



# SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

Some have commented on the number of gambling spree bus trips the Historical Society sponsors. Of course, they are not programs relating to the history of Sharpsville, nor, in and of themselves, are they one of the other purposes for which the Society is organized, such as to “sponsor or produce various cultural, educational, and community-building events.” But the trips do pay the bills—and then some. What many may not realize is that the utilities and insurance on our historic headquarters average over \$4,000/year. Moreover, an estimated \$75,000 in additional funds will be needed to complete the restoration of this building so it can be used more fully as a home for our displays of local history, as well as for performances and other community functions. These bus trips not only pay our ongoing costs but contribute a significant amount—along with the contributions of generous donors—toward our ongoing restoration work. Unfortunately, most foundations place a low priority on historic preservation, and, as you are well aware, government funding is increasingly scarce. So, for now we are reliant on private donors and fundraising projects. (And, in case you’re wondering, we are all-volunteer and overhead amounts to under \$100 a year for items like postage.)

That being said, we plan for 2016 to sponsor a broader variety of events: a Mystery Dinner Theatre in February, a Quilt Show in the Spring, and the show “Always, Patsy Cline” either this Fall or in 2017. We are always open to ideas on events we can sponsor—whether they be purely fundraising, or involve entertainment and cultural enrichment. So, if you have an idea of an event that will interest the community, do not hesitate to contact a member of the Society. (Better yet, if you would want to take the lead in organizing it, we are all ears.)

And we plan to continue our popular gambling sprees since they are such an important element to our yearly budget. They are a lot of work to organize, so special thanks to Rita Sloan, Petie Kelly, and Nancy Finney. We are also very appreciative of the support of those who patronize “the fun bus.”

### Upcoming Events

## MYSTERY DINNER THEATRE

at St. Bartholomew’s Center  
321 Ridge Avenue, Sharpsville  
Friday & Saturday, February 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup>  
7:00 p.m.

Tickets \$30  
*available at Sharpsville Floral, Mehler Insurance, and Borough Building, or at [www.sharpsvillehistorical.org](http://www.sharpsvillehistorical.org)*



### GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIP

Rivers Casino Pittsburgh January 20<sup>th</sup>  
Horseshoe Casino Cleveland February 24<sup>th</sup>

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

### A Look Back

A Fairmont, West Virginia newspaper reported August 6, 1914 under the title “Hypnotism Menaces Eyesight of Youth”: “As the result of being hypnotized at a theater in Sharpsville a few days ago, William Webster of that place may lose his eyesight. Webster today consulted an oculist who informed him that two veins had burst in his eyes due to a strain. After he was hypnotized, Webster was placed with his head and feet resting on two chairs while an assistant sat on him. This is believed to have caused the strain on his eyes. Webster’s parents are threatening a damage suit.”

## Traces of Lost Sharpsville

### Life in the Tenements

The peasant hovel is a reminder that sub-standard housing has been with us since time immemorial. The Industrial Revolution, however, introduced an unprecedented degree of slum conditions as cities choked on the effluvia of industry and the teeming masses. Such urban squalor was brought to the attention of the middle- and upper-classes by Henry Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) and in New York by Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). An early realist novel, *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) is set in Wheeling, W.Va. and gives a glimpse of the living conditions of the iron workers: a half-dozen families to a house, incessant labor, frequent drunkenness, eating rank pork and molasses, and breathing from infancy the soot of the furnaces.

In this country, with its open door to immigration until 1921, the first generation of arrivals were on the bottom rung of the economic ladder; they are intimately associated with this housing, usually referred to as the tenement or company house. The only change was the nationality—the Irish, British, and Germans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by Italians, Hungarians and Slavs in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Addressing the conditions in Pennsylvania, Robert D. Layton, Grand Secretary of an early industrial union—the Knights of Labor—testified before Congress in 1883. During his testimony, he noted the coal miner had few possessions and the worst living conditions; moreover, by being situated in isolated areas, he was at the mercy of the inflated prices of the “company store.” The iron worker, living in a populated place was not compelled to use the company store and lived a little better if skilled, about the same as the miner if unskilled. Even in this comparable comfort, he stated: “if there is any grass on the south side of Pittsburgh attached to a tenement house it is in a little box sitting on the window-sill. I do not know of any existing on the earth. They would have to take up a brick to sow the grass, if they had any. I know numbers of houses where the back yard of each is not more than 8 feet by 10, and that is allowing more territory than many of the landlords do.” The noise of the mill loomed as a constant reminder, with the din requiring shouting in the surrounding tenements when their doors were open.

Given the limitations of language and literacy, few first-hand accounts from the immigrants themselves have been published. One exception is James J. Davis' autobiography *The Iron Puddler: My Life in the Rolling Mills and What Came of It* (1922). Immigrating with his family from Wales in 1881 at age eight, Davis grew up in Sharon, Pa. Like his father, he became a master iron puddler, but later rose to be U.S. Secretary of Labor and U.S. Senator for Pennsylvania. Truly a self-made man, he was perhaps too slow to realize that not all possessed the same measure of inborn ability and drive that allowed him to rise above his lot in life. Yet he never forgot his humble origins and often expressed genuine sympathy for those in want and need. (Although this sympathy at times only went as far as his prejudice against the later generation of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and his political ambitions would allow.) On the other hand, he was implacably opposed to those “systems”—Anarchism and Communism—that sought to help the underclass by overthrowing the existing order.

In his autobiography, Davis describes his family's essentially penniless arrival in this country and many scenes from Sharon in the 1880s. Though compared to Pittsburgh's, the tenements of Sharon were better:

But the lords of steel in Pittsburgh were too new at the game to practice the customs of the nobility in beautifying their surroundings. The mills had made things ugly and the place was not what mother thought it ought to be for bringing up children. So father took us back to Sharon, and there we had sunlight and grass and trees. We rented a neat little company-house with a big garden in the rear, where we raised enough potatoes to supply our table. There were window boxes filled with morning-glories, and lilacs grew in the yard. The company had planted those lilacs to nourish the souls of the worker's children.

Yet despite this fond memory of a little greenery, Davis tells us matter-of-factly that he and his brothers slept five to a bed. (As they shared a single bolster; when one of the boys wanted to flip it to the cool side he would announce “Raise up.”) It was moreover necessary that he find a job, as an eight-year-old shoe-shine boy, when his family first came here. Davis later recalls, wistfully even, his coming home from the mill at 2:30 in the morning while his little brother was just setting out to begin his shift. The younger brother though was of such an age that their mother had to walk him partway because he was still afraid of the dark. This hard life was buoyed by a strong system of

cont'd on page 3

## Life in the Tenements, cont'd.

mutual support within the immigrant community that allowed even those in the most straitened circumstances to get by (though worsening the already crowded conditions):

Our little four-room company-house in Sharon had its doors open to the wayfarer. There was always some newcomer from Wales, looking for a stake in America, who had left his family in Wales. Usually he was a distant kinsman, but whether a blood relation or not, we regarded all Welshmen as belonging to our clan. Our house was small, but we crowded into corners and made room for another. His food and bed were free as long as he stayed. We helped him find a job, and then he thanked us for our hospitality and went out of our house with our blessings upon him. This form of community life was the social law in all the cottages of the Welsh.

In Sharpsville, two accounts give a glimpse of life in the tenements or “company houses.” As they come from viewpoints outside the working class, they contain an odd admixture of condescending prejudice and sympathy.

Thomas Dyson West is justly famous for his contributions to the iron industry, workplace safety, and Sharpsville’s prosperity. Arriving here from Cleveland in 1890, West became the pre-eminent authority on foundry practice, applying scientific principles to what had been a haphazard art of casting iron. His firm, the Thomas D. West Foundry, later the Valley Mould & Iron, whose ingot mold foundry at Sharpsville grew to become the largest in the world. He wrote both technical works as well as books dealing with broader themes of creating a more efficient worker, a safer workplace, and more prosperous communities populated by able citizens. Yet he did not urge corporal works of mercy without qualification; rather, those he sought to lift up were the “deserving poor.” This typically Victorian attitude is still today an undercurrent in our public policy debates. From West’s 1905 book *The Competent Life*:

In order to further display the great evils of the drink habit along with other creators of poverty and the need of encouraging the increase of passion for good homes and all the respectability that accompany them, we show for a contrast the illustrations of homes seen on pages 25 and 57, situated in the thriving town of Sharpsville, Pennsylvania. In the yard of the first we have beer barrels, and in the others flowers and shrubbery. The view on page 25 [shown below] was taken on a housecleaning day. Beds and other household goods were place out of doors for airing as shown at “A.” The house is a double one of ten rooms and the men live in the first half with the landlord and his wife, shown at “B” and “C.”

About two years ago, 35 men, who employed two women as housekeepers, lived in one of these five room compartments; half of the number working days and the other half nights. Their existing as they do can be charged to their being un-Americanized, but more to their waste of money in purchasing beer and other intoxicants. The men are hard workers and receive now (1905,) \$1.60 per day of ten hours’ work. This amount of wages is more than the owners of the home seen on page 25 received on an average during the working period of their industrious lives. It is to be said, that not only do these common laborers, Mr. John Mylatt and Mr. Michael Guyton, own their beautiful homes, but have also other valuable property, and each is the parent of 9 to 11 children. If they had prized beer more than respectability, they would not have been the great credit to their families and benefit to their country that they are to-day. These examples of industry of which there are others in Sharpsville and most all localities demonstrate what some men receiving but common laborer’s wages may do with the aid of a good managing wife in a country like the United States.



Cont'd on page 5

Enshrinement of Drink and Depletion of Homes



These unidentified mourners stand around the casket of their beloved amidst the tenements of the Shenango Furnace Company, ca. 1909. This photo was included with a large collection that was sponsored by the company at that time.

The babushkas and thick moustaches suggest recent immigrants from Europe. Yet, with the varied faces showing that though not all relatives, they were nonetheless members of a close-knit community that lived in the company houses.

## Collections update

**Larry Scott** donated items from the Shenango Furnace Co. including photos, commemorative pamphlets, and two “pigs” of pig iron.

**Bill & Nita Jackson** donated an original Jackson Oiler and a pennant from the 1949 Diamond Anniversary. They also donated tablecloths for use during hospitality receptions at our headquarters.

**Bob & Gail Mahaney** donated photos of “Mr. Sharpsville,” George Mahaney, Sr.

**Kevin Walko** donated his father’s World War II Army duffle bag and a pension document from the Shenango Furnace.

**Anthony Conti** donated several old newspapers including three 1888 editions and eight 1910 editions of *The Sharpsville Advertiser*.

**Charlie & Regina Schook** donated a vintage 1961 RCA television

**Jeannie Goodhart** donated a flat-screen television for use in video displays at our headquarters.

**Bob Verholek** donated an employee badge from the Dean Alexander Construction Co.

## With Gratitude

We recently received donations from

**Debbie Vannoy** in conjunction with a lifetime membership and **Robert & Glenda Yakell**

**Lowe’s of Hermitage** donated 20 bags of bark mulch, top soil and grass seed for landscaping at our headquarters.

## In Memoriam

We were saddened by the passing of Historical Society member **Stanley L. Jones, Jr.**  
1951 - 2015

## 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

## Life in the Tenements, cont'd.

It is noble to extend charity to the weak and worthy, but to tolerate any unnecessary factors which encourage the making of paupers is a grievous error. We need greatly a plain presentation of facts and a fearlessness in setting forth the conditions that are necessary to lift and sustain man above poverty and pauperism.

Thirty-five men living in five rooms—and hot bunking like a submarine crew!

West clearly had a paternal desire to lead all members of the working class to a better life both for their own sake as well as to create a more efficient laborer and a more useful citizen. Yet, disturbingly, he dedicates his book *The Competent Life* to “the Caucasian Race whose Strength, Intelligence and Sacrifices have excelled all others in uplifting Humanity, but whose elevating and industrial Power can wane if Ability to develop and maintain competency is not more fully exercised.” The book’s second chapter is titled “Caucasian Supremacy and Injurious Waste of Industrial Power.” The chapter opens with a warning that the Caucasian—by which term he particularly meant the then advanced nations of America, England, Germany and France—industrial supremacy was at risk from those who chose “inability, indolence and love of ease” over competent and energetic work. Awaiting to overtake the “Aryan workers of the world” was the marked ambition of the Mongolians (East Asians)—the “Yellow Peril” that so alarmed the turn-of-the-century Occident. For the latter two-thirds of the chapter, though, West sets aside his racial theorizing and proceeds to encouraging the aspiration of the greatest number to a middle-class moderation without waste, to urging competence among both labor and management, and to advocating a living wage. Still, this improving urge of the Progressive Era—that brought us workplace and consumer safety measures, public sanitation and political and economic reform of the excesses of the Industrial Revolution—also led to the dark alleys of the eugenics movement.

Another glimpse of life in the tenements here is given in the pages of a wonderful diary kept by Marion Kitch during the years 1916-1923. Marion was the daughter of Willis W. Kitch and was graduated in 1916 from Westminster College. Very literate, the diary details her adjustment to life after college: her desire to succeed in the wider world, her frustrations entering the teaching profession, and an ambivalent attitude toward her hometown of Sharpsville. Coming from a decidedly middle class household—her father served as postmaster and Borough councilman and owned the hardware store on the ground floor of the Opera House—her encounters with the foreign ways and marked poverty of Sharpsville’s recent immigrants shows the prejudices of her class and era yet is tempered by a sympathy for their meager circumstances. Some excerpts:

Monday August 14<sup>th</sup>. [1916] –Mother and I went down to see the picture-show to-night. That audience was interesting. I kept looking it over and thinking how chance and circumstance had thrown those people together, thus causing the town to be built. There were all the old reliables—Mrs. Pierce and Joe, Mrs. Robbins and Mary, Mr. Charlie and Miss Mary, and the Bartlesons, Mother and I; and, mixed in with us—all the types and classes, down to the “Hunkies” and the Chinese laundryman, the former smelling strongly of garlic and the latter of some Chinese herb. They are a motley crew—and education for anybody—and their level of intellect is indicated by the things that appeal to their sense of humor. Sometimes they weary me exceedingly. Most of the time I like them. And, always, they are my home folks. I have an affection for them, and sometimes a great pity.

[August 22, 1916] I go to sleep listening to the throbbing of the blast furnaces and wake up at night to find my room filled with the glare from the midnight train which carries molten iron from the furnace to the foundry. [Her family lived at the corner of Cherry & Church Streets.] Such has been my life. I hear the trains go banging through. Sometimes this environment interests me, and sometimes I can see nothing but the sordid side of it, with the stringy-haired dirty-faced little “Hunkie” children and the shapeless figures of the kerchiefed foreign women, interesting perhaps, but more often just plain tiresome.

[February 15, 1918] I seem better and better able to get a perspective on my environment lately. I see characters in relief, as it were—the deformed and bewhiskered fellow that tends the railroad crossing, the Shenango Row with its troop of undernourished and poorly-clad children; the fat Italian proprietor of the store on the corner, who always reminds me of Henry VIII. Mrs. Byerly, who is our truant officer, went in search of a small child the other day and found him in a little dirty kitchen where his mother was making soup, for four big boarders who soon came in for lunch. On the bed in the corner lay a two days’ old baby, and before Mrs. Byerly had done talking with her, the woman

## Life in the Tenements, cont'd.

protested, "Me tired. Me lie down. You talk jus' same." . . . . "Well, I should say, exclaimed Mrs. Byerly, "Good land alive, woman you ought not to be up cookin' here! You'll die." . . . . "Ma husban' say, 'Men work. Mus' eat. Get up. Cook,' So I cook," with a shrug of the shoulders. And she is only one!

Tuesday March 21<sup>st</sup> [1918]—A fine spring night with a young moon overhead and just the proper degree of moist coolness in the air. Anna and Aunt Jo and I walked to Byerly's Corners; thence past Maple Grove as far as the little red schoolhouse and home. To go out there it is necessary to pass through the flats and the foreign district, next the Valley Mould Foundry, where the Slav owner of a poolroom and a Lithuanian barber vie with a Magyar restaurant proprietor in trying to appear progressive and American, and where a Swedish boarding-house spills its inmates onto the very street. It's interesting when you consider that fifty years ago this was the "most desirable" section of Sharpsville [that is, the area between Canal and High Streets]. There lived most of the so-called "nice" people. There was a depot and post-office, of the latter of which father in his young days had charge. Then came a decline. People moved up onto the hills, and the V.M.I. [Valley Mould & Iron] bought most of that ground on which to erect its plant. The old post-office burned down and the Methodist Church was moved up town. And now has come this new population to build upon and to replace the old—to form the nucleus of a coming generation. I never got so clearly the contrast as to-night—the old stock of Pennsylvania—Dutch, English, Irish, or Scotch—some of New England origin—thrifty, respectable, proper, moderate, their Puritan standards maintained conscientiously in the face of any opposition—and now, the furnaces, the Foundry, bulging with hard or molten iron, have brought their quota of swarthy dark-eyed Italians, Croatians, Slavs, Poles, Russians, Roumanians, Greeks—what not? A typical Pennsylvania foreign population, with a whole new set of standards, that are as much in contrast to what they have displaced as you could imagine, all needing to be assimilated and taught to "Buy American" as the Kentucky auctioneer says. And you see sturdy-legged infants steadying themselves against doorways, and you suddenly realize just what a job it is going to be to educate them all to American habits of life and cleanliness. Their energies are boundless. You listen and somewhere you can hear an accordion being played, and voices and laughter are issuing from the lighted doorway of a house down in "The Row". Against the back of that house are piled empty beer-kegs and cases, and you wonder, 'Is it a wedding or a christening?' They're a happy lot, warm-blooded, full of the love of life, glad for the warmth of the first real spring evening, even as we.

[May 14, 1918] I visited the washwoman to-day and saw one kind of life. It made home look very attractive. I don't see how some of these women stand it! I'd rather be dead. Think of it! In one house a widower with five children married to a widow with nine—sort of a mutual consolation society, but excuse me, A Hell of a mess, particularly for the woman. Coming home I passed "Hunkie" boarding-houses with mattresses sticking out the windows, and everywhere are sober-eyed youngsters. And—there is an eternal smell down there. Odor is too refined a word. This is a smell—of heat and smoke and humanity that is peculiar to the mills. Bless their hearts! Some of them do have souls that are clean, and it is hard to tell what will result from it all when the next generation grows up. I visited Mrs. Kalupka and she insisted on sitting me down to a cookie as large as a platter and a glass of beer. I took a taste and when she was not looking threw the rest of it out the open door. [Earlier in her diary Marion noted that she detests beer.] Then I pretended to finish it, and bless your life! she filled it up for me! One cannot make these foreign people understand, and she couldn't see why I wouldn't drink the whole bottle. She took me through her house and played a small wall music-box for me, which she proclaimed "Came from old country." Above it was a picture of Christ on the Cross, elaborately decorated in bead-work wreathes. Everything in her house is neat, and quaint and peasant-like. The Kalupkas are Austrian. She makes delightful Austrian pastry.

Marion's concern about this "typical Pennsylvania foreign population" needing to be assimilated met with an official response in the formation of a "Valley Americanization Committee." Prompted by qualms about immigrants' loyalty upon America's entry into the First World War, and like similar groups formed across the country, the local committee was organized under the auspices of the Sharon Chamber of Commerce, the Farrell Commercial Club, the Sharpsville Improvement Association, and the Borough of Wheatland. Meeting places and teachers were secured in each of the communities, with classes begun on April 2, 1917. Classes focused on learning English, with the workmen sorted according to their ability in the language. Included was instruction in other topics such as arithmetic, citizenship, and "laws of health and sanitation." Each session opened with patriotic songs which were "sung with vim."

Cont'd. on page 7

## Life in the Tenements, cont'd.

Some of the program's stated aims were entirely practical, such as making the factory foreman understood in a polyglot workplace. Others were more idealized—to give the different nationalities common interests as well as to stimulate civic pride and “a greater desire for achievement in our country.” Critics of the programs, however, contended that they merely suppressed the characteristics of each nationality in favor of Anglo-Saxon traits. Instead, they asked, would it not be more desirable to form a unity, American and harmonious, by drawing out the best of each nation?

In the end Americanization won out. The dominant culture, suspicious of foreign ways, was not about to yield the pre-eminence of the English language, Protestantism, and northern European mores. For the immigrants themselves, whatever nostalgia they may have had for the Old Country, they had children who were eager to shed their accents, fit in with their schoolmates, and to adopt the ways of the New World to get ahead. It was not until memory of the first generation was about lost that pride in one's ethnic identity was recovered, and not until the 1970s that ethnic awareness permeated popular culture.

The company-houses in Sharpsville, meanwhile, persisted for a few decades more, though they were no longer associated with immigrant labor—just with whomever was not fortunate enough to achieve the “American Dream.” Homes off Furnaces Street, including a community privy, were torn down in 1957. The Hickory Street duplexes built by the Clair Furnace were also razed that year. Valley Mould & Iron houses on Maple Street came down in 1960. Though remodeling has erased any hint of a ramshackle past, the duplexes on Water Street, however, still stand.

## Building Update

As part of his Eagle Scout Project, **Ryan Materna** and 24 scouts from **Boy Scout Troop #7**, have completed the construction of a privacy fence and landscaping at our historic building. Much thanks to Ryan and all the guys for a professional-looking job that addresses drainage issues and greatly improves the appearance of our headquarters.



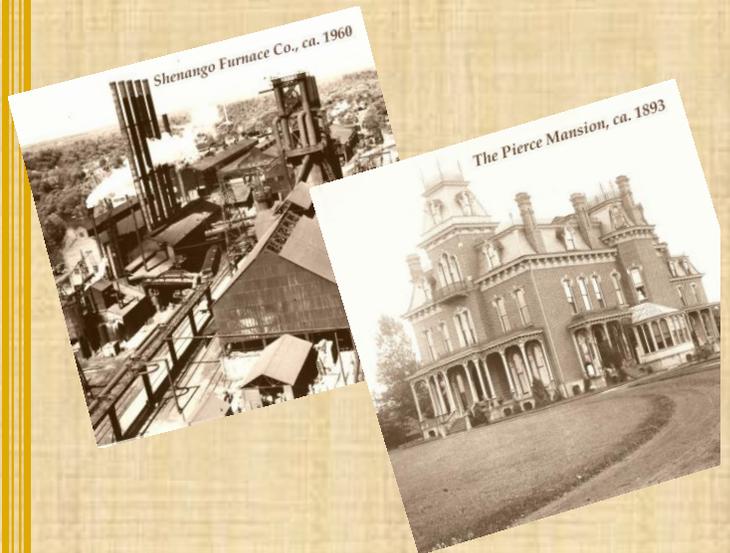
While we have funds to continue additional projects, we will need to rely on the generosity of our members and friends to complete the building's restoration.

Among the projects for which we seek funding are:

- Electrical upgrades
- Repair of stained glass windows
- Reconfiguration of the building's handicapped entrance
- A new sign for the front of our building

## Items for Sale

**Natural Stone Drink Coasters**  
featuring lithographed scenes of old Sharpsville  
17 different choices



**\$8 each, any 4 for \$30**

available at Mehler Insurance or through our  
website at [www.sharpsvillehistorical.org](http://www.sharpsvillehistorical.org)