



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

In his recent book, *The Vanishing Neighbor*, sociologist Marc Dunkelman outlines the sense of loss shared by Americans over the last third of the twentieth century. Despite demonstrable advances in prosperity, security, and health, we cannot help but feel an unraveling of the common purpose that has marked American communities since colonial times. He is careful to note that a collapse of community accompanying the exodus from rural and small-town America to urban centers was predicted a century ago, only to be re-created in the thriving neighborhoods of our great cities. Yet, he persuasively argues that our current times seem to somehow be different.

Central to Dunkelman's thesis is his notion that everyone has three rings of relationships: an inner ring of family and best friends, an outer ring of casual connections, and a middle ring of those people we regularly cross paths with and know something of their personal life but who aren't quite close. During these past few decades, overall, people's inner and outer rings have become stronger at the expense of the middle. While this trend predates the internet, it is easy to see how online connections accentuate the outer ring. Also clear is the qualitative difference between the chat with the local bank teller and a phone transaction with a customer service rep in a faraway call center; between the charity who gets your check and maybe your signature on an online petition and the local civic club's monthly meetings; between an occasional coffee with a neighbor and a post from someone who is just a Facebook "friend."

Dunkelman goes on to connect this shrinking "middle ring" with a growing separation between the political left and right, haves and have-nots, the secular and devout. There was of course no golden age when everyone was in harmony. However, the regular, casual interactions of people from different backgrounds, while not resulting in full agreement, at least helped us see each other's points of view and compromise rather than to regard each other as one-dimensional members of an enemy camp. With such middle ring connections, the plant manager would be more apt to consider the interests of the workers and community rather than just the shareholders, a congressman won't lose a primary for listening to the 45% of his district who belong to another party, and those on opposite sides of the "Culture Wars" would see they are more alike than different.

We here at the Historical Society cannot help but feel a resonance with the arguments in *The Vanishing Neighbor*. After all, we live in a small town, which in contrast to a far-flung suburb or faceless city is well equipped to build that essential "middle ring." By virtue of the proximity of where we live, work, and shop, these middle ring relationships—that are so essential to making a town a community—can more naturally develop, despite the larger forces at work.

Not only that but one of the Society's purposes is community-building. An appreciation for our shared history, we contend, is an essential part of a community. Such an appreciation is not a nostalgia for an unrecoverable past (and as you'll read later in this newsletter by-gone days weren't always so peaceful and happy). Rather, just knowing what once went on in this place you call home (even if you're a newcomer) becomes another connection we can share.

Upcoming Events

Civil War presentation by Dan Dilley at our October meeting
with a re-enactment by Cpl. Price Dilley, Co. B, 140th Pa. Vol. Infantry
7:30pm October 6th Historical Society Headquarters



Gambling Spree bus trips to
Hard Rock Casino September 10th ❁ Seneca Allegany Casino October 8th
Call for 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



Please also support the quality productions of Area Community Theatre of Sharpsville, showcasing local talent.

Songs of Sondheim Musical Revue ❁ September 4th 6th 7th ❁ Pierce Opera House

Traces of Lost Sharpsville

Are we a Burg, a Ville or a City?

Sharpsville, as the town's name, was not fully settled upon until its incorporation as a borough in 1874. With its first appearance by at least 1848, the suffix “-ville” was appended to the name of James Sharp. While not the first landowner here, the grist mill he built marked the beginning of a settlement at this place. And, with the advent of the Erie Extension Canal, Sharp sought to capitalize on the two locks that were located here near the newly built Mercer-Hartford Road and laid out 44 town lots on his land.

During Colonial times, “-town/ton” and “-boro/borough” were the more commonly used place-name suffixes. After the Revolution, these quickly fell into disuse to be replaced by “-burg” and then “-ville.” The French-derived “-ville” is thought to reflect a preference for that country, during a time of lingering animosity toward Britain that naturally resulted from the two wars we fought with her. By the latter half of the 19th century, however, both “-burg” and “-ville” were no longer in fashion and are rarely encountered in towns that were first named then.

James Sharp, however, first named this place “Sharpsburg.” The first record of that name is in 1837 when Sharp laid out the town lots. But because it could be mistaken for the town of that name in Allegheny County, Sharpsburg eventually fell out of use. (Confusingly, the town that lies across the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh was named for a different James Sharp and was also called “Sharpsville” in some early documents.) Another variant, so far found only in an 1837 report by the canal commissioners referred to this place as “Sharp’s Mill.” An 1854 gazetteer listed our village both as “Sharpsburg” and “Blanche Furnace.” The Blanche was the first furnace here, built in 1847, and was later called the Sharpsville Furnace.

These names at this point, however, had no official recognition for Sharpsville was then merely a small settlement, legally part of Hickory Township. The first formal recognition came when a Post Office was established here in 1864, with the chosen name “Sharpsville Furnace.” That was the name of what was still the principal industrial enterprise here and so weighed in on the selection. (In a similar way, Wheatland got its Post Office around the same time and was originally known as “Wheatland Furnace.”)

As the town developed and other furnaces were built here, the Postmaster General was prevailed upon to amend the name of the Post Office to just “Sharpsville.” The change was made in 1871.

This may seem to be the end of the story with that name being used three years later for the incorporated borough. In 1873, however, part of a measure to advance the idea of incorporation before the Pennsylvania Legislature also proposed to rename the town “Iron City.” Who knows what greatness may have come our way if the bill granting us that grand title had passed.

In fiction, a town sharing our name is found in a story appearing in the June 1873 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, “The Three Marys of Sharpsville,” as well as in a collection of Hopalong Cassidy tales, *The Coming of Cassidy*. And while there were once hamlets called Sharpsville in Kentucky, Michigan, Alabama, and Ohio, we currently share the name only with a town in Indiana.

A Look Back

Riots, bombs, loafers and rowdies

Sharpsville has a reputation as a peaceful burg. So it is quite puzzling to find this brief entry, dated October 31, 1881, in the minutes book of the Sharpsville Borough Council: In a list of a couple dozen expenditures that were approved—mostly for work on the streets or hauling cinders—is included “E. Tribie, \$10.50, for services rend[ered] arresting rioters.” The circumstances around this payment, however, received no mention in the Council minutes nor in extant newspapers of the time.

Newspaper editors, however, were eager to recount the tumult which took place here in March 1884. Over the prior six years the Sharpsville Railroad and the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad (leased to the Pennsylvania R.R.) had been engaged in two “railroad wars” over control over their connections. A short time before the latest trouble brewed, Wallace Pierce, part owner of the Douglas Furnace and director and general manager of the Sharpsville Railroad, had the Pennsylvania R.R.’s switching track to the furnace torn out. On the 13th of March 1884 the P.R.R. assembled a large force of men in an attempt to lay their own track to the Douglas. Within an hour, the Sharpsville Railroad responded with their own brigade. They drove the P.R.R. men back, tore up their track and threw cars off the rails to obstruct the work. Conveniently, a supply

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Riots, bombs, loafers and rowdies, cont'd.

of deputies sympathetic to the S.R.R.'s cause was found and sworn in. They proceeded to arrest the Pennsy workmen, with a magistrate's office improvised out of an old caboose. But the P.R.R. men would not be discouraged. In a scene seemingly out of a Keystone Kops short, as fast as the officers took a squad in one door of the caboose, another which had had been previously arrested walked out the back door and resumed work. Andy Paisely was arrested fourteen times. Despite the many threats and menaces on both sides, violence was confined to doing and undoing work, with the exception of Wallace Pierce who was knocked down and trampled.

The most serious outbreak of violence in Sharpsville occurred not many years later, with *The Greenville Evening Record* breathlessly reporting on October 19, 1900 under the headline "Bullets are flying at Sharpsville":

The race war has assumed such proportions that a reign of terror has been inaugurated and bullets are whistling from Winchester, while the town has been turned over to Sheriff Stewart by the authorities who are no longer able to preserve order.

Sheriff Stewart arrived this afternoon to reinforce the deputies he placed on guard Thursday evening. The fifteen which were armed and sworn in that evening were unable to cope with the trouble and forty will be armed and posted tonight.

Indeed racial animosity seems to have underlay the trouble. Expressing the language and attitudes of the day, the paper explains that:

For years Sharpsville has been free from Negro, Dago or Hun labor but some time ago some colored people were employed at the Douglass furnace, owned by the Shenango Furnace company. No trouble resulted until some white men were laid off—at another furnace—it is claimed and then the demand was made that the Negroes be discharged. This was refused and the storm broke the first of the week.

That summer, the census taker counted eleven black men living in town who were either blast furnace laborers or day laborers. While their numbers were hardly a threat to the approximately 800 furnace workers in the town at the time, they were perhaps a convenient scapegoat for the first-generation Irish, German, and British immigrants who had only recently gained a foothold on the economic ladder. There was also a small number of Italian and Slav furnacemen who too were the targets of threats and harassment, but the African-Americans bore the brunt of the attack.

Others blamed the agitation on the failure to arrest a black man, "Slim Jim" Johnson, who allegedly drew his revolver on a man named Houck while on the street car. In any event, a mob attacked a boarding house where many of the blacks lived and shot it full of holes. A black man was also chased causing him to climb to the top of the Douglass Furnace, where he was shot at six times. While injuries were reported, amazingly no deaths resulted, despite the "whistling bullets."

Another item in our collection, a postcard dated September 24, 1919, gives a glimpse at the widespread strikes and riots that wracked the country that year. In what was termed the "Red Summer," the sudden end of war production combined with the rapid demobilization of the doughboys with little thought to their re-absorption into the labor market underlay escalating social tensions. In many cities, much of the violence was racially motivated with widespread lynchings and burnings of black neighborhoods. Elsewhere, a fear that Russian Bolshevism would come to these shores created a state of tension. As the back of our postcard reads (again, please forgive the reprinting of the casual use of ethnic slurs):

They are having quite an exciting time around here with the strike. Several have been killed and wounded in Sharon and Farrell and hardly any one is working. Ford didn't go this morning, it seemed to be a strike among the wops, and they will not let the Americans work if they can help it. Ford helped guard Eckles house last night—they threatened to blow [it] up. . . . [Ford was likely Ford Randall who in 1930 became a Sharpsville patrolman and later chief of police.]

Farrell did indeed have three nights of violence, leaving four dead and at least a score wounded. State troopers and soldiers were brought in and ordered to "shoot, and get your man." Authorities blamed "bolsheviks," though being found with a pistol, a union card and a Slavic last name seemed to constitute sufficient evidence for that charge. In Sharpsville, a mob of "foreigners" did try to enforce a sympathy strike by preventing employees of the Shenango Furnace from going to work. Threats of shooting were made (including one against the burgess, Whig Thompson) but no serious injuries were reported here. Nor was the Eckles house blown up.

Eight years earlier also saw bomb threats here against Meyer Frank, a wholesale liquor dealer. Two "Black Hand"



While hardly on par with the Gilded Age “Society” events of the great metropolitan centers, the 1908 wedding of Katherine Pierce and Dr. Allan Hyde was described as one of the most important occasions in Shenango Valley society that season. Allan and Kate, daughter of Walter Pierce and granddaughter of the General, are here with their wedding party in front of the Universalist Church in Sharpsville. Also seen is some frolicking prior to the wedding at the Shenango Street home of her uncle Frank Pierce. The next day the couple steamed aboard the *Carpathia* (later famous as the ship that rescued the *Titanic’s* survivors) to a honeymoon in Naples, followed by a year’s residence in Vienna where Dr. Hyde continued his medical studies. They later resided on Mercer Avenue in the fine white colonial revival home built in 1918 by Frank W. King

Riots, bombs, loafers and rowdies, cont’d.

extortion letters—a favorite calling card of the Mafia at that time—were sent threatening to blow up his house unless large sums of money were paid. With the ransom drop point staked-out by the police, the extortionist never showed up, nor was the threat carried out.

In 1921, however, a bomb did rock the home and store at 222 Mercer Avenue, with several windows broken, a hole in the wall and a portion of the roof blown off. A connection with Black Hand violence was initially reported but the homeowner later recanted.

A perhaps last instance of mob violence here is noted when the Sharpsville Boiler Works petitioned the Governor in February 1924 for approval to hire a private plant policeman. Their application cited “Congregating of loafers and rowdies in and about the plant of the Sharpsville Boiler Works Co. especially during the night and the inability of the night watchman to oust them from the premises and make arrests in case of resistance without the authority to make arrests. On at least one occasion the night watchman has been badly beat in attempting to clear the plant of loafers.” How it was the loafers and not the rowdies who had the gumption to set themselves upon the poor watchman is not explained.

While crime and violence will always be with us, the idea of riots in our little town is today almost unthinkable. Whatever may be the cause for the change—whether better policing, a stronger social safety net, or maybe something else—it shows just how different the “good old days” were.

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com 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

Note: due to Labor Day, the September meeting will be held on Monday September 8th.