



# SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

The more things change . . . the more they stay the same, or so the saying goes. Indeed historiography, that is the study of historical research itself—its approaches and methodologies—is marked by a dominant question: to what extent does history represent continuity with the past, and when does it mark a disruption. Each event, each story (for that is what *history* essentially is) will lead to a different conclusion. Indeed, succeeding generation of historians may reinterpret past conclusions with an opposite emphasis.

Yet as odd as the attitudes of our ancestors sometimes seem, we can't help but notice the times their mind-set matches ours, often eerily so. Except, perhaps, with its references to "whipping," the following sounds like it could be uttered by most adults today: "A good many years ago, when a boy was whipped at school, he received another whipping when he went home. But in these days the father and mother wipe his tears away and whip the teacher." This lament about the decline in respect and an overall permissive culture comes from a 1910 issue of *The Sharpsville Advertiser*.

Attitudes toward immigrants likewise persist. Unlike today, persons entering Ellis Island or other ports (land crossings were not checked) prior to the 1920s were considered "illegal immigrants" only if they were prostitutes, paupers, polygamists, anarchists and radicals, feeble-minded or insane, illiterate, likely to become a public charge, infected with dangerous and loathsome contagious disease, or Chinese. One-percent of the 25 million who arrived at Ellis Island fell in these categories. The rest, probably your ancestors, were, by default, "legal immigrants." Then as now, economic anxiety over the supply and demand of labor mingled with irrational fears over the mores, customs, and religion of foreigners.

Thus, we see a report from 1898 about "trouble at Sharpsville" on account of immigrants being employed for the construction of the new water works. "Six citizens have been arrested for interfering with them." These workers, however, weren't Mexicans or Muslims, but the first arrivals here from Italy.

### Upcoming Events

## Quilt Show

April 29<sup>th</sup> 10<sup>am</sup> - 3<sup>pm</sup>

Sharpsville Historical Society  
Headquarters

Quilt Judging & Refreshments  
Quilt raffle



### GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Meadows Casino, Washington, Pa. March 22<sup>nd</sup>

Presque Isle Casino, Erie, Pa. April 19<sup>th</sup>

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



Join us for a performance of

## Aretha Franklin

Chautauqua Institute

June 24<sup>th</sup>

Cost \$105, includes motorcoach transport

*Tickets are limited*

Call 724-962-2392



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

*The enduring Broadway favorite*

## GUYS & DOLLS

March 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup>

Pierce Opera House

call 724-815-4388 or go to [actsharpsville.org](http://actsharpsville.org)

## A Look Back

### Art, Music, Literature

After nearly a century of being closed, the opening of the Pierce Opera House in 2009 for the Historical Society's production of the opera *Don Pasquale* revealed a forgotten cultural institution here. Like other "opera houses" in countless burghs across the nation, the venue hosted less of high opera and more along the lines of popular melodrama, musical performances, dances or socials, and speaking engagements—as well as high school graduations and even basketball games. Given the Borough's small size and working-class character, the existence of any sort of cultural refinement here was a surprise to most.

Likewise, many will be surprised that Sharpsville once had its own Public Library. A 1910 newspaper reports that Mrs. McKiernan of Shenango Street recently opened a circulating library here. This seems to have been a private venture with it lasting at least until 1913 when a city directory showed her library as moved to Main and Walnut. She was perhaps inspired by the establishment in 1894 by the YMCA of a reading room in Park Hall (which was located at Park Way and Shenango). They had hopes that what some considered the Public Library—though housed in the school building and under control of the school board—would be made more accessible to adult citizens if moved to another venue. The school board, however, does not appear to have acquiesced and retained the 1,020 volumes held at the time. On the other hand, it was at one time regularly used by the public. A report for 1882 notes that Sharpsville's district library of 364 volumes was patronized by 334 persons over the year.

At the turn-of-the-century, most schoolchildren here left high-school early for work and did not graduate. This fact, along with the image of the frontiersman or immigrant having to sign his name with an 'X', may lead to the assumption that a town library would have served only a few. Yet, illiteracy here was comparatively rare. According to the 1900 U.S. Census, out of 2,320 persons of age 10 and over, only 70 were listed as being neither able to read nor write (with 106, able to read but not write). Only the Chinese laundryman Yee Gee could speak no English. Our illiteracy rate was three-fourths of the statewide rate, and less than half the national average.

Sharpsville's cultural ambitions were not confined to the library and opera house. Musical ensembles were numerous, though apparently mostly short-lived. Like many other towns, we had a Cornet Band in the 1880s. A group called the Sharpsville Brass Band is mentioned in 1885; it may or may not have been separate from the Cornet Band. Woodwind, brass, and drum constituted the eleven-member Independent Band when it was reorganized February 11, 1887. A Ladies Orchestra of Sharpsville was active in 1910. Other town bands are mentioned later—the Sharpsville Martial Band, the West Side Band, and The Municipal Band. The local talent of the Sharpsville Dramatic Company played at the Pierce Opera House in the late 1890s.

Finally, a close look at photos of the Opera House Block from the late 1880s to early 1890s, yields an interesting detail. The first floor of the Opera House contained a hardware store (in a space later occupied for many years by Bloch Bros.). Next to it is a one-story wood-frame building with a sign for an "Art Gallery." What exhibits it may have contained is somewhat of a mystery. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from 1886, 1895, 1900, and 1905 describe the building as a Photography Studio. Most likely, it was a photography studio that also dealt in, as described in an 1879 advertisement for William L. Irish of Sharpsville: "Manager of General Agencies for Copying Portraits in India Ink, Water Colors Etc. Oil and Crayon Portraits a Specialty. Also, Dealer in Picture Frames and Chromos." This same city directory lists a Mrs. Emma Hope, artist, living here.



## Building the Town

### Lustron Homes

*When the Second World War ended, two pressing problems confronted our nation: giant factories devoted to military production now stood idle, and the GIs returning home to their wives and sweethearts, and following the privations of Depression and War, looked forward to a home of their own, only to face a severe housing shortage.*

*Carl Strandlund came up with a solution to both problems: a factory-built home utilizing our steel-making capacity that had helped win the war. An icon of post-war modernity, the all-steel Lustron home enjoyed a brief surge of popularity, with Sharpsville home to at least five on South Fourth Street, between Milliken and Koehler. Other local examples are located on Farrell Terrace in Farrell, Morefield Road in Hermitage, and Buhl Boulevard in Sharon. The following article appeared in the September 1996 issue of a local newspaper All Around the House, and is reprinted with kind permission of the author, Carol Mehler. Although the house featured below has been covered in siding like other Lustron homes on these two blocks, the one show below still shows its original steel siding.*

When Dad was following Ted Williams' and Joe Dimaggio's batting averages, stay-at-home Mom was following "The Romance of Helen Trent" on the radio, and their 2.4 children were listening to "The Adventures of Bobbie Benson of the B-bar-B," a startling look into the future was coming into view in ordinary neighborhoods as trucks rolled in, loaded with prefabricated, streamlined Lustron homes.

The porcelain-enamel-coated, all-steel Lustron homes that can be seen sprinkled around the Penn-Ohio area were a short-lived phenomenon. Carl Strandlund's corporation of Columbus, Ohio, began production in March of 1948 with government backing and public enthusiasm for their seemingly indestructible material, picture windows, and modern built-ins in every room. The newest labor-saver, the dishwasher was standard equipment, with the amazing "Automagic" dishwasher, that doubled as a clothes washer, also available.

But after producing 2,492 of these shiny units, the company went bankrupt in 1950.

Lori and Bill Marstellar are proud owners of a Lustron home on South Fourth Street in Sharpsville that still displays its original dove gray exterior (Maize yellow, surf blue and desert tan were the other colors available). The Marstellars have lived in their steel home 4½ years, but Lori grew up in the house next door. So she didn't give much thought into moving to such an unusual house.

Yet its uniqueness can't be forgotten. Visitors, she says, can't resist knocking on walls and asking questions like: "What would happen if lightning strikes?" Lori always replies: "I guess we'll just wait and see." The manufacturer, however, guaranteed that the house would be "a self-contained grounded lightning rod."

One thing the Marstellars have no worries about is fire. "Can you imagine this house burning?" notes Lori.

The 1.25 tons of steel, coated with another ton of porcelain enamel, is termite-proof, as well as fireproof and meant to require no painting. An occasional hosing was all that was suggested to keep the two-foot-square exterior panels "lustrous." Today, some Lustron owners use car wax to revitalize the sparkle, although rust spots from "modern" pollution seem unavoidable.

Along with a little rust and a few nail holes from previous owners, the Marstellars have some of the problems peculiar to their peculiar home. They weren't able to purchase the standard homeowner's insurance policy, since replacing with the same materials couldn't be promised. And repairs, in general, are more difficult—and costly—because of the impervious nature of Lustron. Then, too, while the draft-free home is cozy warm in winter, the steel also heats up to very warm in the summer.

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This wonderful photo comes to us from the Mahaney Family collection. With the men attired in trousers and dress shirts and the women in dresses, a throng of Sharpstovillites had come out on August 26, 1950 for the Northwest Firemen's Association parade. In the background is Walder's Tavern, famous for its steak sandwiches (now the Marigold II), and the much-missed Ritz Theatre. As a second-run moviehouse then, it was showing the World War II comedy *When Willie Comes Marching Home* and the Joel McCrea-Veronica Lake western, *Ramrod*.

### Lustron Homes, cont'd.

Yet, Lori likes all the storage space the built-ins provide, which along with sliding doors, give a more spacious feeling tot the 1,300 square feet. And for a couple with two young sons, there is another bonus: "The whole house is like a refrigerator for displaying the boys' artwork." Magnets stick anywhere on the vertical Lustron interior "boards."

The Marstellars can feel proud to live in a distinctive part of Americana. A Lustron home in Chesterton, Ind. recently became the first of its kind to be listed in the National Register of historic homes and is open to the public for tours. If such a possibility is in the Marstellars' future, Lori can use her standard way of directing people to their home: "Look for the gray metal house on the corner."

### 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

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Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm at our headquarters