



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Many volunteer opportunities are available at the Historical Society to match a variety of skills and inclinations. Maybe you are a retiree looking to redirect your time and purpose, a newcomer wanting to meet people and connect with your new home, the empty-nester who now has that extra hour a week to spare, or the high school student who needs to meet a quota of community-service hours. Some areas where your time and talent would be most useful include:

With the Historical Society now open two Saturdays a month, guides are needed. Expertise is not required, just someone who like dealing with people. A short orientation and informational sheet will be provided.

We are looking to expand and revamp many of our historical displays at our headquarters. Light construction skills are needed to assemble these new displays.

We sponsor several fundraising events throughout the year. Ushers, ticket sellers, concession stand workers, and the like are needed.

A longstanding ambition has been to microfilm and digitize the editions of our town's newspaper, *The Sharpshville Advertiser* (1870-1918), held by us as well as the Mercer County Historical Society. Volunteers are needed to photograph the newspapers using the apparatus at Mercer. No special skills are required.

Our historical headquarters (dating from 1882) requires light inside and outside cleaning and maintenance throughout the year.

We are also always on the look-out for feedback and new ideas. While it may not seem that opinions are in short supply here in the Shenango Valley, we really do need members and non-members to attend our meetings to give their two-cents. (Meetings are the first Monday of the month at 7:00 p.m. at our headquarters at 131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpshville.)

Important News

Restoration of our historic headquarters building has been the most visible and ambitious project since the Society's founding. Due to its local and national architectural significance, preservation of the building for its own sake and as a focal point of community pride is, of course, important. Just as importantly, though, this distinctive space provides home to display our growing collection of artifacts which help tell the story of Sharpshville.

We are thus excited to announce regular hours we will be open to the public.

Starting October 7th

We will be open the First and Third Saturdays of the month from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Even if you have been here before, it is likely you may have missed an architectural feature or an item of interest among our documents and artifacts on display.

Upcoming Events

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIP

Rivers Casino Pittsburgh November 15th



Gingerbread House

Display & Contest

December 2nd and 3rd

Sharpshville Historical Society Building

Join in the Holiday Spirit

A Visit from Santa ❄️ Treats & Baked Goods

contact 724-962-5544 for information about entering your Gingerbread House

A Look Back

Shady Side

Before there was Buhl Farm Park—certainly before our modern overload of recreational and entertainment options—and even before there was Trout Island (profiled in the July 2012 and November 2016 issues of this newsletter): there was Shady Side.

Shady Side was the name given to the $1 \frac{9}{16}$ acre plot, shaped like a knife-blade, that was situated on the west bank of the Shenango River, about 2 miles upstream above Sharpsville. It was near the area of the present railroad trestle over the reservoir. The area lay in what was termed the Slackwater, a limpid portion of the Shenango River between the old dam at the entrance of the Sharpsville canal lock and upstream where the river turns East.

Jonas and Walter Pierce, sons of the General, purchased the land on May 18, 1874 from George and Elizabeth Thompson. The Pierce brothers intent was to make “a place of summer resort—for picnics, boating excursions, etc.”

That summer, and over the next decade references are indeed made to picnics, with rowing and waterside activity, by church groups, lodges, and private parties. Access was by boat (including one of the same steamers that later went to Trout Island) or by a sidetrack off the Atlantic & Great Western, later the NYPANO, rail line. Fishing was apparently good as well; in 1896 a 40½ lb. catfish was caught there.

The area was one of the first recreation spots in what is now South Pymatuning Township and was extolled for its beauty. An account from 1915 claimed, “There is no more beautiful scenery along the Shenango river or in this part of



“SHADY SIDE.”
TWO MILES ABOVE SHARPSVILLE, PA.

This view of Shady Side, a veritable idyll along the river just above Sharpsville, as depicted by H.P. Whinnery in 1876, was featured as the frontispiece of the County History published that year.

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Uniquely Sharpsville

Sharpsville's Santas

Signs at the town entrances notify everyone crossing into Sharpsville that—like it or not—they will be visited by Santa Claus on December 23rd. Your reaction to these placards probably depends on whether you consider yourself “naughty” or “nice.”

These signs were erected by a local civic organization, the Sharpsville Service Club, and announce a long-standing tradition—Santa's visit to every home—that is, by all accounts, unique to Sharpsville.

The Service Club embarked on the project in 1948, and from the outset, it gained national attention. That year, Lowell Thomas gave it mention in his Christmas Eve broadcast on the CBS Radio Network. Five years later, Sharpsville's Santas were featured in what was once a leading general-interest publication. *The American Magazine*, printed a short article, with five color photos that opened with this paragraph:

Each year, when Christmas rolls around, kids in Sharpsville, Pa. count themselves among the luckiest anywhere. For Sharpsville with 5,500 people., is the only town in the world where a jolly, bewhiskered, red-suited Santa Claus, laden with gifts, personally visits every last house on Christmas Eve. No home is passed by, thanks to Sid Owen, retired tool- and die-maker, and George Mahaney, Jr., an attorney, and their friends and neighbors.

Indeed, around 1943 Mahaney had Owen suit up for a Christmas Eve visit for his own children, which grew to visits to the homes of friends and neighbors. As Mahaney recalled in 1981, “A few of these fellows agreed to dress as Santas and visit throughout the borough. We started out with 11 Santa suits. Today some 40 Santas and helpers participate and Santa visits every one of the 2,000 homes in Sharpsville on Christmas Eve.” The number of Kris Kringles deployed have ranged up to 25, with an equal number of Helpers. The number of children who sat on Santa's lap once approached 2,500, if not more. Of course the decline in the town's population—especially of households with children—from the mid-20th Century onward, has correlated with the number of men required. Still, Sharpsville's population of youngsters skyrockets the night of Santa's visit, with cousins and friends piling in for house parties planned for that eve.

By 1957, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles reserved license plate numbers beginning with SC for our town's Santa Clauses. Short-wave radios were used by that year to maintain contact. Cell phones were introduced in 1997.

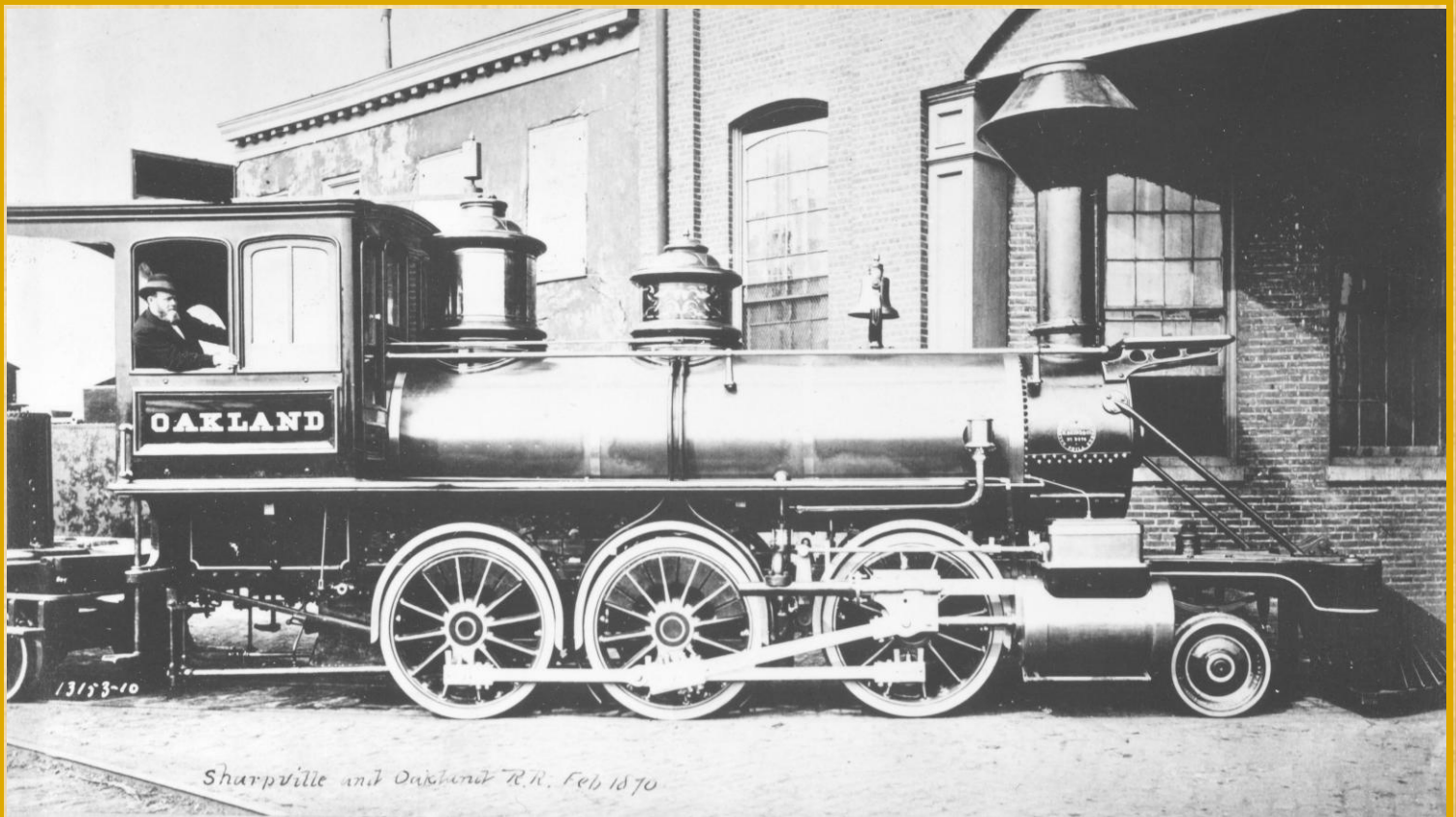
Besides *The Sharon Herald*, reports of the project have appeared in Greenville, New Wilmington, Youngstown and Pittsburgh newspapers, as well as in an Associated Press wire service article. Today, the project remains a regular feature for local television stations and newspapers (who are happy to fill what is otherwise a light “news day”).

In 2006, the visits were changed from Christmas Eve to the evening of the 23rd. Not only was it increasingly difficult to find Santas and Helpers to spend time away from their families on the 24th, many households would miss a visit because they attended church or had other plans on that busy Eve.



“Let's Go! For Sharpsville” reads the chalkboard behind the assembled Santas and Helpers. This was one of the 8 unpublished photos from the 1953 *American Magazine* article in our collection.

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Sharpsville's initial development stems from it being a rail junction, and later it was known as a "railroad town," home to three rail depots. The Sharpsville & Oakland, later the Sharpsville Railroad Company, stands as the most central to our history—and certainly the most colorful—of the rail lines that once ran through here. Seen here is an 1870 photograph at the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Philadelphia of one of their powerful "Mogul" locomotives sold to the Sharpsville & Oakland. The extra steam it produced was necessary to negotiate the steep climb out of Sharpsville into Hickory Township (much of which can be seen in the retaining wall paralleling the Trout Island walking trail). "General" James Pierce, owner of the Sharpsville & Oakland, is likely sitting in the engineer's cab.

Shady Side, cont'd.

the United States than along the old slack water, which is that part of the river which was back up from Sharpsville to Trout Island by the old dam."

Organized parties at Shady Side apparently ended around 1883, since newspaper reports of events being held there trail off then. The rising popularity of Trout Island is likely the cause. Just a short distance upstream from Shady Side, Trout Island offered a broader range of activity: a ballfield, row boats for hire, cooked meals and refreshments, swings, and . . . beer. By 1896, the Erie Railroad tore up the sidetrack to Shady Side. In 1902, the Pierce Brothers sold the property to C.A. Totten, who operated a dairy and resided near there. The land was eventually acquired from his heirs by the Corps of Engineers for the Shenango Reservoir. The scenic shoreline now lies underwater.

With Gratitude

Our "Evening of Mystery and the Uncanny: Edgar Allen Poe's Spirits of the Dead" this past Friday the Thirteenth was a great success. Special thanks to, **Rob Whiting**, who adapted and directed the program, and to the organist, **Don Schumacher**, and to the performers: **Leon Avery III, Megan Donaldson, Ben Houston, Jacob Elliot, and Chelcie Easley**.

A generous donation by **Lindell Bridges and Laurel Alexander** helped fund the event.

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

Sharpsville's Santas, cont'd.

The report from this past Christmas counted 14 Santas, each accompanied by a Helper, who were dispatched along their routes and visited 275 homes. The number of children visited, 752, is gauged by how many popcorn balls—the traditional treat given by Sharpsville's Santas—are distributed. (The popcorn balls were for years made by the men of the Service Club with the help of Myrtle Caracci and the ladies of the V.F.W.; more recently, they have been provided at deep discount by Daffin's Candies.) Others assist at the "North Pole" headquarters, to redirect Santa to a missed house and to answer that night's numerous phone calls, as well as with Santa's make-up (rosy cheeks are a necessity, plus you don't want a kid questioning why Santa has black eyebrows).



Most, but not all, children are delighted by Santa's visit. This photo from 1953 also perfectly captures the mid-century Modern decor of a Sharpsville home.

Planning for the project—balancing routes, lining up volunteers, attending to Santa suits and supplies, begins in September. Its sometimes daunting logistics has been under the direction of Ralph W. Mehler since 2002. Besides George Mahaney, Jr., prior organizers included Gus Grandy, Joe Phillips, Jim Black, and Jim Cattron.

Other communities have embarked on similar projects, but the homes they visit are pre-arranged. Sharpsville's, as far as we know, is the only place where Santa stops at every home with a porch lamp lit. Newcomers—not knowing the custom here—are surprised (and delighted, if they have children in the household) to find a Helper knocking at the door with Santa close behind.

Items for Sale

Scenes of Old Sharpsville volumes 1 and 2

each DVD slideshow features 100 photos of Sharpsville
in years past
\$10 each



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

\$8 each, any 4 for \$30

Collections update

Rita Sloan donated a 1949 photograph of the Third Grade Class at the Deeter School.

Bob Verholek donated a promotional coin bank from the First National Bank of Sharpsville, dating from around 1920.

Maureen Weldon donated several souvenirs from the Sharpsville Centennial.

Dorothy Priestler donated a 1951 Voters Guide, with candidate bios, from the Sharpsville Democratic Committee.

James Rowlands donated a uniform shirt from a ca. 1957 Sharpsville Cub Scout Pack.

Bob Disko donated several items, notably Sharpsville yearbooks and memorabilia from the 1970s and early 80s, and 1942 editions of the school newspaper "The Blue and White."