

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXV, Number 3

November 2007

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

7:30 p.m.

Sewickley Heights History Center — 1901 Glen Mitchell Road

The Russians Landed: Avinoff & Shoumatoff in Sewickley

a presentation by L. John Kroeck, Heather H. Semple & Harton S. Semple, Jr.

These émigré artists were the children of Russian nobility. He was trained in law, was a gentleman-in-waiting to the Czar, and was serving as a government official in 1917 when the Bolshevik Revolution forced him to flee to the United States. His lifelong interest in butterflies became the core of his professional life. She was a gifted painter who fled with her family to America after the abdication of the Czar. She would become the portrait painter of the rich and famous. Both would have connections to the Sewickley Valley.

Andrei Avinoff (1884-1949), through his interest in lepidoptery, became acquainted with William J. Holland, Director of the Carnegie Institute. In 1926 Avinoff was, himself, appointed Director of the Carnegie, a post he held until his retirement in 1945. During these years he held advisory professorships at the University of Pittsburgh and illustrated several books, notably *Wild Flowers of Western Pennsylvania*. Among his acquaintances was airline pioneer George Rice Hann, who enlisted Avinoff to catalog the remarkable collection of Russian icons he housed at his Sewickley Heights estate, "Treetops." Examples of Avinoff's paintings and publications will be on view at the November 14th lecture.



Andrei's sister, Elizabeth (1888-1980), was married to Lyova "Leo" Schumacher, a member of an old Russian family. "Schumacher" was changed to "Shoumatoff" at the beginning of World War I, when anti-German feeling was running high. After emigrating to America, Leo became a partner of Igor Sikorsky of helicopter fame.

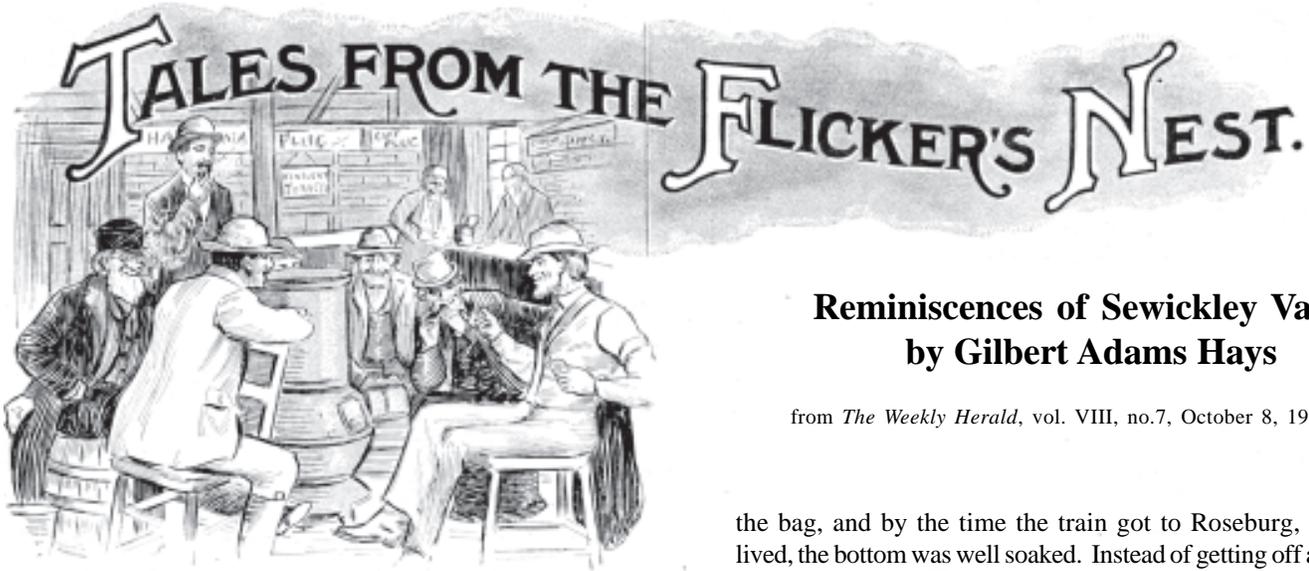


Elizabeth Shoumatoff's talent was "discovered" by artist and neighbor George Inness, Jr., son of the famous Hudson River School landscape painter. Assisted by advertising tycoon Frank Seaman in finding wealthy patrons, she was soon much in demand, painting Dukes, Biddles and Drexels in Philadelphia, DuPonts in Wilmington, Fords in Detroit, Fields in Chicago and scores of subjects in Sewickley. A few examples of her work for Sewickley patrons will be on display at the lecture. Madame Shoumatoff is perhaps most famous for the unfinished likeness of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on which she was working when FDR died. For that story, see page 3 of this newsletter.

More on Andrei Avinoff and Elizabeth Shoumatoff can be found in Alex Shoumatoff, *Russian Blood: A Family Chronicle*, New York, Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1982; and Elizabeth Shoumatoff, *FDR's Unfinished Portrait: A Memoir*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990.

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.



**Reminiscences of Sewickley Valley
by Gilbert Adams Hays**

from *The Weekly Herald*, vol. VIII, no.7, October 8, 1910, p. 2

Dick Swartzwelder, who was one of the popular young men around the village some years ago, had considerable artistic ability, some of his work in white and black, pastel and oil, now gracing several drawing rooms in the valley. Dick was of rather dignified manner, although a member of the perniciously active gang that together went to the city on the Beaver Falls in the morning and returned on the old 6:10 in the evening. This bunch were great practical jokers, especially among themselves, and their pranks are legion and many times original.

Every Thanksgiving day the Westinghouse Electric Company, then having its offices and shops in Allegheny, presented each employee with a nice fat, juicy turkey. Dick was among the fortunate ones, but did not relish carrying the anticipated, but uncooked, feast from the office to the train, so secured the services of one of the boy messengers to get it to the train for him. In an evil moment the boy left the turkey in the machine shop, wrapped up in a big paper bag, unguarded for an hour or so, when some of the men filled the turkey with old pieces of bolts, nuts and turnings from the lathes, until it was next to bursting, just about doubling the ten original pounds it weighed.

The crowd always rode in the smoker, so the turk was placed on the coal box in the rear. En route some wag poured a glass of water into

the bag, and by the time the train got to Roseburg, where Dick lived, the bottom was well soaked. Instead of getting off at Sewickley as usual the majority of the gang stayed on the train to see the fun. As the train stopped, Swartzwelder grabbed the bag, getting as far as the platform when the bottom let go, and the turkey rolled down the car steps and on down the stairs that led to Ferry Street, shredding scraps of iron at every bounce. Dick never turned, but headed straight for home, leaving his next day's pièce de résistance lying where it fell on the street, the boys howling and roaring as he disappeared up Grant Street.

On another evening, Fred Muller appeared on the evening train with three or four ducks still dressed in their original feathers, and not wrapped up, a present from city friends who had been shooting out at Kankakee. Placing them upon one of the racks, Fred went to the other end of the car, where he sat entertaining a pretty girl. The opportunity was quickly taken advantage of, and one of the ducks was fired well up into the middle of the car, only to be followed by all the others, everybody taking a hand in helping the good work along, until the air was full of dissected duck, heads, legs and wings rapidly becoming separated from their original owners in the mêlée. Muller was so intent with the girl that he did not realize what was going on until, about to get off a Sewickley, a piece of the massacred bloody fowl hit him along side the head. Presumably the car cleaners at Beaver Falls got the fragments, for none of the duck was removed at Sewickley.

In Memoriam

Elizabeth Anne Jennings Krush

Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

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

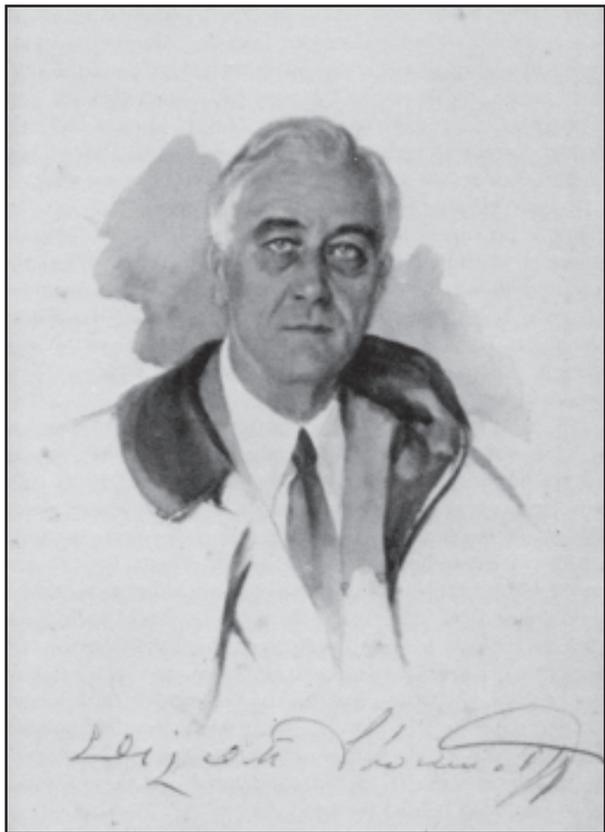
George J. Berry, III; Mrs. David B. Oliver, II

New Members

Will & Katharine Harbison, Sewickley; Mrs. Amy O. Mason, Ambridge; John Witwer, Evergreen, CO

Madame Shoumatoff & the Unfinished Portrait of FDR

In 1937, Elizabeth Shoumatoff, already famous for her celebrity portraits, met a Mrs. Lucy Rutherford, who had been Eleanor Roosevelt's private secretary. Elizabeth was asked to paint Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford, and she did, eventually doing all their children as well. Lucy and Elizabeth became friends. Kept very private was the fact that Mrs. Rutherford had been intimately involved with Franklin Delano Roosevelt since at least 1914. Both Mr. Rutherford and Mrs. Roosevelt seemed to tolerate this most discreet relationship.



In 1943, Mrs. Rutherford arranged for Elizabeth to paint President Roosevelt, the result being a twelve by ten inch head and shoulders of him in his navy cape. Color reproductions soon were hanging in homes around the country. It was decided that Elizabeth should do a life-size portrait for the White House, but nothing more was said of it until March of 1945, when Lucy called to say that the President, just returned from Yalta, had gone to Warm Springs in Georgia to rest and that he had some time to sit for a portrait. Rutherford was very concerned about the President's health and wanted the portrait done immediately.

So Elizabeth traveled to Georgia with Lucy Rutherford. The President, who looked careworn, was nevertheless full of pep when sitting for Madame Shoumatoff on the morning of April twelfth. He was seated at a desk going over some papers and would look up on request as the likeness was blocked out. Elizabeth always started with the eyes and moved outward from there.

The President said, "We have fifteen minutes to work." It was nearing lunchtime. Roosevelt suddenly raised his hand and passed it over his head in an unnatural, jerky way. Then, without a sound, he slumped forward in his chair.

Elizabeth ran out of the room and summoned the doctor. She and Mrs. Rutherford then hurriedly packed their things and left. In a Warm Springs hotel where they stopped to call and find out what happened, they heard from a weeping switchboard operator that the President had died.

Elizabeth Shoumatoff's connection with this historic event made her a celebrity, and the unfinished portrait of FDR became famous. The rights to publish it in the *Daily News* cost \$25,000! The donated portrait hangs today at the Little White House in Warm Springs. Now Elizabeth received

commissions to paint other crowned heads and presidents, including William Tubman of Liberia and Lyndon Baines Johnson. Madame Shoumatoff died in 1980, beloved and honored, painting until the end.

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society Board of Directors voted at its last meeting to donate \$5000 to Sewickley's Cochran Hose Company for the restoration of its 1927 American LaFrance Triple Engine. The fire truck arrived at Sewickley Station on May 1, 1928, and was Cochran Hose's primary unit until 1966. More recently, it has been used in parades and to carry Santa Claus into Sewickley for Yuletide in the Village. It is one of the oldest pieces of fire apparatus still in service.

The venerable vehicle was delivered to Ron's Garage in Eighty-Four, PA—known for being one of the best in the business at restoring antique fire trucks—in October 2005. It is estimated that the restoration will cost between \$60,000 and \$75,000.

Should any member of SVHS wish to contribute further to this worthy project, checks should be made payable to Sewickley Valley Historical Society, marked *LaFrance*, and mailed to SVHS Headquarters, 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143.



Cochran Hose Company's 1927 American LaFrance Triple Engine

Some Recent Visitors

A Sewickley Valley Historical Society member from the state of Indiana was recently back home again in Pennsylvania. Margaret Barnes Wolfe made the trip especially to attend the gala Riding and Driving party on September 28th at the Sewickley Heights History Center, which brought out the Sewickley Hunt in full regalia and a fabulous display of classic automobiles.

Horses and history are both interests in Peg Wolfe's life. She has four horses in her barn in Charlestown, IN, across the river from Louisville, KY, and she is a member of the Clark's Grant Historical Society in Charlestown.

Although her work lured her away from Pittsburgh, Peg has never neglected her Western Pennsylvania roots. She grew up on the Wolfe Farm along Glen Mitchell Road in old Sewickley Heights Township. Her father, Charles J. Wolfe, was the township secretary, and his meticulous tax inventory record of the grand estates rests in the SVHS collection, thanks to Peg Wolfe. Also in the



Peg Wolfe & B. G. Shields

SVHS files are photos of the great Clydesdales on the Wolfe Farm and copies of the awards family members won from the American Jersey Cattle Club.

Peg's trips to Sewickley always include looking up classmates from Sewickley High School's Class of 1939. Peg furthered her education at the University of Pittsburgh and then went on to a successful career in advertising.

Another recent visitor was John Harden Willock, a great-grandson of B. F. Jones. Mr. Willock was in Western Pennsylvania to attend a reception at the Jones Library in Aliquippa, a gift to that city from members of the family of the famous industrialist and leader of Sewickley Heights society. Mr. Willock, who lives in Chestertown, MD, was accompanied by his wife Judith and daughters Jill Willock Caron and Susan Willock.

During his visit, John Willock was invited to sit in the chair used by his great-grandfather in 1888, when he was chairman of the Republican National Committee. The chair is a prized possession of SVHS, presented to the Society by the family of B. F. Jones, Jr.

John Harden Willock's grandmother was Alice Jones, wife of William W. Willock. A few years ago, Norman, John's brother, visited SVHS headquarters, and he, too, was invited to sit in the Jones chair. According to B. G. Shields, the two brothers resemble one another and bear a likeness to photographs of B. F. Jones, Sr.

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



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