

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXIV, Number 5

March 2007



Join us on Wednesday, March 21, for a visit to

Vicary House: Beaver County Landmark

NOTE: Parking at Vicary House is quite limited. Carpools will leave the Old Sewickley Post Office between 6:50 & 7:10 p.m. For more information, call headquarters at 412-741-5315.

Sea captain William B. Vicary was born in Philadelphia in 1771, son of Captain John Vicary and Mary Harvey Vicary. The oldest of four surviving children, he was orphaned at age twelve and became the ward of Samuel Coates, an influential Quaker merchant. At the age of sixteen, Vicary accompanied Revolutionary War hero Commodore John Barry on one of the first American trading ventures to China. In the years that followed, Vicary enjoyed a lucrative career as a ship captain, making several trips to the Orient. He retired from the sea in 1806, married Anna Maria Gossler of York, Pennsylvania, and settled in Philadelphia, becoming a land speculator.

The Vicarys moved to Columbia, Pennsylvania, around 1812, where Vicary became head of the Columbia Bridge Company and Chief Burgess of the town. In 1821, the family moved to land they owned near Big Sewickley Creek, and Vicary became a gentleman farmer. He lived near his good friends the Shields and Way families and became close to George Rapp, leader of the Harmonist settlement at Old Economy. In 1826 Vicary sold his land to the Harmonists, bought about one thousand acres known as "Heath," where the town of Freedom now stands, and built the Vicary mansion, which was

completed in 1832. In 1837 he laid out the village of Saint Clair, often referred to as "Vicary Extension," which has been part of Freedom Borough since 1896. He farmed his land in Freedom until his death in 1842.

Vicary mansion is a striking example of local Western Pennsylvania architecture, built of massive dressed stone blocks that were quarried on the property. It was spared the wrecking ball in 1974, when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1982, Beaver County purchased the house with Community Development funds, and it is now home to the Beaver County Historical Research and Landmarks Foundation.

Our hosts for the evening will be Brenda Applegate, Executive Director of the Beaver County Historical Research and Landmarks Foundation since 1998, assisted by her husband, Roger. In addition to a short slide presentation entitled "Vicary Mansion Looking Toward the Future," which shows before and after slides highlighting the mansion's restoration, the Applegates will discuss the Vicarys and their many Sewickley connections.

Sewickley "Antiques Roadshow" a Success

Frigid temperatures didn't discourage Sewickley and Pittsburgh antique lovers from traveling to the Old Sewickley Post Office on Saturday, February 17, for the Historical Society's version of the popular Antiques Roadshow. Objects ranging from Chinese bronzes, to Civil War *cartes de visite*, to mechanical cast iron banks, to rolling slide rules, to portfolios of prints illustrating *Pilgrims' Progress* were appraised by a team headed by John Kroeck. The morning was capped by a program at which the appraisers talked about the most interesting items. Shown at right is a photo taken by Mim Bizic of Christy Semple holding a hand-colored lithograph of Abraham Lincoln, *sans* beard. The show was such a success that there are plans to repeat it in future years.



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 Bicycle Craze in Sewickley

The following appeared in Franklin Taylor Nevin's *The Village of Sewickley* (The Sewickley Print-Shop, Inc., 1929).

It is excerpted from the chapter entitled "When Bicycling Was a Sport: The High Wheel and the Sewickley Valley Wheelmen."

Sewickley in the [eighteen] seventies boasted of no paved streets. The wooden velocipedes of the very young consequently enjoyed an extremely restricted use, while the few "bone shakers" possessed by some of the more fortunate Sewickley youths barely managed to cruise about town on the sidewalks. These so-called "bone shakers" were too rough and used up too much power to be really popular even had better roads been available.



It was in the early [eighteen] eighties that reports began to come in of a glorified "silent steed" that was making a stir in the East. These strange machines had one wheel as high as the dismounted rider's chin, followed by a diminutive rear wheel at the end of a curved rod, both wheels with wire spokes and shod with solid rubber tires. The high bicycle had arrived.



Sewickley lost no time in taking up the craze. First one, then another "machine" appeared on its streets. Farther and farther afield the riders ventured, contending with dust and ruts and stones; contending too with the other occupants of the highway, horsemen who objected to the new-fangled usurper that frightened their

horses and arrogantly claimed to be a vehicle entitled to a share of the road. The sidewalks were no longer available since pedestrians quite rightly objected, and moreover the cracks between the boards offered too great a risk of "headers," those sudden unpremeditated dismountings, head first over the handle bars with the little wheel following after to administer the *coup de grace*, a crack on the head, if one failed to dodge it in its descent. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, "Sewickley bicyclists," the local paper said, "are very indignant at the City Fathers because they are compelled by them to direct their fiery steeds through the dust and gravel of the streets."



The number of "wheels" increasing, a bicycle club – The Sewickley Valley Wheelmen – was soon formed. A modest one-storied club house was built facing Little Street. Summer evenings saw the club

members on the road. Usually they would meet at the Athletic Grounds, then in groups down Beaver Road they would go, and out Little or Big Sewickley creek where the favorite gathering place was at the top of the rise just beyond the Van Cleve chapel. Then toward dusk came the return trip to the club house porch for a smoke and chat and later, lighting the oil lamps that hung from front wheel hubs inside the spokes, the riders wended their several ways homeward.

The new sport was not taken entirely seriously by the general public. Small boys loved to run beside the mounted cyclers shouting "Monkey on a stick," while such facetious comment as the following appeared in print: "A Sewickley Bicycle Club has been organized. Our MD's offices and Chief Justice Rudisill's are putting on a new coat of paint. Broken limbs and runaway teams are expected to make business lively during the dull summer months." Still, the wheel's popularity was voiced on behalf of deserted femininity: "We notice that girls do not take kindly to bicycles and bicycle talk. This can not be wondered at. Every June evening, when the roads are in good condition, there are forlorn damsels sitting alone that would be enjoying masculine attendance but for the silent steed."

Beside these evening excursions, longer trips were taken on Saturday afternoons. Not yet had Sunday been recognized as a possible day of recreation. After the family carriage had returned from morning service the streets and roads were virtually deserted. Some may remember the half shocked, half puzzled comment when the leader of the Presbyterian choir braved public sentiment by riding his wheel to church of a Sunday morning and parking it against the ivy till the service should be over. Here was food for controversy. His was riding his bicycle on Sunday! Yes – but he was using it solely as a means of getting to church. A puzzling dilemma for the advocates of strict Sabbath observance.

Among the numerous makes of bicycles, one styled the "Kangaroo" calls for special mention. Modeled after the "ordinary" high-wheel bicycle, but in miniature, its pedals were close to the ground and connected with the axle by a sprocket chain. Here for the first time appeared a prophecy of doom for the high wheel, the prototype of the "safety" that was soon to appear, displacing the "ordinary" and casting it upon the scrap heap; that "safety" which was looked upon with scorn as effeminate and lacking in sportiness, but which by its safe riding quality at last completely drove out the old machine. Bicycling remained for some years a real sport, [but] with the passing of the high bicycle the gymnastic element in the sport was eliminated and the wheel gradually settled down into its present more or less utilitarian character.



A Bicycle Romance

We found this in an issue of *The Sewickley Valley*, a weekly published here between 1895 and 1912. Bicycles really were a big thing!

He was a callow youth, ... and she a blushing maiden. He had escorted her to church several times, to the theatre once or twice; had let her curly head repose gracefully on his manly breast, and once, when she had put on his hat, he had kissed her; so, with the usual rapidity of the times, they were considered engaged, and they evidently thought they were, too.

Well, one evening he was talking to her over the gate. He had been riding and was still sitting on his wheel. She was leaning over the gate. It was in the gloaming and no one was in sight. He leaned his handsome face down to her, and the black mustache approached dangerously close.

She looked *so* sweet in the half light – how he *would* love to kiss her!

“Darling,” he said, laying his hand on hers, “Do you love me?”
“Yes,” she said, looking up shyly.

Of course he couldn’t leave her mouth untasted after that, and so he bent to kiss her. Great guns! He had forgotten his wheel, and when he moved the wheel moved, too. He took an artistic header that landed him in the gutter, and she ran into the house laughing.

He picked up that wheel, and he started for home, a sadder but wiser man. He put the bicycle away. There it remains, and she hangs over the front gate and sighs for him in vain. He is looking in a broken-hearted, dejected sort of way, for a new girl that won’t laugh when he takes a tumble.

Newly Discovered Aerial Photos of Heights Estates

Glenn and Carol Bohn of Sewickley, who attended the Historical Society’s Antiques Road Show on February 17, brought with them a number of photographs of Sewickley Heights estates taken in the late 1930s by William E. Reetz from a small plane flown by a relative of theirs, William H. “Wild Bill” Riley.

Riley’s 35-year flying career ranged from barnstorming to piloting commercial jet aircraft. Despite forced retirement from commercial flying in 1972 at age 60, he continued flying well into his 80s and concentrated on his hobby of restoring antique clocks. At one point he worked on the clock in the Methodist Church tower in Sewickley. The pictures of the Heights estates were apparently a speculative venture: he and his partner hoped to sell the images to the owners. Three are shown here.

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society is grateful to the Bohns for allowing these images to be copied and placed in our files.



Edgehill Manor & Harton Hall



Farmhill



Franklin Farm

2nd Annual Celebrate Sewickley!

March 9-24

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society, Sweetwater Center for the Arts and the Old Sewickley Post Office Corporation will team up for the 2nd annual **Celebrate Sewickley** art sale and exhibition, to be held March 9-24 at the Sewickley Valley Cultural Center. The exhibition will open on March 10, from 6:00-9:00 p.m., with a reception featuring live entertainment, wine and hors d'oeuvres, and a silent auction. Tickets are \$30 per person and can be reserved by calling Sweetwater at 412-741-4405. All proceeds will benefit the Sewickley Valley Cultural Center, home to the three organizations.

Noted local artist Jebby Potter has created a new painting representing Wolcott Park specifically for the event. Posters of the painting are for sale for \$10 at the Center and at Penguin Book Shop; a limited edition canvas *giclée* will be included in the silent auction.



Wolcott Park, by Jebby Potter

Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

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

Mr. & Mrs. R. P. Simmons

New Members

William Kleeman; Gail & Jeff Murray, all of Sewickley

Save the Date!

On **Wednesday, April 25**, David J. Vater from Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation will present a program at the Edgeworth Club entitled **Brandon Smith, Eclectic Architect**. The presentation will be preceded at 6:00 by an optional dinner. Smith (1889-1962), who designed the Edgeworth Club, was also architect for the B. F. Jones Memorial Library in Aliquippa and the now demolished B. F. Jones III house on Creek Drive. Watch for details!

Signals is designed and edited by Susan C. Holton. Visit our website, www.sewickleyhistory.org — or e-mail us at sewickleyhistory@verizon.net.



March 2007

Non-Profit Org
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit 70
Sewickley, PA

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143