

Sewickley Valley Historical Society *Signals*

XLIV, Number 2

October 2016

Wednesday, October 19th, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.

Old Sewickley Post Office

Marketing The Presidency

A Presentation by Steve Mihaly, Collector of Presidential Memorabilia



Steve is a retired Vice President of the H.J. Heinz Company. He and his wife have lived in Gibsonia for over 20 years and have one daughter. Steve has been a collector of Political Americana for more than 50 years, starting at the age of 10. Beyond being a collector, he considers himself to be a Political Historian. He has been a guest on morning television talk shows and interviewed on national television. His complete collection encompasses over 20,000 items spanning from 1896 to the present. 1896 was an important year in American politics, as this was the first year when real marketing of the presidency on a modern scale began.

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 Friendly River" by Franklin T. Nevin

Author of The "Village of Sewickley"

Reprinted from the Sewickley Herald, April 13, 1928

[Written as the railroad, prior to moving its tracks from where Ohio River Boulevard is located today, is dumping fill along the riverbank, ruining it for recreation and blocking access.]

Sewickley no longer possesses a waterfront. The shelving expanse of pebbles that extended from Glen Osborne to Chestnut Street, with the willow-covered river frontage farther downstream, has completely disappeared under a deep covering of earth deposited there by the steam shovels that are preparing the railroad's new right-of-way. Another natural feature is thus sacrificed in the inexorable march of progress. Time was when the river and its beach were the delight of all Sewickley boys both great and small; one might say the chief delight, for strange as it might seem to the current generation, the river and its interest once occupied a foremost place in the affection of the youth of the Valley. At all seasons of the year it furnished recreation of one kind or another, swimming and rowing in the summer and skating in winter, while in spring and fall the beach with its piles of driftwood invited to the enjoyment of roaring fires where potatoes were to be baked and an occasional jack salmon broiled and eaten with a gusto that the absence of salt failed to diminish. The first swim of the season some time in May and the last usually in late September though too cold for real enjoyment, were the occasions of much pardonable boasting, while in the regular summer season no day went by, Sundays included, without its troop of youngsters splashing and shouting in the river, running up and down the beach, or diving from barge or towboat that chanced to be tied up awaiting the return of high water. To run barefoot on those beach pebbles called for soles like shoe leather, but these were soon acquired since all the boys in those days said farewell to shoes in early spring. Bathing suits were of course unheard of, excepting when politer parties of sedate older folk resorted to the river on summer evenings- and such improvised bathing suits as did then appear! Just to play about on the beach was a delight; collecting strange kinds of pebbles, lucky stones with holes through them, fossils that we called "coral" and that red and orange colored "keel" so convenient for writing and marking on board fences and on house walls. Then there were crawfish to catch, springs of cold water to dig for and "trotlines" to set, pulling them in the next day with now and then a jack salmon on one of their many hooks. But, after all, the swim was the thing. Mr. Bruce Tracy's barges below Chestnut Street were the favorite resort for those who enjoyed diving, but for the real experts in that line the upper deck of a steamboat or the topmost bucket of its stern wheel was none too high. Then there was old Stevenson's scow to swim from if he

weren't around; the old flat that he pushed before him, wading waist deep and picking up the round stones that he sold in Pittsburgh as paving or cobble stones. Stevenson was crabbed by reputation, a hater of youth, one who would steal your clothes it was said, besides giving you a bawling out if he caught you near his flatboat. Occasionally a great lumber raft would appear from the far upper reaches of the Allegheny, a beautiful sight, like a floating island quietly drifting with the current, the two big sweeps at the bow and stern guiding it around the bends and in the middle a board wigwam, the living quarters of the half dozen rough lumbermen that composed its crew. Great sport and exciting it was to swim out and clamber aboard, to run up and down on the clean pine boards and dive off before you were carried too far downstream. Our village sidewalks were made of planks from those rafts; "seconds" bought cheap probably because they had in them the auger holes through which the stakes had been driven to hold the raft together.

It was no great trick to swim across the river in time of low water and when the river was particularly shallow it could be waded afoot or on horse-back at the riffle opposite Osburn Station. Rowing vied with swimming as the favorite summer sport, the field of adventure extending from the riffle to Dead Man's Island. Both of these land marks (or water marks?) have now been done away with. The current at the riffle was too swift to stem with oars, though by clinging to the timbers of the wing dam that extended downstream near the far shore of the river you could work your skiff up to quiet water and so to the "back river" above Middletown, now called Coraopolis. Thus returning you enjoyed a short dash down through the swift water and a quiet row to the home port. The only excitement matching this was to row out and into the second or third wave behind the stern wheel of a steamboat.

In winter time the skating was not associated especially with the freezing over of the river though that sometimes occurred, but was enjoyed here and there in more or less sheltered coves like that just below "Tracy's abutment" at the foot of Chestnut Street, although occasionally continuous stretches of available ice along shore lure the youngsters as far as Little Sewickley Creek and beyond. Especially fortunate was it when one could cross the river and enjoy the larger field of ice that lay within the wing dam. Usually, however, this was inaccessible as Lashell's ferry opposite Chestnut Street would be out of service at such times because of floating ice. Lashell's ferry where you shouted "Over" and old Mr. Jolly, the ferryman, would row across for you, charging fifteen cents for the round trip.

Interest in the river was not confined to these summer and winter sports. There was river traffic with its towboats and packets, the former guiding great fleets of coal barges and the passenger packets with deck, “texas” and pilot house trimmed with fancy woodwork and gleaming in white paint. Every boy kept a list of boats he had seen. Their names and appearance were familiar to all and many a lad could distinguish them by their whistle, or even by their manner of puffing, before they came within sight around the bend. The *Boaz* with its fancy pilot house, the *R. J. Grace*, *Nellie Walton*, *Tom Dodsworth*, *Kate Stockdale*, *Buckeye State*—any boy could run through a score of these from memory. Once in a great while a boat would come up from the lower river, beyond Cincinnati, or even from the Mississippi and then great was the excitement and bitter the disappointment of those who missed the sight. On the rare occasions when a packet made a landing at Chestnut Street it was an opportunity to dash up the gangplank among the real southern dark stevedores, to be chased off with a rush when the starting bell sounded or when the mud clerk lost his temper. Then there was the little steamer that was always warmly welcomed on its somewhat rare visits, the Lighthouse Tender *Lily*. Like “Light Horse Harry Lee” the name itself sounded sweetly on the tongue. Shyly we recognized something poetic in her name “Tender Lily,” the word “Lighthouse,” not registering particularly, and it was not until after years that we realized that the government boat *Lily* was merely a lighthouse tender bringing lamp oil and supplies up river to the numerous shore lights. In the early spring the first of the jo-boats appeared, usually with a tin type “gallery” attached. Here you disposed of your winter’s accumulation of old iron, glass bottles, etc., in return for which you had your picture taken—no extra charge for the dog- or you accepted a bit of pressed glassware, say a pair of salt cellars in the shape of swans or elephants or something graceful and artistic. The jo-boat man fixed the price of your scrap iron and you took whatever he said for it. Then there were the boat clubs whose members were the proud possessors of paper racing shells in which they skimmed the surface of

the waters on summer evenings, in training for imaginary race meets. A real boat race now and then furnished a thrill, as when John Lynch, the village champion, met some rival oarsman from one of the Pittsburgh clubs, and when Captain Paul Boyton gaily paddled by on his way to New Orleans in his inflated rubber bathing suit and towing his diminutive supply boat christened “Baby Mine,” the beach was lined with cheering spectators. [Note: Paul Boyton (1848-1924), known as the “Fearless Frogman,” was an entrepreneur and showman who spurred world-wide interest in water sports, especially open water swimming. He began toying with a rubber suit invented by Pittsburgher C. S. Merriman as a life saving device for steamship passengers. This first immersion suit, which would become Boyton’s trademark, consisted of rubber pants and a shirt cinched tight at the waist. Within the suit were air pockets the wearer could inflate at will using tubes. Similar to modern-day dry suits, the suit kept its wearer dry. The suit enabled the wearer to float on his back, using a double sided paddle to propel himself, feet forward. Boyton made numerous journeys in this suit, swimming up and down rivers across America and in Europe. Boyton would tow a small boat behind him in which he carried his supplies and personal possessions. Boyton’s arrival in small river towns was often heralded with great fanfare. Among his exploits were a crossing of the English Channel in 24 hours, a crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar and the journey cited above in September 1881 from Oil City, Pennsylvania to the Gulf of Mexico—2342 miles in 80 days.]

The river teemed with varied interests the year round. Its sleepy low water in summertime and its wild freshets in winter and spring, all of its moods met a response in our daily lives. It was the central fact in our boyhood existence. Whether roaming the beaches in the hot summer sun, playing Indian on the mud flats back of the dam, or in winter-time standing on the shore ice with “hawking pole” struggling to bring ashore saw-log or lumber as it floated by, the River was our great playground; and today—how many give it a thought; how many have even noticed that Sewickley has lost her waterfront!

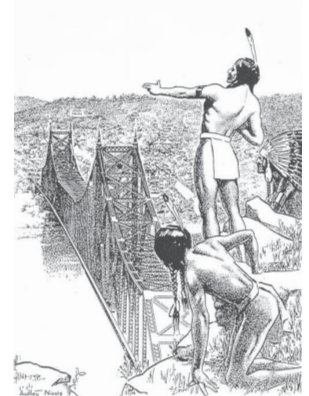


Looking upstream on the Ohio River circa 1880, well before the Sewickley Bridge, with Chestnut Street Landing in the left foreground; Neville Island in the background; Middletown (Coraopolis) on the right.

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October 2016



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