



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Know any good ghost stories? The Historical Society wants to hear any lore about strange happenings in the Borough. So far, we have about four such tales of the uncanny or the unexplained. As we collect more of them, we would like to include them as part of a "Ghost Walk" tour planned for next October. So, with the nights now long perhaps you'll be inspired to recall that mysterious tale heard long ago. And while we normally strive for historical accuracy, in this case something that's just rumor or supposition is fine, as long as a good story is involved.

Some other things we are on the lookout for to add to our growing collection include a copy of the History of South Pymatuning Township pamphlet from 1977 and photos or home movies from the 1974 Sharpsville Centennial. Of course, we are interested in all sorts of items—photos, documents and artifacts—as long as they can help tell the story of our town and how we lived.

If you want to keep your photos, please allow us to make a high-resolution scan since this is more useful than a photocopy.

Items for Sale

Last chance!

2014

COMMEMORATIVE WALL CALENDAR

featuring twelve rarely-seen photos of old-time
Sharpsville along with other nuggets of
historical information.

Available at: Sharpsville Boro Building, A.J. Kovach Tax Office, Sharpsville Floral, Mela's Tax Service, Muscarella's, 1st National Bank (Sharpsville Branch), Mehler Insurance, Touch of Class Salon, Pizza Joes, & St. Bartholomew's

Cost \$10

Events

The **Madrigal Singers of the Shenango Valley Chorale** presented a wonderful Christmas Concert at our building December 21st. In addition to filling all who attended with holiday spirit, their generosity allowed the event to be a financial success for the Society as well.



Upcoming at Pierce Opera House is one of the quality productions of Area Community Theatre of Sharpsville

the smash Broadway hit *Les Miserables*

March 14-16, 21-23, 28-30

Call 724-815-4388 for tickets

From the Archives

The Federal censuses are an important window to times past, with the occupational listings among the most intriguing items. The 1880 and 1900 censuses for Sharpsville of course reflect the large number of workers at the blast furnaces, with other occupations giving glimpses of life in those years.

Teamster, Drayman, Liveryman and Hostler remind us of the former importance of the horse. The list includes a Huckster, Chore Boy, and Lace Maker, plus a number of Blacksmiths. Reminiscent of past days is the Telegraph Operator and Delivery Boy—Groceries. A Manufacturer of Wire Novelties and the City Lamp Lighter also lived here.

Despite being a gritty mill-town at the time, there was an Artist in the 1880 census and in 1900 five Actors or Actresses (though four were living in a hotel the day the census was taken and so must have been part of a travelling troupe).

Test your knowledge of our town

Sharpsville boasts the oldest of what type of organization?

answer on back page

A Look Back

Another look at the Sharpsville Railroad

The May 2013 issue of this newsletter profiled the "Lincoln Coach," the sole passenger car of the Sharpsville Railroad whose 1909 burning was widely reported in newspapers across the country. Town lore held the coach as the same one used by Lincoln on his journey from Springfield, Illinois to his first inauguration in Washington; however, a follow-up article in one of the local papers cast doubt on that claim.

Newly uncovered evidence, though, establishes a provenance for the coach and increases the likelihood of a connection with Lincoln's journey.

An 1898 article in the *New Castle News* tells us that:

The old ironclad coach now in use on the Sharpsville [Railroad] . . . was built in New Brighton in ante-bellum days by Merrick & Hanna, car manufacturers . . . These iron cars are the invention of John Glass, a one-time famous master mechanic, who claimed iron passenger cars was the solution from fires following railroad accidents. An order was given by the Ft. Wayne company for twenty-four such coaches, and the Sharpsville car is one of the number. In that day they were thought to be the pinnacle of style and elegance, but were soon tabooed by a number of causes. They were then used to haul emigrants and afterwards parceled out to the many branch roads and used as way freight cabooses.

In an early day, however, it was used as a private car by the officers of the Ft. Wayne road, and in a number of cases was tendered and accepted as a means of conveying notable personages . . .

Indeed Merrick, Hanna & Co. passenger coaches were the only iron-clad designs that found their way into general production in the 19th century, with the Pittsburgh, Ft. Wayne & Chicago Railroad apparently their only customer. The coaches were eventually found to be too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter and so fell out of favor.

One of the cars was in use four months before Lincoln's inaugural journey in February 1861 as the premier railcar on the Pittsburgh, Ft. Wayne & Chicago. As he travelled eastward, Lincoln changed trains at Rochester, Beaver County, and rode that line into Pittsburgh. So it is very likely the iron-clad Merrick & Hanna model carried the President-elect on this leg of his route. (The iron cladding it turns out was merely a feature of the best the railroad had to offer and was not a defense against the threat of assassination that hung over Lincoln.)

The Ft. Wayne road ordered four additional cars in 1862, with more later. At this point, we cannot say whether it was the original car that carried Lincoln—or one of the later sister coaches—that ended up on the Sharpsville Railroad, at some point after they started passenger service in 1871.

By the 1890s, the local papers took a quizzical interest in the little 17-mile railroad, long past its days of importance as the principal means of shipping coal from the fields of Hickory, Neshannock and Bethel. (It was operated under receivership from 1897 until it shut down in 1931, one of the longest insolvencies on record.) The reports often included quips from its editors, basically along the lines "How is the Sharpsville Railroad still in business?" One particularly amusing account from a 1900 journey from Sharpsville to New Wilmington reads as follows:



An iron-clad Merrick Hanna coach similar to Sharpsville's "Lincoln Coach" many years later on the South Carolina Railroad

"Have you ever taken a ride over the Sharpsville railroad?" asked a local man of the *Vindicator's* railroad hustler this morning. Receiving a negative reply he continued:

"You've missed it. Talk about antiquities—well, it's the limit. The other day I was in Sharpsville and had business in Wilmington Junction. This Sharpsville road operates between these two points. The distance is only 17 miles but it takes just one hour and 20 minute to make the trip one way. The road is now and has been for some time in the hands of a receiver and it's no wonder.

A Look Back

Sharpsville Railroad, cont'd.

"Well, I took the train—its an accommodation—at Sharpsville and by slow stages covered about half of my journey. In the distance of eight or nine miles I think the train stopped at least a dozen times to let off or take on a passenger. I had settled myself in one of the most uncomfortable seats I ever occupied and in a dreamy sort of way took in the scenery as we crept along at indifferent speed. Suddenly the report of a gun rang out immediately in the rear which almost frightened the life out of me. Jumping to my feet I remembered having heard one of the trainmen bemoan the fact that he had forgotten to bring his gun along and my first thought was that we had been attacked by a bunch of bold brigands and were about to go through an experience such as the Jesse James gang used to dole out with a lavish hand. A second or two later and before I could gather my scattered wits the train came to a standstill and peering out of the window expecting to see a swarm of train robbers armed to the teeth I shook like a victim of the ague.

"Well what did you see?" questioned the reporter as the speaker hesitated.

"I was disappointed. I saw a man disappear in the bushes along side the track and a second or two later emerge carrying a big fat rabbit. You see a passenger who occupied a seat in the rear of the car, who was onto the opportunities a trip over the road presented for hunting had brought his gun and as he rode along kept a sharp lookout for game, of which there is an abundance in that neck of the woods. He saw the bunny seated on its haunches and blazed away.

The equipment of this road is equally as interesting as the method of operating it. The train, which makes the round trip from Wilmington Junction to Sharpsville twice a day, is usually made up of an engine of the vintage of 1830, a couple of freight cars, a combination baggage and mail-car and a passenger coach that saw service on the main line of the Lake Shore when that road was in its swaddling clothes. A description of the train recalls the pictures that my grandfather used to draw for us children when telling us about the march of progress in 'ye olden times.' "

While much wisdom may be found in the words "life is about the journey, not the destination," we do not expect it to be a philosophy espoused by trainmen. Two years before the above account, another report tells of a railroad man who shot at a rabbit, wounding it, with the engineer stopping the train so the whole crew could chase after it. Another tale of the Sharpsville Railroad has the crew hopping off the engine to pick berries and swinging back onto the caboose as it rattled past.

A century ago, for many Westminster College students the train was the principal means of travel to New Wilmington. It was often the subject of collegiate jokes and skits. They referred to the train as the "Hoodle Bug"; the "jerk train" or the "Toonerville Trolley" (after a comic strip of that name) were also appellations, derisive to be sure, though not without affection for the lumbering relic.

Despite the ridicule prompted by the railroad's long senescence, its origins were important to the industrial development of Sharpsville and the greater Shenango Valley. Originally built as the Sharpsville & Oakland Railroad by Gen. James Pierce it ran through present day Hermitage and Shenango Township with many spurs connecting to the numerous coal mines dotting the area. The coal, the famous "Mercer County Block Coal", was shipped to Sharpsville where there stood a junction with the Erie & Pittsburgh, with much of the coal sent to the docks of Erie. And because the properties of this coal enabled it to be used in a blast furnace without being coked, much of it fueled Sharpsville's iron-making.

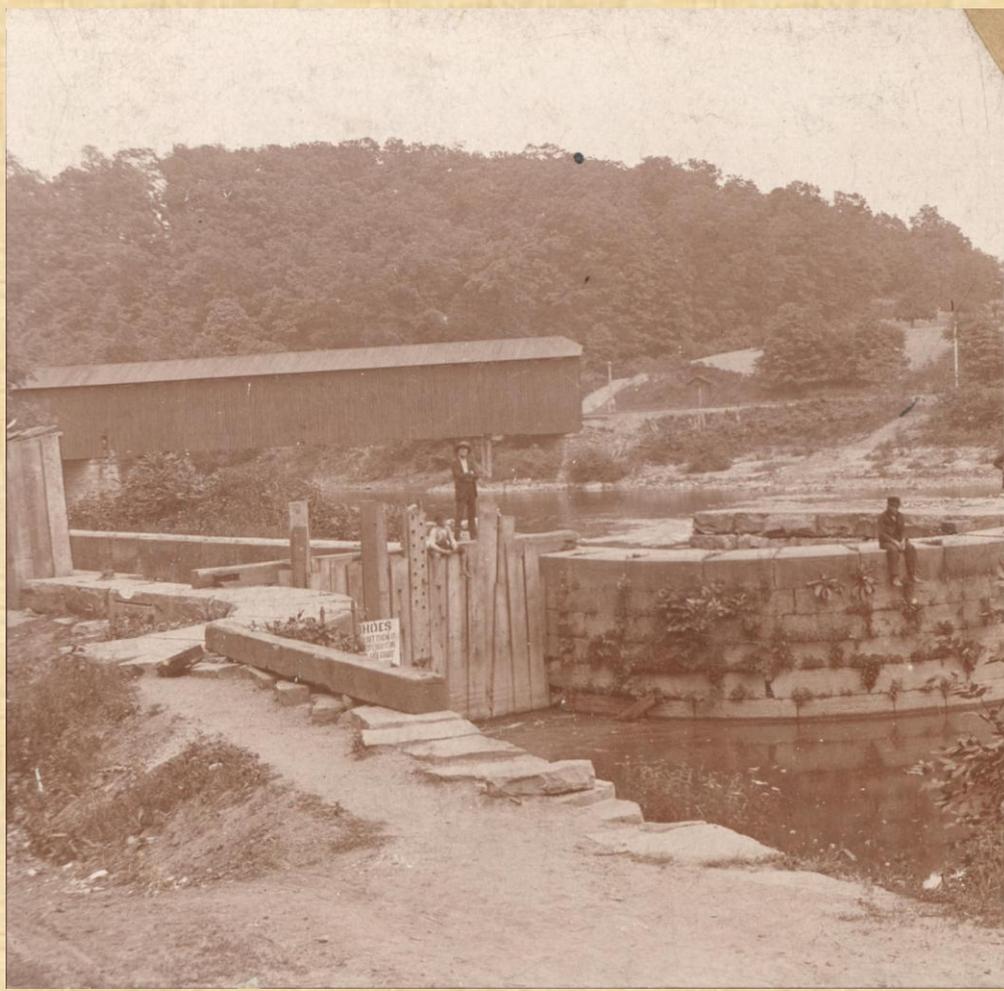


A 1918 monthly ticket for a Westminister student to use on the Sharpsville Railroad

A Mystery

In 1949, Atty. Donald Hittle donated to the Sharpsville High School one of the most celebrated items of sports memorabilia—a baseball autographed by none other than Babe Ruth. It was put on display in the trophy case at the main entrance of the old High School (later the Middle School) on Ridge Avenue.

Years before, Attorney Hittle had attended an exhibition game, umpired by Sharpsville Burgess George Mahaney, the Yankees played against a local nine at the old Elks Field in Masury. Despite an announcement before the game that Ruth wouldn't be signing autographs, after the game the Bambino relented and Hittle was one of the lucky few to receive a signed ball. What became of the baseball remains a mystery. It likely went missing when the contents of the trophy case were moved to the new high school in 1959, if not before.



This photo, from a stereopticon card from the early 1890s, shows the upstream entrance to Lock No. 10 of the Erie Extension Canal. If you zoom in you will notice an advertisement for a shoe store affixed to the heavy wooden gate to the lock. Much of the stonework survives, though the extension to the right formed part of the Slackwater Dam which was washed away in the 1913 flood.

What is startling to see is the covered bridge in the background. This was the old railroad bridge, originally part of the Sharon Railway, with the line subsequently part of the Atlantic & Great Western Railroad, the Nypano and then the Erie Railroad. It stood alongside, at an angle to, the Kelly Road bridge. The span was later replaced by a steel truss bridge that was torn down when the railroad line was re-routed for the construction of the Shenango Dam.

With Gratitude

Past issues of this newsletter have highlighted the financial support the Society has received from a number of donors. As 2013 draws to a close, we'd like to take this opportunity to also thank the volunteers, who have just as importantly, given their time and effort throughout the year. These workers, too many to mention individually, have made possible our cultural and community-building events such as the annual Ice Cream Social, the trip to the Beach Boys concert, the opera *Rigoletto*, Cahal Dunne's performance, and the Madrigal Singers' Christmas concert. They have likewise made possible important fundraisers such as our casino bus trips and the concession stand at Pierce Opera House events. Finally, members and non-members alike have helped further our goals of sharing our town's history through our historical calendar and DVD projects, the Antiques Roadshow event, programs at our meetings, and in working to restore and maintain our historic headquarters.

If you would like to get involved, we are engaged in a variety of projects suiting a range of interests, talents or time-commitments.

Finally, monetary donations are still needed and welcome. As a 501(c)(3) organization, donations to the Sharpsville Area Historical Society are tax deductible.

Collections update

The following have been recently added to our collections:

Terry Slaven donated an iron coal chute cover inscribed Wade D. Mertz & Son, Sharpsville, Pa.

Gregg Smith donated a copy of the 1959 booklet "This is Shenango: a History of the Shenango Furnace Co."

Clayton Ruminski added two more photos from 1907-8. to the collection of Shenango Furnace Co. digital photos he previously shared with us.

The Society also acquired a 1873 map of Sharpsville that was originally published in a *Combination Atlas of the County of Mercer*

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org
 email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com
 or see our website for officers' phone numbers

Headquarters: 131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpsville, Pa.
 Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane, Sharpsville, Pa. 16150
 Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month
 at 7:00pm at our headquarters

answer to quiz question: The Sharpsville Service Club is the oldest independent service club in the nation.