



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Sharpville's sesquicentennial celebration this summer—both for the many who attended the festivities as well as for those who helped plan the events—brought together lifelong residents, relatively new arrivals, as well as some “expats” who had moved away 40-or-so years ago but came back for the big doings. In one respect, the community spirit expressed is surprising—in this age of civic apathy and households and individuals now seemingly sequestered in each of their own “bubbles” (digital or otherwise). On the other hand, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. Through the years, those from elsewhere have noticed a town-spiritedness from Sharpvilleites that exceeded not only that of other Valley towns but even more the civic engagement of places more far-flung.

This brings up the question, where to we go from here? Past anniversaries—in 1999 and 1974—had generated an increased interest in the town's history, though they eventually waned. Following the 150th, the Historical Society has likewise received an interest in new memberships.

For one, our monthly meetings are packed with an agenda for board-business which is understandably less interesting to a new or inquiring member. We will now be supplementing each meeting with a short show-and-tell presentation of some of our artifacts (especially those not on permanent display). We, moreover, used to have 4 or 5 public meetings where a speaker would give a presentation of interest. These have dwindled to 1 or 2 a year. Especially if we don't confine them to Sharpville-specific topics, we are planning to increase the number of speakers and the overall audience.

Both recent and past events are being evaluated. In May, we conducted a Tour of Riverside Cemetery and a Historical Walking Tour of Shenango Street in June; these echoed similar tours we had done in earlier. We also plan to continue the performances and events that brought culture, entertainment, and community-building to our area.

What for the future? There was certainly an energy and enthusiasm for renewing civic engagement among those who planned and those who helped with the 150th celebration. We hope that this will lead to a continuation of community-building events. We also hope that this renewed interest in Sharpville's past will lead to more members and involvement with *your* Historical Society. We are in need of those with various interests and skills—even if you can commit only a limited time involvement—to help the younger generations tell the fourth half-century of Sharpville's story.

Upcoming Events

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Two-night Getaway to Seneca Niagara
Casino, September 17th - 18th - 19th

Wheeling Downs Casino, October 16th

Call 724-813-9199 for details

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—both interior and exterior—of our historic building and a large display of our artifacts, documents, and photos of Sharpville history.

Our basement display has expanded and includes items you may have missed on a prior visit.

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com

see our website for officers' phone numbers

Headquarters: 131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpville, Pa.

Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane, Sharpville, Pa. 16150

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

Because of Labor Day, our September meeting will
held on Sept. 9th

A Look Back

Local writer and artist Deb Derrenbacher submitted the following story to be included in our newsletter. It is a poignant recollection of kindly, but perhaps troubled, soul. She was the sort of character that is part of the fabric of our town's history, that would never be noticed by newspaper accounts, but is remembered only in stories like these.

We encourage submissions like this—long or short—to be included in future newsletters. Tell us a story from the past that adds to our collective memory of Sharpsville.

Picking Apples at Midnight

When I was ten, my Crazy Mary experience began. It wasn't until we moved to the low-income housing called "the projects" in our small Appalachian town [i.e., Sharpsville], that she showed up unannounced one day at supper. No knock at the kitchen door – she just walked in, pulled up a chair like it was waiting for her arrival with baited breath. She pretended that her news was like it was from our long-lost Aunt Polly, whom we would have welcomed with open arms and asked to join us for a meal. We could have hung on every word of Aunt Polly's adventure, hankering for more as we gripped the edge of our seats. But all we got was this woman, unforeseen and unwelcome.

My mother had Crazy Mary experience from growing up in her neighborhood. I'm sure she didn't know she was on the Crazy Mary weekly route in our town. She was a strange woman, carrying a bag loaded with her finds of the day hanging out – some things from the shelves of the local grocer across the street, some things picked up from the sidewalks on her journey. Her face had wrinkles created from years of worries that no one knew about or even cared about. She made herself look as attractive as she knew how with deep red rouge on her cheeks. Lipstick, thick lipstick, the color of crimson (made from whale blubber), filled in the lines on her lips. Mary experienced life, filtered through her looking-glass eyes, and shadowed by dark black eyebrows painted where hers were thin. Her life was kinda like that, too.

Her grey curly hair was covered up by a babushka, a well-known clue to her ancestry and other things she held dear. The babushka concealed more than just her hair. It seemed to hold deep meaning as it was worn with honor, symbolic of her love for the Lord. It was a rite of passage to wear because it epitomized a life that deserved the love and respect of a grandmother. But since she had not been blessed with children of her own, the whole town was her family, and she took care of it the best way she knew how. Only locals knew some of her story, many times hidden by a thin veil of misunderstanding.

I was just one of the town children who didn't know the real Mary, and didn't care either. All the town children knew was that she was strange. Every time children, like me, walked by Mary, we were tempted to laugh at her shabby appearance. She was like an old broken-down house, wrapped by weeds and unkempt with years of growth. My mother validated our Crazy Mary experience by the way she reacted to our need to show disrespect. Since my mother was a polite woman, she would never say a word to hurt Mary. She knew more than we did about her past and showed every compassion to Mary. No judgement. It was as if Jesus was speaking through my mother – as a reminder of the unspoken rule back in his day to welcome the stranger that shows up at your door. It was important to do that because no one knew a person's hurts or disappointments. If a stranger was unwelcomed and unwanted, they dusted their feet off and moved on.

I am sure Mary had many hardships. But as a ten-years-old, I only cared about making fun of things I didn't understand. I would think to myself: *What a strange human being?* I, like all the others who experienced her craziness, misunderstood Mary's intentions. Us kids would shutter at the door opening every time she came by because she was our own personal daily update on all the townspeople's illnesses and diseases. She had a regular schedule of visits, catching up on everyone's personal news. Then she was a *one-woman, live news report* to all she visited, sharing the news of people's current life stories.

One time, we were sitting down to a nice fried chicken dinner turned up-side-down-unpleasant the moment she arrived. As I went to take a bite of my chicken leg, I heard her exclaim to my mother: "Donna, did you hear about Mrs. Lee? She had to have her leg amputated the other day. It was black with gangrene. Yep, they cut it off right below the knee, poor soul!" To which I watched my mother stop eating immediately, almost choking and put her head down with a big sigh.

At that point, my little sister asked: "Mom, what's amputated?" Mom quickly stifled her: "Never you mind, just eat your chicken!" My dad just rolled his eyes as he always did.

Picking Apples at Midnight, cont'd.

Dinner at our kitchen table was a sacred time according to my mother. No one was permitted to talk of such bodily things as to disturb one's appetite, and also out of respect for others. She'd say: "Watch your manners!" But there was just one exception to the rule and that was when Mary was at the table. It would have been more unmannerly and disrespectful to make a guest feel unwelcome. So, we literally, swallowed our feelings along with the chicken and smiled.

Mary had a random diet for daily gossip which is part of the reason she was referred to as Crazy Mary. Along with that, she also had a passion for caring for her community, even if it was on her terms. We didn't know how much she cared until we moved to her neighborhood – just one block away. My mother's grace was a kindness magnet to Mary. Labeled for her lack of social graces and norms, Crazy Mary, abdicated her own home duties to help my mother with yardwork. One day, Mary brought over some apples to give to my mother. She walked in the door spontaneous as usual. She couldn't see my dad's eyes rolling behind his newspaper. I'm convinced it wouldn't have mattered in the least. And she shouted out in her ill-mannered way: "Hey, Donna. Got some apples for ya from your tree. Yeah, picked them last night. It was dark, but I could see em' just fine." My mother politely smiled and thanked her. My dad just grumbled behind the paper at the thought of her out in our yard while we were all sleeping. Not only did she pick apples, but she pulled weeds, picked up garbage and trimmed the hedges.

I've come to believe, now that I have reached Mary's age back then, that maybe she wasn't so crazy after all. Sure, she had her eccentricities. And since we lived in a small town, there were tales of the abuse by her husband of twenty-eight years: like, how he removed all the light bulbs in their house or the day he took out the stairs to their basement. Still, other hearsay floated around that he had died by being run over by a Volkswagen bus after hiding tons of money from her throughout their house. None of these things can be verified because these have become folktales of a past age and past lives of bygone days. Not many people still living today know of the so-called Crazy Mary I knew.

As times fade, so do people and their life stories. I know now that there's definitely more to Mary's story, more than anyone will ever know. Mary made an impact on the everyday life of people of her time, people she knew in her small town. She contributed to her community. She made it beautiful in ways that she may never know. Just like many other small towns, the spirit of a soul who gave what she could, the way she knew how, will remain here in this small town, not as a crazy person but as someone who gave love to people in small lonely places.

This story is a tribute to a person who will remain unnamed who was a resident of a small Appalachian town. A person we all know somewhere in small town, USA. Someone who made her town a better place by picking apples at midnight!



The author, who is also an artist, included this drawing of Mary to go along with the story.



The Sharpsville Fire Department is here fighting the November 23, 1959 fire at McDowell's Market on Mercer Avenue. (It was where the Thrive Pilates studio is now, next to the Pierce Opera House.) The fire started in the basement and spread through the store and the four second-floor apartments that were once above the building. It threatened Bloch Brothers Clothing store and the bank next door, as well as the post office on its other side. The fire was brought under control after four hours and the help of eight neighboring fire departments.

Items for Sale

Traces of Old Sharpsville

A thoroughly researched history of Sharpsville with short, readable articles grouped into themed chapters and many photos — \$40

Charcuterie Boards

Engraved with images of Pierce Mansion, First Universalist Church, Jonas Pierce House, or the Santa Visits Every Home Sign — \$40 each

Santa Collection

Featuring images of Sharpsville's beloved Santa visits

Mugs — \$15

Ornaments — \$15

T-Shirts — \$20

Bookmarks

Engraved with the 150th Anniversary Logo — \$5

Available at shops throughout town or contact 724-699-3884 or visit sharpvillehistorical.org

We still have limited quantities of:

Natural Stone Drink Coasters featuring lithographed scenes of Old Sharpsville — \$4

CAT'S MEOW art portraits of the First Universalist church or Pierce Mansion — \$10

T-Shirts with the Historical Society Logo S-M-L — \$12; XL and above — \$15