

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXIV, Number 2

October 2006

Please note October program changes!

The NEW date and time: Saturday, October 21, at 10:00 a.m.

A shuttle bus will drive members and their guests to “Pulpit Rock” on Little Sewickley Creek Road for SVHS President Joe Zemba’s slide lecture, *The Walker Houses of the Sewickley Valley: Architecture & History*. Please park your car and meet the bus in front of the Woodland Swimming Club, Woodland Road Extension. The bus will return you to your car after the program. **There is no parking available at “Pulpit Rock.”**



“Pulpit Rock,” Little Sewickley Creek Road, Edgeworth. Built for Samuel C. Walker. Rutan & Russell, architects, 1901

The Walker Houses of the Sewickley Valley: Architecture & History

Famous for the Harbison-Walker Refractories Company, which dominated the U. S. market for the fire bricks that lined blast furnaces, the Walker family of Pittsburgh also had major investments in banking, an iron foundry, wireless and radio technology, the manufacture of margarine, fertilizer, stoves and water heaters, and distilling. Their conservation strategies helped preserve the historic landscape of the Sewickley Valley.

Mr. Zemba’s slide presentation will include the Walker family’s estates in the Sewickley Valley—“Elm Ridge,” “The Ledges,” “Bagatelle,” “Pulpit Rock,” “Muottas” and “Sunny Hill”—as well as their Allegheny City townhouses; “Bonny Blink” and the first home of the Allegheny Country Club in Brighton Heights; and houses rented or owned by the Walkers, such as Lark Inn and Way Tavern. He will discuss family connections, the architects of the houses and the family’s preservation efforts..

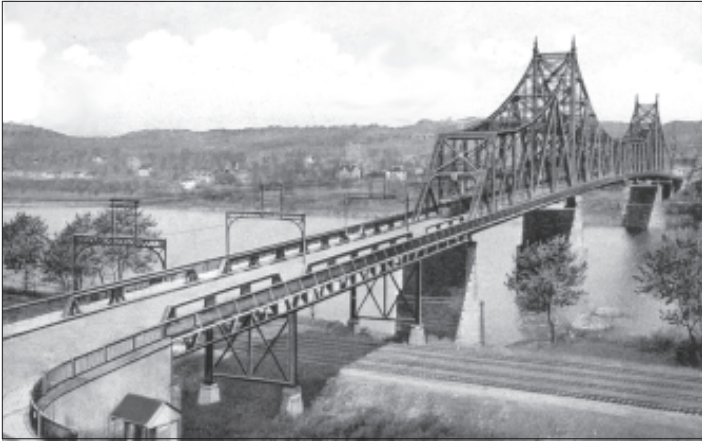
The mission of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society

is to promote interest in and to record, collect, preserve, and document the history of the Sewickley Valley.

The Birthday of a Bridge

October 21, 2006, marks the 25th Anniversary of the new (2nd) Sewickley Bridge. The original Sewickley Bridge was erected on the same site and served the communities on the north and south shores from 1911 to 1980, when it was dismantled to make way for the new bridge.

During those years, 1977-1980, the most common topic of conversation throughout the communities was "The Bridge." From the supermarkets to the ball fields, the gas stations and the cocktail parties, everyone was asking for an update on the status of the bridge.



The old Sewickley-Coraopolis Bridge

The campaign that began in the mid-seventies to replace the severely deteriorated span across the Ohio River took on momentum when suddenly, without warning, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation closed the bridge in 1977.

Prior to that time local citizens were informed by state officials that they didn't need a bridge there since the state built one upriver, the Interstate I-79 Bridge, over the Ohio River at Glenfield and Neville Island. However, just two days before the Sewickley Bridge closing, the state closed the I-79 Bridge, following a report from a towboat captain that he had spotted a crack in the structure.

The communities on the north and south shores were stranded without a crossing between McKees Rocks and Ambridge. Emergency meetings were called by the municipalities, school districts, Sewickley Hospital, ambulance services and many others. Quickly, a committee of volunteers that represented all the services on both sides of the river was created, and soon everyone became aware of the "The Committee to Save the Sewickley Bridge." Jack Simpson, a Sewickley resident who had just opened an office supply business in Coraopolis, volunteered to chair the committee. His 10 minute trip to work became a 50 minute commute over the Ambridge Bridge.

The call to arms for support from neighboring towns was trumpeted throughout the valley, and the call was answered by 28 communities that passed resolutions in support of a replacement bridge.

By March of 1977 a highly publicized town meeting was held in the St. James School Auditorium. Officials representing communities, state and federal government met with citizens. The state committed to a band-aid repair with a check for \$250,000 in order to reopen the bridge with a weight limit of three tons. The bridge was closed three times before the final closing in May 1980.



The Bridge bumper sticker

In July 1977 a three day festival, "Sewickley Turns Inside Out for the Sewickley Bridge," spotlighted the individual campaign drive of the bridge committee. Funding was needed to support the efforts in securing the new bridge, and the citizens responded.

Bridge pins were worn by citizens, while others attached bumper stickers to their vehicles. In the schools, children participated in bridge-related projects. At Quaker Valley High School, the physics class built toothpick bridges. The entries were judged by professional engineers. The 1978 graduating class at Sewickley Academy chose the river as the theme of their yearbook and spotlighted the Sewickley Bridge. The children at St. James School (adjacent to the bridge) learned about the importance of the bridge to the communities and participated in several early morning gatherings at the bridge as the television cameras recorded the events.



The Bridge pin



Gloria Berry and Jack Simpson at the new Sewickley Bridge

(continued on next page)

Signals is designed and edited by
Susan C. Holton

Now, twenty five years later, former bridge committee members reminisce about the work, the action and the result.

Jack Simpson:

It is truly a great example of how concerned citizens in a democracy can come together for a cause and right a wrong decision made by uncaring people in high places in government. I am proud of what we accomplished.

Lannie Gartner, former resident of Moon Township and a member of the committee, recalls her early morning departures to attend the weekly 7:30 a.m. committee meetings in Sewickley where the only way was the long way, across the Ambridge Bridge. Lannie also remembers the dedication day and the opening of the new span on October 21, 1981.

I arrived on the Moon Township side of the Ohio River and stood on the new replacement bridge before any traffic proceeded across the span. The platform for Governor Dick Thornburg and other dignitaries was decorated and in place on the middle span. The high school bands from Quaker Valley and Moon Area marched across. This was a proud moment for me, the mother of a Moon Area Band trumpeter marching, not in cadence, across the new bridge.

Martin McDaniel, former Borough Manager of Sewickley and a member of the Committee to Save the Sewickley Bridge, when asked for a comment said:

Nowadays I'm sure many of us take the bridge for granted and might even complain a little about sitting in traffic. Each time we cross the bridge just think about the years of weight restrictions and closures we suffered through and enjoy our good fortune.

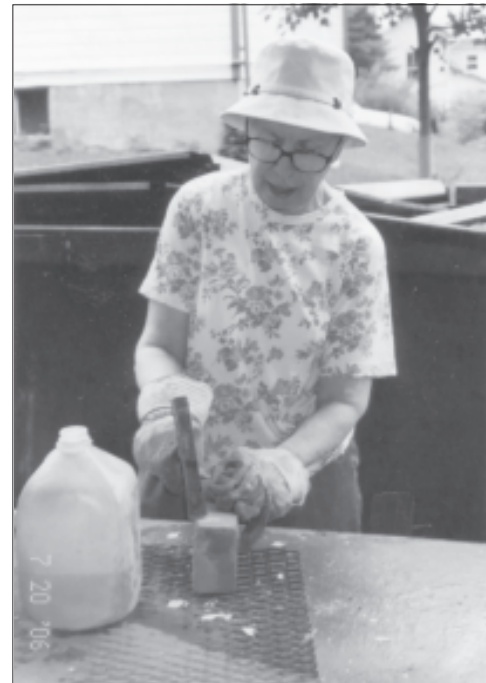
Marvin Wedeen, Vice Chairman of the bridge committee and an administrator at Sewickley Hospital, now retired, says:

The realization of the adverse impact with the loss of the bridge on the local economy and health and social services galvanized the communities on both sides of the river to take action. A steering committee of volunteers and specialists was formed and met weekly for almost 3 years..... Since its dedication, the new Sewickley Bridge stands as a monument to the collective efforts of local residents, business and political leaders and the state and federal representatives of that period.

— by Gloria G. Berry, Coordinator CSSB
Past President of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society



Photo from the *Sewickley Herald* by B. G. Shields of members of the Committee to Save the Sewickley Bridge at a breakfast at the home of Dr. and Mrs. George Berry celebrating the first anniversary of the October 21, 1981, bridge opening. Pictured are, 1. to r., Row 1: John R. Simpson, Ferguson Ferree, Josephine H. Sybo, Joseph V. DiVito; Row 2: Calvin X. Heinlen, Martin McDaniel; Row 3: Howard White, Gloria G. Berry, Lannie Gartner; Row 4: John S. Portella, Marvin M. Wedeen; Row 5: Leroy L. Kite, William C. Gourley Jr., Gary Burnworth, Charles H. Norman, Walter J. Brannon.



B. G. Shields, Volunteer, cleaning old bricks for the Lemont Granary project, Lemont, PA, July 2006

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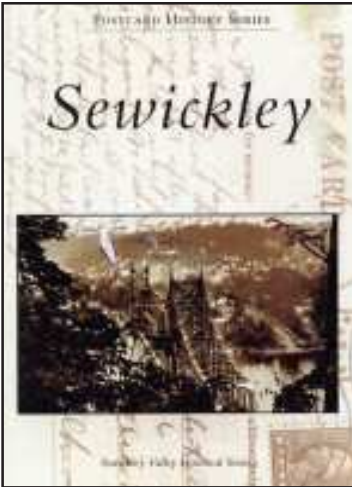
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Thanks to the following, who have generously supported the Sewickley Valley Historical Society with gifts in addition to membership dues:

Mr. Carl Wood Brown, Cordelia Glenn, Mr. & Mrs. L. John Kroeck, Wayne & Mary Murphy, Sally S. Ruffin, Sewickley Heights History Center, Peter & Susan Sour, Mr. & Mrs. Richard Spatz, Mrs. W. Bruce Thomas, Mrs. LeRoy Thompson, Joe Zemba, Mary M. Zemba

New Members

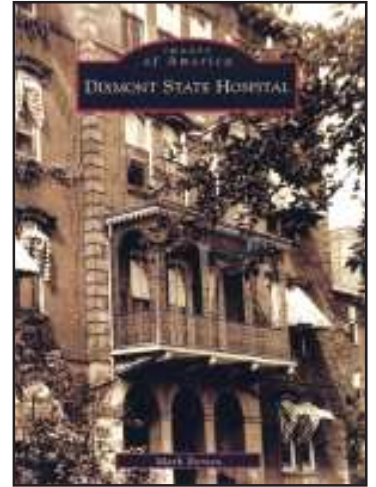
Mr. Robert E. Bagans, Mr. & Mrs. Joseph McLean, Dr. & Mrs. Gary Schurman, Ms. Marilyn K. Smith, *all of Sewickley*



Published in 2006 by Arcadia Publishing in its "Postcard History Series," *Sewickley* is a 128-page, paperbound book with over 200 captioned photos, most of which are from the SVHS collection, plus an introduction by the SVHS staff giving the history of the Sewickley Valley.

Dixmont State Hospital by Mark Berton, also published in 2006, is in Arcadia's "Images of America" series. The recent landslide at the site of this 1859 refuge for the mentally ill named for health care reformer Dorothea Dix makes the book especially interesting. The 128-page, paperbound volume includes illustrations, maps and plans.

Each of these books is available for \$19.99 (plus 7% Pennsylvania sales tax) or for \$25 postpaid. Come to SVHS Headquarters for your copy, or mail your check to Sewickley Valley Historical Society, 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143.



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