



# SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, an anthropologist wrote about how little he knew about the lives of his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Even though other anthropologists and professional historians (who shared this realization with the author) are trained to elicit this information, they had to answer “No” when confronted with the question “do they know as much about their family as they think?”

If we are lucky, we know the family lore and the familiar anecdote. But the specifics, the every-day life of our forebears is often unknown—unless we ask. True, it is hard to get someone to open-up about the past. Introspection is hard, harder if difficult subjects are involved—and even if not, times not thought about for decades can take time to recall.

If you want to delve more deeply into this subject, Elizabeth Keating’s book, *The Essential Questions: Interview Your Family to Uncover Stories and Bridge Generations* can serve as a guide.

But here are some helpful hints: Specificity is key, so after asking a relative about the home they grew up in, follow up with details—what did their windows look onto, and what did they hear when they woke up in the morning.

Elicit a longer response by asking what family dinners were like, what were their worst first dates, and where they bought their clothes. The elderly grandma can be seen as a lively teenager when she tells she would be an old maid if she didn’t marry by her early 20s. The grandfather, even if not shipped off to war, may have plenty to tell of Army life.

Even if the parent or grandparent grew up in more recent times, the 60s, 70s, or—let’s kid ourselves, the younger generation consider them old-timers—the 80s, approach them too. After all, The Knack’s “My Sharona” was as far away from today as 1979 was from the midst of the Great Depression.

So, don’t be afraid to go ahead and ask. Usually only a gentle coaxing is needed to get an older family member to open up. (Though the “tougher nuts to crack” usually have better stories to tell.) You may be well rewarded with valuable additions to family lore that can be passed down. While we don’t need to know purely personal history or family gossip, if that relative wants to share his or her reminiscences of growing up in Sharpsville, please let us know.

### Upcoming Events

Sharpsville 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Spaghetti Dinner

March 3<sup>rd</sup>

Night at the Races

May 4<sup>th</sup> – St. Bartholomew’s Center

Watch for details on these and other events in the lead up to the June celebration.

### Open House

As a reminder the Historical Society is open  
the first and third Saturday of the month  
from 1:00p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Come see the unique architecture of our historic building and a large display of our artifacts, documents, and photos of Sharpsville history.

### 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

January meeting 1/8 due to New Year’s Day

# A Look Back

## Dance Cards

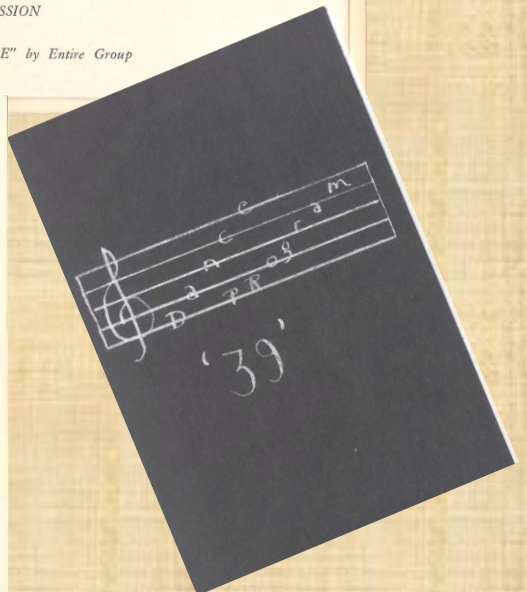
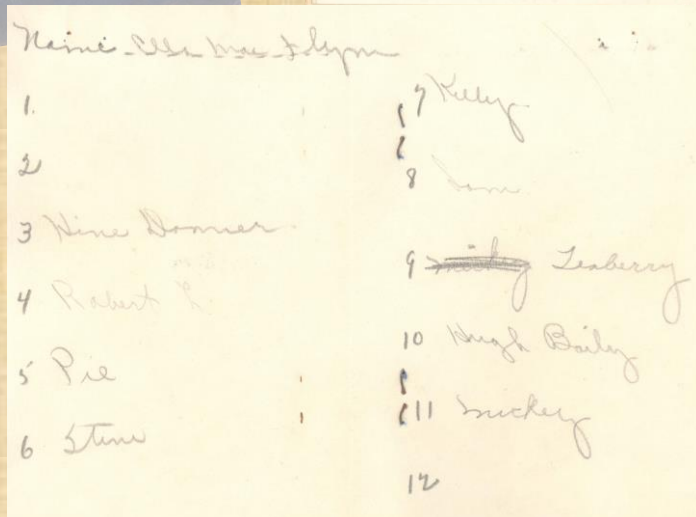
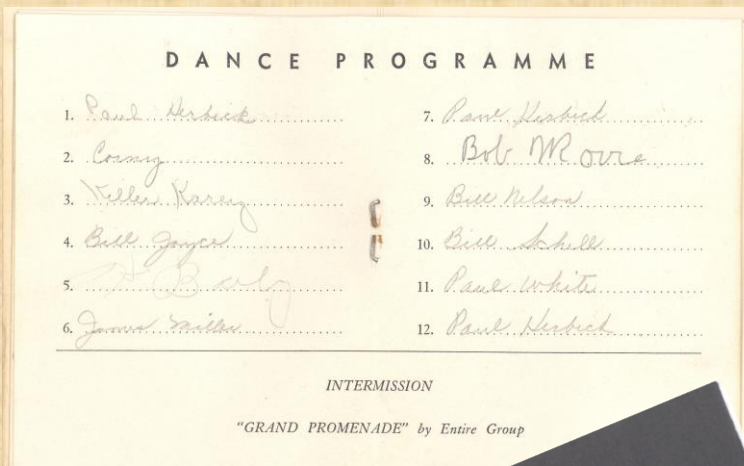
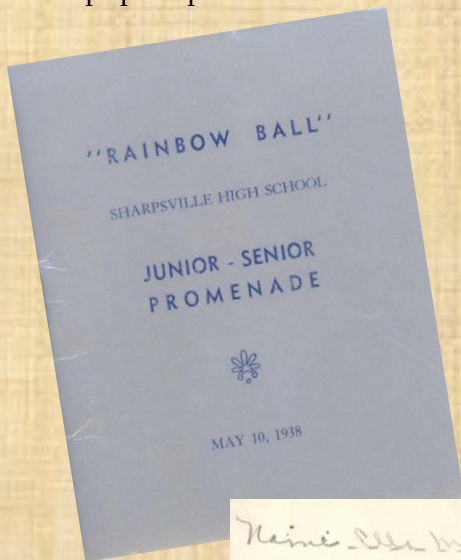
Within the archives of the Historical Society are prom mementos found within scrapbooks or yearbooks. Those from the 1930s and 40s include a Dance Card, or Dance Programme, with a numbered list of the guys a high-school girl would dance with.

The phrases, “Pencil me in” or “My dance card is full” stem from what was an originally a 19<sup>th</sup> century custom. In those years, both men and women would receive a dance card early in the evening and when a man asked a woman to dance, he would pencil his name in next to the title of the dance he wanted to share with her. He would then pencil her name into his dance card. Keeping track this way assured that male and female dance partners would not confuse their dancing schedules and inadvertently hurt each other’s feelings by asking for a dance or accepting a dance from two partners for the same dance.

If a woman arrived to dance with an escort for the evening, the gentleman would mark the lady’s dance card to indicate their dances. It was considered proper at this time to only share up to six dances together, allowing other men the opportunity to request dances. When the custom spread to college and school dances, mingling was encouraged, and so a dance card filled with only one partner was frowned upon.

Shown below are two prom programs—one professionally printed from 1938, and another handmade from 1939, each with the dance partners filled in. The dance cards were often looped with a string for the girl to put around her wrist. These examples did not include that and so likely involved some pre-planning. (To add to the stress of asking a girl to the prom, the guy would apparently have to get up the nerve to ask several other girls to be included on their dance card.)

Histories say the custom had already died out by this time; though, our little town was perhaps behind the trend. The “Programme” within the 1938 memento included a “Welcome” and “Response,” five toasts, a poem, a recitation of a “Legend,” a quartet, and a solo. While formal proms would of course continue, the influence of the informality of the 1950’s Sock Hops perhaps led to the final demise of these more stilted relics.



This photo is of the 13<sup>th</sup> Street School Rhythm Band. The 13<sup>th</sup> Street school was established in 1922 to accommodate the westward expansion of the town and included just first and second grade. Older students were thought capable of the walk to the Robison School on Seventh Street. The buildings were closed in 1958 and bus service provided for the young pupils. The photo was taken in May 1939.

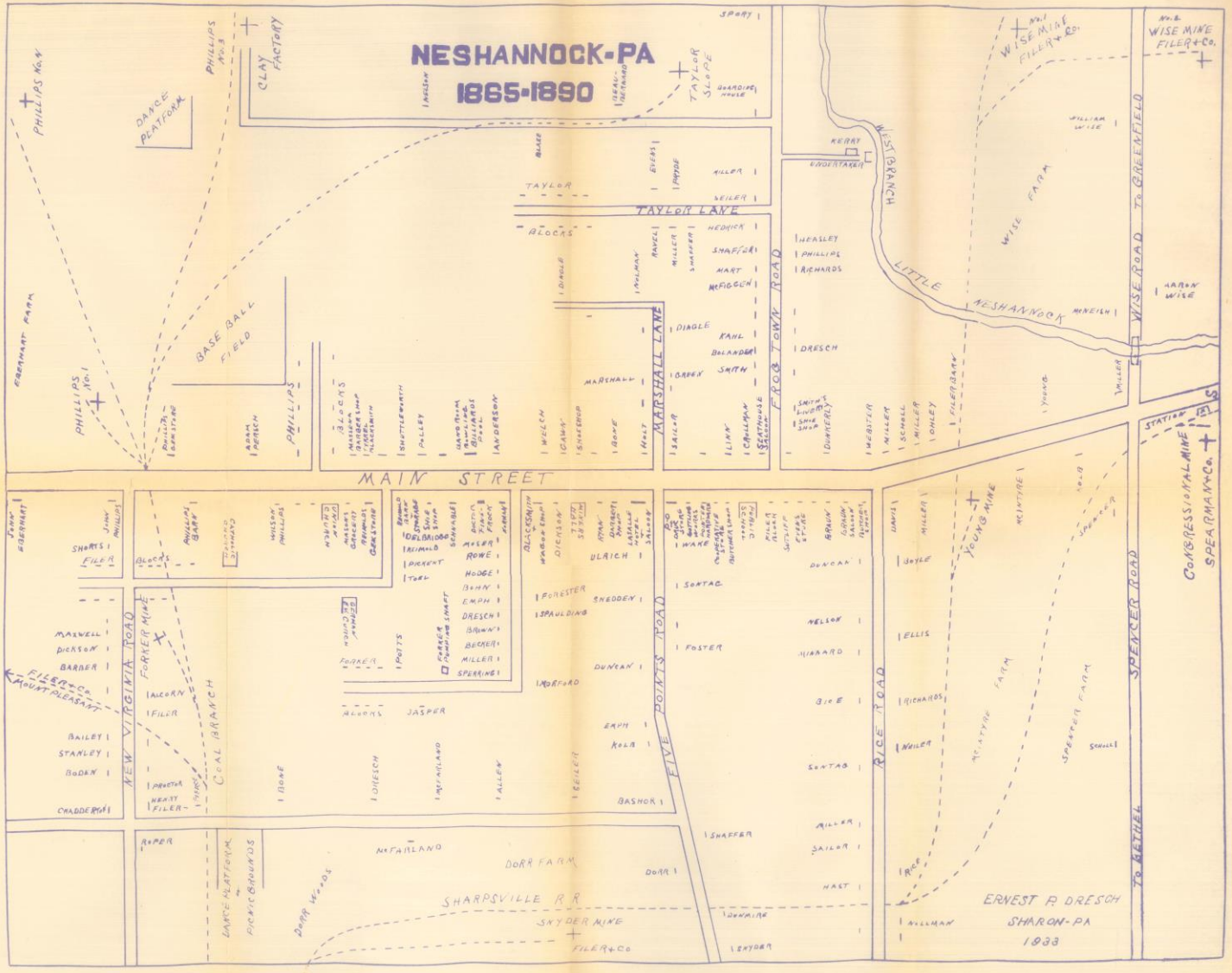
Their banner is shown as well. Also in our collection are several of their uniforms consisting of a beret and cape. All were homemade, in line with the thrift necessitated by the era.



# Places No Longer Here

## Neshannock

Here, we're going to venture a little outside the bounds of Sharpsville to the now-defunct and mostly forgotten village of Neshannock, as depicted in a hand-drawn map in our archives. Located in Hickory Township, now the City of Hermitage, Neshannock was the original terminus of the Sharpsville Railroad. It was a center of mining of the famous Mercer County Block Coal, which was so instrumental in the development of the iron industry in Sharpsville, Sharon, and Wheatland. Nearly all of the mines' output ended up in Sharpsville, where it fed our town's nine blast furnaces, or was sent to other Valley furnaces. It was otherwise shipped out from Sharpsville on the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad to the port of Erie, where it found high demand not for the blast-furnace, but as a fuel coal. (Zoom in to see the map in more detail.)



First, some orientation. The left side of the map is North, the right side South. What is called Main Street is present-day South Neshannock Road. New Virginia Road and Frogtown Road are the same as the present-day roads. What is called Five Points Road is now Miller Road. Wise Road is currently called that on both sides of South Neshannock, so what is termed Spencer Road on the map is still Wise Road today. (The current Spencer Road doesn't start until one gets to South Keel Ridge Road.) Rice Road and the smaller streets of the village are no more.

The dashed lines are spurs of the Sharpsville Railroad, each leading to a mine, marked by an "X." (Mines are sometimes named "slope" or "bank." The main line of the railroad, is towards the bottom of the map before it curves upward. Neshannock Station is at the right edge.

Houses are marked with the names of their owners, though we presume more transient workers lived in the various

## Neshannock, cont'd.

“blocks”: Forker, Filer, Taylor, and Phillips. These are apparently company houses owned by mines of that name.

An 1877 History mentions Neshannock Village, along with three other settlements in Hickory Township: Hermitage, New Virginia, and Keel Ridge. Neshannock, though, is devoted more space where it is noted it “is quite an important mining town.”

An 1888 History says that Neshannock “was formerly of considerable importance, but like its sister villages, which have depended for their prosperity upon a business that was likely to be temporary, it has receded. It has supported the usual complement of dry goods and grocery stores, public schools, hotel and post-office, and has furnished communicants for four different religious organizations, Methodist, Catholic, United Brethren and Baptist, three of which were supplied with church edifices. The Baptists were accustomed to meet in the school building.”

Three churches are shown on the map—Catholic, Union Church, and German Evangelical. But there are also many other institutions and businesses: a baseball field, not just one—but two—dance platforms (one adjoining a picnic grounds), a schoolhouse, two shoe shops, a blacksmith & wagon shop, an undertaker, a clay factory, Smith’s livery, the Seathouse Saloon, and the LaSalle Hotel & Saloon. (Whether these saloons mimicked those of the Old West, is not known. But a concentration of hard-working, single men of different ethnicities likely led to raucous times, if not fisticuffs.

By 1908, according to a U.S. Geologic Survey Map, the village streets and most of the structures were gone.

In its heyday these other institutions made it a town, or at least a village for a time, though, a reminder for reason for the place’s existence was not too far away. Not only did the mine’s railroad spurs cut very close to some dwellings, and across the outfield of the ballfield, there is also shown here a “Miner’s Hall.” It may have been a focus of activity during the “Long Strike” of 1875-76. That involved first the anthracite miners of Eastern Pennsylvania (with the feared tactics of the infamous “Molly McGuires”), and would grow to include the bituminous and block coal miners of Western Pennsylvania and the Mahoning County. In a predecessor union to the United Mine Workers of America, the local miners struck against a reduction in wages imposed by the mine owners. The Mahoning County miners placed down their picks and shovels for three months. Those from the Shenango Valley held out for eight months.

It is also a reminder of how dangerous mining was in those days. The earliest coal mines in the Shenango Valley extracted the coal exposed on hillside outcropping, with a large dog pulling out a car of 15 bushels on wooden planks. (It was considered a great technological innovation when William Fruit introduced mules to replace the dogs.) Soon though, shafts would reach much deeper. The tragedy that is described in the following happened 22 feet down, though the following year, a shaft over 200 feet down would be dug.

An 1878 newspaper article—with its description of mining deaths here by no means atypical—though, in its detail, is particularly horrific. It tells of Andrew Bernard who descended into the shaft at the Oakland Coal Co., in Oakland (now part of Hermitage). “On reaching the landing at the top of the fourth stairs, he was overcome with black-damp, which entirely filled the shaft, and fell forward on his face. The others hearing him fall, Notman went down to his assistance, calling back after Young to come and help get Bernard out. Young made the attempt twice, but was driven back by the foul air. By this time, Notman, who had gone below Bernard, was overcome also, and fell forward on the stairs, cutting his head on the timbers. The remaining boys then ran to the houses near by and gave the alarm, among the rest to Peter Meichan, who ran to the shaft and went down to the assistance of the two boys, laid hold of Bernard and attempted to raise him up and bring him out, but, being an old man and out of breath by running, he was soon overpowered and fell over Bernard, with one arm clutching the stair post. Young again went down, and was overcome also. Then were there four men in the shaft, and all in the fatal embrace of the foul air—John Young uppermost, Peter Meichan and Bernard lying together and just below Notman.” Another group of men then attempted a rescue, with a Kirby also overcome. Bundles of straw were then lit on fire and lowered into the shaft to burn off the gas. This allowed the rescuers to carry up the five bodies, but two hours of precious time had elapsed. Amazingly, three of the men recovered, but Bernard, age 21, and Meichan, age 50, died.

The Neshannock map shows the Forker Pumping Shaft which would have used a steam-powered pump to drain water that would constantly collect in the mine. The other problem of ventilation—before electric fans were available—was solved by placing a furnace at the bottom of the mine. This would create a draft and draw in fresh air through a ventilating shaft. (This introduced a new danger in that it could ignite underground supporting timbers and consume all the oxygen.) Apparently, though, no such system was in place to save Bernard and Meichan.