

Sewickley Valley Historical Society *Signals*

XLIII, Number 5

April 2016

Wednesday, April 20th, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.
Old Sewickley Post Office



The Homer Smith approaching Walnut Beach, Sewickley

Steamboats on the Western Waters A Presentation by Danny Back

Danny Back is a respected river historian who has been lecturing on the history of inland river transportation and steamboats since 1990. He has presented programs aboard the *River Explorer*, *American Queen*, *Mississippi Queen* and most notably as a guest lecturer aboard the *Delta Queen* during her Heartland of America trip. Danny proudly lives on the banks of the Ohio River at mile 519.4 in Patriot, Indiana.

As President of the Cape River Heritage Museum, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, Danny developed *Steamboats on The Western Waters* to take river history into the community providing an overview of the rise and fall of the steamboat era. Danny begins his presentation with early river transportation before steam power. He then moves through the development of the steamboat and its first appearance on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, once considered the western waters of the frontier. Soon after the arrival of steam, the rivers were quickly transformed into bustling commercial trade routes, requiring for regular service the identification of hazards and the creation of a shipping channel. Danny provides glimpses into what life would have been like on the river for a passenger, for the crew, as well as their captain, with special focus on Sewickley's very own Captain Frederick Way, Jr. He concludes his presentation with a discussion about the decline of the steamboat industry and what its remnants look like today.

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.

Steamboats on the Ohio River

The first steam-powered boat on the Ohio River, called the *New Orleans*, was constructed in Pittsburgh in 1811 by Nicholas J. Roosevelt, a partner in the firm of inventor Robert Fulton. Her machinery, fabricated in New York, was transported in pieces over the Allegheny Mountains. She came down the river successfully under her own power in that year of portents, with Halley's Comet visible in the sky and the earth convulsed by the New Madrid earthquake.

Within a few years, the steamboat would penetrate to the headwaters of most tributary streams and become the best way to move people and goods. The early steamboats were simple in design but later became larger and more ornate, culminating in the period of the 1870s and 80s, enshrined in the work of Mark Twain. The river at that time was crowded with large packet boats, produce boats, shop boats, gospel boats, engineer boats, light and buoy boats, showboats, houseboats and yachts. Boatyards lined the shores. There were large yards at Shousetown on the shore opposite the mouth of Big Sewickley Creek (today Glenwillard) and just down the river at Freedom, where Conway rail yard sits today. There was a boatyard in Sewickley at the foot of Ferry Street, which produced its first hull in April of 1879, the steamer *Butte*, meant for trade on the upper Missouri River. In all, seventeen hulls were built before the yard was destroyed by fire in 1883.



The *Homer Smith* picked up passengers at the Monongahela Wharf in Pittsburgh



The *Homer Smith* passing under the Sewickley Bridge

Until the 1930s, Sewickley was a typical river town, with a landing at Chestnut Street and a riverfront hotel at the top of the wharf grade. After 1863, that hotel was the Park Place Hotel, and from the 1890s on, there was the Elmhurst Inn. River news was a prominent feature in the newspapers from 1840 at least until the 1920s. Life focused on the river. There was a very popular Sewickley Canoe and Boat Club. At the foot of Walnut Street, a beach was developed and opened in 1915 by James S. Gray, a civic minded tailor, where the water was shallow with a smooth gravel bottom. There was a pavilion for roller skating and dancing, a bathhouse, a baseball field, refreshment stands and picnic tables and eventually numerous riverfront cottage camps owned by individual families. Large parties of tourists and picnickers from area companies would travel by boat from Pittsburgh for outings at the beach. One of the most popular excursion vessels was the one pictured here, the *Homer Smith*, a sternwheeler, 235 feet by 40 feet with a draft of 5.9 feet. At a large gathering such as a river regatta weekend, which featured swimming, surfboard, skiff and canoe races and fancy diving contests, the population of the town of Sewickley would double. The relocation of the railroad closer to the river [from the right-of-way where the Ohio River Boulevard is today], a process begun in 1924 and concluded in 1927, necessitated the dumping of slag for a new railroad bed, ruining Walnut Beach and forcing its closing. The town was cut off from the river that had sustained it for so many decades. Sewickley was no longer a river town.



**Reminiscence of Ohio River
Steamboat Days by W. G. Sibley
excerpted from *Ohio History
Journal***

“A great river is a powerful influence over the lives of all who dwell on its banks. When a river is intimately associated with the affairs of a small community, its whole population becomes conscious of it. So it was, with boyhood in the late 1860s and 70s, when spent in almost any village along the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, a never to be forgotten experience, for in those decades the Ohio was “the Stream of the Empire,” when the West was in the making. The



Walnut Beach, Sewickley

The river and its activities, seen season after season, and year after year, get a strong grip on a boy’s imagination, desires and ambitions. It gave me my first glimpse of the wide, wide world -and its unknown far away- to be explored in later years. I learned intimately its seasonal changes, its high waters and low waters, its nearby beaches, bars and creeks, its floating ice in winter, its fishing and swimming in summer, its skating and boating adventures. Every village boy on the bank was acutely conscious of the Ohio River all year round.

From spring to autumn in the sixties the great pine forests on the hillsides of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers floated down by the village in huge rafts of logs. In the seventies they were replaced by rafts of fragrant sawed lumber bound to ports on the lower Ohio and Mississippi. There was also the daily panorama of towboats pushing ahead of them acres of heavily laden barges of coal from Pittsburgh and those full of Pittsburgh industrial products, a mighty volume of commerce that continued to ride the river until the country became a network of railroads.

All these things were highly interesting, but the finest attraction of the river was the swift passenger packets, side wheelers and stern wheelers, half a dozen or more a day bound up or down stream, full of people with bands of music, and all painted white, from their hulls to their pilot houses. The steamboat era was in its heyday then, with no competition for quick freight or passenger transportation. The stage coach was passing out and the railroads were only in their beginnings. Nowhere, not even on the Mississippi, famous for its magnificent passenger packets, did the steamboats travel in braver array, or mean more to the populations along the shores, than on the upper Ohio. The villages and the towns on the banks were the homes of the crews, masters, pilots, engineers and mates -whose standing was professional- and office clerks, stewards, watchmen, firemen, cabin boys, porters, maids and deck hands.

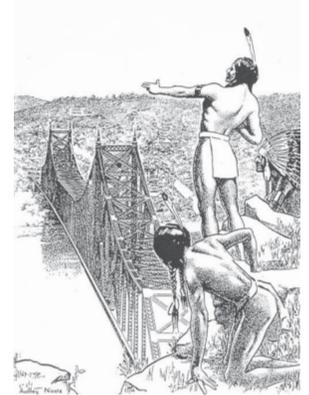
The river valley population depended almost wholly on the river for both freight and travel business. When ice or low water suspended traffic, there were none but dirt roads along the banks, often impassable when winter thaws came. The river traffic built the towns from Pittsburgh down: Wheeling, Marietta, Parkersburg, Pomeroy, Gallipolis, Ironton, Portsmouth and on to Cincinnati. Much capital was invested.

In the nineties the great decline set in which brought an end to the romance of the steamboat on western waters. The railroads all but crowded out the passenger packets. Little is left now but memories, and they are fast disappearing as the old professional river men, captains, pilots and engineers drop off. Time was when every steamboat brought a thrill, but none do that now.”

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

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April 2016



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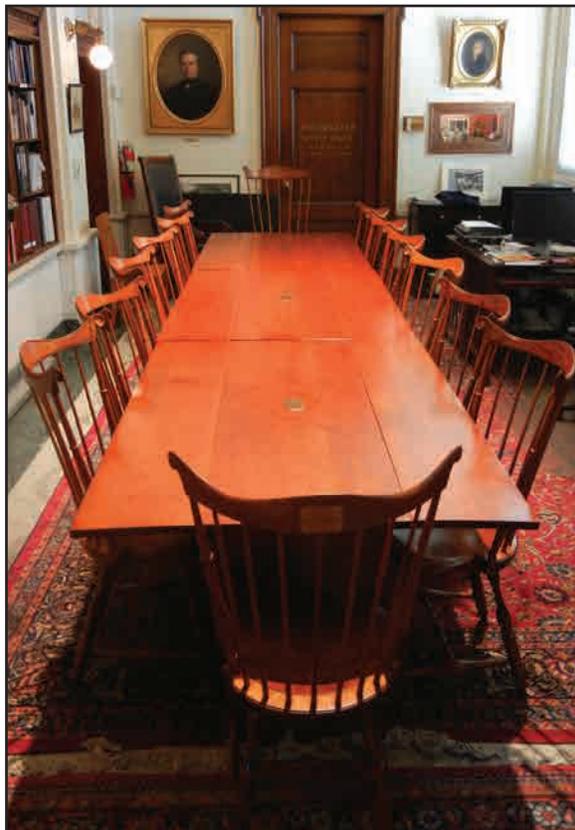
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Thank you to those who contributed new chairs to complete our boardroom. The plaques on the back of the chairs read:

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We are open 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., Tuesday through Friday, or by appointment.