



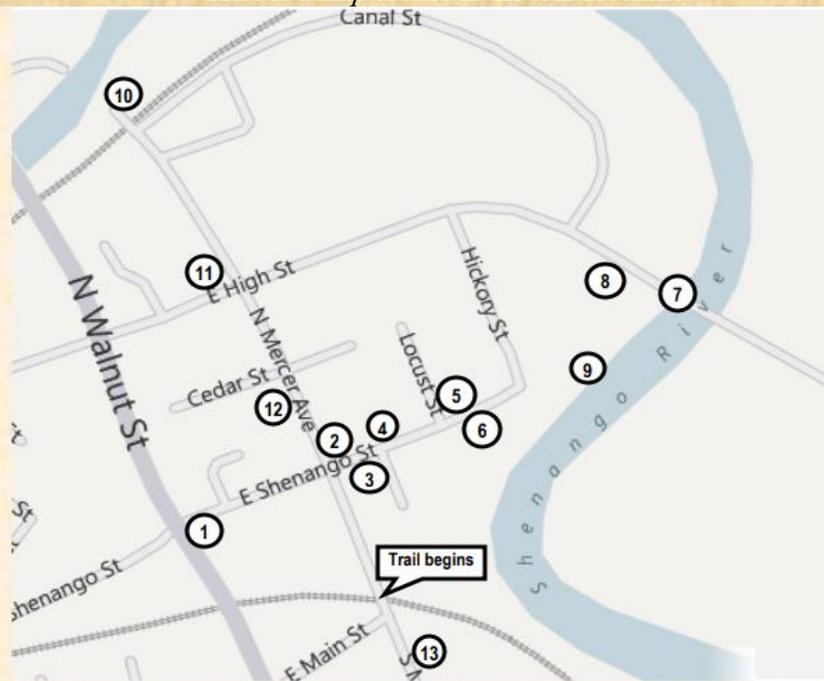
SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

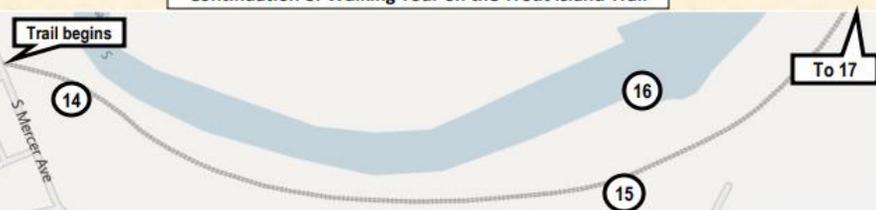
Warmer weather will soon be here and we are all looking for an excuse to get out of the house. One resource you may not be aware of is the Society's "Historic Walking Tour of Sharpsville." We publish an informative pamphlet with 17 stops, with all but the site of the last in relatively close proximity, making for a pleasant outdoor activity. For those with mobility issues, much of the tour can be accessed by car.

Pamphlets are available in the receptacle attached to the notice board at the beginning of the Trout Island Trail. These are quickly taken and we are not always able to replenish the stock. An online version is always available on the home page of the Society's website (sharpsvillehistorical.org). Even without the highlights noted on the tour, a walk through the older part of town, with its stone sidewalks and interesting architectural details, makes for a pleasant outing. Since some of the sites noted are on private property, please respect the privacy of the owners.

Here is a map of sites in the tour brochure.



Continuation of Walking Tour on the Trout Island Trail



Upcoming Events

COVID-19 UPDATE:

Our historic headquarters is back to being open to visitors. Come see our displays on the first and third Saturday of the month.

1:00pm to 3:00pm



Our monthly meetings have also resumed. The first Monday of the month at 7:00pm



Please watch for announcements of resumption of our other events.



As always, interesting items may be viewed under the Archives section of our website

www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

Collections Update

The Borough of Sharpsville donated a ca. 1898 fire hydrant that was recently replaced. The Street Department also sandblasted and repainted the hydrant. Reynolds Industries donated a base they fabricated on which to display the artifact.

Bill McNally donated the "Class Prophecy" his mother, Margaret Mehler, wrote and recited at her 1919 Sharpsville High School graduation. A song-sheet from the graduation was also donated.

If you have a document, artifact or photograph relating to the history of Sharpsville, let us know. We can also scan items if you want to keep the original.

A Look Back

Speedway Park

One of the more curious, though now forgotten, fads of nineteenth century America were walking contests, often termed “pedestrianism.” What is even more surprising is the description of these contests, as given in one account: that for “several decades in the later nineteenth century, the favorite spectator sport in America was watching people walking in circles inside big buildings.” Walking marathons could last six days, unless exhaustion or inability to stay awake intervened; the earliest trading cards featured not baseball players but competitive walkers. No record of walking contests taking place in Sharpsville is found, though Greenville had at least one in 1880. There, Miss Edna Verne promised to walk 100 miles (within an indoor hall) in 27 hours; a local competitor Jimmy Kelley said he would best her with 120 miles in that time span. The “peds,” as they were called, set off, with a couple of two-hour breaks interspersed. Toward the end of the contest, the spectators became more numerous with Miss Verne making her 100 miles in the allotted time. While Kelley finished a half-mile ahead, he did not reach his promised 120 miles.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, well before any organized track-and-field or cross-country meets or the 5Ks spawned by the fitness craze of more recent decades, Sharpsville’s foot races seem to be confined to picnic competitions. (Reports of picnic games across Mercer County included old favorites like an egg-race, three-legged race, tug-of-war, and running contests with divisions by age and gender. Reflecting the sensibility of an entirely-different era, however, was the occasional inclusion of a fat-man’s and fat-woman’s race.) The 1924 celebration of Sharpsville’s 50th Anniversary as an incorporated borough included a more ambitious athletic program. The broad jump, high jump, pole vault, mile, and 50-, 100-, and 220-yard dashes, were mixed in with the egg-and-spoon and three-legged race. Also held was a rather grandly termed “marathon”; though, its distance from Clarksville to the Sharpsville Borough Building was just a little over eight miles.

Boat races enjoyed a brief period of popularity. Shadyside, the pleasure ground along the Shenango (profiled in the November 2017 edition of this newsletter), was the scene of “The Sharpsville Regatta” held on September 20, 1874. Thirty-five years later, it was still recalled as “one of the most exciting events in Sharpsville.” A newspaper account described in remarkable detail races involving single sculls, double sculls, and working boats. While undoubtedly humble skiffs, the boats, all bestowed with names, vied for large purses. A tub race closed the event. Mainly for the crowd’s amusement, boys navigated unwieldy wooden washtubs, with the success judged mainly by finishing without overturning. Four years later, the Independence Day festivities at Shady Side again featured boat races—single and double sculls, along with the tub race. Prizes, though, had been reduced from the \$110 awarded overall in the 1874 contest, to purses totaling \$6.50. (For landlubbers, foot races, sack races, and wheelbarrow races were held, and the day closed out with a “grand balloon ascension” and fireworks.)

While we avoided the fad of walking contests, Sharpsville fully embraced the bicycling craze of the 1890s. By then, what was later termed the “safety bicycle,” with equal sized wheels and pneumatic tires, allowed ridership by men and women, young and old. (The high-wheel, or “penny-farthing” bicycles of the 1870s, had been the province of adventuresome young men as a spill from one of these contraptions often resulted in broken bones, if not worse.) Nationally, bicycle sales started to increase in 1891, and reached reaching their peak in 1896, before starting to drop precipitously. By 1900 the craze was over.

“No let up to the bicycle fever,” reported *The Sharpsville Advertiser* on June 5, 1895. While it is unlikely that our streets were clogged with cyclists, that is the image brought to mind with the report of this improbable accident of May 1896: “The wood rim of the rear wheel on Miss Clara Hadley’s bicycle was broken in a collision between Miss Hadley and Miss Alice Palmer on Main street last evening.” Yet still, a May 1894 paper warned that, “Bicycles are getting so numerous in town that pedestrians have to keep both eyes open to avoid coming in contact with them.” Female ridership presented another challenge to Victorian mores. Not only did the athleticism of cycling confront the stereotype of the “weaker sex,” but the mechanism of bicycle gears and chains required an adjustment of the era’s demure fashions. Bloomers replaced long skirts, with the town’s paper commenting in 1895: “What a “hubbub people make over something that they are not accustomed to. A woman on the streets showing her calves while riding a bicycle gives a whole lot of people the horrors, but at the seaside, where every woman dresses that way when in bathing, nobody thinks of commenting on it.”

Cont’d. on page 4



The scene is familiar—a chilly fall evening and packed stands for a Sharpsville home football game. The spectators' dress, though is a little more formal than we are accustomed to nowadays. Shown is the Sharpsville Athlete's Parents Club's first annual "Mom's Night" in 1958. The players' mothers are seated as guests of honor and are presumably ready for the errant pass or out-of-bounds tackle.

Commemorative Bricks

While unforeseen delays caused a change of suppliers, but all bricks ordered before October 15, 2020 have been delivered and checked. We are waiting for the spring thaw for them to be installed.

We are still accepting orders for a second shipment of bricks. Please consider an "In Memory of" or "In Honor of" brick for a loved one.

4" x 8" bricks with three lines of inscription—\$75

8" x 8" bricks with six lines of inscription—\$125

The bricks will be placed around the Shenango Furnace Ingot Mould in the town park.

**Stop at Mehler Insurance or call 724-962-2392
or email sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com**

With Gratitude

A significant donation that will allow us to continue the restoration of our historic headquarters was made by:

Ralph & Carol Mehler

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

Speedway Park, cont'd.

In the 1890s, local merchants did not hesitate to become dealers for one of the country's over 300 bicycle manufacturers. The Robinson Bros.' Sharpsville Furniture Rooms offered the Imperial Bicycle. Joe Pierce in the Park Hall building had the concession to sell the Speeder Cycle, whose frictionless gearing was "The Wizard that Saves your Muscle."

The Sharpsville Advertiser also ran ads for various bicycles that were available by mail-order. Pat Connelly owned a bicycle repair shop at 15 S. Walnut Street from at least 1903. He was still operating in the 1920s, where it was recalled, "he entertained the Robinson Brothers, Charlie Carney, Billy Young."

There was enough interest in town for a bicycle club to be formed. The club's second annual race was scheduled for July 4, 1896, with a dozen riders agreeing to enter. Under consideration was a ten-mile course starting at Park Way, going up Walnut to the intersection of Buhl Farm and State Street, "to Robinson's grove, around the loop, back through Hermitage and back to Sharpsville." Unknown is whether that was approved or, alternatively, a shorter five-mile route that would be ridden twice allowing spectators to cheer on their favorites yet again. A two-mile course from Park Way out to 12th Street and back was decided on for the girls' race, with five or six young ladies from Sharpsville agreeing to enter.

The sports page of the September 27, 1896 *Saint Paul* [Minn.] *Globe* reflected the era by reporting on two subjects of the season: football, which then meant college football and the dominant Ivy League elevens, and bicycling, highlighted in a "Tales of the Wheel" column which included a round-up of bicycling news from across the country. In that column a race at Sharpsville was mentioned, mainly for the participation of G.L. Scott of Coal Hill, Pa. Four years prior, Scott had lost both his hands and forearms to an accident with a mowing machine. Despite this misfortune, he learned to ride, and at the race here, "The surprise of the spectators can be imagined when Scott actually beat out all of the contestants and came within thirty seconds of winning the time prize." He governed his bicycle "by two large hooks that are tightly clasped to bars and firmly attached to the stubs of his arms. He has wonderful control of his machine, and can handle it with the same skill as an expert who is physically sound. In guiding his wheel he does not depend so much on the use of his artificial arms as he does on the artful movements of his legs and body." He "generally carries away a large share of the prizes" in the amateur tournaments he entered that season in Eastern Ohio and Western Pennsylvania.

By the following year, local bicycle races became even more extravagant. The second annual meet of the Associated Wheelmen of Sharon featured several categories of races: one-mile novice, one-mile professional, one-mile championship for Trumbull, Mahoning, Mercer, and Lawrence Counties, one-mile handicap, one-mile open professional, two-mile handicap, one-mile handicap (professional), one-mile open, one-mile tandem, boys under 18, "boys' slow race," and a hill climbing contest on the West Hill. The half-mile open (amateur) was "declared off on account of slovenly riding." Riders from Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Detroit came to participate.

These various forms of locomotion for recreation and entertainment in Sharpsville reached their culmination in the creation of Speedway Park. Laid out in the spring of 1897 along Walnut Street on land owned by the Pierce family, the facility was originally intended to be a quarter-mile bicycle track with a ballfield within the track's infield. A 400-seat grandstand was also envisioned. Baseball opened there June 11, 1897 and for a time competed against Junction Park as the main diamond in town. The race track was not yet ready by then, and with the country's cycling craze soon to end, when the oval did open that September, horse racing, harness races specifically, had been added. T.M. Fowler's well-known 1901 bird's-eye view map of Sharpsville depicts the sulkies there. While by then partially built over, the track's

An advertisement for mail-order cycles that appeared in an 1892 edition of *The Sharpsville Advertiser*

Speedway Park, cont'd.

outline can still be discerned in an aerial photo from 1938. Since one of the General's sons, Wallace Pierce, was a noted breeder of trotters—horses he bred named Walter, Sam Randall, Phoebe, Albertena, Estelle Guy, Fresh, Lena Guy, Miss Charmer, Nelly Bel, Peggy Pierce, and Louise Simmons are all mentioned in a journal dedicated to the breed—it is hardly surprising that the track would be used for such races.



Close up from T.M. Fowler's 1901 Bird's Eye View Map of Sharpsville. The Speedway Park oval is along Walnut Street.

An inaugural trotting race marked the formal opening of Speedway Park on September 14, 1897. A total of fourteen heats for trotters and pacers was held, though as much excitement happened off than track than on it. One of the horses, Abe Lincoln, in the course of racing ran away three times, “in one instance leaving the track and tearing through the woods, clearing a team of horses which stood in his path in a single bound, leaving harness and sulky behind. The third time Lincoln ran away he knocked down John Burford of Five Points, an employee of J.H. Frampton, who was so badly trampled that his recovery is doubtful. Mr. John Smith, of Five Points, owner of the animal was also knocked down and had three ribs broken.” Another account tells of trotting races to benefit the Sharpsville Fire Department

being held there in 1902. “Dove Eye” broke the track record. The event also included a bicycle race. A baseball game had been scheduled too, but was called off because the South Sharon team arrived too late.

An 1899 football game between Sharon and Greenville was played at Speedway Park. Other football contests were likely played there, but with local football games in the late 1890s and the aughts an intermittent affair, the field's main use was for baseball. The initial horse race of 1897 was followed by a baseball game between the Sharon Hustlers and Sharpsville's nine. Indeed, many of the games appear to have been held in conjunction with races like those held as part of the town's 1901 Independence Day celebration. Baseball—along with music and daylight fireworks—was likewise a part of a 4th of July fête held by the Catholic Mutual Benefit Association at the Park grounds in 1906. The fullest account of a ball game at Speedway Park, though, is given in an entertaining history of the barnstorming ballclub, the Nebraska Indians. This team, consisting mainly of Native Americans, travelled the country for crowd-pleasing exhibition contests against local nines. The Nebraskans played a formidable brand of ball and usually won. Their founder and manager, Guy W. Green, thus described the game:

A drunken drayman and a mixture of sun time, standard time, eastern time and ten or twelve other brands of time were responsible for our missing the train which should have taken us out of New Waterford, Ohio, to Sharpsville, Pennsylvania. As a result we reached Sharpsville very late for our game on August 16th [1899] and the park was overrun with people before we appeared on the grounds. About half the population seemed to have passes to the park, which had been issued to them in prehistoric times for manual labor performed in improving an alleged race track. We went ahead, however, and played against a team recruited from Warren, Pittsburg, and several other burgs. The Indians made eleven safe hits off of the first thirteen balls thrown by the Sharpsville pitcher, and nine runs in the first inning. This was a surprise the Pennsylvania people had not counted on, and before they came to their senses we won the game by a score of 21 to 6.

Speedway Park's last race or ball game is not recorded. In a 1979 interview, George Mahaney, Jr., recalled, “There was a speedway that packed spectators in on the east end of town (Irish Town), but that was before my time.” Mahaney, born here in 1906, continued, “They had horse races, then ballgames on the high school football field.” The Park's end can perhaps be traced to the departure of Wallace Pierce, whose enthusiasm for trotting horses was the likely impetus behind the its formation. In 1909, he sold the Mount Hickory farmstead he inherited from his parents, and by at least 1914 was living in Long Beach, California where he died in 1926.

An interesting coda: Dan Mahaney, great-grandson, of Burgess George Mahaney, Sr., is a horse-breeder in Indiana. A thoroughbred foal of his will be born this month and its name has been registered as “Sharpsville.”