

# Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XL, Number 2

November 2012

Tuesday, November 13, 2012

7:30 p.m.

Old Sewickley Post Office

## Mary Roberts Rinehart



A Presentation by David Grinnell and John Canning

David Grinnell is Reference and Access Archivist at the University of Pittsburgh Archives of an Industrial Society. He is also on the Board of Directors of the Allegheny City Society and is a member of the Western Pennsylvania Archives and History Commission of the United Methodist Church. He graduated from Albion College in Michigan, where he majored in history. David's interests include local history, Methodist history, genealogy and, particularly, Charles Avery and the abolitionist movement in Western Pennsylvania.

John Canning taught history in the Mt. Lebanon schools from 1963 to 2001. He is a lifelong resident of the North Side and Vice President of the Allegheny City Society. Over the past decade he has helped organize programs that help to tell the history of what was, until 1907, Allegheny City. John also is involved with the Oasis programs for active seniors, which meets at Macy's in Pittsburgh. Here he has presented programs related to Western Pennsylvania history and organized day trips to sites of historic interest.

The presentation will focus on Mary Roberts Rinehart's years in Old Allegheny and Glen Osborne, and Mr. Grinnell will bring some items from Pitt's archives for us to examine. See page two of this newsletter for an exciting new donation to the Sewickley Valley Historical Society relating to Mary Roberts Rinehart!

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS PROGRAM WILL BE PRESENTED ON TUESDAY!**

### *Friends, Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors*

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

Dr. & Mrs. George Berry; Mr. & Mrs. Hal Bonnett; Mr. & Mrs. Richard Elste; Margaret Gilfillan;  
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### *Donations*

W. P. Snyder III Charitable Fund  
Pat & Judie Vescio,  
in memory of Tom Pastorius

### *In Memoriam*

Mrs. Fred Hamren  
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Mrs. Hay Walker, IV

### *New Members*

Mr. & Mrs. Michael Szuba, Sewickley  
Mr. Thomas Szuba, Sewickley  
Mr. Donald P. Traviss, Sewickley

*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.

## Mary Roberts Rinehart's Mirror a Gift to SVHS

The fine piece of old Sewickley history seen in the photo at right is called a pier glass. It is a mirror placed on a pier, the wall between two windows supporting an upper structure—thus its long, tall shape.

The provenance of the mirror seems to be as follows:

It has been dated to the 1860s, so it is likely that it belonged to George Washington Cass (1810-1888) and was in his house here in the Sewickley Valley. Called “General” because he was a graduate of the class of 1832 at the United States Military Academy at West Point, Cass was first in the package delivery business and then become a railroad executive. In 1856, he assumed the post of President of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad, which eventually became the Pennsylvania Railroad, serving in that capacity until 1881. In 1863, Cass bought substantial property in Glen Osborne from James Park, where he built a mansion called “Cassella” on the hill overlooking the Ohio River. He had a rail siding constructed to his property to accommodate his private railroad car. This mirror could have been in the house to witness the marriage in 1866 of Cass’s daughter Sophia to Francis Hutchinson, who also worked for the railroad. In 1873, Cass sold “Cassella” to Thomas Hare and moved his family to New York City. In February 1911, the Hare heirs sold the property in two parcels to a George Shaw and an Effie M. Encke.



Philip Nanni restoring the mirror

Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958) and her husband, Dr. Stanley Marshall Rinehart, purchased both parcels in September 1911 and refurbished the house, renaming it “The Bluff.” Very likely the unwieldy mirror was in the house when she purchased it, because we know that she owned it. She was, of course, the famous mystery writer, sometimes called “the American Agatha Christie.” Her most popular work was *The Circular Staircase*, written in 1907. She

went to Belgium as a war correspondent in 1914. The family moved to Washington, D. C., in 1922 so that Dr. Rinehart could do research for the Veterans Administration. “The Bluff” was sold to the Marks family in 1925 and was ultimately torn down in 1969.

Sometime before the 1925 sale of the property by the Rineharts, Eleanor Willard George (Mrs. William Dickson George), grandmother of Susan and Hugh Nevin Jr., bought the mirror from Mary Roberts Rinehart. Dr. Lewis H. Willard, Mrs. George’s father, was a colleague of Dr. Rinehart’s at the Homeopathic Hospital in Pittsburgh, and Mary Roberts Rinehart trained as a nurse and worked there. The Georges, who resided at 905 Beaver Street, Sewickley, installed the mirror in the living room of their home, where it remained for approximately ninety years.

Following the death of William D. George in 1953, his estate sold 905 Beaver Street to Pat and Ann Ranson, who in turn sold the property in 1956 to Alfred H. and Roberta C. Lewis. In 1958, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis sold the property to Fred I. and Carol Sharp, longtime members of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society. After the death of Mr. Sharp in 2011, Mrs. Sharp sold the property and moved to Florida. Before leaving Sewickley, she made a gift of the mirror to the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, and it has been restored and installed in the lobby of the Old Sewickley Post Office.

## The Edgeworth Tradition

*Transcribed from an unpublished manuscript by Frederick Way, Jr.,*

In 1956, Edgeworth council president A. O. Pierce spoke of what he termed “The Edgeworth tradition.” Pressed to define his meaning of the phrase, he said this of it: “The Edgeworth tradition is the handing down from generation to generation [of] the unwritten code of ideals sparked by the pioneer settlers and since guarded by their descendants and the newcomers.”

Which is probably as near the bull’s eye as anyone can shoot. The teaser is this: Could we teach taste or genius by rules, they would be no longer taste or genius. The thing retreats as you approach it. But in Edgeworth it always bobs up again.

Edgeworth is, and always has been, the taproot of Valley culture, an amazing paradox inasmuch as that community’s leaders have loudly quarreled with any deviation from status quo. If some of Edgeworth’s noblemen had had their way about it, there still would be unpaved, dusty streets—well, not streets, for Edgeworth peculiarly has no official streets—all “roads” or “lanes.” The first highway in Edgeworth was paved only after a bitter struggle in the Pittsburgh courts. [See the article on pages 3-4 of this newsletter.] Some of such objection has been preserved into household phrases: The first telegraph line (“the poles will scare the horses”),

the first railroad (“Don’t be alarmed, Auntie, the Economites and Mr. Shields are opposed to the railroad and it won’t be built”), and the first concrete sidewalks (“those glittering white ribbons of cement”).

Yet, for all such backwardness, two private telephones were in Edgeworth homes before anybody in Sewickley owned one. Edgeworth residents were buying White Steamers and Winton cars before any automobiles were owned elsewhere hereabouts. Public education commenced in Edgeworth. The first formal church group organized here. Also the original Post Office. Under the name of Sewickley Bottom, Edgeworth was some shucks, with a general store and a water mill and a town shoemaker, while Fifetown (early Sewickley) still was a ragamuffin toughy noted principally for its beer joints and spectacular street fights.

Geographically, Edgeworth might have become a prosperous

town with a business area of some dimension. This possibility was apparent to prehistoric man; three well-defined Indian mounds were in Edgeworth when the first whites arrived, evidence of an ancient culture. Still the community developed to contain—not business—but the biggest acreage of tended lawns in any borough of western Pennsylvania. Edgeworth is, today, the most expansive borough (1.47 square miles) bordering the Ohio River’s north shore in Pennsylvania.

If Edgeworth were to adopt, a motto, that motto might be: “When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.” Think a moment—this is not a passive attitude at all; quite the contrary; this denotes the special brand of vigilance and alertness which typifies Edgeworth’s genius and good taste. As you realize this distinction, you go a long way toward understanding what Mr. Pierce meant when he spoke of “The Edgeworth tradition.”

## The Opening of Woodland Road

*Transcribed from The [Sewickley] Herald, Vol. 35, no. 15, March 20, 1941.*

How Woodland Road, Edgeworth, first became a public street against the bitter opposition of some of the farm owners through whose property it passed, is a story which should not be overlooked by the student of the local history of the Sewickley Valley. There had long been a cartway through those Leet Township farms, but it took quite a fight in court and on the ground to have it opened to the public, first under the name of Centennial Avenue, (including the upper part of present Academy Avenue) as a continuation of Centennial Avenue in Sewickley. As one of those who took part in that fight, Harry Reno of Sewickley has consented to write for *The Herald* something of the story, from his recollection and from consultation of the official records....

Centennial Avenue through Edgeworth was opened as a private road in 1873, and small trees were planted along either side. It commenced on the Little Sewickley Creek road, about one-fourth mile northeast of the present location of the old stone bridge on Beaver Road, which crosses the Creek there; thence in a southeasterly direction with several curves, through the then Leet township; and crossing Chestnut Road to connect up with Centennial Avenue in the borough of Sewickley, which had been incorporated August 30, 1853. This connecting point was on the boundary line between Sewickley and the present borough of Edgeworth, which was incorporated out of part of Leet township on February 9, 1904.

In the hope and belief that eventually this private road would become a public highway, several citizens bought ground and built homes fronting on it. Among them was Wilfred Henry Nevin, who acquired about one acre from his father, the Rev. Daniel E. Nevin; it was situated on the corner of what is now Woodland Road and Poia Place. He married, built a home, and then started a movement to have ‘Centennial Avenue’ made a public road.

Mr. Nevin, Ezra Porter Young and myself as a helper secured the services of Attorney Thomas C. Lazear of Pittsburgh to draw up a petition praying Quarter Sessions Court to appoint viewers and report to the court on the merits and necessity of making ‘Centennial Avenue’ a public road. Their report was favorable, but they were tardy in filing their findings to the court—three days later than the date specified in the court’s order. Exceptions on account of

this error were filed by John Way, Jr., and Captain David Shields, landowners affected, and the viewers’ report was therefore thrown out by the court. The residents were almost unanimous in signing the petition for the road, Mr. Way and Captain Shields being the only opponents. Mr. Way’s farm contained 127 acres, about one half clear and the rest woodland; the Shields tract consisted of about an equal acreage, with clear and forest land.

When the viewers’ report was thrown out, we were somewhat dismayed, but not discouraged. At intervals during the time between 1873 and 1883 several petitions for the road were presented to the court, but to no avail; the objectors invariably got out an injunction stopping us from opening the road to the public.

Not despairing, we had a survey made in May, 1883, and prepared another petition. County Engineer Charles Davis made the survey. Meanwhile, Ezra P. Young had thought out a clever plan; on Saturday, June 9th, at 11:50 a. m. another petition was presented to the Quarter Sessions court, the viewers having made a favorable report. As the court adjourns on Saturdays at 12 noon, it was impossible to secure an injunction that day.

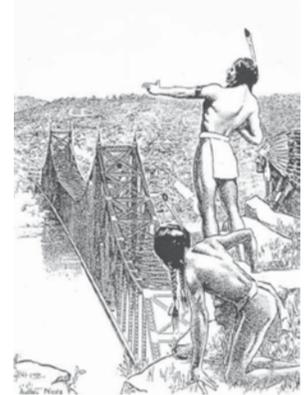
At 12 noon on that day, June 9, 1883, there were twelve of us stationed on the Little Sewickley Creek road awaiting a message from Mr. Young in Pittsburgh that he had received the court order and we could proceed. We received the word at 12:05; my brother Charles S. Reno with a team of horses and plow ran a furrow on one side of the road all the way to Centennial Avenue, Sewickley, at

*(continued on next page)*

**Sewickley Valley Historical Society**  
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**November 2012**



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*(continued from page 3)*

the (then) foot of Academy Avenue; then turned and furrowed the same on the other side back to the starting point. In the meantime, the rest of us were filling in depressions in the roadway, removing stones and cutting roots as the plow struck them.

At 5 p. m. of the same day we had finished the job—opened the road—and then the horses were hitched to a big two-horse wagon and most of the children of the Valley climbed in. With tin horns, flags and singing of songs, it was a most unusual and enthusiastic demonstration. This first wagon was followed by another, loaded with the workmen that had opened the road....

The paraders traversed the entire length of the new road, and on returning disbanded at 6 p. m. in front of the new home of Wilfred Nevin; there they were agreeably surprised to find that he had prepared for them on his green, spacious lawn, a feast for all that

cared to partake; there was such an abundance of eatables that it is not easy to forget—especially by myself.

The last three viewers...made a favorable and final report.... Thus on Saturday, June 9, 1883, at six o'clock p. m., Centennial Avenue was declared a public highway. It required only five hours and 55 minutes to complete the work of opening. The weather conditions were ideal, the sky clear and the temperature moderately warm. It was indeed a gala day for the residents of the Valley; and today, 58 years later, with people passing along beautiful Woodland Road, with shrubbery and flower-bedecked walls, it makes one wonder why any person could have had the disposition to oppose such a great and lasting public improvement. The name Centennial Avenue was changed to Grand Avenue, and later to Woodland Road, its present name.

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Remember to check Sewickley Valley Historical Society's website  
([www.sewickleyhistory.org](http://www.sewickleyhistory.org)) for ideas for Holiday giving.

We offer a number of publications on various aspects of Sewickley Valley history and architecture.

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*Signals* is designed and edited by Susan C. Holton. Visit our website, [www.sewickleyhistory.org](http://www.sewickleyhistory.org) — e-mail us at [sewickleyhistory@verizon.net](mailto:sewickleyhistory@verizon.net) — or call us at 412-741-5315. We're open 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., Tuesday through Friday, or by appointment.

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