

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE AGE OF AN ALLEGED CENTENARIAN

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Abstract—At times, persons have been reported as living to extremely advanced ages such as 130, or even higher (McWhirter and McWhirter, 1977, p. 26; Medvedev, 1974; Merrill, 1976). However, controlled studies of closed groups like Civil War veterans (Myers and Shudde, 1955) have not shown any persons surviving beyond age 110, when age has been reasonably verified. It seems, therefore, highly plausible that reports of extremely advanced ages at death reflect exaggerations of age rather than reality. This note reports a case history which supports this view and illustrates how ages can be verified using available census data.

The gravestone of Christopher Vanpool in a small country cemetery near Warrior's Mark, Pennsylvania, states that he died at the age of 112 years, 4 months, and 4 days on October 20, 1866. Newspaper accounts and other contemporary statements affirmed that Mr. Vanpool (at times his name appears with different spellings, such as Van Poole and Vanphule) was about this age. Interesting accounts about him have recently been published—for example, Gwendolyn Wagner, "Christian Van Poole," *Centre County Heritage*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Bellefonte, Pa.: Centre County Historical Society, Spring 1977), and J. Marvin Lee, "The Durable Dutchman," *Town and Gown*, vol. 12, no. 4 (State College, Pa.: Barash Advertising Company, April 1977).

According to these accounts, Mr. Vanpool was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania on May 23, 1754. He did not fight in the Revolutionary War, but he alleged that he had visited Philadelphia frequently and had seen not only George Washington and Lafayette, but also General Howe and his British redcoats. Mr. Vanpool was said to have migrated in 1805 to a rural tract of land near Stormstown, Halfmoon Township, Centre County, Pennsylvania.

He remained there, working as a farmer and tanner, until his death in 1866.

Because Mr. Vanpool had resided in the same place for about 60 years before his death (and, further, because this place was in a small rural township), it seemed to be a feasible bit of research to attempt to trace him in the census records for 1810 to 1860. These records are on microfilm in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. It was possible to locate Mr. Vanpool in all such censuses except the 1820 one, with the results shown in Table 1. It should be noted that the censuses before 1850 did not enumerate by single ages, only by broad age groups.

[There are some cases, however, when census data cannot be used to verify ages. For example, the person who is stated to be the oldest living Social Security beneficiary, Charlie Smith (Merrill, 1976), was alleged to have been 113 years old when he was first covered under Social Security in 1955 as a farm worker. He began to receive benefits in 1956 and is still alive, at an alleged age of 135. There was no significant proof of date of birth or attained age at a young age many years before. Because of his name being a common one and because he moved around so

Table 1.—Data on Ages Reported for Christian Vanpool in Various Censuses and Corresponding Years of Birth

Census	Age Reported in Census	Year of Birth Based on Age Reported in Census ^a
1810	26-45	1764-1783
1820	--b	--
1830	50-59	1771-1780
1840	60-69	1771-1780
1850	76	1773
1860	103	1756

a- This is computed on the basis that the age reported was that attained on May 23 (his birthday) of the calendar year preceding the census.

b- -- Not reported.

Note: Based on his gravestone, his year of birth is 1754. There is a slight discrepancy of a few days between the date of death (October 20, 1866) and the length of life (112 years, 4 months, and 4 days) shown on the gravestone and the date of birth reported elsewhere (May 23, 1754).

frequently, tracing him in the census records in the National Archives is impossible.]

The year of birth of Mr. Vanpool as derived from the age reported in the census was reasonably consistent for the three censuses before 1850 for which data were reported for him—namely, at some year

between 1771 and 1780. The reporting in the 1850 census was consistent with that in the earlier censuses and seemed to pin the likely year of birth down to 1773. However, when we come to the 1860 census, Mr. Vanpool seems to have aged 27 years in the decennium! And then he aged 8 years in the 6 years between the 1860 census and his death in 1866.

In summary, Christian Vanpool, whose gravestone shows him as having died at age 112 and who was widely believed to be over age 110 a year or so before his death, actually seems to have begun exaggerating his age in the 1850s, when he was actually about 80 years old. His age at death was very likely 93 (or, at least, very close to that), not 112.

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