

# My Wealthy New York Relative, Willis Sharpe Kilmer

Information Compiled by D. A. Sharpe

Willis Sharpe Kilmer is my half second cousin, once removed. Our ancestor in common is John Elsefer Sharp, Willis' great grandfather and my great, great grandfather. Willis is descended through John and his first wife, Eve Markle. I am descended through John and his second wife, Elizabeth Bodine.



Willis Sharpe Kilmer was born October 18, 1868 in Brooklyn, New York. His family moved to Binghamton, New York in 1878 where he lived the rest of his life, which ended in 1941.

Willis Sharpe Kilmer was born on the first anniversary of the United States' acquisition of Alaska from Russia. He was born in the year that the Great Train Robbery took place near Marshfield, Indiana, as seven members of the Reno gang made off with \$96,000 in cash, gold and bonds.

"Binghamton is a [city](#) in the [Southern Tier](#) of [New York](#) in the [United States](#). It is near the [Pennsylvania](#) border, in a bowl-shaped valley at the confluence of the [Susquehanna](#) and [Chenango](#) Rivers.

Binghamton is the [county seat](#) of [Broome County](#) and is the principal city and cultural center of the [Greater Binghamton](#) metropolitan area (also known as the [Triple Cities](#)), home to a quarter million people. The population of the city itself, according to the [2010 census](#), is 47,376.

"The city was named after [William Bingham](#), a wealthy Philadelphian who bought the surrounding land in 1792. Before that, the first known people of European descent to come to the area were the troops of the [Sullivan Expedition](#) in 1779, during the [American Revolutionary War](#).

"The community was first settled around 1802 at the junction of the Susquehanna and Chenango rivers and was known as Chenango Point. Binghamton was first incorporated in 1834 as a [village](#) of the [Town of Binghamton](#). Binghamton became a city in 1867. Abel Bennett, who was elected as secretary on January 30, 1845 of the Pennsylvania Coal Company, was the city's first mayor. His extensive property on the city's west side is known as the [Abel Bennett Tract](#)."\*

\*[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binghamton, New York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binghamton,_New_York)

[The Cleveland \(Ohio\) Plain Dealer](#) newspaper article by Dan Parker in the Sunday, December 8, 1946 issue provides very interesting information on Willis Sharpe Kilmer, published some six years after his death. The heading claimed, "Everything the Patent Medicine King Touched Turned to Gold - Even Horse Racing." He was known to have amassed a \$10 million plus fortune, mostly on a



cure-all patent medicine known as [Swamp Root](#), but also in newspaper publishing, real estate development and horse racing.



The greatest medicine he gave the public was what was considered a bag of horse bones named [Exterminator](#), the winner of the Kentucky Derby on May 11, 1918 in a field of eight contenders. The jockey riding the winner was William Knapp, the breeder was F. D Knight and the trainer was Henry

McDaniel. In 1928, Willis was the breeder for the winner of the Kentucky Derby, [Reigh Count](#). That horse was ridden by jockey Charlie Lang, trained by Bert Mitchell, and owned by Mrs. John D. Hertz. That same year, Reigh Count was voted the [American Award for Horse of the Year](#). Also in that 1928 Derby, Willis owned the 11th place horse out of 22 running, [Sun Beau](#). The rider was jockey John Craigmyle and the trainer was Charles W. Carroll. Willis, of course, was the breeder as well. This horse racing information came from an Internet search on Willis' name.

Another major source of the Kilmer family wealth under the leadership of Willis was vast elements of real estate development. He built the first sky scraper in Binghamton, New York, a towering six stories high! It was the [Kilmer Building, 141 Chenango Street](#), built in 1903, which was originally used as the home of the Kilmer product, Swamp Root. It was at the corner of Chenango and Lewis Streets.

"When you step off the railroad train, the Swamp-Root laboratory is the first striking object that confronts you - a beautiful, white, high-

towering building." This description of a first impression on arriving in Binghamton and seeing the Kilmer Building, appeared in a 1917 issue of [New York Sunday World](#). The article continued: "In many respects this building stands unique. The main office is wholly unlike anything of the kind in the country. The massive columns of solid marble and beautiful hand-carved molding, cornices and ceiling, and the marble mosaic floor, is of a type that forces admiration."\*

The Kilmer Building is an ornate, six-story brick and stone block faceted, 72,000 square foot building. It is located in the central Binghamton business district.

The building was built in 1903 for Jonas Kilmer as home of Dr. Kilmer & Company, manufacturers of "Swamp Root". Swamp Root was a late 19th century patent medicine. Jonas and son, Willis Sharp Kilmer played prominent roles in the development of Binghamton.

The Kilmer Building features a marble foyer, grand lobby and mahogany executive offices. It is a local landmark listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.



An early 1900's postcard featuring the Kilmer Building

Even in 2010 when the Kilmer Building was undergoing renovation (there have been several owners over the years), the project head was quoted as saying about the Kilmer Building that it is "one of the last riveted steel buildings made, and will probably be here for another 500 years."

<http://nyslandmarks.com/treasures/07sep.htm>

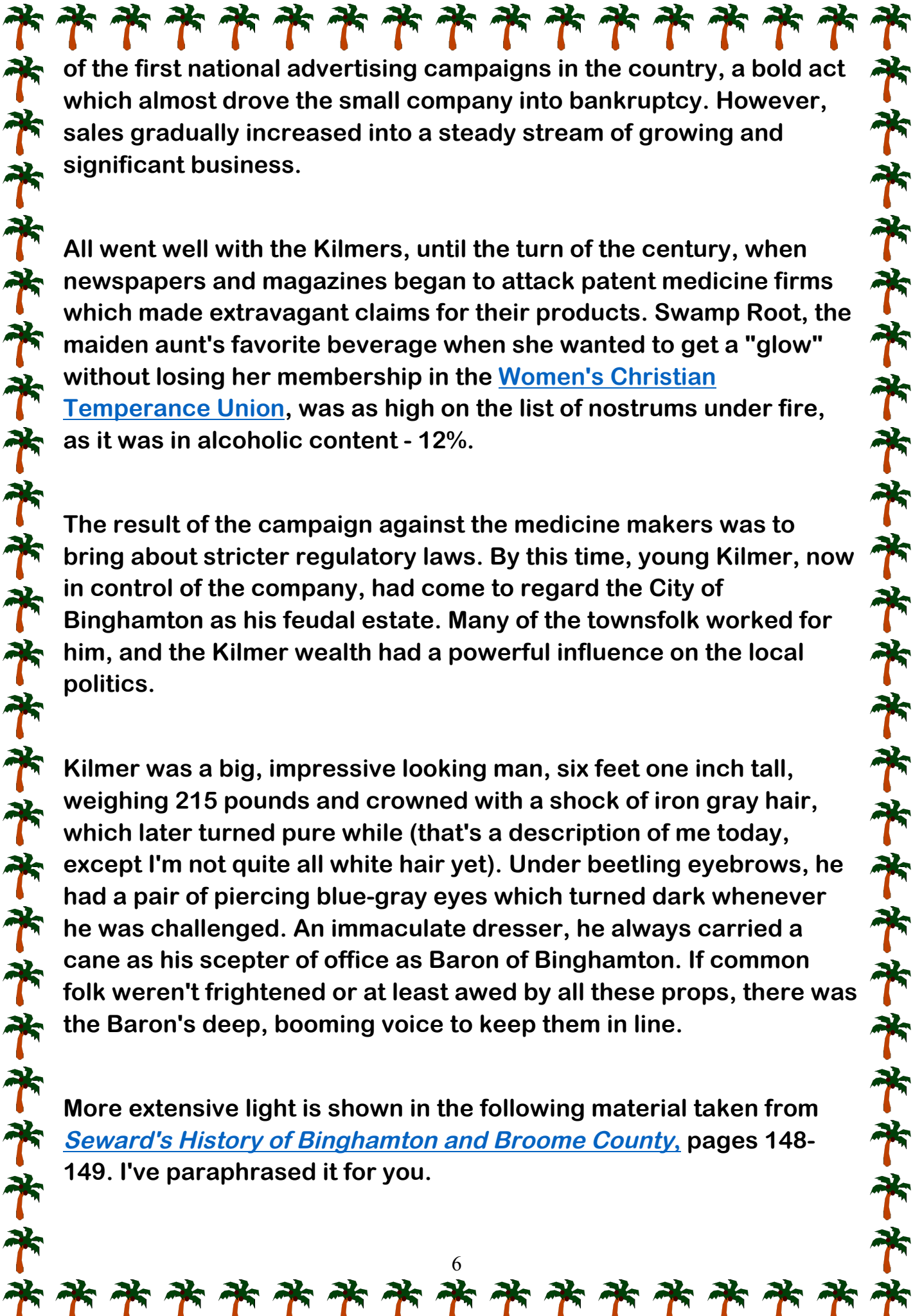
About 1914, Kilmer brought [Alfred \(Fred\) Lansing Sharpe](#) up from Texas to manage his buildings. Fred is a first cousin to Willis' mother, Julia Sharpe Kilmer. In 1904, Fred was the first Republican elected to a state office in Texas, following the Days of Reconstruction, Post War Between the States. In 1916, Fred's life ended with a self-inflicted gunshot wound, following an argument and shooting of Fred's daughter, Holland. She survived.



He generally was referred to by his full name of Willis Sharpe Kilmer, with the emphasis on the middle name. This not only accounted for the strong heritage of his Mother, but a general acknowledgement about the acumen he was perceived to possess. This reflected his success in the four wildly divergent endeavors he pursued, medicine, publishing, real estate development and horse racing.

Kilmer was age ten when the family moved to Binghamton. His father obtained an interest in the proprietary medicine business owned by [Dr. S. Andral Kilmer](#), Willis' uncle. Their product, Swamp Root, was reputed to be a cure-all for kidney, liver and bladder ailments. During those years, the business was mostly in and around Binghamton.

This all changed when Willis returned home from his [Cornell University](#) education in marketing. His first step was to insert advertisements in small newspapers all over the country. It was one



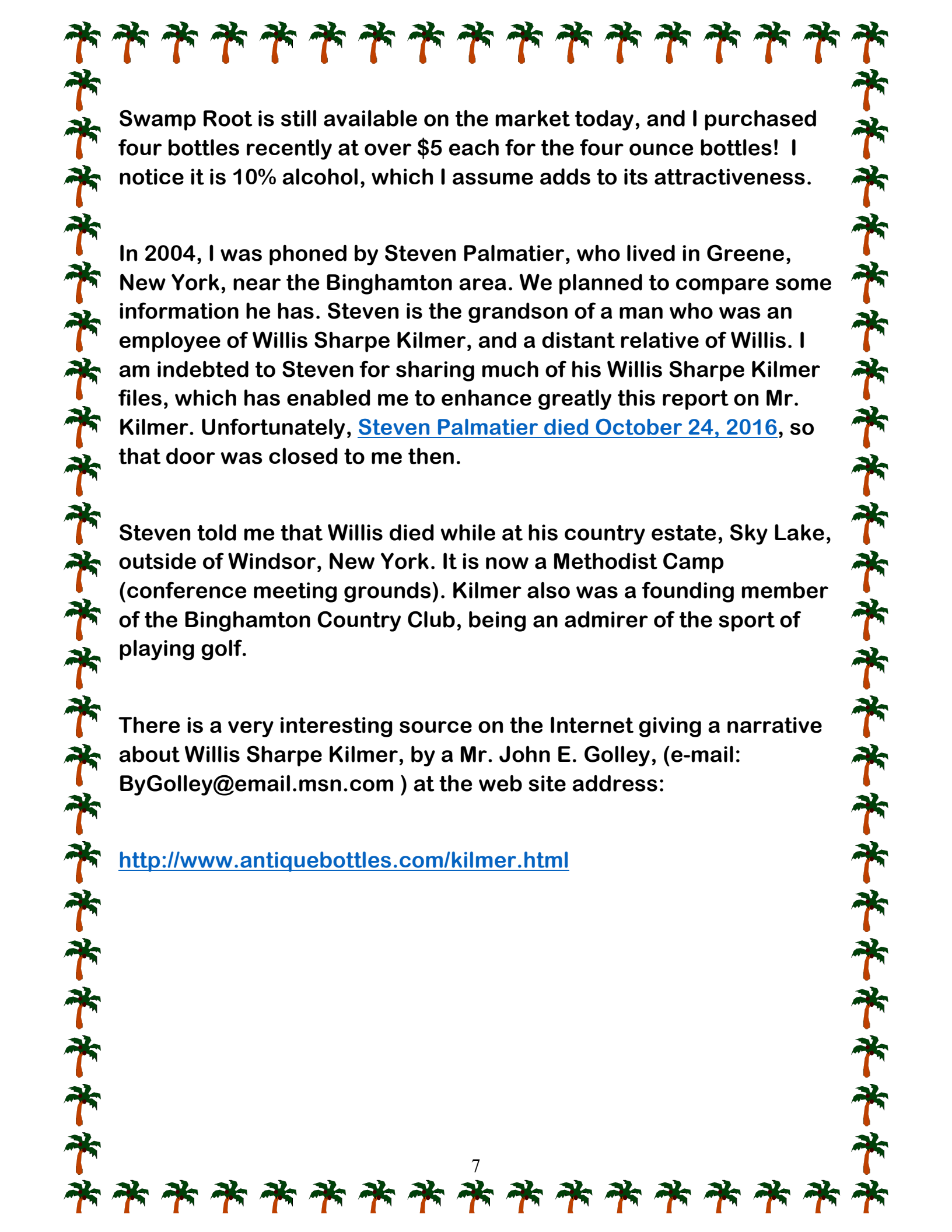
of the first national advertising campaigns in the country, a bold act which almost drove the small company into bankruptcy. However, sales gradually increased into a steady stream of growing and significant business.

All went well with the Kilmers, until the turn of the century, when newspapers and magazines began to attack patent medicine firms which made extravagant claims for their products. Swamp Root, the maiden aunt's favorite beverage when she wanted to get a "glow" without losing her membership in the [Women's Christian Temperance Union](#), was as high on the list of nostrums under fire, as it was in alcoholic content - 12%.

The result of the campaign against the medicine makers was to bring about stricter regulatory laws. By this time, young Kilmer, now in control of the company, had come to regard the City of Binghamton as his feudal estate. Many of the townsfolk worked for him, and the Kilmer wealth had a powerful influence on the local politics.

Kilmer was a big, impressive looking man, six feet one inch tall, weighing 215 pounds and crowned with a shock of iron gray hair, which later turned pure white (that's a description of me today, except I'm not quite all white hair yet). Under beetling eyebrows, he had a pair of piercing blue-gray eyes which turned dark whenever he was challenged. An immaculate dresser, he always carried a cane as his scepter of office as Baron of Binghamton. If common folk weren't frightened or at least awed by all these props, there was the Baron's deep, booming voice to keep them in line.

More extensive light is shown in the following material taken from [Seward's History of Binghamton and Broome County](#), pages 148-149. I've paraphrased it for you.



Swamp Root is still available on the market today, and I purchased four bottles recently at over \$5 each for the four ounce bottles! I notice it is 10% alcohol, which I assume adds to its attractiveness.

In 2004, I was phoned by Steven Palmatier, who lived in Greene, New York, near the Binghamton area. We planned to compare some information he has. Steven is the grandson of a man who was an employee of Willis Sharpe Kilmer, and a distant relative of Willis. I am indebted to Steven for sharing much of his Willis Sharpe Kilmer files, which has enabled me to enhance greatly this report on Mr. Kilmer. Unfortunately, [Steven Palmatier died October 24, 2016](#), so that door was closed to me then.

Steven told me that Willis died while at his country estate, Sky Lake, outside of Windsor, New York. It is now a Methodist Camp (conference meeting grounds). Kilmer also was a founding member of the Binghamton Country Club, being an admirer of the sport of playing golf.

There is a very interesting source on the Internet giving a narrative about Willis Sharpe Kilmer, by a Mr. John E. Golley, (e-mail: [ByGolley@email.msn.com](mailto:ByGolley@email.msn.com) ) at the web site address:

<http://www.antiquebottles.com/kilmer.html>

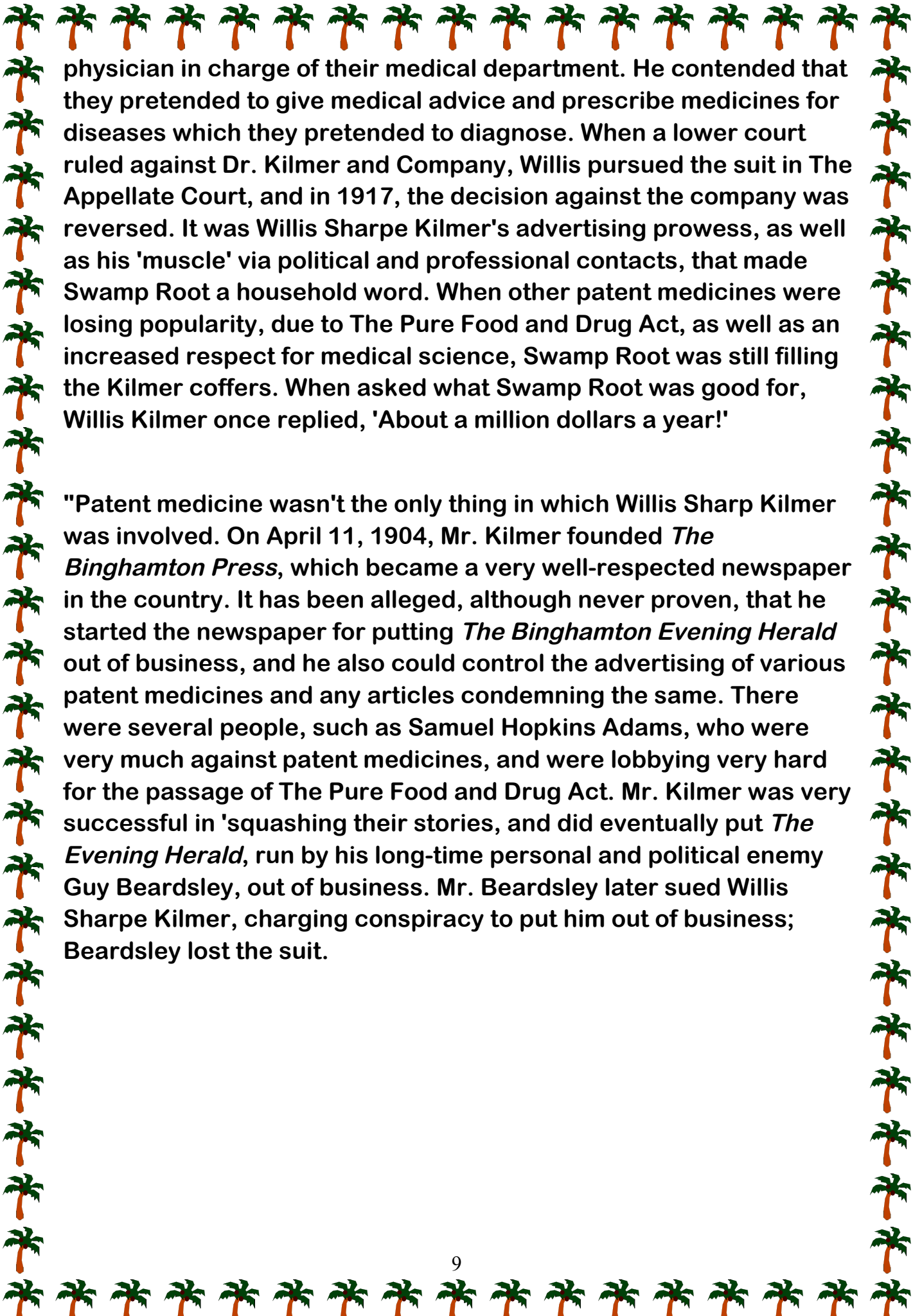


Below is an excerpt:

"Willis Sharpe Kilmer was born in Brooklyn, New York on October 18, 1869. He graduated from Cornell University in 1880, and went to work in the family business. Willis was put in charge of the advertising department of Dr. Kilmer and Company, which led to a swift increase in business. Advertising in the late 1800's was not the "science" that it is today, and Willis Sharpe Kilmer was one of advertising's earliest pioneers. His first wife was Beatrice Richardson whose socially prominent father was one of the brightest executives in a fledgling newspaper advertising agency in New York City. Willis Kilmer had a more metropolitan upbringing than many of his peers, and his relationship with Mr. Richardson and his family connections all helped benefit Willis and his new ideas. Dr. Kilmer and Company utilized all the forms of advertising of the day, including painted wooden signs, posters and printed circulars, but with the entrance of Willis' leadership, began purchasing advertisement space in newspapers, expounding the virtues of their numerous cures. They were amongst the fore-runners in printing Almanacs, which not only would list the normal items, such as moon phases, best planting times and the like, but at every turn of the page, listed one or more of the products, printed testimonials for the same and helped diagnose 'ailments' of which one of their products would 'cure.'

"The packaging of their products was also easily noticed on the shelf. For ease of finding the correct cure, their Heart Remedy had an embossed heart on it, Swamp Root Kidney Cure had a kidney embossed on it and so forth, and their packaging was bright orange, with the likeness of a whiskered Dr. S. Andral Kilmer, printed boldly on the front. The package also invited customers to write to Dr. Kilmer for advice and prescription, which, long after Dr. S. Andral Kilmer had sold his share of the business, caused Dr. Kilmer to initiate a lawsuit against his brother and nephew in which he accused Dr. Kilmer and Company of representing him as the





physician in charge of their medical department. He contended that they pretended to give medical advice and prescribe medicines for diseases which they pretended to diagnose. When a lower court ruled against Dr. Kilmer and Company, Willis pursued the suit in The Appellate Court, and in 1917, the decision against the company was reversed. It was Willis Sharpe Kilmer's advertising prowess, as well as his 'muscle' via political and professional contacts, that made Swamp Root a household word. When other patent medicines were losing popularity, due to The Pure Food and Drug Act, as well as an increased respect for medical science, Swamp Root was still filling the Kilmer coffers. When asked what Swamp Root was good for, Willis Kilmer once replied, 'About a million dollars a year!'

"Patent medicine wasn't the only thing in which Willis Sharp Kilmer was involved. On April 11, 1904, Mr. Kilmer founded *The Binghamton Press*, which became a very well-respected newspaper in the country. It has been alleged, although never proven, that he started the newspaper for putting *The Binghamton Evening Herald* out of business, and he also could control the advertising of various patent medicines and any articles condemning the same. There were several people, such as Samuel Hopkins Adams, who were very much against patent medicines, and were lobbying very hard for the passage of The Pure Food and Drug Act. Mr. Kilmer was very successful in 'squashing their stories, and did eventually put *The Evening Herald*, run by his long-time personal and political enemy Guy Beardsley, out of business. Mr. Beardsley later sued Willis Sharpe Kilmer, charging conspiracy to put him out of business; Beardsley lost the suit.



"Willis Sharpe Kilmer was also a very fine judge of horses. The family mansion is still located on [Riverside Drive in Binghamton](#), and on the surrounding grounds, Mr. Kilmer built Sun Briar Court, which had a 1/5-mile indoor track, an outdoor track connected to a half-mile circular track, 100 fire-

proof stalls, and the main stable, included offices, quarters and a clubhouse. The Kilmer racing colors were brown, green and orange. He owned many fine horses; Genie, the son of Man O'War, Sun Briar, Sun Beau and Exterminator, which won the 1918 Kentucky Derby, and was the leading money winner for four straight seasons. Sun Beau held the American record for money won, until Sea Biscuit broke the record in 1939.

Mr. Kilmer owned a large estate on the Rappahannock River in Virginia known as Remlik (Kilmer spelled backwards), as well as a game preserve near Binghamton, called Sky Lake. He was a pioneer in forest and game preservation in New York as well as in Virginia. He established the Kilmer Pathological Laboratory in Binghamton, and started Binghamton's first nine-hole golf course, which later became the Binghamton Country Club.

An interesting story is available here about the [USS Remlik and the Metal of Honor](#)! Remilik is Kilmer, spelled backwards.

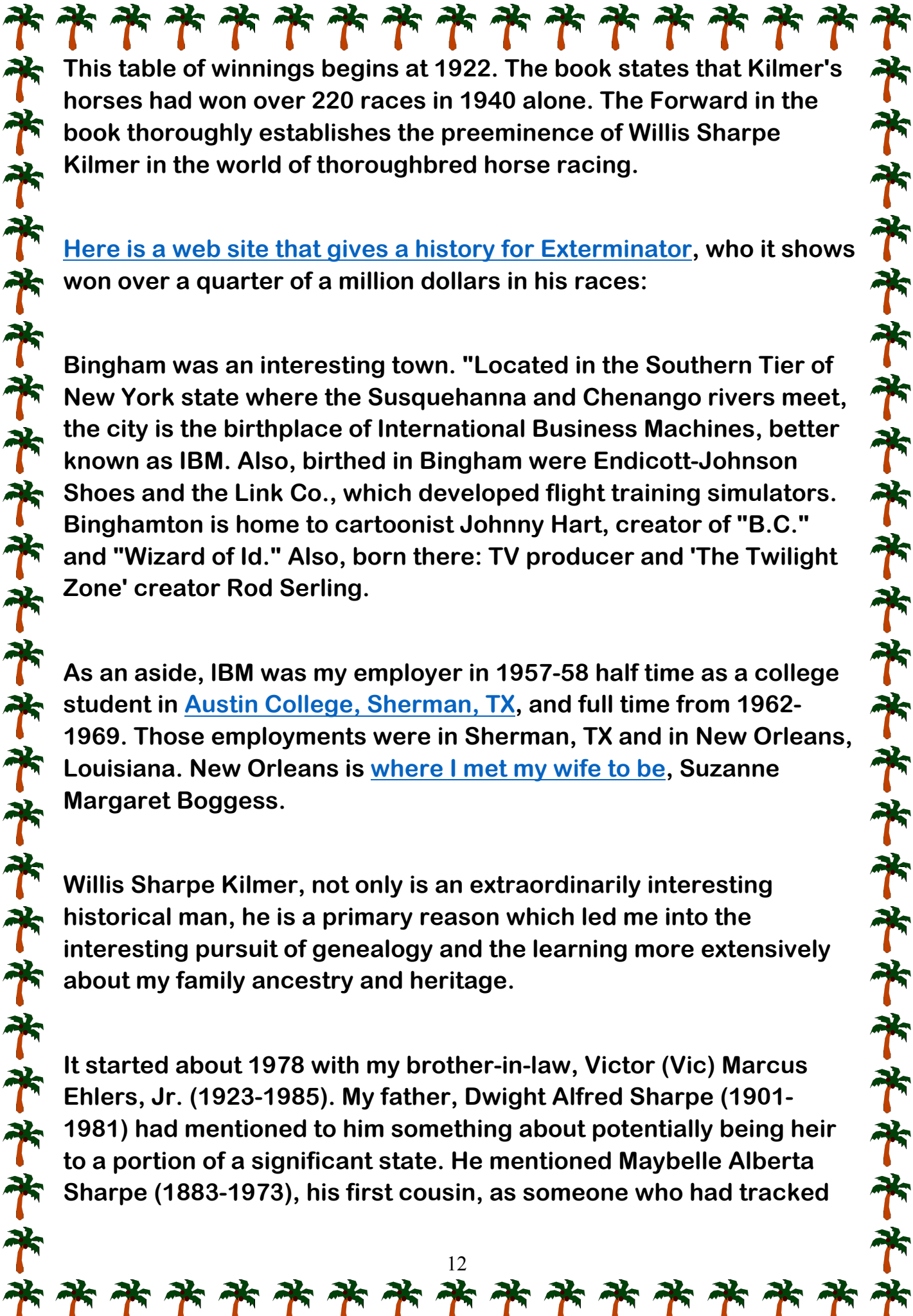
**"Willis Sharpe Kilmer died of pneumonia on July 12, 1940, leaving an estate estimated at \$10 to \$15 million dollars, and is interred in the family mausoleum in Floral Park Cemetery in Binghamton, New York.**



**"After World War II, his second wife, Sarah Jane Wells, sold the rights to make and manufacture Swamp Root to Medtech Laboratories of Cody, Wyoming. The six-story Kilmer Building, built in 1903 after the original**

**building was damaged by fire, still stands at 141 Chenango Street, and Swamp Root was still on the shelves of the E. C. McKallor Drug Company in Binghamton in 1983. It can still be ordered today, more than almost 120 years after it was first produced, a testament to the advertising skill of Willis Sharpe Kilmer and the strength of the Kilmer name and reputation."**

**About in 1994, Steven Palmatier loaned me a paper-bound book, well over 100 pages long, that used as the catalog for cautioning off the race horse stock of Willis' estate on October 30, 1940 at the Farm, Court Manor, near New Market, Virginia. The elaborate book gave the schedule for the day, including lunch, displayed an inventory of all the stallions, weanlings, and brood mares, had an individual page devoted for the genealogy and pedigree of each of the 102 horses being sold, including photographs some of them, and a table showing the house race winnings of Kilmer annually, totaling \$3,919,519 for the previous 18 years. This, of course was not all his winnings, for we know he owned a Kentucky Derby winner in 1918.**



This table of winnings begins at 1922. The book states that Kilmer's horses had won over 220 races in 1940 alone. The Forward in the book thoroughly establishes the preeminence of Willis Sharpe Kilmer in the world of thoroughbred horse racing.

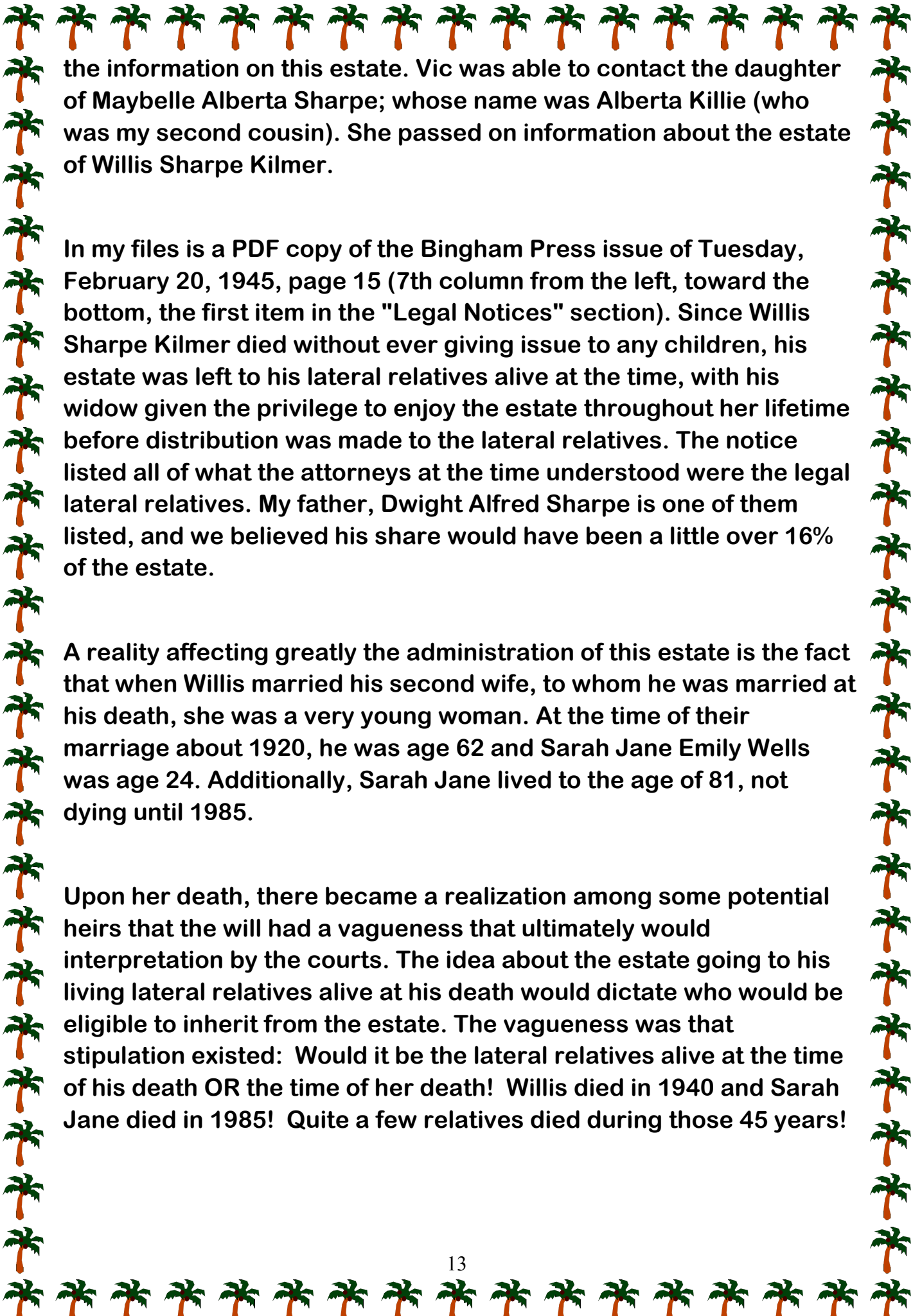
[Here is a web site that gives a history for Exterminator](#), who it shows won over a quarter of a million dollars in his races:

Bingham was an interesting town. "Located in the Southern Tier of New York state where the Susquehanna and Chenango rivers meet, the city is the birthplace of International Business Machines, better known as IBM. Also, birthed in Bingham were Endicott-Johnson Shoes and the Link Co., which developed flight training simulators. Binghamton is home to cartoonist Johnny Hart, creator of "B.C." and "Wizard of Id." Also, born there: TV producer and 'The Twilight Zone' creator Rod Serling.

As an aside, IBM was my employer in 1957-58 half time as a college student in [Austin College, Sherman, TX](#), and full time from 1962-1969. Those employments were in Sherman, TX and in New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans is [where I met my wife to be](#), Suzanne Margaret Boggess.

Willis Sharpe Kilmer, not only is an extraordinarily interesting historical man, he is a primary reason which led me into the interesting pursuit of genealogy and the learning more extensively about my family ancestry and heritage.

It started about 1978 with my brother-in-law, Victor (Vic) Marcus Ehlers, Jr. (1923-1985). My father, Dwight Alfred Sharpe (1901-1981) had mentioned to him something about potentially being heir to a portion of a significant state. He mentioned Maybelle Alberta Sharpe (1883-1973), his first cousin, as someone who had tracked

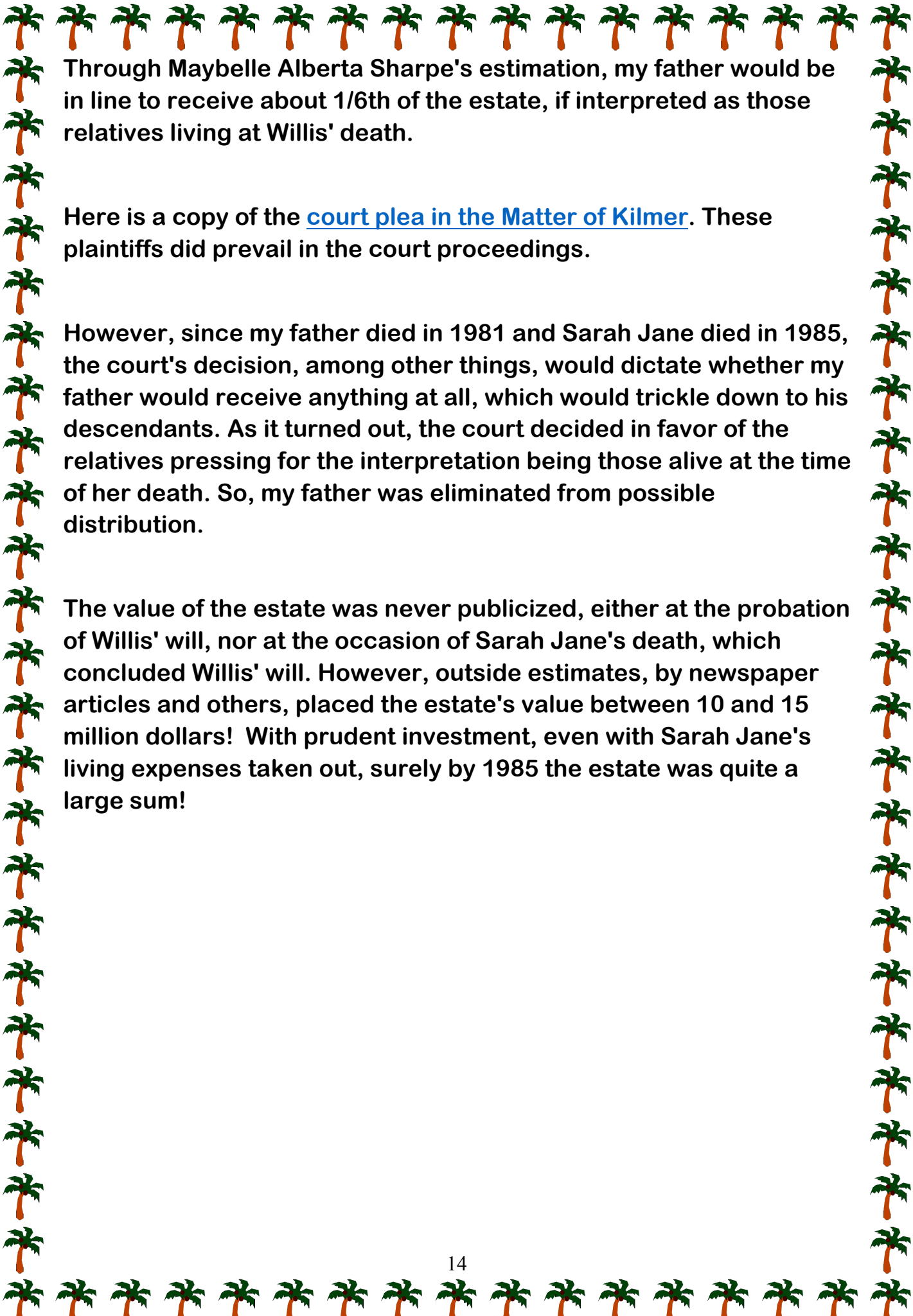


the information on this estate. Vic was able to contact the daughter of Maybelle Alberta Sharpe; whose name was Alberta Killie (who was my second cousin). She passed on information about the estate of Willis Sharpe Kilmer.

In my files is a PDF copy of the Bingham Press issue of Tuesday, February 20, 1945, page 15 (7th column from the left, toward the bottom, the first item in the "Legal Notices" section). Since Willis Sharpe Kilmer died without ever giving issue to any children, his estate was left to his lateral relatives alive at the time, with his widow given the privilege to enjoy the estate throughout her lifetime before distribution was made to the lateral relatives. The notice listed all of what the attorneys at the time understood were the legal lateral relatives. My father, Dwight Alfred Sharpe is one of them listed, and we believed his share would have been a little over 16% of the estate.

A reality affecting greatly the administration of this estate is the fact that when Willis married his second wife, to whom he was married at his death, she was a very young woman. At the time of their marriage about 1920, he was age 62 and Sarah Jane Emily Wells was age 24. Additionally, Sarah Jane lived to the age of 81, not dying until 1985.

Upon her death, there became a realization among some potential heirs that the will had a vagueness that ultimately would interpretation by the courts. The idea about the estate going to his living lateral relatives alive at his death would dictate who would be eligible to inherit from the estate. The vagueness was that stipulation existed: Would it be the lateral relatives alive at the time of his death OR the time of her death! Willis died in 1940 and Sarah Jane died in 1985! Quite a few relatives died during those 45 years!



Through Maybelle Alberta Sharpe's estimation, my father would be in line to receive about 1/6th of the estate, if interpreted as those relatives living at Willis' death.

Here is a copy of the [court plea in the Matter of Kilmer](#). These plaintiffs did prevail in the court proceedings.

However, since my father died in 1981 and Sarah Jane died in 1985, the court's decision, among other things, would dictate whether my father would receive anything at all, which would trickle down to his descendants. As it turned out, the court decided in favor of the relatives pressing for the interpretation being those alive at the time of her death. So, my father was eliminated from possible distribution.

The value of the estate was never publicized, either at the probation of Willis' will, nor at the occasion of Sarah Jane's death, which concluded Willis' will. However, outside estimates, by newspaper articles and others, placed the estate's value between 10 and 15 million dollars! With prudent investment, even with Sarah Jane's living expenses taken out, surely by 1985 the estate was quite a large sum!



Compiled by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. A. Sharpe".

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