

Riverfront Park Picnic

May 26, 2004-6PM

Thank you Joe, B.G., Harton and the Sewickley Historical Society for asking the Riverfront Park to participate in this year's speaker's series. Our history doesn't go back as far as a lot of other topics you have discussed in your series but we are glad to be part your presentations. I would be willing to bet that many of you know more about the history of this area than I do.

I thought I'd start off by telling you a little bit of background about this area and then talk about the park.

Sewickley is fortunate to have two railroad stations remaining. The railroad tracks used to run on the Ohio River Boulevard. When the tracks were moved closer to the river in 1927 the first station was moved by train to the north end of Chadwick Street. Here it became the headquarters for the American Legion Post 450. The first station was built in 1887, it looked like an inn or large country house. At the time it was built, the architects didn't know what a train station should look like so they built it to fit into the local architecture. Travelers were impressed with this picturesque station with beautiful gardens. .

The second railroad station is currently a dermatologist office. Between the time of construction of the two stations a pattern had developed that was adopted for this station.

In the 19th century, this area was a major stop for passengers, water and fuel. Passengers could commute to Pittsburgh and other main destinations such as Boston, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia. Trains changed the fabric of the Sewickley Society and the train enabled the city residents to move to the quiet suburbs of Sewickley far from the dirt and congestion of the

city. The first railroad service to Sewickley started in 1851. The Ohio and Pennsylvania Railroad started service between Enon Valley (near Beaver) and Pittsburgh.

Boating became the pastime for college-educated middle class people. The Sewickley Canoe and Boat Club was started in 1907 by Gilbert Hays at the foot of Chestnut Street. It was a houseboat moored at the edge of Chestnut Street and it included a dance hall and reception area. The opening celebration included canoe and rowboat races.

Whites' Field was located from Ferry Street to Walnut Street. It had a baseball field and picnic area and it was the first park available to African-Americans. White's Field was located at the end of White Street above Walnut Beach. Walnut Beach was not open to the African-American community. Some time later the field shifted down the street to what is now known as the Community Center Athletic Field. The first African American YMCA was located on Walnut Street.

Walnut Beach was a very popular site that opened at the end of Ferry Street in 1915. There were beach houses, concession stands and many people came there for church picnics or company gatherings. This beach was the idea of Jimmy Gary, a civic minded tailor. It was not a sandy beach but a place where the river was shallow and with a stony bottom. There was a pavilion and a tent for bathing facilities plus tables and benches for picnics. There were cottages along the river where families stayed during the summer and the men commuted to on weekends.

That is a brief sketch of this area in the past so now on to the present day and beyond.

Allegheny County has had a long history of promoting interest and development of its three rivers. The Ohio River Corridor Study was conceived in 1986 when Clint Childs and Jean

George were on the Sewickley Borough Council. Sewickley was listed as one of the 19 participating municipalities to study and to develop recreational uses for the rivers edge. This past month, Carnegie Mellon University hosted a symposium in developing the Ohio River Water Trail. So, I'm happy to say that these groups and many more continue to develop interest in recreational uses along the rivers.

The idea of the Riverfront Park began around 1996 when Susan Gaca was on the planning commission of the Sewickley Borough Council and heard that a storage facility was going to be constructed on this site which was an abandoned, concrete parking lot. She asked me if I would be interested in doing a project with her. I happily agreed, thinking we could knock this off in a year or two. Well, here we are eight years later. The park is about 2 1/2 acres in size and it is pie shaped. The elevated walkway is at the level of the railroad tracks so the Chadwick Street neighbors would still have their view. Most of the construction took place in the year 2000-2001. We received two state grants and contributions from many generous people to make this park possible. One donor gave this gazebo and her initials are woven into the design. Around that same time, Station Square was sold to Forest City, a New Jersey development company and they wanted to get rid of all of the historical artifacts. You will see many of these items along the gravel path. The stones are from old city schools and other demolished buildings in Pittsburgh. The Tom Thumb engine and cabooses, as most of you know, are from Mr. Fred Okie's house on Backbone Road which is where the McCrady's live now. He was President of two railroads, the Union Railroad and the Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad. These two railroad cars sat on his front yard until he moved to a retirement home in 1978 when they were shipped to Station Square. The new Station Square owners, Forest City, brought the cars back to Sewickley and to this Park. The Tom Thumb engine was built in 1897 in Pittsburgh by the H. K. Porter Company. It was used for maintenance purposes in the Duquesne Works of the U.S. Steel Corporation. As you see, it is a small locomotive suitable

for short hauls at low speeds.

Other focal points about the park include the sundial along the gravel path. We found out through the internet that many of the European parks have interactive sundials. An interactive sundial means that a person's shadow shows the hour instead of a pointed object. We had to get the correct latitude and longitude for the position of the sun's shadow at the exact spot at the park. We asked a Carnegie Mellon Math Professor to measure the sun's position and he supervised the construction of the sundial.

Another item in the park is the World War II Navy Anchor donated by the American Merchant Marines. It weighs about 8 tons and was transported from Texas. The Merchant Marines built the base, the flagpole, sanded and painted this tribute to fallen soldiers. It was dedicated in last year's Sesquicentennial celebration along with the rest of the Park. We are very pleased and grateful that the Merchant Marines chose our park for this memorial.

The future of the park looks promising. Norfolk Southern Railroad has offered a lease of additional land to Sewickley Borough and we are presently working out the details. This area is adjacent to the park and is about an acre in size. We plan to design it to look similar to the existing park with a gravel path and plantings. We also would like to develop the Walnut Street underpass and have access to the river. We are thinking of an overlook or a platform to view the river.

The last item I'd like to mention is the mural inside the caboose. Susan, BG and I spent many hours sorting through old photos of train stations, old train schedules, and other historical photos of this area to make this mural. I hope you will take some time to look at it and I know you will enjoy seeing it.

Thank you again for asking us to your picnic and we hope you enjoy the Riverfront Park.

NOTE

N/S main east-west route is this one. They average 50 trains daily carrying a wide range of products, coal, and mail. AMTRAK also operates 6 daily trains. This line is called the Ft. Wayne line and was incorporated in 1848 but that's another story.