



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Thoughts of the Good Old Days often conjures an emotional response. Nostalgia appears to be a natural impulse and thankfully the human brain more readily remembers the good than the bad. Studies have shown that one's conception of what years really were the good old days is actually just the years of one's youth. Regardless of which decade you grew up in, it's not that it was better than others—it's just that's when life was more carefree for you personally.

But as generally agreed upon halcyon days, the years around 1920 are often invoked: an era of a booming economy, neighbor-helping-neighbor, and a simpler, slower lifestyle. Yet a review of death certificates signed in Sharpsville for the years 1917-1925 contains some startling facts. As expected, for the years of the flu pandemic (1917-1919), one sees a large number of deaths from influenza and associated pneumonia. What stands out even more is that one in three burials were for children under two years old. The number of stomach cancer deaths is another surprise—for a four-year stretch they were about 23 times the incidence currently. (It turns out that Department of Agriculture research and regulation in the 1920s resulted in substituting potassium nitrate with sodium nitrite as a meat curing agent and putting a limit on nitrite concentration. This is the most compelling explanation for the drastic reduction in stomach cancer.)

But perhaps the most startling statistic to be gleaned from these death certificates, though, is the incidence of murder here. There were seven murders in Sharpsville between 1917 and 1925, when the population was about the same as today. This works out to be a rate of 16.6 murders per 100,000 population. The rate was even higher at 26.7 per 100,000 for the five murders between 1917 and 1920. As a comparison, the average rate nationally for 2014 was 4.5. Not only was our little burg at the time far above today's national average, we approached the City of Youngstown's current murder rate of 29.

As a large number of single men worked here at the time, crowded into tenements, and with arguments perhaps exacerbated by alcohol and ethnic rivalry, the numbers are, upon reflection, not surprising. The larger point, though, is that the "good old days" weren't always all that great. Certainly, there are plenty of problems in the country today and progress usually proceeds at a pace of two-steps-forward-one-step-back. Still, those who, perhaps to sell books or garner votes, urge a return to a sunny past if only to contrast it with their portrayal of a dark, dystopian present are ignoring the historical record.

Items for Sale

Brand New

Scenes of Old Sharpsville volume 2

a DVD slideshow featuring 100
ALL NEW
photos of Sharpsville in years past
\$10

Still Available

Natural Stone Drink Coasters

featuring lithographed scenes of
old Sharpsville
many different choices
\$8 each, any 4 for \$30

Scenes of Old Sharpsville volume 1

a DVD slideshow featuring 100 photos
of Sharpsville in years past
\$10

available at Mehler Insurance or through our website at www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

Great Christmas Gifts!

Traces of Lost Sharpsville

Boats to Trout Island

The idea of the pleasure ground at Trout Island, upstream from Sharpsville—and now remembered only in name—continues to fascinate. Even more charming to contemplate is the idea that transport to the island was made via a double-decked paddle-wheel boat, the *Kindoshawa*. It launched from the upstream side of the canal lock and the three mile trip took about forty minutes. The Island also had railroad access via the Nypano (later the Erie) Railroad.

An 1889 article from a Pittsburgh newspaper paints a scene of picturesque decay along the river at Sharpsville:

Within the lock above the upper gate lies sunken the remains of one of the old canal boats, whose name even has been forgotten. On the other side of the Shenango, half hidden among the trees on the bank can be seen the rotting ribs of another vessel, which was so noted in its time that its name is still preserved. It was the *Kindoshawa*, and was so called for an Indian chief who, tradition says, once lived on the banks of the Shenango. It will soon pass into greater oblivion than did the aborigine whose name it for a time recalled.

Indeed there was a Chief Kiondashawa of the Pymatuning Indian tribe of this area. His name (under various spellings) meant “flying fish”. He is also memorialized in the name of the former Boy Scout camp that lay near New Hamburg as well as in name of the island in the Shenango between the canal lock and the present dam.

Mention of a second excursion boat is given in an 1888 advertisement:

The steamyacht *Fearless* has been given a thorough overhauling, and is now stronger than when new, the old hull having been entirely covered over with inch sheathing. The boat is now ready to carry pleasure parties of all kinds, day or evening, and will make trips up the river daily. Landing at foot of Shenango street. Special rates to large picnic parties. For particulars address J.H. Hofius, Sharpsville, Pa.

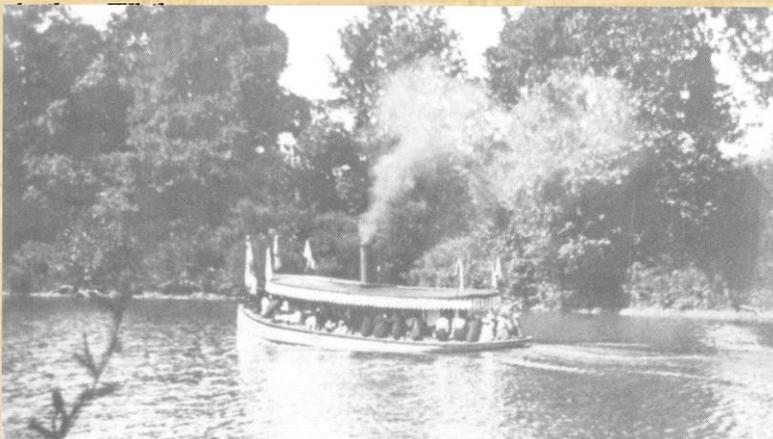
Round trip fare was 25 cents.

A third steamer, the *Oneida*, was launched in 1891. It was built by the versatile Robinson Brothers, whose father had started a planing mill. They joined him in business and branched out into the making of furniture and other woodworking. As boatwrights, they also built the rowboats Trout Island had available for its visitors.

Steam-powered craft, in response to boiler explosions, and by law since 1852, were required to have a licensed engineer on board. When investors presented their ultimately unsuccessful plans to build a hotel at Trout Island in 1900, one of the recreational features would be naphtha launches. Naphtha, a petroleum distillate, powered a particular type of engine where the naphtha both fired the boiler as well as served as the source of the condensing gas within the

boiler. While its use this way hardly seems a safety measure, it did avoid the engineer requirement, and would allow one to take a power boat out for a jaunt.

Navigation to Trout Island was made possible by the Slackwater Dam that stood at the head of the canal lock at Sharpsville and created a reliably deep section of river. The dam's partial collapse in 1904 halted the boat traffic. An announcement that year of the annual picnic of the Stag Club “will be held at Trout Island September 15, despite the fact that the steamer no longer plies the



The *Oneida* on the Shenango River, 1890s.

A Look Back

“The Carnegie of the Northwest”

Past newsletters have noted the Sharpsville boy who made good in a distant city. Our attention is thus drawn to a 1912 obituary which begins: “Captain William D. Hofius, millionaire manufacturer, banker, railroad builder and capitalist, known as the ‘Carnegie of the Northwest,’ a former Sharpsville resident, died at his home in Seattle yesterday after a short illness.”

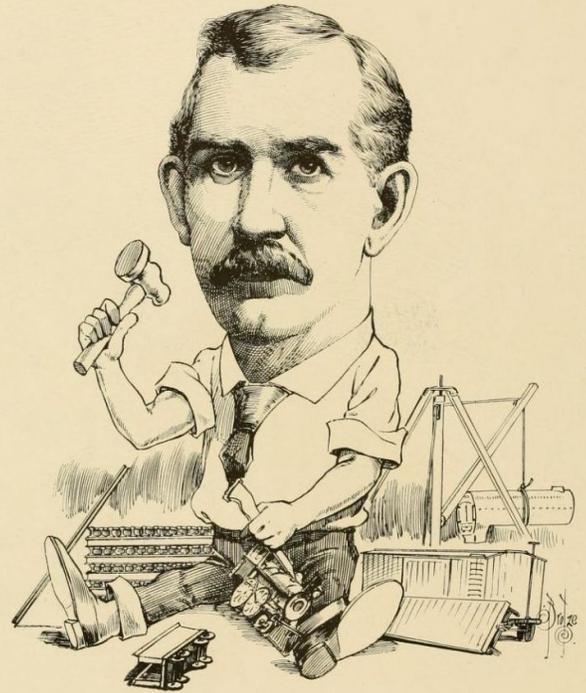
In 1852 William Douglas Hofius was born in West Middlesex to Seth and Elizabeth (Maxwell) Hofius. The family moved to Sharpsville around 1869 when Seth was called to manage the Pierce family’s Mt. Hickory Furnaces. After an interruption working elsewhere, he returned to manage the Spearman Furnace in 1886. William, though, stayed in Sharpsville working at the Geddes Foundry, before establishing a foundry and machine business in Sharpsville in 1883, Hofius & Eldridge. Five years later, Hofius entered into partnership with William McKeefrey and acquired, in what was his first out-of-town venture, the two stacks of the Grafton Furnace in Leetonia, Ohio. Both were eldest sons of experienced furnacemen and both married into the families of Shenango Valley iron masters. McKeefrey wed the daughter of pioneer iron manufacturer John Spearman, and Hofius married Emma Laux, the niece of Jonas Pierce’s wife. In 1890, Hofius severed his relationship with McKeefrey and the following year, he partnered with William Pigott, a traveling salesman for the Hubbard, Ohio furnaces, to lease a blast furnace in Syracuse, New York. By the following year, the Syracuse venture had failed, with Pigott and Hofius striking out west, relocating in Trinidad, Colorado and purchasing the Trinidad Iron & Steel Works.

Three years later, the Trinidad works were sold to Colorado Fuel & Iron, and Hofius went to Los Angeles as a representative of that firm. He reportedly owned several mines and orange, lemon and olive groves in California. In the mid-1890s, he landed at Seattle, soon joined by William Pigott. They formed another partnership, selling railway equipment and supplies, steel, and machinery. This was a fortuitous time to arrive in Seattle as it would soon boom as the main point of embarkation for the Klondike gold fields.

Pigott severed his partnership with Hofius in 1901. He would initially enter into a similar line dealing in steel and railway equipment but later would produce logging trailers, forming in 1905 what became the Pacific Car & Foundry Co., now PACCAR, Inc., the maker of Kenworth and Peterbilt trucks.

Hofius met with continued success. In addition to his Hofius Steel & Equipment Co., he accumulated large real estate holdings in Seattle. He built and owned stern-wheeler ships for the Yukon and Whitehorse Rivers routes. Hofius moreover held positions as President of the Seattle Dock Company, Vice-President of the Superior Portland Cement Company and Director of the First National Bank of Seattle. In contrast, his personal life was saddened by the death of his second wife only six years into their marriage. When the former Lucy Lacy—daughter of a colorful rancher from along the Goodnight-Loving trail—died on a visit to Tuscon, Arizona in 1906, William was left to care for two young sons. He was described as “unassuming to a marked degree” and with “friends who will swear by him to the last ditch.” It is thus unsurprising to hear that Hofius, a shareholder in the Centennial Mills and Moritz Thomsen, its president, rolled up their sleeves to stow cargo from the flour mill aboard a German steamer during a Seattle stevedores strike. The pair, joined by another wealthy friend along with three of the ship’s officers, together loaded 3,288 sacks of flour in ninety-five minutes. Despite his absence far afield from Sharpsville, he maintained contact with people here. A 1902 letter refers to business dealings he had with Willis W. Kitch of this town.

At his death, his estate, valued at \$1,750,000, was split between his two sons. Sadly, the oldest died just four years later of blood poisoning. William D. Hofius’ mansion currently serves as the official residence of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Seattle.



W. D. HOFIUS,
Railway Supplies, Iron and Steel.

Hofius, as depicted in *Cartoons and Caricatures of Seattle Citizens, 1906*



The Sharpsville Service Club began its “Santa Project” in 1942.

In 1953, the Club achieved national recognition when an article on Sharpsville’s Christmas Eve Santa visits appeared in *The American Magazine*, a noted monthly that ran from 1906 to 1956.

The men here are preparing to go out on their rounds, visiting all the homes who leave their porch light on and handing out popcorn balls to the kids—just like today.

The image is from a collection of the original photo negatives taken in conjunction with the magazine article, and which have been recently digitized by the Society.

If you did not receive the September issue of this newsletter in your inbox, it may be downloaded from our website www.sharpsvillehistorical.org.

While you’re there, check out the other interesting items in our Archives section.

With Gratitude

We received a significant donation that will allow us to continue with restoration of our historic headquarters from:
Ralph & Carol Mehler

Boats to Trout Island, cont’d.

pleasant waters of the Shenango from Sharpsville to the Island, a ‘Bus will run.’ (The use of ‘Bus with the apostrophe dates from when the word was still considered a contraction of “omnibus.”)

Ephraim Truxall’s 1906 plans for a large amusement park around Trout Island (outlined in the November 2015 issue of this newsletter) called for the rebuilding the dam and dredging of the Shenango. While this gave brief hope that excursion steamers would again ply the waters, Truxall’s plans were never realized. By this time, viability of the park hinged on extension of the street car line as the principal means of access.

Upcoming events

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIP
Presque Isle Casino November 16th

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



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

a 1960s style musical variety show

Christmas at the Piereo

December 15th through the 18th

Pierce Opera House

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

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

Building update

Work has begun on a major phase of the ongoing restoration of our headquarters, built in 1882 as the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville and recognized by the National Register of Historic Places as the fullest expression, locally, of High Victorian Gothic architecture and as a nationally significant example of the Akron Plan of church design.



Joe Fuoco of Respond Enterprises, has begun the restoration and painting of the exterior woodwork. Joe, an experienced steeplejack, is working on both the bell tower and the lower level. Work will be completed in the Spring.



A large stained glass window thought to have been broken in a storm in the 1950s, will be recreated by the J.M. Holtz Company, master art glass artisans, to match the window on the opposite side of the sanctuary.

Also, a new sign created by Signs of an Art Attack, echoing the building's decorative motifs will replace the 1960s utilitarian signage

We hope to soon embark on the following projects as well:

- Rebuilding of the front steps and installation of Victorian-styled handrails
- Electrical upgrades
- Refinishing of the wood floors

Our members and friends have generously given consistent support towards the building's restoration. Among the projects that we still seeking funds are:

- Recreation of the decorative painting scheme of the Sunday School Room ceiling
- Refurbishing of the pipe organ (the oldest in Mercer County!)
- Further repair of stained glass windows
- Rebuilding the decorative brickwork of the chimneys

The next issue of this newsletter we include further information on our immediate as well as more long-range plans.