

**The Diaries of Thomas Grim Fister:  
Snapshots in the life of a Lynn Township original!**

By: Glenn Koch

**Fister Family**



Left right Front: Alton G. Fister, Daniel Peter Fister (Father) Catharine Grim Fister (Mother), Thomas Grim Fister (the diarist).

Rear, Left to Right: Maggie Mae Fister,

Reuben Henry Fister, Mary Salina Fister, H. Edwin "Eddie" Fister, Emma C. Fister, Samuel W. Fister, Elmira Rosella Fister, Lewis Peter Fister, Amanda Irene Fister.

After his death, his collection of diaries appears to have been split up amongst family members. Until I was given access to a small group of them, the only others I had seen had been two small ones that were in our family, and a larger group that appeared at auction in 1983. Though they were purchased and disappeared. As follows, is the story of Uncle Tom a culled from his diaries, and a few other sources.

Thomas Grim Fister (1863 – 1933) was born in the Borough of Hamburg, Berks County, PA on October 30, 1863. He was the first of eleven children eventually born to Daniel P. Fister and his wife Catherine (Grim) Fister, and was a descendent of Durst Pfister, who, along with his wife Elizabeth (Born) Pfister, and their children, had emigrated from Bern Canton, Switzerland, to the American Colonies around 1774. Here they became one of the

earliest families in Reading, PA. Pfister, in the Swiss-German dialect, translates as baker, a trade-based surname. In the city of Bern, in Bern Canton, there is still a “Gesellschaft of the local Pfistern”; a trade hall of bakers.

By the second and third generations of this family in America, the leading “P” in the surname had been unceremoniously dropped. Later generations of Pfister emigrants who arrived in the second wave of German immigration in the 1840's and thereafter, retained the original spelling of the surname. Throughout the midwest you still find this spelling today. A notable example of which is the luxurious turn-of-the-century Hotel Pfister in Milwaukee, WI.

The very earliest years of his life were spent in Wessnersville, (Stony Run), Berks County, where his father farmed the land of his own father, Solomon Fister, a Wheelwright and chair maker. In 1875, Daniel purchased the Isaac Levan homestead and its adjoining 66 acre farm in Kistler's Valley and there resided until his death in 1915. Thomas and his family were members of New Jerusalem (Red) Church in Kistler's Valley. In politics, they were staunchly Democratic. This comes through loud and clear in his writings.

He attended Lynn Township's public schools, and Prof. Alvin Rupp's select school at New Tripoli. He went on to the Keystone State Normal School at Kutztown where he graduated with the class of 1885. He was licensed him to teach school in 1880, 5 years prior to his graduation. He began his career in a one room schoolhouse at Rabert's Corner, Lehigh County. Over the course of his teaching career he taught in a number of different schoolhouses, generally boarding with local families or patrons, and then returning to Kistler's Valley when term ended.

His diary for 1902 gives us the first view into his life, and also the life of his family. Brother Alton, who census records show had first been working as a hired hand on neighbor's farms rather, sought his success by heading west. In 1902 he was prospecting for gold in the vicinity of Prescott, Arizona. After a brief stay in Los Angeles, he relocated to Bakersfield, California where he was employed by the Potomac Oil Company. Lewis, another brother, had also left the farm and was working as a Barman at a hotel in the vicinity of Egypt, Pennsylvania. In November of 1902, after receiving a letter from Alton extolling the virtues of western life and the opportunities for success there, he decided to move to California. Alton was to secure him a job and by year's end he too had gone seeking greater fortunes.

Brother Reuben had been apprenticed out as a young man to a Tailor in Kutztown, Pa. This did not last long and afterwards he learned the creamery business which he conducted at New Tripoli for twelve years. Eventually though he turned to farming after marrying Alvena Miller of New Tripoli and purchasing the Miller farm. This left only brothers Samuel and H. Edwin at home working the family farm with their aging father. Shortly thereafter, following some family rift, Eddie left home too.

### **Tom's sister, Maggie**



In 1902 Tom's sisters, Elmira and Emma, no longer at home, were both working in Philadelphia, probably as domestics, coming home on occasion to visit. This left sisters Mary, Amanda, and Maggie still at home with their parents. Amanda who had been born with a hunched back, would die unmarried, at age 34, in 1905. Mary, soon began to date Willie Fetherolf, a young lad that came to Tom for Latin lessons. Eventually they married and "little Willie" became Dr. William J. Fetherolf of Stinesville, Pa. In June of 1903, youngest sibling Maggie married Edgar Greenawalt of Kempton, departing from the family home for good.

Tom was happy for his sister, but a cloud of melancholy descended upon him due to the change that had taken place within the family home. At the end of 1902 he wrote that "when darling Maggie and brother Eddie left home... all sunshine for a time seemed to be gone". At the time he also wrote "May the God of all consolation bring sunshine again and

give me strength to conquer this melancholy state of mind". Before the next year was over, things within the family would be forever changed.

In September of 1903 his brother Alton briefly returned from California to marry Miss Alice Frantz. Having not seen his family in eight years, they were all were pleased with his return. Tom noted that "he looks as natural as when he left, but that he is much sunburnt". Within days of the nuptials, Alton and Alice headed back for California despite receiving an ominous letter from Lewis who "urges him to stay here in the East".

Then, just two days later, "at about 9 a.m., Dr. Leh knocked at my school house door to inform me that he received a message from New Tripoli". At that time Thomas Fister was serving in his fifth term as teacher at Butz's School in Hokendaqua. The message he was handed was that his "dear sister Maggie died last evening of Pnuemonia". Upon calling Squire James Miller in New Tripoli he was given the details of what had happened.

On September 12th, Maggie and Edgar Greenawalt had become the parents of a baby boy, but only after a difficult birth. When Tom arrived back in New Tripoli he was "given a description of sister Maggie's child bed ordeal, which reflected poorly on Dr. Brunner". It was there, still in child bed, that she died on September 23rd, never having fully recovered from the difficult birth.

After Maggie's funeral, one of the largest ever held in that vicinity, Tom, with sorrow now heaped upon sorrow, continued to deeply mourn the loss of his youngest sibling. He poured his grief out onto the pages of his diary. He prays "to God for the strength to bear his sorrow". Then proceeds to describe the heart rending scenes he encounters when he makes a call upon Maggie's grieving husband, Edgar.

"Words fail to describe bro. Edgar's terrible bereavement. When he shows me the things she prepared for the winter, it was enough to break any heart. He said 'O sie war mir lieb!' This tells his sorrow in a comprehensive way. My own grief I could not tell in better language". Unfortunately for Tom and the rest of the family, this was not the only death they were to suffer that year. One more yet remained.

It began with another messenger at the schoolhouse door on the 14th of December. This time the message was that brother Lewis had died in California the previous Saturday. Tom closed down his schoolhouse for a week and returned home and, with his family, awaited the arrival of his brother's body for burial.

### **H Edwin Fister and Lila Braucher Fister**



On December 21st, much to their “great relief and satisfaction”, Lewis returned to Lynnport via rail. When the coffin was unloaded undertaker Greenawald transported it to the family home where “the undertaker opened the box and it was found that Lewis looks quite natural in death”. The undertaker said he “could easily be preserved”. Along with the corpse was a letter tucked in the casket that informed the family that Lewis had died of enlargement of the spleen.

The funeral was held in the family home, and then after the procession, a service in New Jerusalem church with burial in the church cemetery. Following the service the mourners gathered for a dinner at Wm. Snyder's Hotel in Stony Run where 125 people were served dinner at twenty-five cents a head.

When New Year's Eve rolled around, bringing with it the end of a terrible year, Tom was left to reflect back on all that had happened. He wrote "The Angel of Death entered our home for the first time in our history and removed from us our beloved brother Lewis and darling sister Maggie. The home circle is broken never to be repaired again. Our bereavement is keenly felt by all the rest and my own grief I can better imagine than describe. Maggie and Lewis were lovely in their lives, and in their deaths were not long divided. This ends the year in which I had to endure sorrow and distress".

The diaries for the intervening years provide more information on Tom and his family, but nothing as dramatic as what had transpired in 1902/03. There is one particularly humorous series of exchanges that takes place concerning state enforced vaccinations that were being forced upon teachers and students. Tom felt that this was the ultimate form of tyranny because he was either required to be vaccinated, or he couldn't teach. He felt that vaccinations were nonsense, if not even downright dangerous. Under much duress, he finally went through with it rather than lose his livelihood, but not without much hand wringing and complaining.

Another interesting exchange is recorded in his diary for 1917. That year, teaching at a schoolhouse located on Emaus Avenue in Mountainville, he boarded with two of his unmarried Kistler cousins in a house that they ran near Muhlenberg College. Midway through the year a new couple took up residence in the home. Tom found them to be lovely people, great conversationalists, and enjoyed their company very much. So when they asked him to accompany them to their church, he accepted. It turned out that the church was Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Allentown's Sixth Ward.

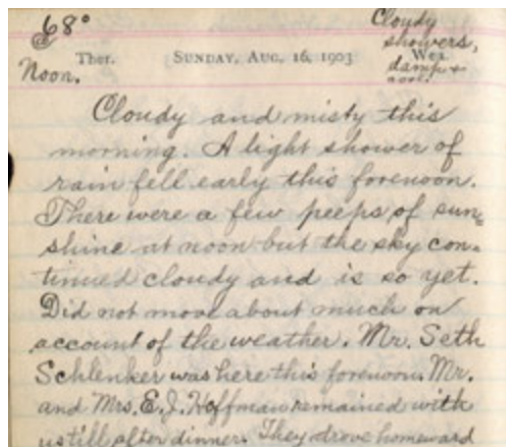
The Pennsylvania-Germans as a group are not ones that easily forget the past. To them, the demonization of Catholicism, a long standing foundation stone of the Reformation, was always bubbling just below the surface. And although active hostility had long ago ended, their distaste for the subject was never far away. It is surprising that he even chose to go once



he knew what church it was. But being of an inquisitive nature, it probably got the better of him, and that's why he went. His summation of the experience was rather succinct. "I had my first experience of attending a service of the Roman Church. I am glad that my religious training in my youth was not in this church".

Moving forward in time to 1928 we find Tom now in his 65th year and a crotchety old man. His opinions had become sharper, his patience had worn very thin, and everything seemed like a problem. One of the biggest issues that year was over the family home. Apparently, sometime after the death of his Mother in 1921, and with him gone for good parts of the year teaching, he had started renting it out to tenants. That year his tenants were actually a niece and her husband. Even though they were family, in a time-honored Pennsylvania German tradition, he found nothing but fault with them. Much of the problem, it seemed, stemmed from generational differences.

### Tom's diary



His agitation began early in the year. Apparently part of the landlord/tenant arrangement that they had was that the tenants were to provide meals for Tom, and often for his unmarried brother Sam, in addition to other chores, tasks, and general homemaking duties. But being of the younger set, the tenants had a "machine" (a car) and excelled at "joyriding" (travelling about the countryside by machine) day after day and night after night. This was particularly vexing to him and he constantly began to note "Tenants are off joyriding again tonight!" and "the folks left this morning for a place known only to themselves". Even his sister-in-law Alice Fister complained about her son Alton, Jr. and his fondness for joyriding.

Part way through the year the tenants became parents for the first time with the birth of a daughter. Tom was particularly charmed by the newest member of the family and made note of the child's birth, which offered up a brief reprieve from the growing tensions. But no sooner had the child been born, and off the entire family went, joyriding again with baby in tow, very much to his annoyance. But it was an entry on July 9th that really summed it all up, "my spirits are sinking. I fail to see how I and my tenants can get along together. These folks are too much on the road for farmers who can find work at home".

The troubles escalated as the year progressed with instances of coming home expecting meals, and finding none, having to break into his own house because they had locked him out, and even bickering over who's food belonged to who, ending with the tenants locking him out of his own kitchen at night. At the end of 1928 he had had enough and family or not, terminated their lease. Not having learned a lesson, he then offered the lease up to a nephew.

It seems one of the few highlights of the year took place on September 21st. On that day he was in Allentown conducting business and called upon an old friend named Kenneth Miller at his place of employment. It just so happened that Mr. Miller worked "on the "15th floor of the big building at 9th & Hamilton Streets. He took me to the top of the building. Here one sees beautifully over the whole city and far beyond". We know that building as the PP&L Building. In 1928 it was brand new and I can imagine that to a 65 year old man who had been born during the Civil War, that Art Deco skyscraper was some pretty amazing stuff.



### Thomas Grim Fister as a young boy



As if his problems at home that year weren't enough, professionally he had nearly reached the end of his career. In an odd twist of fate, it would be his last assignment, at the same place as his first assignment, the Rabert's Corner one room school, which would finally push him over the edge. His diary notes his continual agitation and exasperation with just about everything, but he saves his best for the students at Rabert's Corner and their unruly behavior.

As you read, you can see the growing agitation. "Henry J. Rabert was naughty. He does not have his voice under control. I caught him at his game." "Was annoyed by the disorder of some malicious pupils. Rubber slinging and whistling." "My work is not very congenial to me. The whistling nuisance was active again and the rubber slinging." "Helen Leibensperger revealed to me the guilty parties as Russell and Stella Olewine." "It feels bad to be annoyed by vicious youngsters". "I paid Henry J. Rabert (the father) for one month's boarding. He is anxious to have more for boarding. I told him about the behavior of his youngsters in school. It seemed to have the desired effect". "Before school this morning Lester Wertman climbed the flag pole. He can do this very well. His father warned him to not repeat this feat but will whip him if he does". "Henry Rabert said to me in arithmetic class 'I don't care for work'". "Randall Wertman broke a desk". "A youngster was throwing stones into the school

room. Can not yet catch the demon that does this meanness". "At recess the demon was in some youngsters to pelt the door with stones". It just goes on and on, day after day like this.

On October 29th he writes "One case of discipline arose. Gave him a good shaking which tore his shirt. (Geo. Rabert). He whistled". Stuck into a pocket in the back of the diary I found the following note sent back to the stern disciplinarian from the boy's father, but obviously written by one of the boy's siblings. I think it's priceless. "My Father does not want to send him to school because you shake him when he came home from school and he was sick when he spell words right you say it not right his father would not sent him to school my father would not let you kill him you should not do that" His diary makes no note of his reaction.

On the 30th he notes that he "passed the 65th milestone of life's journey to-day". The next day he opined that "the youngsters are getting particularly vicious. I feel that it will be best for me to leave if things will not change for the better. Rachel Wertman cried when I pointed out her mistakes. Stones flew again at the door". The unruly behavior just continued to escalate.

By mid November he appears despondent over the situation at Rabert's Corner. "The work of this school is demoralized so that it seems irredeemable. How I am to conquer them seems impossible. I shall probably be able to conquer them if I can catch one of the school mates and give him a good threshing for his unbecoming conduct". The next day, in a long rambling commentary about the onset of winter darkness and about depression, he finishes by saying "I feel that I must stop my labors in the school room if I shall be healthy". On November 16th he called it quits and retired after a very disagreeable day in the classroom. I "decided to stop the school and leave the work to abler hands. Do not like to teach the school any longer. These youngsters need another master to rule them. Hail and Farewell".

The next day he felt some remorse about the decision, but wrote "I do not regret going to leave such heathens". Within a few short weeks of passing his 65th birthday, and with his nerves so jangled from having taught the students of Lehigh County for 48 long years, he took his pension and retired back to the family farm. With the arrival of his first pension check in November he signed off with this commentary "this is a relief to a teacher who is about worn out and will enjoy the superannuation fund".

## Fister Family Home



Unlike most of his siblings, Tom Fister remained unmarried throughout his life. An interesting commentary in his diary may provide clues to why that was. In 1902 he wrote “I have so far taken no chance in the matrimonial line although I could have had some if I had taken advantage of the opportunities which I had. So long as I can see no improvement of my condition by marriage, I shall carefully resist all inclinations toward making the step”.

Thomas Grim Fister died at his home on Golden Key Road, Lynn Township, Lehigh County, PA on April 4, 1933, just shy of what would have been his 70th birthday. Obituaries in the Allentown papers hailed him as a “Veteran School Teacher” of Lehigh County. He was laid to rest in the family plot at New Jerusalem Church Cemetery within a stone's throw of the family church where he had spent so much time, and finally, once again, surrounded in death by those who in life had meant the most to him. His was a life well and thoroughly lived.

After his death, Tom Fister's diaries, his belongings, and his extensive personal library, were scattered to the winds. Occasionally a volume from this library with his name carefully scripted inside the front cover will turn up, as one recently did on e-bay. And just last month I discovered that his birth certificate, and also that of his father, is now part of the fraktur collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia. How they made it there is anybody's guess.

As follows are some additional excerpts from his diaries that I hope the readers of this article will find of interest.

***Life in Lynn Township:***

8/18/1902 Early this morning Eddie went to Trexler's with the load of apples we picked on Sat. to get the cider made. It gave 109 gallons. At noon, cooking apple butter was begun and will continue the whole night.

8/19/1902 Gipsies encamped in Bachman's woods this morning at Arndt's. They are descendents of old Martin Reinhard. Several of them called to beg for food and hay. One of the old women was here to sell baskets. The folks bought two. Spent some time in listening to stories which the basket woman told and later saw her work at basket making at their encampment.

3/15/1904 Jacob K. Hartman's barn burned down last Saturday evening. This is a severe calamity for Mr. H. The property is insured.

3/18/1904 Met Edwin Hermany at Lynnport this evening. He told me that the Sheriff closed Frank Krauss's store at New Tripoli.

5/25/1904 Elias Werley's coach maker shop is entirely removed.

5/27/1904 After breakfast I walked to Lynnport station. At the post office I mailed some letters. A short time I spent in C.M. Henry's store. Went to Germansville with the train. Walked to Saegersville to attend the examination of teachers for Heidelberg Twsp. Took dinner at Albert K. Hoppe's place. Five applicants in the class. One failed. Rode with Edgar O. Reitz to New Tripoli. Saw the church which is being frescoed now.

6/8/1904 This afternoon I churned butter for mother when she had returned from Braucher's (Her Son Edwin's home) She went there by request of Eddie. Lila was being operated upon (in her home) by doctors Erb, Chester Kistler, and John Kressly. Mother says that Lila suffered much pain when consciousness returned.

6/17/1904 Attended the teacher's examinations of Lynn. Eleven applicants in the class of whom five failed. The school board made the appointments this evening.

6/22/1904 After breakfast Father, Sam and I went down to Jonathan Smith's to assist at the work of putting up the frame of his new barn. About forty men assisted at this. Carpenter boss John Follweiler commanded his men well and the work was done very nicely.

8/28/1904 Camp Meeting at New Tripoli today.

10/23/1904 I accompanied Rev. Kurtz on his team to Allentown. We drove via Steins Corner, Seiberlingsville, Hynemansville, Seipstown, Fogelsville, and Cetronia. Reached Allentown (from Kistler's Valley) in about four hours.

8/23/1917 A Syrian peddler was here over dinner. Bought a pair of stockings from him.

8/25/1917 After dinner I walked to Lydia Werner's to attend the public sale of her lately deceased aunt's personal property and her grandma's estate. Mrs. Werner bought the lot for \$515. Lawyer Ed Trexler and wife were there. Met some old acquaintances. Squire Kistler clerked. Geo. Kistler assisted. Some old china ware brought high prices.

4/28/1928 Snow. 38 degrees at 6:30 a.m. The snow fall at this season is an unusual experience. I recall a heavy snow fall on April 29, 1873.

7/3/1928 Bought a shirt at Miller's store (in New Tripoli) at a reduced price. Mr. Miller is going to quit business and will sell out if he can find a purchaser.

7/13/1928 Read the Call (the Allentown Morning Call). It gives another account of the two people who flew past here on Wednesday (in an Aeroplane) and fell down and were killed on Charles Gilbert's farm on the other side of the mountain. Morris M. Fitterington of Brooklyn, N.Y. aged 35 and Lucretia Perry Andrews, 30, of Williamsport were the ones killed. To-days paper says they were struck by a bolt of lightning.

7/14/1928 Homer Snyder hauled citizens from New Tripoli to see the wreck of the aeroplane which went down at Snyder's on the Gilbert farm.

7/29/1928 Alvin D. Fetherolf told us of his son James who is a patient at the Allentown Hospital in consequence of an automobile accident which occurred near Schnecksville on last Thursday. He is in very serious condition.

9/26/1928 Rachel Wertman and her brothers went home to pick potatoes in accordance with the permission for which they asked by request of their father.

Genealogical Notes:

3/12/1904 I saw the "Democrat" and read that Miss Tivilia Snyder got married to Monroe Weaver of Lynnville, with whom she had been for years.

4/7/1917 I paid a visit to old Joseph Rauch who is in his 81st year and is still giving his leisure to making rakes.

9/1/1918 A little baby boy came to our neighbors Mr. & Mrs. Wilmer Oswald this morning. Dr. W.J. Fetherolf was the attending doctor.

12/13/1918 John C. Wuchter of Lynnport has heard from both of his sons who are in the U.S. Service in France. Allen is suffering from a wound. (the armistice ending WWI had just been announced a month before).

6/19/1928 On the Slatington trolley enjoyed the society of Ida Fusselman-Rohwitz of Omaha, Neb. whom I met in Aug 1895 at the funeral of her grandfather Jacob Kistler. Her husband is the Gen. Passenger Agent of the C.B.&L. R.R. She is 52 yrs since March, married 30 years. She is an elegant woman, a fine conversationalist and she told me much about her life. She is a cousin of Wilson Bachman and of Lila Braucher, Ed's first wife. (Wilson Bachman was married to Tom's sister Emma, and Lila Braucher was the first wife of Tom's brother H. Edwin Fister. She died in 1906)

8/20/1928 After supper Victor Snyder invited me to accompany them to his brother John's to learn the result of testing John's cattle. 8 were dropped from a herd of 15. Enjoyed this visit. Mrs Snyder nee Minnie George treated to fresh cider, the crowd. It was good. I am glad to learn to know this family. Her daughter Verna looks like her Aunt Mercy.

And finally, under the History does repeat itself category:

3/17/1917 Stopped at cousin Jesse's. Here I encountered a Republican "mud head".

7/13/1917 The President appeals to the business world to stand by him. He says profit and patriotism should not be used in the same sentence.

3/6/1918 Met Mr. J. F. Gallagher on the car this evening. He is engaged in the Americanization of aliens. These must either become citizens of our country or seek more congenial climes. America has reached the limit of toleration.

6/20/1928 Read the Democratic platform. It denounces the Republican tariff and corruption in the last eight years of the Republican party.

10/25/1928 Al Smith dives into Herbert Hoover for saying that Smith advocates Socialism.

10/31/1928 Some youngsters flooded me with masks of Hoover's effigy. I do not admire it. Hoover is a fake.

11/8/1928 Read in the call that "Holz Hoover" has a big majority. I can share the glory of this "Demons" triumph. Let the Devil have his due. I expect nothing but additional oppression. Hoover promises much but will do nothing. The Renegade carries Lehigh and Northampton counties.