. John said, "*And when Grandpap Roach came there (Windber) he bought a couple thousand acres of land for 50 cents an acre. And it turned out that under that land was the best bituminous coal in the world. And, Grandpap Roach occasionally was a drinker. He would go along for 5 or 6 months just as nice as could be and all of a sudden he'd start drinkin' and get so drunk that I would have to go down to the bar room and drape him over my shoulders and bring him home. But anyhow, during one of these times when he was drunk, it could even been planned to get him drunk, anyhow, they started to gamble*

and of course he was rooked out of everything. The 2000 acres, even the house that they lived in, the gamblers won. But in those days the code of the gamblers was that they would never intentionally penalize the wife so the gambler who won the house took the deed, signed it over to Grandpap Roach's wife, put it in her name, and he gave her the house and the lot that it sat on. All of the other 2000 acres were gone. Now, we could have been millionaires 10 times over, billionaires, if he could have held on to that 2000 acres of coal. But, that's what happened. And so for years Grammy Roach struggled along trying to keep the family together by having a cow that she would milk and sell the milk. That's how she survived. A little garden in the back yard. Didn't have much room for a garden but she had a garden back there."

Ed Surkosky offered an anecdote that saw Sol's wife banish him from the house to his shop for his behavior. After behavior like gambling away the house and a potential fortune, I think I would too!

The 1940 Esquire magazine piece by Edwin L. Peterson also mentions that Sol was known for his drinking. *"My mother did not quite approve of Solomon. Few mothers did. They said he was "given to drink."*

On a 2006 trip to the Johnstown area I had the pleasure of meeting George Deyarmin of St. Michael. George was still operating the family store and meat market at age 89. He was a 1935 graduate of Windber H.S. and remembered Sol and his shop very well. He went to the same church as the Roaches and walked by the shop on his way to school and to church. He said he could still see Sol sitting in his big chair in the shop. I explained to George that alcoholics come in different forms and why I was interested in knowing about a mans drinking habits 70 years ago, not even knowing if a young person would have been observant enough to understand it and even remember it. Without hesitation George replied, *"Sol drank all the time, but you never saw him drunk."*

On that same trip I also had an opportunity to talk to a lady who was a young girl of about 8 years at the time that Sol killed himself on New Years Day 1933. Her family ran the funeral home across the street from Sol's shop. The family was just returning from New Years Day Mass and she could remember the commotion and the police at the shop. Her parents hustled her into the house. She said that the children, as a general rule, were warned to stay away from Sol, reinforcing the mother's comments in the Peterson article.

In January of 2007 I made another trip to Pennsylvania for the purpose of tracking down violins and looking for connections to known violin makers. On the way I made a swing through Tawas City, Michigan where Sol's son Wilbur, better known in his baseball days as Roxey, had moved his family in 1924. Roxey's son Bill related a story about Sol and his father during Roxey's major league career. We talked about a possible rift between Roxey and Sol. Bill said that Sol showed up at one of Roxey's ball games at a time when he was trying to set a record for consecutive games played. Sol was very inebriated. Roxey had to leave the game to get Sol to a hotel. He also got him a bottle of whiskey. Roxey scolded Sol saying that he was ruining his career with his behavior. Sol pours off a bit of whiskey and then pitches the rest of the bottle out the window saying he would never drink again. Roxey was in professional baseball from 1907 to approximately 1918. Sol would drink again.

John Roach explained in his 1979 talk with Jeff Davis that Sol was a person from another era. John said, *"Grandpap Roach was a frontiersman, strictly frontiersman and anything that he didn't like, he was ready to fight. That's the way they lived. If you did*

something to me and I didn't like it you were gonna get your head knocked off. And Grandpap was a very violent fighter when he got mad. He was like his brother who'd fly off the handle and not be controllable. But Grandpap Roach had that same violence in him but he could control it. So he knew what he was doing all the time and like I told you too, he and his buddies would go into a bar room and somebody would say something to him and they'd start to fight. They'd throw the whole bunch right out on the street and they'd have the whole bar to themselves. Just at the drop of a hat. I can remember Grandpap Roach tellin' me one time he said, 'a guy looked at me cross eyed' he said, 'and I didn't like it so I just give him a side-winder', like that. He said, 'I caught him on the side of the nose and he turned completely around'. That's the kind of stuff that they did, you know. That was big talk to them. That's what they liked to talk about was their ability to fight, to control the situation. Before his time they did it with guns, the gun fighters. But in his day it came down to fist fighting. Then after his time, then of course, it was eased off a little bit more and it's like it is today. We went through a cycle there of gun fighting, and then fist fighting and then through law. Law came."

During my 2007 trip through Michigan on my way to Pennsylvania I also made a stop in Ann Arbor for a visit with two more cousins, Nancy Davis and Margaret Ann Carter. Nancy is the daughter of the first child by the third wife of Sol's son Wilbur and Margaret Ann is the daughter of the first child of Wilbur's first wife. Margaret Ann said that her mother told her that Sol was gone a lot and that Margaret had to run the shop. Sol would make a batch of guns and then head west to sell them, being gone for extended periods of time.

There was discussion around the table at Nancy's home about Sol possibly working for the railroad at some point. Margaret Ann said her mother had said something about that. Buffalo Bill worked for the railroad too, at one time. Sol would apparently be away for long periods of time and would carry a sawed off shotgun. She told the story of her mother having to meet Sol, who was coming in from the west, at the train station in Detroit and drive him up to Tawas. He showed up with a long coat like Wyatt Earp and his sawed off shotgun under the coat (Nancy had heard the story as a long coat and flowing white hair and that the crowds parted for him at the site). A policeman saw him and was coming over. Margaret said, "I'm putting him into the car and taking him up to Tawas City. Don't worry about him, but, don't try to take his gun from him." Since sawed off shotguns are only good for killing people, they thought he might have been hired to clear outlaws from the railroad towns. However, if his granddaughter Margaret picked him up this would have had to occur between 1924 and 1933, and it's unlikely that it would have been necessary to confront outlaws during those years! Perhaps two stories have gotten mixed, one from the 1920s and one from the 1800s.

Windber Era March 26,1903

Sol Roach was among many Graham Ave. property owners who put down substantial sidewalks last week. A number of other progressive citizens did like wise. The good work will bear imitators.

Johnstown Tribune Democrat February 26, 1914

Windber- Sol Roach, the violinist and woodworker of this place, is working on six violins which he will send to New York as part of a display of homemade instruments to be set up by the American Academy of Violin Makers.

January 1933: Sol's obituary states that, "*Men high in the councils of Pennsylvania politics were friends of "Sol" Roach, as were many men prominent in business and the professions. During his many years spent in hunting and trapping, Mr. Roach acted as guide to many distinguished personages.*"

Betty Ann Jarve Carroll wrote of her mother Bernice Roach Jarve, Sol's youngest daughter, when Bernice's future husband John Jarve began courting her. They met in the church orchestra at Windber in 1925, she playing the violin and he the saxophone. As things developed Sol began to notice that this young fellow was coming every Sunday earlier and earlier. He said, "*If this keeps up he'll soon be here for breakfast.*" The next Sunday was Easter Sunday and sure enough John was there for breakfast. They were married in 1928.

According to Betty Ann Carroll, Bernice's father thought that children should learn only one instrument. Bernice was given a violin to play and learned to play the piano on the sly.

A complex mix of virtue and vice. A multi talented eccentric. A figure caught between the world of the frontiersman and the industrial age. Companion of the ordinary and the high and mighty. What was Sol Roach like? You'll have to make up your own mind. Those who could tell us without bias are long gone.



Bernice Roach and John S. Roach in 1915