

Sewickley Valley Historical Society

Signals

XXXVIII, Number 3

January/February 2011

Saturday, February 19, 2011

A Walking Tour of the Lobbies of the Oliver, Union Trust & Frick Buildings & the Omni William Penn Hotel

conducted by docents from the
Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation

followed by an optional "Dutch treat"
Lunch at the Harvard/Yale/Princeton Club

Meet at the Palm Court lobby of the Omni William Penn Hotel. Parking is available in the Mellon Square lot. **The tour will begin promptly at 10:30 a.m.** and will conclude about noon, after which we will walk to the Harvard/Yale/Princeton Club for lunch.

The tour will run, rain or shine or snow, so please dress for the weather and wear comfortable walking shoes.

The tour is free; the cost of lunch is \$20.00, tax and tip included.

LUNCHEON MENU

Sautéed breast of chicken with sun-dried tomato cream sauce

English-style filet of fish with breadcrumbs and lemon caper cream

Pittsburgh-style steak **or** chicken salad (with french fries and cheddar cheese) and a cup of soup

Garden vegetable quiche with roasted red pepper coulis and a side salad

Please call headquarters at 412-741-5315 for tour and luncheon reservations, indicating your choice from the above menu.

Make luncheon checks payable to Sewickley Valley Historical Society and mail to
SVHS, 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143.

Also, let us know if you will need a ride to the Omni William Penn.

Deadline for reservations is Friday, February 11, 2011.

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.

In the course of our research, we occasionally come across information about noteworthy individuals from the Sewickley Valley. These two native sons came to our attention through an e-mail inquiry in the first instance and, in the latter, from a group of scrapbooks from the collection of Dorothy M. Moore.

“Pittsburg Phil”

Our “Pittsburg [sic] Phil,” George Elsworth Smith (1862-1905), was born on a farm in Sewickley, although we haven’t been able to identify the farm, to Elizabeth and Christian Smith. (He shouldn’t be confused with Harry “Pittsburgh Phil” Strauss (1909-1941), who was a contract killer for Murder, Inc., a Brooklyn mob in the 1930s, and was executed in the electric chair at Sing Sing.) George had two sisters and a younger brother. The family moved to Allegheny City in 1872, and George went to work as a cork cutter, maybe at Armstrong Cork Company, for \$5 a week. He supplemented his meager income by purchasing and training gamecocks, a fact that he hid from his mother and sisters, who disapproved of gambling. He also began to bet on the outcome of National League baseball games in Pittsburgh pool halls and attributed his often substantial winnings to pay raises at the cork factory. It was in those same pool halls that the results of horse races, obtainable via telegraph, began to interest him, and he started compiling lists of the names and times of winning horses, forming crude racing charts. In the fall of 1879, he bet on a horse named Gabriel running at Brighton Beach racetrack, Coney Island, with odds of 5:1 and won \$38. George decided he could make a living betting on the horses, and he quit his job at the cork factory.

By the mid 1880s the young man had won over \$100,000. In 1885 he began to work out of William “Silver Bill” Riley’s pool hall in Chicago, and it was Riley who gave Smith the nickname “Pittsburg Phil” to differentiate him from other gamblers he knew named Smith. By betting large sums on Chicago races, Smith became one of the most successful “plungers” (gamblers or speculators) of his day. Eventually he focused his betting operations on tracks in New York. He also purchased and raced Thoroughbred horses under the name Pleasant Valley Stable, whose colors

were royal purple and canary yellow. His principal trainer was his brother, Bill.

“Pittsburg Phil” was successful betting on the horses because he was very methodical. He carefully noted every detail about the horses: their conditions and performances and the state of the tracks they ran on. He also learned about the jockeys. As he became more successful and famous, he could not place bets openly, as the odds would be affected, so he commissioned others to place his bets for him.

A book about him came out in 1908, three years after his death: *Racing Maxims and Methods of Pittsburg Phil (George E. Smith): Complete System as Employed by the Most Successful Speculator in the History of the American Turf; Condensed Wisdom of Twenty Years’ Experience on the Track, from the Only Personal Interviews Ever Given by the Famous Horseman*, edited and published by Edward W. Cole, Turf Editor of the *New York Evening Telegram*. The book was dedicated to Smith’s friend Walter Keys, who said in a letter to the editor, “The idea that Pittsburg Phil was a lucky plunger will be abandoned after a perusal of this work. It is a complete and accurate record of the methods of



one of the country’s shrewdest business men who speculated in races not as a matter of sentiment but because racing was as much a field of investment to him as [is] Wall Street to the broker.”

According to colinsghost.org, a website dedicated to Thoroughbred racing history, his handicapping methods and approach to playing the horses laid a foundation for



from *Illustrated Sporting News*,
October 1903

all handicapping books that followed, and “men like Pittsburg Phil brought an air of intellectualism into the betting ring. They created some of the handicapping tools — like race charts, running lines and speed figures — that we take for granted today.” The book emphasized the importance of systematic record-keeping, and the daily



racing form found today at every track, which allows a bettor to make an informed judgment about potential results, was based upon this approach. Some of Smith’s maxims: “Special knowledge is not a talent. A man must acquire it by hard work.” “A man cannot divide his attention at the track between himself and women.” “All consistently successful players of horses are men of temperate habits in life.” “Cut your bets when in a losing streak and increase them when winning in a spasm of good luck.”

George Smith never married, and when he died from tuberculosis in North Carolina at age 43 in 1905, he was intestate. His considerable fortune of more than \$3 million, worth at least twenty times that today, was shared among his family. Accompanied by a large crowd despite a raging snowstorm, the popular gambler was laid to rest in Uniondale Cemetery on what is today Pittsburgh’s North Side (formerly Allegheny City) in a handsome granite mausoleum, which reportedly cost \$30,000. “Pittsburg Phil” had had it constructed for himself a number of years before. Sometime after his death, his mother had a life-size statue of him wearing a suit placed on top of the mausoleum. He is clutching in his right hand what appears to be a racing form.

George Smith, the 1916 Kentucky Derby winner, was named after “Pittsburg Phil,” because he had once owned the colt’s dam, Consuelo II.

George E. Smith’s mausoleum in Uniondale Cemetery

“Mote” Bergman

The life of our second native son is copiously documented in six scrapbooks. Likely remembered by persons still living, Leetsdale resident Alvin Floyd Bergman (1887-1978) was nicknamed “Mote” by his mother, as he was so tiny at birth that he was not expected to survive. However, he went on to thrive and perform amazing feats of physical endurance.

Bergman received the title of “champion walker” in 1916 at age 29 for winning a 50-mile race that he walked in just under seven hours. For some fifty years thereafter he walked one mile for each year of his age on his birthday, as well as walking fifty miles practically every weekend. He was a familiar figure on Western Pennsylvania highways. Two of his outstanding walks were from Pittsburgh to Chicago — 500 miles, in six days and twenty-three hours — and Pittsburgh to New York City — 400 miles, in six days and five hours.

“Mote” Bergman made his living as a barber in Leetsdale until 1942, when he went to work for Armco Steel in Ambridge. He retired from there in 1958 at the age of 71. He continued walking until he was 89 and retired to a rest home in Virginia, having walked 385,000 miles in his lifetime. “Mote” appeared several times in Ripley’s *Believe It or Not*.

In distance walking, Bergman followed a tradition of outdoor exercise that became popular after the Civil War, following

in the footsteps of men such as Edward Payton Weston, who walked from New York to California — 3,895 miles in 104 days — only to turn around and walk back — 3,600 miles in 77 days. There were a number of these long distance walkers in Western Pennsylvania, S. G. “Old Soldier” Barnes and Hughey Bruce to mention but two.

Alvin Floyd Bergman is buried in Sewickley Cemetery.

Believe It or Not By Bob Ripley

WHAT IS THE LARGEST NUMBER THAT CAN BE MADE WITH TWO TWOS AND A FIVE? Answer Monday

GENERAL CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ
AUTHOR OF "PRINCIPLES OF WAR" (WRITTEN IN 1810)
USED AS A TEXTBOOK FOR 130 YRS. BY THE GERMAN MILITARY MACHINE
AS THE INSPIRATION OF GERMAN MILITARISM, HE HAS CAUSED MORE LOSS OF LIFE THAN ANY OTHER MAN IN HISTORY

A. F. BERGMAN
Leetsdale, Pa.
HAS WALKED ONE MILE FOR EACH YEAR OF HIS AGE ON HIS BIRTHDAYS FOR THE PAST 40 YRS.

4 BROTHERS MARRIED 4 SISTERS AND LIVE IN 4 HOUSES IN A ROW IN VALLEY STATION, NY. (BAILEY BROTHERS — RAGGARD SISTERS)

Ripley's Believe It or Not!

AT REST ANNA S. WOOD 1824-1896 HERE I LAY MY BURDEN DOWN, CHANGE THE CROSS INTO THE CROWN

TOMBSTONE
Table Rock, Nebraska

ALVIN BERGMAN
Leetsdale, Pa.
HAS WALKED ONE MILE FOR EACH YEAR OF HIS AGE ON HIS BIRTHDAYS FOR THE PAST 50 YEARS

OFFER AND PROFFER MEAN THE SAME THING

THE ILLITERATE GENIUS
JAMES BRINDLEY
(1763-1834) of England

ONE OF THE GREATEST ENGINEERS OF HIS TIME NEVER LEARNED TO READ OR WRITE!

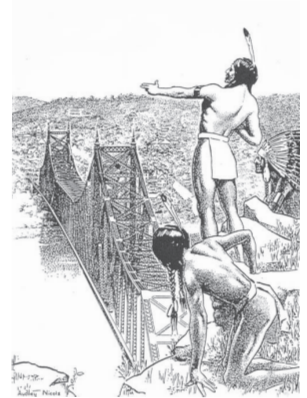
HE BUILT 365 MILES OF CANALS - INCLUDING THE FAMED MANCHESTER CANAL - WITHOUT PUTTING A SINGLE COMPUTATION ON PAPER.

TOMORROW—The kidnaping that changed history.

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

Non-Profit Org
U. S. Postage
PAID
Permit 70
Sewickley, PA

January/February 2011



Friends, Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

*Thanks to the following, who have generously supported the Sewickley Valley Historical Society
with gifts in addition to membership dues:*

Kelso & Vera Baker; Mr. & Mrs. Dominique Barbour; Dr. & Mrs. George J. Berry; Kathy & Rich Brandt;
Mr. & Mrs. J. Judson Brooks; Mr. & Mrs. T. Ronald Casper; Mrs. Clinton L. Childs, Jr.; Carole Moore Ford;
Thomas & Jennifer Hay; Kenneth Johns; Susan Jones; Drs. Gretchen & David Medich; Mrs. William Moroney;
Michael Murphy; Linda & Scott Schober; Frank Simons; Furman South III; Mr. & Mrs. Donald W. Spalding;
The Hon. & Mrs. William L. Standish; Eric & Laura Theis; Mrs. Phyllis J. Thomas; Belinda & David Thompson;
Mr. & Mrs. Michael J. Tomana; James R. Wardrop; Mr. & Mrs. Frank Wasco, Jr.; Carol R. Yaster; Rives Yost

Donations

Mrs. M. Pollard Joyner
Betty G. Y. Shields, in memory of Margaret Barnes Wolfe
Penguin Book Shop

New Members

Kelso & Vera Baker, Sewickley; Mr. & Mrs. Dominique Barbour, Sewickley; Mr. David Caughey, Vienna, VA;
Mr. & Mrs. Grant D. Duffield, Sewickley; Dr. Willis D. Shook, III, Pittsburgh;
Lola M. Weber, Longview, WA; Carol R. Yaster, Blue Bell, PA