

Sewickley Valley Historical Society

Signals

XLV, Number 3

November 2017

Wednesday, November 15, 2017

7:30 p.m., at the Old Sewickley Post Office

The Story of Private Nicholas Russin

Omaha Beach, D Day, 1944

A PowerPoint Presentation by George S. Gaadt

This is the story of PFC Nicholas Russin, the unknown soldier in PFC Walter Rosenblum's photograph seen here—one of the most famous photographs taken on Omaha Beach. Russin, a Pittsburgher, served in the 5th Engineer Special Brigade from March 25, 1943, to January 22, 1946.

On June 6, 1944, American boys were racing toward Normandy's beaches. Before that day ended, there would be three thousand Allied casualties and many more left uncounted, lost beneath the waves. For those who survived, months of heated battles would follow before they achieved the liberation of Europe, but June 6 would remain forever the day that not only made history but changed the future.



An artist and illustrator, George Gaadt has lectured widely and has served on the Boards of Sewickley Valley Historical Society, Sweetwater Center for the Arts and the Daniel B. Matthews Historical Society. His clients have included the National Football League, Major League Baseball, Basketball and Football Halls of Fame and the Pittsburgh Steelers. "Morning Glory," his donated portrait of B. G. Shields, hangs in the Historical Society. He has received over 95 awards for his work and has exhibited both nationally and internationally. Gaadt is also an amateur historian and collector of military memorabilia, and military history has played a major role in his career.

Reception Honoring the Memory of B. G. Shields

Please join B. G.'s friends and family

Friday, November 10, 2017, from 5:00-7:00 p.m.

at the Old Sewickley Post Office

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 Ku Klux Klan in Sewickley

IN HER 2000 BOOK *Their Story: The History of Blacks/African Americans in Sewickley & Edgeworth*, Bettie Cole writes, “Most Sewickley Valley Blacks/African Americans have always loved their hometown. . . . But the African American citizen knows that no place is without flaw. Not even sublime Sewickley Valley.”

What follows in Cole’s book is an incident related to her in a 1984 interview with John Tucker (born 1899). It is one of several examples of KKK sightings and cross burnings reported in Sewickley after World War I. While such burnings were infrequent, they did happen, and they were chronicled in the *Sewickley Herald*.

Tucker told of an experience when he was 15 or 16. He and his friend Willard Townsend were walking up Broad Street after having taken the trolley across the Sewickley Bridge from Coraopolis where they had attended a movie, as blacks weren’t allowed to go to the theater in Sewickley. They saw a big light on the hill in the cemetery, where a huge cross was burning. The boys had planned to stop at Butler’s Creams and Ices, located in the Flatiron Building at the corner of Division and Beaver Streets, for ice cream. They weren’t allowed to eat in the shop, but they could order take-out. When John and his friend walked in, eight Klansmen were seated there in their robes, enjoying a snack. The friends ordered and left. No words were exchanged, and they did not waste any time out in the street that night.

HERE IS A DESCRIPTION of another incident, written by James Allen McCracken (1911-1987). Born in Sewickley and a 1929 graduate of Sewickley High School, James was a son of George McCracken, who had a livery business on Beaver Street, and Anne Vance McCracken. He was on the editorial staff of *Reader’s Digest* for 26 years. This is part of a feature condensation entitled “Mother Is Home” that appeared in the April 1980 edition of the periodical.

The piece comprises reminiscences about Sewickley and Pittsburgh evoked by a journey back to Sewickley after the death of his mother in 1969. What follows is excerpted from the chapter called A BURNING CROSS.

“Across from us in Sewickley lived a black family. Their name was Butler. Mr. Butler ran an ice-cream parlor. The family, about the same number as ours, lived above the business. Basil Butler was two years younger than I was. He could run and he could shoot marbles. Basil and I were close friends. . . .

“Sewickley’s cemetery lay on a hill high above the town. One day there were rumors about. Look up at the cemetery tonight about nine o’clock. Ghosts? Never mind. Just watch. The rumor spread.



“Evening came, then darkness. It was summertime. The insects hummed and whined in our ears as we all—Mother, Father, brothers and sisters—stood out in the yard. People idled along the sidewalks or stood in their own yards, eyes turned upward to the cemetery. Nine o’clock approached, then passed. I noticed the Butler family at the windows of their home above the ice cream parlor.

“Suddenly there was a burst of yellow flame, far up on the cemetery hill. We stood dumbfounded. A cross—a burning cross. And we knew what it meant: the Ku Klux Klan. As we stood, I felt my mother’s hands on my shoulders. They trembled. Mother was afraid. Afraid, as was I. But no, it was not fear. ‘An outrage,’ she said, and she said it again and again.

“At last the flames died. We wandered up to our porch, sat there and talked in whispers. My mother was furious, my father less so. He tried to calm her, reason with her. The burning of the cross was dead wrong. But he could deal with it less passionately than could my mother.

“Our house was on the main street of town—Beaver Street. In those days it was a joy to live on the main street. There

was still the clip-clop of horses pulling carriages, buggies and wagons. There was the clank of a few automobile engines. Otherwise, quiet. For it was a quiet time in this century.

“But this night there were people about, an unusual number, talking about what had happened. A voice would rise, strident in the night, then fall.

“We watched and listened from our porch. Then the voices died. People pointed down the street. There were buildings in the way, and at first we couldn’t see what was happening. It was as though some cataclysmic event was about to occur. And then we saw! Up the street strode a man in a white robe and hood, carrying a torch. Behind him was another white-clad figure. Then another, and another, a dozen or so in a single file. They walked in silence down the main street of our town.

“Suddenly Mother sprang up from the swing. We heard her footsteps on the walk. Click, click, click. An angry sound. At the curb she stood and watched. Then she spoke. Her voice was quiet, but it trembled with outrage.

“I don’t know who you are, under those disgraceful sheets, but I am sure I know every one of you. I talk with you in the streets and in the stores. Even in church. And I talk to you now. *You are nothing but cowards. There is not one man among the lot of you!*”

“With that my mother turned and ran up the sidewalk. Her feet pounded up the steps to the porch and inside. The front door slammed like a gunshot to puncture the silence. We sat on the porch in fear and pride and awe. The parade dissolved. People left the street and we went inside to find our mother.”

Friends, Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

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

Amy Barry, Dr. & Mrs. George Berry, Barbara Briller, Mr. & Mrs. Fred Rose

New Members

John & Lucy Malarik, Sewickley

Special Contributions

Mr. & Mrs. William J. Burrows

Ann & Frank Cahouet Foundation

Anne L. and George H. Clapp Charitable and Educational Trust

Executive Director Position

Sewickley Valley Historical Society is accepting applications for the position of Executive Director. Under the direction of the Board, the Executive Director will manage the affairs of the Society, supervise paid and volunteer staff, coordinate events and activities of the Society and generally help the Board grow its non-profit organization and programs.

For the complete job description, see our website: www.sewickleyhistory.org

This is a part-time position with a standard of 15-20 hours per week. Salary will be commensurate with qualifications. The anticipated start date is January 2018. Interested candidates may submit a cover letter, detailed resume and contact information for three personal references to sewickleyhistory@verizon.net. Questions may be directed to Sewickley Valley Historical Society, 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143, Attn. Susan Holton, Associate Director, or to 412-741-5315.

Documents should be submitted by November 10, 2017.

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

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November 2017



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IF ANY MEMBER has an item that he or she feels should be discussed before the membership at a scheduled program meeting of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, please notify the office, and that item will be put on the agenda at the beginning of the next meeting.

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BYLAWS COMMITTEE has completed a thorough revision of the Society's Bylaws, which has been approved by the Board and now must have membership approval. All members will receive a copy by mail of the existing Bylaws, the proposed revisions and rationale behind the changes at least 15 days prior to the meeting at which the revisions will be presented for a vote. We anticipate that this will be the March 2018 meeting. If, however, you would like to see the revisions before then, we can either send you a copy via email or you can drop by the office for a hard copy.

An interesting view
of the Sewickley Railroad
Station and Broad Street
before the Old Sewickley
Post Office was built

