

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XLVI, Number 6

April 2019

Wednesday, April 24, 2019

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

The Golden Age of Bridge Building in the City of Bridges

Allegheny County's 1924-1940 Bridge Construction Program

A PowerPoint Presentation by Gerald M. Kuncio

Between 1924 and 1940, the Allegheny County Department of Public Works (DPW) erected hundreds of bridges, one of the largest infrastructure improvement programs ever undertaken by a Pennsylvania municipality. The bridges included engineering masterpieces that have become signatures of the county's modern landscape, such as the "Three Sisters" across the Allegheny River, the West End, McKees Rocks, Liberty and Westinghouse Memorial bridges. This Golden Age of bridge building cemented Pittsburgh's reputation as the "City of Bridges" and developed infrastructure that helped knit the city and county together. Political opposition, however, undercut the bridge program and played a part in a local political sea change that pushed the Republican party out of power and ushered in an era of Democratic dominance and control. This presentation examines the DPW's bridge program, its bridges and the political fallout. It highlights how and why some of Pittsburgh's best-known bridges

were built and how bridges, in this case, both unified and divided the county.

Gerry Kuncio has been a historian with Skelly and Loy, an environmental engineering company, for more than 20 years. He has also worked for the Pennsylvania State Preservation Office and as a museum curator, and has taught undergraduate and graduate school courses on historic preservation in Western Pennsylvania and Maryland. He holds a B.A. in American History from Duquesne University and an M.A. in American History from the University of Delaware. In the late 1990s, Mr. Kuncio became fascinated with the bridges built by the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County during the 1920s and 1930s. His interest resulted in an article entitled "Golden Age in the City of Bridges" for the predecessor to *Pittsburgh History Magazine*, from which this talk is derived.

Sewickley Valley Hospital School of Nursing: A Trip Down Memory Lane

An exhibition of memorabilia from the Sewickley Valley Hospital School of Nursing will be on display at the Old Sewickley Post Office from Monday, May 6-Wednesday, May 15.

The exhibit will open at noon on May 6 with a short program and light refreshments.

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.

Sewickley in the (Old) Movies

“SEWICKLEY IS IN THE MOVIES heart and soul, and while the Cot Club with Miss Bleecker as directress is really the power behind the crank, Sewickley as a whole has the fever to [accept] almost anything as part of the plot for the ‘Skeins of Destiny.’” Thus begins an article in the September 30, 1916, issue of the *Sewickley Herald*, describing in detail the filming of a three act “photo-play depicted by Sewickley folk.”



The Miss Bleecker mentioned above was Katherine Russell Bleecker (1893-1996), sometimes called the first professional American moving picture camerawoman. A member of an old Knickerbocker family, she had the idea of having members of society act in films. Debutantes of the day often put on amateur theatricals and posed in *tableaux vivants* for charity.

It was Bleecker’s idea to put the plays on the screen. Among the places she chose for her productions were New York, Philadelphia, the Thousand Islands and Sewickley. According to the *Herald* article, she much admired the manner in which the amateur actors here went through their paces in this new art form.

Sewickley’s Cot Club, headed in 1916 by Mrs. George Phelps Rose, was organized by a group of amateur players in 1906, its object being to support, by the production of dramatic and other entertainments, an Isolation Annex at the Sewickley Valley Hospital and to maintain one or more free beds, or cots, at the hospital. “Skeins of Destiny” marked the 10th anniversary of the Club. Previous entertainments had included eleven comedies, four series of orchestra concerts, one lecture, a country fair and an opera. By October 14, 1916, the date of the first showing of “Skeins,” the club had donated \$5,609.55 to the hospital — \$130,085.46 in today’s dollars!

Here’s a synopsis of the plot of the melodrama, taken from a partial souvenir program we have in the SVHS collection:

“Lionel Lonsdale, second son of the Earl of Sandhurst, through desire for plunder, heads a band

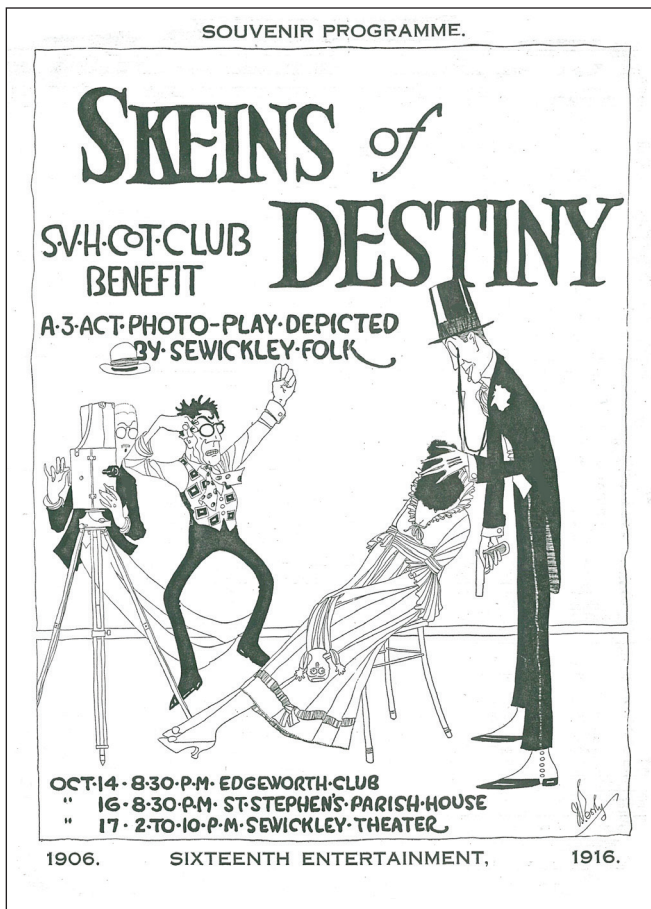
of robbers operating in America. They plan a daring venture in Sewickley; but before the robbery can be accomplished Lonsdale meets Ruth Collingwood, whose father is president of the bank he hopes to plunder. How Ruth is saved from the designs of the social highwayman through the efforts of Dick Munroe, a secret service man, makes an interesting story of love and adventure.”

The first day of filming began at the Sewickley railroad station, which in 1916 was near the Old Sewickley Post Office, as the tracks hadn’t yet been moved closer to the river. The action next went to the lobby of the Park Place Hotel. Later scenes were shot at the Allegheny Country Club, representing a tea at the close of a tennis match in which a number of the Club members participated. On the second day, there were scenes at the Y.M.C.A. ball field, then at a tea at the Osborne home of Mary Roberts Rinehart. The next day saw a garden party at the home of Mrs. William Thaw, “As You Like It,” which included the “Dance of the Hummingbirds,” shown below.



Also on that afternoon was a fire scene, in which the Cochran Hose Company participated. Interiors were shot the next day at the home of Mrs. Henry R. Rea (Farmhill), and an automobile wreck was staged on a Sewickley Heights road. The final scenes of the play were of a ball held at the old Edgeworth Club.

The souvenir program thanks not only the Governors of the Allegheny Country Club and the Edgeworth Club, the Park



Place Hotel, Mrs. Rinehart, Mrs. Thaw and Mrs. Rea, but also Mrs. William P. Snyder, Mrs. Halsey Williams, Mrs. John B. Reno, Mrs. James G. Pontefract, Mrs. J. Frederick Haworth, Mr. R. R. Quay, and the First National Bank for their courtesy in providing settings for the play.

The cast included such names as James Schoonmaker, Jr., William L. Clause, Mrs. Wilson A. Luce, Miss Eleanor W. Scott, William P. Craig, Miss Mary Agate Brown, Oliver S. Richardson, Edward P. Coffin, James Crossan Chaplin, J. Frederick Haworth, Jr., Lowell W. Nichols and Hartley Walker.

IN JANUARY 1963, the public was invited by the Women’s Auxiliary of Sewickley Valley Hospital to the Edgeworth Club to view a re-conditioned reel of “Skeins of Destiny,” which had been shot at 36 mm and had been reprinted at 16 mm. Much of the flicker was reduced, and the old movie was remarkably clear. The show was a big hit, and many of the amateur actors came again to see themselves in the movies — one former resident traveling all the way from Portland, Maine. A spring showing was scheduled for Allegheny Country Club.

Unfortunately, no one seems to know what happened to “Skeins” after the 1963 showing. If you have any idea where it might be, please notify the Historical Society. We’d all like to see the town as it was in 1916!

We will, however, all be able to view another old movie recently discovered in the SVHS collection. In June 1940, Sewickley

celebrated its Centennial: The One Hundredth Anniversary of the Naming of the Town “Sewickleyville.” There were five days of festivities, which culminated with a parade on the evening of Wednesday, June 19th. It is this parade that we have on film. John Poister has been working with a Coraopolis firm to have the movie restored and digitized, and we plan to show it at a program in the Fall.

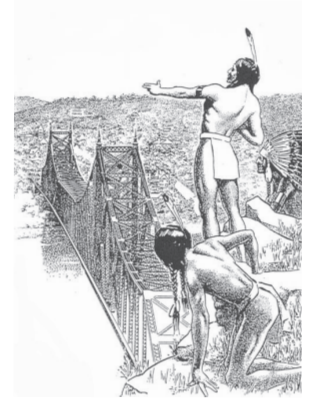
Report of the Nominating Committee

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society Nominating Committee (George Berry III, Sally Dunbar, Sasha Koledin, Kathy Lang, Joseph Marrone) proposes the following as officers and directors, to be elected at the Annual Meeting, Wednesday, May 15, 2019. At that time, nominations may be made from the floor, provided the person nominated has agreed to serve if elected.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Directors for a first two-year term: | Verna Corey
Marty O’Brien
Janet Oellig |
| Officers for a second two-year term: | Harton Semple, President
Joe Zemba, Vice-President
Mary Beth Pastorius, Secretary
Connor Cogswell, Treasurer |
| Directors for a second two-year term: | Gloria Berry
Brewster Cockrell
Edward Harrell
Ivan Hoffman
Lori Kastan |

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

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April 2019

**SEWICKLEY VALLEY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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Associate Director

Blythe Burgan Davis

SVHS Acting Executive Director
Susan Holton, Moon Township
Historical Society President Earl
Edwards, Pittsburgh History &
Landmarks Executive Director Louise
Sturgess and SVHS Board President
Harton Semple at the joint dinner
meeting of the Sewickley, Moon
and Avonworth historical societies
at Montour Heights Country Club,
March 7, 2019.



Special Contributions

The George H. and Susan D. Craig Fund of The Pittsburgh Foundation

Simon Noel, in memory of Donna D. Noel

New Members

Nicholas Pusateri, Sewickley

In Memoriam

John A. Lindquist, Jr.