

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XLVII, Number 1

September 2019

MEMBER SHOWING

Wednesday, September 18, 2019, 7:30 p.m., Old Sewickley Post Office

PUBLIC SHOWING

Monday, September 23, 2019, 7:30 p.m., in rented space at the

Tull Family Theater 

Restored Vintage Films: Sewickley's 1940 Centennial Revisited



In the early 1990s, the Sewickley Borough building was undergoing renovation, and Marty McDaniel, then Sewickley's Borough Manager, was cleaning out closets. In one, he found records, old film cans and a number of unsold program booklets and commemorative medals (*see at left*) from the 1940 Centennial Celebration of the Naming of the Town "Sewickleyville." Some of the medals were sold, and extras were given to the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, along with the records, programs and films. The films were cataloged, but they were never viewed. Last year, they were re-discovered, and the Historical Society had them restored and digitized.

Join us for a night at the movies!

This evening, John Poister will explain the restoration of the films and will offer commentary on the hour-long Centennial movie. After a brief intermission, we'll be treated to two "short subjects": an amusing one on Borough trash collection and another on the fine homes of Sewickley. **TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE, THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION MOVIE HAS NOT BEEN SHOWN SINCE JUNE 26, 1940!**

A Call for Committee Members

If you are interested in serving on one or more of the Historical Society's committees, please let us know. They include ARCHITECTURE, ARCHIVES/COLLECTION, DEVELOPMENT, FINANCE, HOSPITALITY, MEMBERSHIP and PROGRAM. A description of each can be found in the SVHS Bylaws, ARTICLE IX, which you can see on our website, www.sewickleyhistory.org, under the heading "Latest Articles." We look forward to your participation.

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.

1840

SEWICKLEY CENTENNIAL

1940

One Hundredth Anniversary of the Naming of the Town "Sewickleyville"

In June of 1940, Sewickley celebrated its Centennial. It was a five-day affair that featured athletic contests, a regatta, a mammoth parade and, of course, fireworks. It was a huge undertaking for a small community. And, it took the vision of one person, William E. Gray, to pull it off.

Born in Sewickley in 1891, Mr. Gray knew two things very early in his life: that he would spend his life in Sewickley and that he would become a mortician. In the 1930s he established his own funeral home on Beaver Street. The Gray funeral home was successful. It later became the Gray-Cole Funeral home and continues today as the Richard D. Cole Funeral Home.

As the owner of an important business in town, Mr. Gray became active in local affairs. He was a member of the Doric Lodge, a member and officer with the Sewickley Kiwanis Club and President of the Sewickley Board of Trade.

By 1939, Sewickley and the nation were finally coming out of the depression and recession that had plagued the country for a decade. While Europe was at war, the unemployment rate was dropping in the U.S., and pay envelopes were getting fatter. Mr. Gray and a few other local business people felt that a celebration was in order, and Mr. Gray knew exactly what the town could celebrate.

In 1840, Sewickley got its name. The community had been growing thanks to a thriving river trade. There was no formal name for the town that boasted a number of taverns where thirsty river men could wet their whistles. They called the area "Dogtown" and "The Devil's Racetrack." Those names would not do for permanent residents. So, after considerable debate the name "Sewickleyville" was chosen. When it was officially announced, townspeople were so excited they formed an impromptu parade that snaked its way down Beaver Street.

A student of local history and President of the Board of Trade, Mr. Gray knew the anniversary was approaching. In May of 1939, he called a meeting of the Board of Trade and 19 other community organizations to discuss the idea of a community-wide centennial celebration. To his surprise, the idea was met with skepticism. Leaders of the community groups were concerned that, with the Board of Trade behind the idea, the historic milestone would become a carnival, with a midway and tawdry sideshows.

Mr. Gray wouldn't give up. In a recently discovered letter dated June 9, 1939, addressed to leaders of the community groups, Mr. Gray faced the objections head-on. "Considerable criticism has been heard of the 'plans' for the celebration," he wrote. "There are no 'plans', only suggestions." Mr. Gray, in his letter, sought to allay fears. He promised that the Board of Trade would step back "into the ranks on an equal basis with the other organizations." He

asked for another chance and called a second meeting with the community groups to try, once again, to sell his idea.

On the evening of June 20, 1939, the various groups gathered in the basement of the Baptist Church. Mr. Gray made his pitch. He outlined a vision of what the celebration could be. The reporter covering the meeting for the *Sewickley Herald* put it this way: "A great parade, an elaborate historical pageant in which local people would appear in scenes taken from Sewickley's past. Displays of historic relics, sporting events at the 'Y' field, and a union church service." What it wouldn't be, Mr. Gray promised, was a "cheap carnival atmosphere." He wanted his home-town centennial to be uplifting.



The *Herald* reported that many representatives of the community organizations were still not satisfied. Mr. Gray pushed ahead and before the meeting was over had appointed an executive committee to begin to develop plans for the celebration. Meanwhile, he continued his efforts to convince other community

leaders that the celebration would be a success. It apparently took a lot of persuading, because there was not another meeting held until December 7, 1939. By that time the executive committee had put together a tentative four-day (later expanded to five days) schedule of events, set up subcommittees to handle the many aspects of the celebration, and, most importantly, got the support of elected officials, community leaders and the 19 organizations originally invited to participate.

Beginning in January of 1940, the executive committee met weekly. More than 300 residents were recruited to serve on 24 subcommittees. Slowly, Mr. Gray's vision began to take shape. The Centennial events would begin on Saturday, June 15, and continue to Wednesday, June 19. It would be Sewickley's biggest celebration ever.

In the end, it was the event Mr. Gray had hoped for. The Village was decorated with green and white banners and flowers. Many merchants placed historical displays in their shop windows. A 76-page program booklet that includes a long essay on Sewickley history as well as vintage photographs, a river regatta, athletic competitions, a huge community choir performance, amusement rides for the kids and teens, a two-hour-long parade and fireworks were highlights of the celebration.

The *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* reported that 10,000 people lined Beaver Street for the parade. As many as 3000 turned out on a hot humid afternoon for the regatta. At least 1000 attended the union church service.

The celebration was an artistic and operational success, but it was a money loser. In almost every case, committee members over-

estimated revenue and under-estimated costs. The final accounting showed that the Sewickley Centennial Association lost \$1200, which would be the equivalent of \$21,500 today. With unpaid bills piling up, the association made one last appeal to the good citizens of Sewickley.

In a letter dated September 19, 1940, William Grey got right to the point. "Sewickley must pay its obligations, so we can only do

it by private subscriptions or be obliged to hold a carnival for a week—with bingos, raffles, etc., just what we tried to avoid in the celebration, as it brings undesirables in the town and we would dislike to have to resort to that method now."

The appeal was successful. They raised the \$1200 and the association was able to close the books at the end of the year with all bills paid.

— John J. Poister, Jr.

Sewickley officially became a state chartered borough in 1853. In February 1953, the Herald reported that "a group of interested citizens met to discuss ideas" for another centennial celebration. Nothing came of the meeting. There was no official commemoration, but the Herald did mark its 50th anniversary and the borough's centennial with a special 64-page edition in the fall of that year. In 1990, the town celebrated the sesquicentennial of its naming with the publication of an 80-page program booklet and a year's worth of events. Then, from October 3-5, 2003, the 150th anniversary of the borough was marked with a street dance, concerts, a parade, fireworks, tours and exhibitions. Documentation of all of these anniversaries, including newspaper articles, photographs and programs, can be found in the collection of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society.

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Thanks to the following, who, since our last newsletter, have supported Sewickley Valley Historical Society with gifts in addition to basic dues.

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Special Contributions

Bruce & Patty Coleman, in memory of Larry Vaccaro

Elsie Lewis; Sally & Ned Ruffin — for film restoration

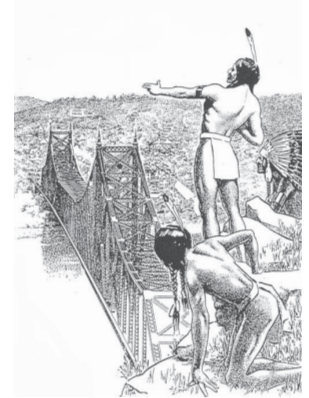
Marguerite Standish, in memory of Dona S. Dreeland

Mrs. Joan B. Sullivan, Simon Noel — for the B. G. Shields Memorial Garden

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

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September 2019



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A children's class enjoying the B. G. Shields Memorial Garden at the Old Sewickley Post Office. The garden was dedicated at the SVHS Annual Meeting last May and is looking better every day. Come visit!

The Historical Society continues to accept contributions for the maintenance of the garden. Please send donations to SVHS at 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143.

The SVHS Bicentennial Gallery now on Forever.com

In 1975, the Sewickley Valley Bicentennial Committee decided to save old photographs for posterity by inviting Valley residents to submit them for showing in a gallery. The photographs were selected by a committee headed by B. G. Shields. The Bicen Gallery was located on Division Street and was open during the summer months of 1976 as an official Bicentennial project. The photos became the basis of the SVHS Bicen Gallery photo collection, and they have been borrowed by many organizations and individuals through the years.

These photos and their descriptions have been uploaded to an album in Forever.com. Go to www.sewickleyhistory.org, scroll down to PHOTOGRAPH ALBUMS, click on BICENTENNIAL GALLERY, and the link will take you to the album. You can then scroll through the images by clicking the forward and backward arrows in circles at the middle left and right of the image. The descriptions appear automatically if you're on a PC or a tablet. If you're on a smart phone, click on the small box in the upper right-hand corner to view the description.