

Sewickley Valley Historical Society

Signals

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Perception, Fact and Gossip of the Civil War

a program by Ron Gancas

Tuesday, March 28, 2006, 7:30 p.m.

Old Sewickley Post Office

Ron Gancas is President, Chief Executive Officer and Senior Historian at Soldiers & Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial in Oakland. He has studied history at Penn State, the University of Pittsburgh and Allegheny College. For the past 30 years, during an annual "Staff Ride," he has studied Civil War History and military tactics with an eminent group of historians formerly based out of the U. S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. During 1999, he led a battlefield seminar at Stones River, Tennessee. He will lead a battlefield seminar in Gettysburg in March of 2006.



Mr. Gancas has written an account of the Civil War entitled *The Gallant Seventy-Eighth*, a history of the Pennsylvania Seventy-Eighth Infantry Regiment. His other published works on the Civil War include: *The Hardluck Regiment*, a history of the One Hundred and Third Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry; *Dear Teres*, the Civil War Letters of A. Joseph Duff and Dennis Dugan of the Pennsylvania Seventy-Eighth; and *Fields of Freedom: United States Colored Troops from Southwestern Pennsylvania*. He has also edited and republished *The History of Company K, 155th Pennsylvania Infantry*; *The History of the Pennsylvania Fourteenth Cavalry*; and *The American Jew, Citizen, Soldier and Patriot*.

Mr. Gancas is a lifelong resident of southwestern Pennsylvania. As the CEO of Soldiers & Sailors, it is his duty to preserve the lasting tribute to those who unselfishly gave of themselves in serving this country during the wars from the Civil War to Iraq. He is the great-great grandson of Colonel William Sirwell, regimental commander of the Pennsylvania Seventy-Eighth Infantry. His great, great aunt, Mame Sirwell, the daughter of Colonel Sirwell, was an assistant to the treasurer of the committee that raised funds to build the Soldiers & Sailors Memorial in 1910.

A reprint edition of *Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life; or, Memories of Sweet Valley* by Agnes L. Ellis will soon be available from the Sewickley Valley Historical Society. The cost is \$30, plus \$5 shipping and handling if ordered by mail.

Please make checks payable to SVHS and mail to

Sewickley Valley Historical Society, 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143.

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has generously supported the Sewickley Valley Historical Society with a gift in addition to membership dues.

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.

On the Heights, Fairacres II was the tops!

How many out there remember the late Michael and Margaret Fifer, poets laureate of Sewickley Hills? Their charming verses about life on and around their rural spread on Magee Road regularly appeared in the *Sewickley Herald* during the 1970s. One of Peg’s poems expressed her appreciation of the beauty of a Sewickley Heights area she regularly passed. Entitled “Fern Hollow,” here are her words:

*These woods are mine
Although
Tax receipt I cannot show
Nor do I know
How runs the line
Or where its many acres go.
These woods are mine
As sure as snow
Will drift and blow
In powder fine;
As sure as wild flowers
Bloom in spring;
As sure as warm winds
Blow and sing
In summertime;
Or autumn mixes air with wine,
These woods are mine.*

The poem expresses the proprietary feeling many Sewickley Valley people feel not only about the land but also about the grand estates that existed on Sewickley Heights. Even though relatively few were fortunate enough to visit one of the fabled mansions, or ever enter as a guest, still they identified with the castles on the hill.

Thus, it came as a great shock when the townspeople read in a Pittsburgh paper in late February of 1964 that the rumor was true: “Fairacres,” the palatial home of B. F. Jones II, was to be torn down. Confirmation came in an article in the *Pittsburgh Press* by Fritz Lalendorf. The headline announced: “Mansion Walls to Come Tumbling Down.” The subhead read: “3 Years to Build, 30 Days to Raze in Sewickley Heights.” Accompanying the article was a photo of the front facade of the three-story mansion being surveyed by Frank J. Givens, president of the wrecking firm of Austin Givens Inc.

The Press might just as well have told Sewickley people that the Titanic was going down. The reaction to rumors that “Fairacres” was to be the victim of the headache ball was swift. According to the reporter, “Crowds of curiosity seekers, who have only dreamed about such things, walk around the three-story home and the 135-acre grounds daily.” Yes ... and in February!

Although “Fairacres” was the not the first of the Heights mansions of the Grand Era to go, the passing of this dazzling white Beaux Arts beauty caused the most impact. Even though passersby would not be able to define the architectural style or name the distinguished architect who designed it, still they appreciated its beauty. To them, this big wedding cake with lots of meringue was the pinnacle of the Heights. It had become everybody’s dream house.



Even before the magazine article appeared, the Givens crew was stripping the interior of the 100-room mansion of its marble mantels, wood paneling and oak floors, selling them to the highest bidder. Oak paneling in the living room was reckoned to be worth \$15,000. Marble mantels were going for \$1,000. Also for sale was the impressive statuary that graced the gardens of the 135-acre estate. (The lacy pavilions were acquired by Longwood Gardens, where they still may be seen today.)

According to the *Press*, the major factor contributing to the razing of this gem of a house was the high cost of maintenance. In the newspaper interview, Givens remarked that the 100-room house with its 33 bedrooms and 17 baths required as much heat as the entire Frick Building. Givens added although the house was “fireproof, vermin proof, soundproof and every proof,” it was coming down anyway. It was obvious he was making the point that they would never build them that way again. Truly, here was the end of an era.

In the future, like the fabled “Manderley” in Daphne DuMaurier’s novel *Rebecca*, those who saw and loved “Fairacres” would go there only in dreams.



The “Fairacres” described above was actually the second home built by B. F. Jones Jr. on the property facing Blackburn Road. It was built in 1916 by the New York firm Hiss & Weekes and designed especially to accommodate the vast collection of English paintings the Joneses had acquired. These were sold at auction by Parke-Bernet in 1941 at the death of Mrs. Jones. After her death, the house remained vacant until its demolition. “Fairacres I” (1899-1915) was designed by the prestigious firm of Longfellow, Alden & Harlow.

B. G. Shields

Signals is designed and edited by
Susan C. Holton

Presidential Visits to Sewickley

The visit this month by President George Bush to attend a fundraiser for Senator Rick Santorum at “Birchmere,” the home of Mr. & Mrs. Richard P. Simmons in Sewickley Heights, reminds us of other presidential visits.

In 1848 President Zachary Taylor passed through Sewickley on the Beaver Road on his way west. The presidential party left Pittsburgh on the morning of August 31, anticipating lunch at Economy and spending the night at Beaver. Citizens of Sewickley met the President on his approach to the Valley and implored him to visit the Edgeworth Female Seminary. A letter from the students reads in part:

Dear General,

We wish very much to see you, but delicacy forbids our running to the roadside to gaze upon you whilst passing. Could you not drive into the Seminary grounds, and pause a few minutes in front of the porch? We will always gratefully remember your kindness. That you, our President, should pass our gate without our having the privilege of seeing you, would fill us with lasting regret.

Yours respectfully,

The young ladies of Edgeworth Academy

“Old Rough and Ready” could not resist this appeal. He turned into the school from Beaver Road, and there were speeches made by the President and Governor William Johnston, greeted by round after round of cheers. As the party drove away, the girls continued their cheers and waved their handkerchiefs until the cavalcade was out of sight on its journey to Beaver.

On May 29, 1909, President William Howard Taft visited Sewickley. The town was appropriately decorated in his honor. The President came by special train from Union Station in Pittsburgh to Sewickley Station at the foot of Broad Street. He rode in an automobile through the village and up Blackburn Road to attend a luncheon at “Farmhill,” the estate of the Henry Robinson Reas on Country Club Road. He then proceeded to the Allegheny Country Club for a large gathering of Yale University alumni, including his classmate at Yale, O. D. Thompson, who had been a football star at college and was Secretary of Allegheny Country Club. After an impromptu baseball game staged by the Yale men on the first fairway, at which Taft threw out the first ball, the



President returned by train to Pittsburgh for a real baseball game between the Pirates and the Cubs at Exposition Park. Incidentally, in November 1918, when Taft was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, he again visited Sewickley to address the Woman’s Club of Sewickley Valley at the Edgeworth Club, supporting the League of Nations as an organization necessary to promote world peace.

On October 12, 1962, during the mid-term Congressional elections, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy passed through the Valley on Ohio River Boulevard, heading from a speech in Aliquippa to Pittsburgh. He was in an open limousine, and people gathered on the roadside could see him well. B. G. Shields remembers how brown his hair looked in the sunshine.

So a visit by President Bush is history repeating itself, and it is likely that Presidents will continue to frequent our little town.



Do you recognize this house?

This postcard image is from a scrapbook in the SVHS collection, but, as you can see, it isn’t identified. We would like to use the picture in our postcard history of Sewickley, but would really like to be able to say whose house it is (or was). If you know, please contact us at 412-741-5315 or at sewickleyhistory@verizon.net.

In Memoriam: John G. Alexander

We mourn the passing on March 4 of John G. Alexander at the age of 96. He was among the original incorporators of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society in 1978. For the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, Mr. Alexander wrote an essay, which is in our archives, describing his youth in Edgeworth. He evokes a time that seems idyllic from this distance, and although one tends to romanticize what is safely past, growing up in Sewickley before World War I must have been sweet.

The essay takes the reader through a year, beginning with Memorial Day. In those days the entire community marched up Broad Street to the statue of Fame in the cemetery for speeches and singing. Everyone walked!

Summer meant 4th of July. Fireworks were legal, so every boy saved his pennies to buy some. Warm weather also brought fishing and swimming in Little Sewickley Creek or in the Ohio River. Dead Man's Island by the narrow and swift channel at Shields was a favorite spot. Upstream was

Walnut Beach, with its cottages, picnic tables, dancehall and bathhouse, where Pittsburgh people would come on the steamer "Homer Smith" to get away from the city. Indian arrowheads were found in the cornfields along the bottoms where Buncher industrial complex is today. There was heavy steamboat traffic to watch. The boys would beg for chips from the drivers of the ice wagons. Mr. Alexander built racers using baby carriage wheels and had a rudimentary skateboard. On occasion, he walked up to Allegheny Country Club to caddy. The rate was fifty cents a round and maybe a tip. Today a caddy makes at least \$35 for an 18-hole round.

With fall came school. John started at age five under Miss Sheets, who taught for fifty years. At Halloween, masked and costumed tricksters accumulated large bags of goodies. Chestnuts ripened and could be had in abundance if you could beat the squirrels to them.

With winter and Thanksgiving, John's family would buy a live turkey and kill and dress it themselves. Of course, it tasted

better back then. Christmas services were held at Shields Church, and there was an elaborate tree at home with gifts. Everyone was satisfied because, as John says, they "weren't spoiled and so appreciated everything." In those days there seemed to be more snow, and it lasted longer. Sled riding was all the rage. Chestnut Road was the perfect run, and crossing guards were posted at Woodland and Beaver at night with lanterns to warn any cars. Bonfires were built at the street corners so everyone could get warm. Many people used horse drawn sleighs "with the bells on the harness jingling and ringing a merry tune." The movie house in town showed films only in the winter.

Early spring was kite flying time. Then sassafras root and ginseng could be harvested and sold, and gardens were put in. Everyone had gardens, and everyone canned.

"We did have a good life in those days," said John Alexander, and that seems to be the case.



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