



# SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

In 2011, we published an on-line Walking-Tour through Historic Sharpsville. Since then, many have clicked on it through our website, the Borough's, or that of Mercer County Trails.

In addition, for the past three years, Society volunteers have also conducted guided walking tour for Sharpsville Middle School's seventh-grade class. Their tour covers much of the same route, though it includes a more in-depth discussion of various topics worthy of discussion in their Social Studies class.

We are pleased to announce that our on-line tour has now also been formatted and printed as a paper copy. They are available in a brochure holder at the start of the Trout Island Trail.

Whether you follow our guide or take your own stroll through the older part of town, you're bound to find surprises. Even if you regularly frequent "downtown" Sharpsville, your perspective is entirely different when walking compared to driving by.

So, we encourage you to follow our tour (it may be found online on the homepage of our website [www.sharpsvillehistorical.org](http://www.sharpsvillehistorical.org)), but also to do a little exploring on your own. Maybe you'll see a keystone engraved 1898 at the old water pumping station, or unexpected traces of an old railroad line, or the foundation to an 1848 church building, or even a possible architectural reference to the Great Comet of 1882.

### Engaging the Community

The Historical Society recently conducted our third annual tour of historical sites in Sharpsville for the seventh grade class of the Sharpsville Middle School.

Earlier this spring, the Society gave a presentation on Sharpsville history to each classroom of seventh-graders. This was to provide background material and inspiration as they embarked on their copper repoussé special project with an Artist-in-Residence.

### Upcoming Events

#### GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Seneca Niagara Casino July 18<sup>th</sup>  
Mountaineer Racetrack & Casino August 15<sup>th</sup>

*Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations*



#### ANNUAL ICE CREAM SOCIAL AT MAHANEY PARK

Sunday July 15<sup>th</sup>

*National Ice Cream Day!*



"I Love  
Lucy"

Bus Trip  
August 18<sup>th</sup>

visiting the Lucy-Desi museum in Jamestown, NY  
and the Chautauqa Institute and their craft fair

*Call 724-962-2392 for info and reservations*

### With Gratitude

Our appeal for donations toward restoration of our headquarters building's historic pipe organ continues to generate response. Since the last newsletter, we have received the following sponsorships:

Gold Level

Walmart Community Grants

Silver Level

Shenango Valley Performing Arts Council

Bronze Level

Greg Perrine

*Please consider a donation today!*

## A Look Back

### Entertainment in Year Past

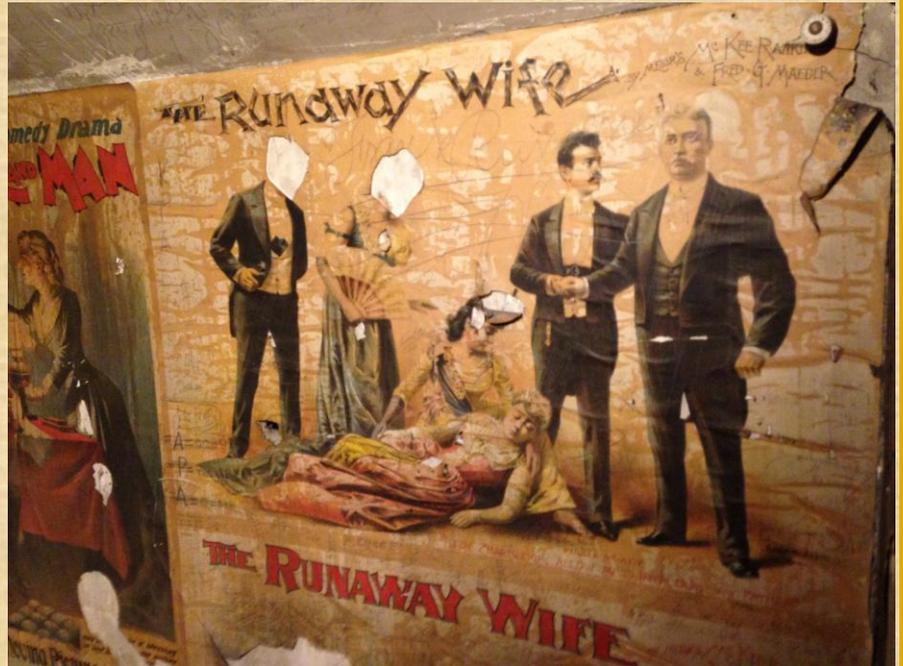
When we think of recreation in by-gone days, simpler pastimes of course come to mind, certainly nothing digital or with a screen. What we might forget, however, is that recreation was found right here, often in walking distance, and not requiring a drive to a neighboring town.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until the advent of the movie theatre here, the Pierce Opera House was the center of entertainment. The following is a sampling of the wide variety of programs provided:

In March of 1892, Howorth's Double Show of the Grand Hibernica and Dublin Dan Comedy Company presented "Blunders," a comic tour through Ireland. (This was in an era when the Irish were generally ridiculed, if not despised. Ridicule often extended to other groups outside the Anglo-Saxon tribe.) The next year, the comedy-drama *One of the Bravest* featured a "great realistic fire scene in the second act" with "six beautiful snow white arabian horses and a real steam fire engine and hose carriage." Those who have trudged to the third floor of the Opera House for recent performances will be left scratching their heads at the logistics of bringing horses and fire equipment to that level.

Following years saw performances of "the powerful melodrama" *The World Against Her*; dramatic monologues with music by Miss Nellie Nichols; a benefit concert for St. Bartholomew's Church featuring recitations, vocal solos, and performances on the mandolin, autoharp, and by Prof. Franklin's full orchestra; and Pittsburgh's Byron King, the great elocutionist and entertainer.

The Opera House was also venue for fêtes such as an 1896 Leap Year Party, the Avon Club's New Year's party two year later, a Masquerade Ball, as well as a Dance featuring Cave's Imperial Orchestra as late as 1913. A recital by Prof. Bott's dancing class and a stereopticon lecture about the Passion Play at Oberammergau also entertained Sharpshvilleites.



Stage show posters from inside the ticket booth at the Pierce Opera House

Either in an attempt to regulate an unmanageable influx of exhibitions, or else merely to raise revenue, in 1883 the borough council decreed "that any person exhibiting any show of natural curiosity, works of art, juggery, plays, theatrical performances etc shall pay for such license as follows.: Natural Curiosities \$2.00. Works of Art \$2.00. Juggery \$2.00. Plays or Theatrical Performances \$2.00 Circus Showes \$3.00 Animal Showes \$3.00 Circus and Animal Showes \$4.00"

Recorded music has now become so commonplace (even as juggery has become less so), that we would perhaps find it surprising that, in 1895, Charles H. Perry gave "one of his phonograph concerts" in the Opera House. This was the first exhibition in Sharpshville of Edison's invention; a 25¢ admission was charged.

Homegrown entertainment, perhaps in many cases unrecorded, is witnessed by the notice shown on page 5 of the Cherry Avenue Comedy Club. It was included among a donation of documents relating to the Willis W. Kitch family who lived in a house at the corner of Church & Cherry Streets. Their backyard barn, facing Cherry, was likely host to the fun. While only guesses, we can imagine it as rehearsed skits, or an old-time of "open-mic night."

Enjoying the spectacle of a circus or even a real Wild West Show, with their attendant parade, appears to have required a street-car ride to Sharon. Sharpshville, nonetheless, was host to travelling outdoor entertainments such as the merry-go-round that arrived in 1894 on Main Street at Fourth near the old Knapp House. Five years later, "Forest's Uncle Tom's Cabin Company exhibited here . . . under a tent to a big audience." (The reach of the most popular novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was exceeded only by the many travelling dramatic adaptations it engendered.) Falling within the

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# Traces of Lost Sharpsville

## The Slackwater Dam

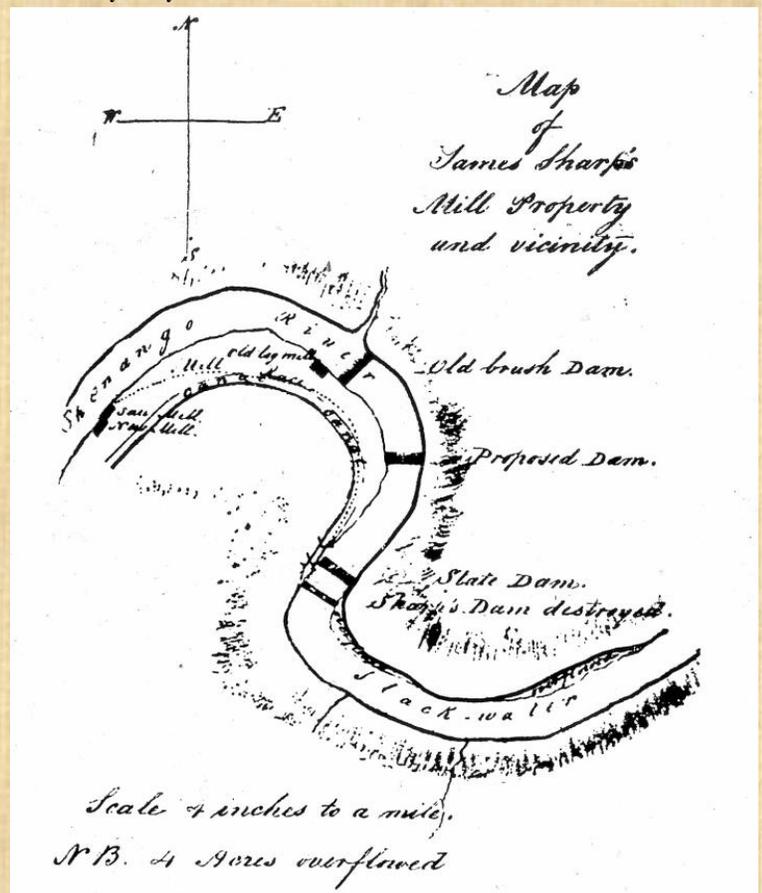
Sharpsville is noted as being the site of Lock No. 10, the only surviving lock of the Erie Extension Canal. Yet there are also remnants here of an associated structure, the State Dam. Popularly called the Slackwater Dam, it spanned the Shenango River on the upstream side of the canal lock. Its purpose was twofold: to regulate the supply of water from the river into the lock and canal, and to create a sufficiently deep section of the river to permit canal boat traffic. This section of the river was termed the Slackwater and ran from the lock upstream to near Clarksville; a navigable section of the natural watercourse of course saved the expense of digging a canal bed along this stretch. The area was of particular beauty, with the pleasure grounds of Shady Side and later Trout Island in its midst. Even after the era of the canal boat came to close, the Slackwater's depth continued to allow steamers to travel to Trout Island. (Shady Side, Trout Island, and the steamers are profiled in the November 2017, July 2012, and November 2016 issues, respectively, of this newsletter.)

Built at the same time as the lock, at a cost of \$11,913, the dam was one of five built on the canal's Shenango Division (which ran from Pulaski to Conneaut Lake). The dam was completed by 1839, and the canal's entire length from Beaver to Erie opened for traffic in December 1844. There were two earlier dams here, though, both built by the town's founder, James Sharp. In conjunction with his gristmill, Sharp first erected a dam built of brush, April 11, 1825 on the bend of the river paralleled by Canal Street, about where R. Donatelli Electric's building now stands. About eleven years later, a flood washed away the brush dam. Sharp replaced it with a more permanent structure of stone and timber, near where the Slackwater Dam would be built. It, too, was built to provide a reliable water source for the millrace. (This supplied a new saw- and grist-mill Sharp erected at the site of the present feedmill.) As part of the construction of the canal, the Commonwealth tore down Sharp's dam and filled in his millrace as it lay in the way of the canal's path. He sued for reimbursement but the settlement was insufficient. Insolvency resulted for Sharp, eventually causing him to flee his creditors and the town he laid out. Where he ended up remains a mystery.

Remnants of the dam stand today on private land directly across from the lock. During low water the stone foundation can still be seen in the river. It was built at a length of 229' and excess water was designed to flow over the top, rather than through gate-controlled sluices. Unlike the lock or the dam's abutments, the dam itself was not stone but rather a timber crib design. Heavy timbers formed the walls of the dam with the space between filled with rubble. Either gravelling or planking the upstream side of such dams was done to mitigate leakage. While the timbers required periodic replacement, if subject to constantly wet conditions, their lifespan was lengthened.

Sharpsville's topography largely spared it from the destructive floods that plagued Greenville and Sharon. On January 23, 1904, however, raging waters did not spare the town. While Sharon, Greenville, and New Castle newspapers would report that a large part of the lower section of Sharpsville was submerged, the editor of *The Sharpsville Advertiser* issued a pointed correction: "The Sharon Telegraph, in giving its flood news says that Sharpsville was partly submerged by the high water. This is an error. Sharpsville has not been flooded since the days of Noah." Instead, the great rush of water swept away the western abutment of the Mercer Avenue

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This 1840 map shows the location of Sharp's original mill and brush dam, his second dam (along with the millrace to his second mill) and the State (Slackwater) Dam.



Burgess George Mahaney, Sr. is seen here in his office, ca. 1947, receiving a plaque from cheerleaders (we think), Shirley Rice, Nancy Toscano, and Ellen Yarabinec. An ardent sportsman, Mahaney made many contributions to the civic life of Sharpsville and the Shenango Valley.

### The Slackwater Dam, cont'd.

bridge (which once spanned the Shenango near the feed mill). A mad dash to the far end of the collapsing bridge saved many of the at least 15 person who were on it. Several were plunged into the Shenango, with at least four who were able to cling to bushes near the river bank and be rescued by onlookers who drew them up with pole and boards. The current carried one man about 1½ miles before he was saved. At least four men, though, were drowned, with one body not found until two months later. The dam, too, was mostly washed away. Navigation to Trout Island ceased, and the scenic Slackwater was no more.

(The bridge disaster, strangely, has been ignored by subsequent town histories, and merited just passing attention by the contemporary press. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that because the victims were newly-arrived immigrants, more was not written of the sensational tragedy. As one newspaper noted, "The four unfortunates were Italians whose names cannot be accurately learned." On the other hand, Victor Dunham was named as drowned, according to early but ultimately mistaken reports. While

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## With Gratitude

Our headquarters was opened up to our third annual Quilt Show which was again very well attended.

Much thanks to the 13 entrants who brought their quilts for display and congratulations to Ann Stigliano who won best-in-show. We would like to especially thank Jeannie Goodhart who donated a quilt for our raffle and the best-in-show prize.



Thanks also to Laurel Alexander for donating the cost of plumbing repairs in our historic headquarters building.

## Collections Update

**Linda Garnack** donated several early 20<sup>th</sup> century postcards of Sharpsville, photographs of the Canal Street area after demolition of the Valley Mould buildings, two Jackson Oilers and a miner's carbide lamp.

**Patty DeJulia** donated three school class photos from the 1930s and two photos of Shenango Furnace workers from 1929.

**Richard Perfilio** donated a 1968 pamphlet from the Sharpsville Women's Club 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, a 1962 handbook from the Shenango Furnace, a map showing the parcels slated for demolition for Urban Renewal.

**Altha Graham** donated two 1909 sterling silver souvenir spoons with depictions of the Spearman Furnace and the Second-Ward (later Deeter) School.

**Don Morrow** donated 1912 blueprints of the Sharon Odd Fellows Hall.

**Michael Yeatts** donated a promotional bottle opener from Ken's Auto Body.

**Karrie Johnson** donated a digital copy of the Class of 1932 graduation photo.

## Contact Us

website: [www.sharpsvillehistorical.org](http://www.sharpsvillehistorical.org)  
email: [sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com](mailto: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

## Entertainment, cont'd.

the borough's "natural curiosities" licensure was the Hettrich collection of 1,000 curiosities, including the monster shark (36 feet long and over 10,000 lbs.!) caught in Monterey Bay, California. These were displayed in a rail car that toured from town to town, stopping here in 1910, part of a tour by a Barnumesque promoter named Mondula Leak (whose father bore the even more improbable name of Crapo Leak), and sponsored by northern California counties. A second rail car contained samples from the orchards, vineyards and ranches of the Golden State, with literature touting investment there.

The pool-hall enjoyed a period of popularity. "Billiard and Pocket Billiard" establishments in 1930 included The Arcade Billiard Parlor at 14 N. Walnut, as well as places run by Tony Garofoli at 225 N. Mercer Ave., Anthony Pagliaroli at 202 N. Mercer Ave., and Walter Zesely at 88 Park Way. (Zesely was also listed as more wholesomely selling confections and ice cream.) By 1935, the billiard halls had been reduced to two: Joseph Nerone's at 514 W. Main, and Anthony Rose's at 225 N. Mercer. A 1910 notice reports two sharks with comically stereotypical names—Kid Woodruff and Kid Lloyd—were meeting for a rematch at the Park Hall parlors.

Bowling was likewise popular, though a century ago duckpins were more common here than ten-pins. A map from 1912, shows a bowling alley facing E. Main Street, in a building behind what is now Palo Floral. No such establishment, however, is shown in a city directory from the following year. Perhaps they had competition from the Odd Fellows who completed their new lodge in 1912; it included a duckpin lane on the lower floor. One of the lanes is still standing in the building, now owned by Joseph Chiropractic. The Sharpsville Bowling Center on Eighth Street, was built in 1946 by the Barca family, and continues to this day.

Those who grew up here in the 1950's and 60's will fondly remember Angel's Casino. Originally built as livery stables, it had been remodeled by a Mr. Hanlon into a roller skating rink in the 1940s. August Angel then bought the North Second Street property in 1953.

Angel's initial plan to rent out the space for roller-skating parties, was soon upended by the high demand for the hall for wedding receptions, club dinners, and other adult parties. He added a kitchen (with dinnerware purchased from the recently-closed Camp Reynolds) and bar area and did remodeling to accommodate this new demand. Angel admits in his autobiography, *Trivia & Me*, that the term "Casino" may have been inappropriate. He indeed intended it as a wholesome community center, though the traffic jams and crowds on what had been a short, dead-end street initially generated complaints. (He also relates an account of the hall being rented to a printer's union. The party included a full range of games-of-chance along with a full bar. While the event was for a charitable purpose, it perhaps ran afoul of state gaming or liquor laws. In the middle of the fun, Chief Walt Karsonovitch, along with a squad of Sharpsville police officers, burst in and started taking the names and addresses of those in attendance. At the height of the tension, the Chief announced it was all a hoax, the tickets torn up, and the grinning cops joined in the evening's gaming and refreshments.)

Angel's seated up to 200 people for dinner, though 300 were squeezed in for Shenango Furnace events. For the weekly Friday-night record hops, as many as 500-700 teenagers would show up. When word spread of the venue's popularity, the Pittsburgh Musician's Union objected to the playing of recorded music. An agreement was then made to include live music. This only increased the popularity of Angel's, even though by this time other hops were launched in the Valley. By 1964, the Angel family had move to Kentucky and the "Casino" sold and eventually razed.

Yet, even in an era of novel entertainments, Marion Kitch in her diary entry from the spring of 1918 ponders why Art should hold preference to Nature: "Shades of the future! Those picture-shows! With everybody sitting in darkness when they should be out enjoying and appreciating the warm sunshine, what there is of it!"



Home-grown entertainment here in 1889

## The Slackwater Dam, cont'd.

language barriers contributed to the indifference, no follow-up reporting giving the names of the “four foreigners” has been found. And, when the body of one of the drowning victims, “a foreigner apparently about 45 years of age,” was discovered two months later, the remains were described as “clad in a shirt, three pair of overalls, and a heavy pair of wool socks, but the pockets of the clothing contained nothing by which identification could be established. It is the opinion of the undertakers that the man, when drowned, wore a pair of sandals, such as are frequently seen on foreigners, who have not yet given up their native dress, but that these have been lost.” That a workman obviously dressed for January weather should be wearing sandals, is an odd presumption.)

The great flood of 1913, which so decimated Sharon, finished the work and carried off the remnants of the dam.

The passing of the Slackwater Dam was indeed lamented. A 1911 newspaper article urged its rebuilding. A main concern was that seasonal low water at Sharpsville, Sharon, and Farrell was a problem for the mills and furnaces along the Shenango, with shut-downs a possibility. A dam here to regulate the water flow was an apt solution; moreover, the resulting reservoir three miles upstream could be used by smaller power boat and “make possible the establishing of a great summer playground.” The Sharpsville Board of Trade was expected to press the



Remains of the eastern abutment of the Slackwater Dam, on private land across the river from the canal lock.



Scene on Shenango River, Sharpsville, Pa.

This postcard dates to around 1910 and shows the Slackwater ruined by the 1904 flood but before it was entirely swept away in the 1913 flood.

with an eye toward supplementing the Pymatuning project with an additional impoundment pool, the Sharpsville Improvement Association (successor to the Board of Trade) urged rebuilding a dam at Sharpsville. The backers also introduced another benefit—the new dam could be a source of hydroelectric power as well. Yet despite the arguments of these practical businessmen, nostalgia for the old Slackwater continued. Added to the advantages the dam would provide industry, was this wistful thought: “There is no more beautiful scenery along the Shenango river or in this part of the United States than along the old slack water.” The proposal was no idle pipe dream. The following year the Improvement Association—by all accounts an energetic group—even employed a Pittsburgh engineering firm to design a concrete dam.

Nothing came of these plans, yet the recreational possibilities of the waters near Sharpsville must have remained in the local consciousness. While the 1965 completion of the Shenango Dam—long urged but finally moved forward in reaction to the 1958 and ’59 flooding of Sharon—was officially a flood-control project, the thousands attracted annually to boating, camping, swimming, and fishing at the Shenango Reservoir cannot be overlooked.

proposal forward.

The need to regulate the flow of the Shenango for industrial use was the initial objective for building the Pymatuning Dam. After the 1913 flood, flood-control was seen as equally vital. The State acted that year to approve construction of that dam, but an insufficient amount was appropriated. Finding the funds, acquiring the land, and gaining cross-state cooperation (where the reservoir crosses into Ohio), delayed groundbreaking for the dam until 1931. Despite these long efforts, given the distance between its outlet at Jamestown and Sharon, early doubts that the Pymatuning Dam alone could regulate waterflow and prevent floods would be proven true. In 1915,