



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

A favorite pastime among a certain species of politician as well various media outlets, including the editor of our local paper, is to rail against the “coastal elites” who ignore, if not denigrate, “fly-over country,” which is meant to include our own beloved home-town. Now residents of every locale suffer from a similar myopia—small-town boosterism and Manhattanite conceit both tend to ignore the lives of those over 15 miles away. (One difference, though, is that the views of those residing in national media centers are broadcast into our living rooms.) We should also remember that those who encourage resentment for political gain have a long pedigree, though the current strain has a direct link to Spiro Agnew’s attack on “an effete corps of impudent snobs”.

Now, why would a politician—or a venture capitalist—want to ignore a large swath of the country, including areas such our own? Think what you will of the members of these two occupations, but they are not dumb—at least with regard to their particular interests: they can count money and they can count votes.

Let’s compare recent years to 1960, when times were prosperous here and our prospects sunny. Between 1960 and 2016, the number of votes cast in the county (as a share of those state-wide) fell 21%. Even worse, in that same time period, Mercer County’s *average* household income fell from being 3% above the state-wide average to 19% below. So, to the outside world, we have measurably fewer votes and much less money to spend.

Yet it almost feels that this 21% decline in influence may be understating things. After all, JFK made an overnight stop here in 1960 and Sharon would soon be considered to be seat of a cathedral. Good-paying union jobs were readily available and the attitude was more optimistic—if, for any reason, the country had vanquished both the Axis and Depression less than a generation before.

Students of American history may note that westward migration to more fertile lands left many of the once thriving towns of rural New England and upstate New York virtually abandoned after the mid-19th century. Even now, the towns of rural America built around agriculture, timber, and mining, with few exceptions, remain in a sad, seemingly irreversible decline.

What is the answer? Pittsburgh’s touted renaissance and how Brooklyn “got its groove back” are well-known examples. But their model may not be reproducible in an area such as ours with a far smaller population and less robust institutional resources. Of course, there is no easy way to create thriving communities. (Those spouting-off a simple fix do not have your best interests at heart.) But our local history can be instructive: The large majority of the Valley’s significant industrial and commercial establishments over the last century-and-a-half were founded by local entrepreneurs. While some—for better or worse—ended up being bought by out-of-town owners, the lesson is that we have always created our own prosperity. While it can’t hurt to vie for a state grant or for a Fortune-500 company to build a facility here, history indicates Sharpsville’s future will depend more on that expanding local firm, the guy or gal down the street who quits their job to venture out on their own—or the recent college grad who passes up good job offers to pursue his dream in his hometown.

In the meantime, support your local merchants, services, and restaurants. You may be surprised at the good selection and Amazon-beating prices that can be found within a five-minute drive. The Shenango Valley, moreover, has no shortage of organizations which are dedicated to improving the quality of life here. Yet, aside from a small, dedicated core of supporters, they all need more help. Even if you have just an hour a week to spare, volunteer and do your part. Finally, too many here give the cold shoulder to both new ideas and to newcomers, especially those of unfamiliar ethnicities. Think about it—if your ancestor from Italy, Slovakia, or Ireland took the risk to journey to the U.S., they had the grit to succeed the cousins who stayed in the Old Country perhaps lacked. The unfamiliar face who travelled here from Mexico, Haiti, Syria, or Vietnam is likely to share that same sense of initiative as your great-grandfather.

One thing is for sure: bitterness and resentment won’t bring back jobs or make for more vibrant communities. *Nor will listening to those who advocate such resentment.*

Traces of Lost Sharpsville

West Sharpsville

As a small town, it would be odd to consider Sharpsville as having suburbs. Yet, the unrealized town of Truxall City (profiled in the November 2015 edition of this newsletter), would qualify were it ever built. The locale of Deweyville—remains shrouded in a bit of mystery. Built on the Sharpsville-Sharon border, it wasn't really a town or suburb, though it had its own name. One additional place, moreover, has come to our attention: West Sharpsville.

Alan Buchman's recent book, *Pennsylvania Railroad Lines West: Erie & Pittsburgh Branch*, serves as a valuable reference of the local routes of that sprawling network, including descriptions and many photos of the P.R.R.'s presence locally. From company records, Buchman has uncovered the existence of West Sharpsville. Certainly not a town, nor even a locale, it was the name of a station built in 1908 near the Elastic Enamel works. (The ill-fated Enamel works was profiled in the March 2014 edition of our newsletter.) It was located along the Pennsylvania R.R. line, currently the Trout Island Trail, about 220 yards west of the Dam. The stop was built to accommodate the largely female workforce at the Enamel works. Otherwise, there was no path other than to walk along the rail line to the plant. The fare for the journey from the P.R.R.'s Sharpsville station (located behind what is now the Sharpsville plaza) was a nickel.

During that era, the danger of being hit by a train was unexpectedly high. In the two years preceding and year following the P.R.R.'s "accommodation" Sharpsville alone witnessed six being run over by trains. While two of the deceased worked in railyards, and the drunkenness of two others led to their deaths, the peril of passing trains was hard to ignore. Yet the stop was made only for those arriving on the #239 train for the morning shift. At the end of the day, workers would need to walk home. As local railroad historian Nate Clark points out, the train stop likely was done less with safety or convenience in mind but to ensure the workers arrived for their shift at the same time. When they got home wasn't much of a concern to the employer.

This leaves the question of why was the stop called West Sharpsville, when it lies due east of the town? Nate Clark also explains that to a railroad, directions were determined not by points on a compass but by their position on its timetable. A train heading from Sharon through Sharpsville and eventually to Erie on the Erie & Pittsburgh branch of the P.R.R., was, according to the railroad's reckoning, a westbound train

Upcoming Events

Join in the Holiday Spirit at the

Historical Society's Christmas Celebration

Featuring beloved hymns and carols played on our NEWLY RESTORED 1881 POMPLITZ PIPE ORGAN, the Lakeview Concert Choir, and a sing-a-long of favorite carols

Wednesday December 19th

Free will offering



GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Rivers Casino, Pittsburgh, November 14th

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



Save the Date!



A loving dramatic tribute to the life and music of Patsy Cline

March 8th – 10th 2019

St. Bartholomew's Center, Sharpsville



Due to unexpected circumstances, the screening of silent version of **The Phantom of the Opera** with live accompaniment on our newly restore pipe organ has been delayed.

AN EVENING OF EDGAR ALLEN POE is likewise postponed until next fall.



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

A nostalgic look at the tradition and music of :

Christmas Through the Ages

December 14th – 16th

Pierce Opera House

call 724-815-4388 or go to actsharpville.org

A Look Back

The Home Front

The term “total war” is usually meant to describe unrestricted attacks on civilian infrastructure through strategic bombing, blockades, and a “scorched earth” campaign. Except for the Civil War campaigns of Sherman and Sheridan in certain regions of the South, the United States has not experienced this dimension of total war. The term’s definition can also include, however, the mobilization of nearly all a society’s resources to fight the war. In this sense, America’s involvement in the Second World War could be said to be our only involvement in “total war”.

In Sharpsville, 790 men and women served in our Armed Forces during the conflict. Those at home each contributed in their own way toward the war effort, but here especially it was seen in Western Pennsylvania’s mighty industrial output—“the Arsenal of Democracy”—that eventually overwhelmed the Axis.

The Shenango Furnace Co.’s output—pig iron and ingot molds—stood at the most basic stage of industrial production and so did not involve contracts with the War Department. Nor do we have records of their production during the war years. It may be safely assumed, however, that the pig iron produced by their two furnaces here mirrored the increase in production nationally. By 1944 America was producing over 75% more pig iron than in 1939.

The town’s other main industrial employer at the time, the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators, on the other hand, did directly manufacture war materiel. In a government contract beginning prior to Pearl Harbor and continuing throughout the war, they ultimately supplied 4,000 large gasoline pressure tanks for domestic and foreign airfields. Sections of dry docks and amphibious LST craft were also fabricated at their plant and then shipped to Neville Island where they were assembled by Dravo Corporation. Their application for the coveted Army-Navy “E” Award listed an exemplary record of production, overcoming supply shortages, and cost savings to the government. We do not have records of the final disposition of their application, though it does not appear that this award for “Excellence in Production” was granted them. (Only 5% of defense suppliers did qualify). Within that company’s archives, however, were other reminders of how much the war effort was integrated into the everyday work of the nation’s factories and businesses. The firm printed its own Roll of Honor to recognize its employees who were serving in the armed forces. An inspirational poster, produced by the Office of War Information, was likely hung in the plant or office. Finally, the firm’s archives, within our collection, include a large collection of the industrial version of the weekly Newsmaps. These large posters were profiled in our March 2015 newsletter and were hung in defense plants around the country to keep workers up-to-date on the progress of the war. They typically featured maps of the world or continents with insets of local areas seeing fighting as well as photographs of troops and Home Front efforts.

With the increased industrial production, and with a significant portion of their workforce enlisting, local plants were eager for workers. In March 1942, early in our nation’s mobilization efforts, our school newspaper notes that twenty-five high school boys had “quit school to get jobs, many of them in defense industries.” Nor were schoolchildren spared the reality of the War. That same school paper reports two movies shown to both Junior and Senior High assemblies. *Fighting the Fire Bomb* described methods of extinguishing incendiary bombs. *The Warning* presented the reality of battle, particularly air-raids. These



The Office of War Information sent posters such as this to war materiel production plants across the country including the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators.



This photograph, printed on a postcard as well as in articles in the trade press, dates from July 25, 1894. The photographer had apparently set up to snap a view of the Claire Furnace, when being in the right place at the right time, he recorded the dramatic “slip”.

When blast furnaces are filled, the coke forms a base layer, with the ore piled on top. Like when building a campfire, it is necessary that the fuel be packed not too tightly, so it can burn. At times, however, the bed of coke collapses, causing the “slip” and what seems almost like an explosion.

In the event pictured here, no one was injured, and the furnace suffered minimal damage being put back into blast the next week.

The Home Front, Cont’d.

films were then shown in an evening screening to the town’s adults.

In 1941, the Sharpsville American Legion Post erected an aircraft observation post atop its old building on Walnut Street. The Ground Observer Corps was a national program, in cooperation with the American Legion, to utilize volunteers to scan the skies for enemy aircraft. The program ended in 1944 when the threat of German bombers reaching the U.S. became increasingly remote. The Corps was, however, revived during the Cold War, with over 8,000 observation posts nationwide. (The wonderful online blog, “Small Town Memories,” recounts memories of duty there in the 1950s.)

Other official duties that required local citizens were members of the draft board and air-raid wardens. Indeed, despite our inland situation, periodic air-raid drills were conducted, with some being multi-county operations involving hundreds of thousands. A warden for each neighborhood would enforce the mandatory “lights-out”, or drawing of black-out blinds. All but emergency vehicles would be required to pull over and extinguish headlights. Violation of blackout rules—which even included standing on a street-corner with a lit cigarette—could be the subject for arrest.

Documents in our collection include reminders of how much the Federal government intervened in the national economy. Some programs, like the ubiquitous ration booklet, were aimed at prioritizing production and distribution for the Army and Navy. Others, include a November 1942 appeal to the Office of Price Administration for an increase in the allowable rent at 641 Main Street. The OPA was set up to prevent price-gouging, the disruption of the War might encourage. (Here, an

Collections Update

The **Clark Post Office** donated a receipt from 1893 for a post office box there.

John & Nancy Cailor donated an important collection of 24 *Sharpsville Advertisers* from the 1870s through the 1910s.

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:

Bronze Level

**Catherine Faller Alex & A.J. Kovach
Marguerite Kautzman**

Sponsor: **Pat Boynton**

Patrons: **Lucy Yanak Lorrie Ghering-Burick**

While the work is completed, we remain short of our goal by \$2,165. Please consider a donation today!

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

The Home Front, Cont'd.

influx of workers to critical areas of war production, such as the Shenango Valley, created artificial shortages of housing.)

Minutes from 1942 of the Sharpville Women's Club indicate a flurry of activity to aid in the war effort. (Even before America's entry, the Club was involved in the "Bundles for Britain" project of sending knitted garments to England.) Among the Club's discussions were: registration for defense work, book donations for the soldiers, a Soldier's Aid collection, purchase of war stamps, presenting corsages to the mothers, sisters, wives, and sweethearts of servicemen, and a fat salvage project. (Strained drippings were indeed collected to provide the glycerin used in the manufacture of munitions.) The club at that time was renting the First Universalist Church with aims of making



Kathryn Fye and P.J. Whalen stand watch at the aircraft observation post Ajax #71 atop the old American Legion building.

it into a community center. They offered the USO this space for the benefit of the boys stationed at Camp Reynolds. But perhaps the most telling hint of the involvement of the town's women is the notation that the Club's "Town and Citizenship Department" had by November 1942 suspended meeting since its members were too busy due to Red Cross and Ration Board work.

Scrapbooks kept by teens and young adults pre- and post-War largely consisted of sports articles, movie icons, or friends' engagements. During the War, instead, clippings of servicemen predominate—enlistments, promotions and the occasional sad account of killed- or missing-in-action. Likewise, school yearbooks during the early 40s still included the usual fond reminiscences, inside jokes, who has a crush

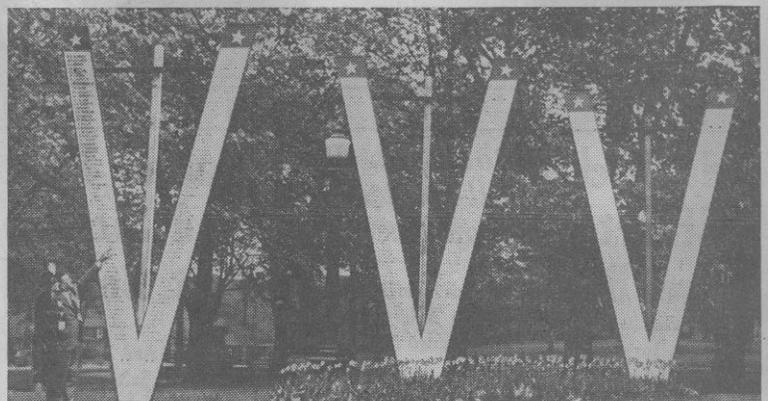
on who, etc. But they also included grave reminders—from both faculty and students—of a world at war, and into which many would soon be cast.

If the newspapers' daily account of the movement of the front, or the periodic drives for scrap rubber, iron, tin cans, and paper, were not reminder enough, one could not help but notice an addition to the town park. There, three large V's (each about 16-foot tall) were erected. They were inscribed with the names of local service members.

Finally, in contrast to the hundred-thousands of tons of iron being poured and hundreds of fuel tanks being welded each year here during the War Years in Sharpville, a humbler contribution was also taking place. As the War in the

Pacific cut off supplies of the tropic fiber kapok, a substitute filling for life-vests was needed. The lightweight, flossy fibers found in milkweed pods are very similar to those of kapok. As Sharpville once was filled with fields and vacant lots, and thus large patches of milkweed, schoolkids were sent to collect the pods. Collection was organized by classroom, with the pods scooped into large sacks tied to the school building's fire escape. The project was repeated in towns across the country. The aviator shot down, or a sailor hurled into the sea by a *kamikaze* perhaps owes his life to the boy who collected milkweed pods in Sharpville.

Servicemen's Names Inscribed On 'V's'



Sharpville's new "V" honor rolls in Legion Park are a constant reminder of the sacrifices local men and woman are making in leaving their homes and jobs here to fight for freedom. Dr. and Mrs. B. A. Frye, left, are pointing out the name of their son, Benjamin, Jr. He is stationed at Columbus, O., during an aviation course at Capital university. Dr. Frye is a World War I veteran.