

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXVIII, Number 4

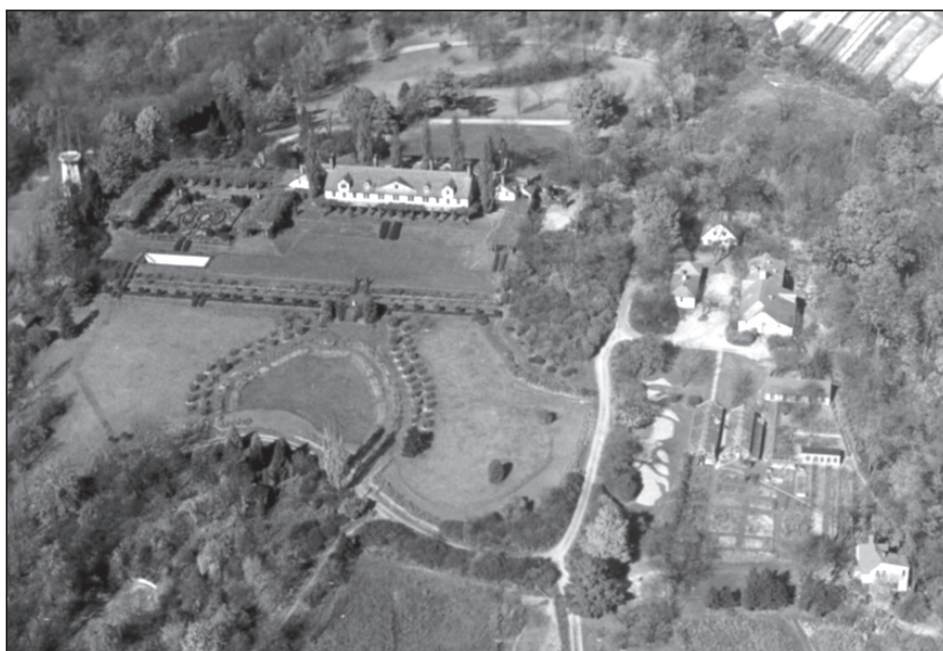
March 2011

Wednesday, March 16, at 7:30 p.m.

Sewickley Heights History Center, 1901 Glen Mitchell Road

Elizabeth Dohrman Thaw

A presentation by John Canning & David Grinnell of the Allegheny City Society



One of Sewickley Heights' great estates was *As You Like It*, seen in the aerial photo at left. It was built as a summer home by Elizabeth Dohrman Thaw, widow of William Thaw, Jr., a Pittsburgh coal merchant who was a half-brother of Harry Thaw, notorious for his 1906 shooting of architect Stanford White on the roof of the old Madison Square Garden. (See page 2 of this newsletter.) The 44-room Tudor Revival mansion, designed by architect George S. Orth and completed in 1902, was truly a summer home: it had no central heating. The estate was landscaped by John C. Olmsted, stepson of Frederick Law Olmsted, the creator of Central Park. In 1939 the house was demolished at the order of Mrs. Thaw, and the site became a subdivision, "Thawmont."

The life and career of Elizabeth Dohrman Thaw, who, after her husband's sudden death became a pioneer of civic reform in Pittsburgh, will be the primary focus of this presentation. We will also have on display several items of Thaw memorabilia from the collection of Ted Stevenson, a Thaw descendant.

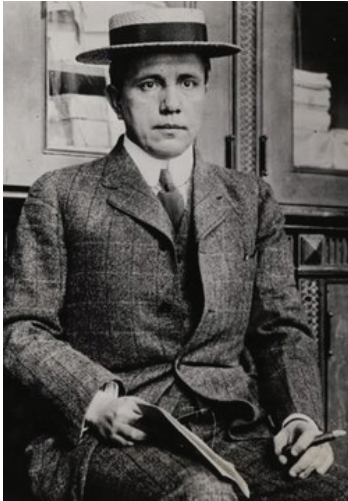
John Canning was a history teacher in the Mt. Lebanon schools from 1963 to 2001. A lifelong resident of the North Side and Vice President of the Allegheny City Society, over the past decade he has helped organize programs that help to tell the history of what was, until 1907, Allegheny City. John is also involved with the OASIS program for active seniors, which meets at Macy's in Pittsburgh, where he has presented lectures related to Western Pennsylvania history and organized day trips to sites of historic interest.

David Grinnell is chief archivist at the Heinz History Center. He is also on the Board of the Allegheny City Society and is a member of the Western Pennsylvania Archives and History Commission of the United Methodist Church. A graduate of Albion College, he is at present a doctoral student at Pitt's School of Library and Information Science. David's interests include local history, Methodist history, genealogy and, particularly, Charles Avery and the abolitionist movement in Western Pennsylvania.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS PROGRAM WILL BE HELD AT
SEWICKLEY HEIGHTS HISTORY CENTER.**

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.

Who Was Harry Thaw?



Harry Kendall Thaw (1871-1947)

Although Harry Kendall Thaw is often associated with Sewickley Heights, it is unlikely that he ever did more than visit here. He was the son of William Thaw, Sr. (1818-1889), and his second wife, Mary S. Copley Thaw (1842-1929). Harry's half-brother was William Thaw, Jr. (1853-1892), son of William Thaw, Sr., and his first wife, Eliza Burd Blair Thaw (died 1863). William, Jr., was married to Elizabeth Dohrman (1854-1948), whose summer house on Blackburn Road was *As You Like It*. Thus, Harry was Elizabeth Dohrman Thaw's (half) brother-in-law.

In his memoir, *The Traitor; Being the Untampered With, Unrevised Account of the Trial and All That Led to It* (Philadelphia, Dorrance and Company Publishers, 1926), Thaw states on pages 18-19, "... we did start the Allegheny Country Club, with the golf links in the Homewood Driving Park, Blair Painter, Remsen Messler, Win Sewell, Willie Murray, Hen Chalfant, John Morehead [sic], Frank Carnegie and I." This statement seems, however, to be inaccurate. Thaw appears to be remembering golf with his friends at the old Pittsburgh Golf Club. In the words of John Moorhead, Jr., describing that club, "...on the center of the old Homestead race course, I got six old pea cans [and] laid these out as well as possible...I subsequently laid out the old course of the Allegheny Country Club on California Avenue, in Allegheny, and had there really the pioneer golf course [in Western Pennsylvania]." The Allegheny Country Club was founded in 1895, a year when Harry Thaw was abroad. Richard E. Spatz's *The History of Allegheny Country Club: The First One Hundred Years* (Allegheny Country

Club, 1995) contains no roster of the 1895 founding members, but there are records from 1899 that do not list Harry Thaw as a member; only Mrs. William Thaw, Jr., is listed as an Associate Member. The roster from 1902, when the Club moved to Sewickley Heights, lists the following Thaws: Josiah C. (Harry's brother), William (probably William, III, Harry's nephew) and Benjamin (Harry's half-brother) as active members and Mrs. William Thaw, Jr., as an Associate Member. Harry Thaw is buried in Allegheny Cemetery.

New Members

Frances Love Merryman, Sewickley

Friends, Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

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

George J. Berry, III; David J. Sautter

The Nominating Committee

The following members have been named to the Sewickley Valley Historical Society Nominating Committee and will report to the membership at the program meeting on March 16, 2011.

Nancy Baldwin, Chair

Brewster Cockrell, Barb Frey, Maleet Gordon, William Kleeman

If you have suggestions for officers or directors of SVHS, please contact one of these individuals. The election will be held at the Annual Meeting, Wednesday, May 18, 2011.

Moon Genealogy Club

Whether you're just curious or have been doing genealogical research for a long time, you're invited to talk with other amateur genealogists at the Moon Genealogy Club's monthly meetings at the Moon Library. The meetings are on Thursdays at 6:30 p.m. Upcoming dates include March 10th, April 14th, May 12th and June 9th. For more information, contact the Club at heathersfamilysearch@gmail.com.

A Recent Gift

The three-volume *Genealogical and Personal History of Western Pennsylvania* (John W. Jordan, Editor-in-Chief, New York, Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1915) was presented to the Sewickley Valley Historical Society by Ava Maria Chamberlain Shaughnessy in memory of her parents, Ralph and Mary Pass Chamberlain. These handsomely illustrated volumes will be of great assistance to us in our genealogical research.

The following is excerpted from a paper delivered by Mrs Robert Wardrop (Agnes Dawson Miller, 1853-1941) at the Edgeworth Club, April 11, 1932, on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Woman's Club of Sewickley Valley.

Sewickley in 1897

My subject this afternoon is early Sewickley—hoping in a very informal way, to tell something of its habits, aims, occupations, amusements, etc., and to give my own idea of how unconsciously for many years it was preparing its feminine population for the organization of a Woman's Club which has always been interested in literature and music especially, and in the higher life generally.

Mr. John I. Nevin and Dr. Bittinger of the Presbyterian Church organized a history class here in 1865, which developed into what is now known as Query Club—dear to many of us—and which is still actively engaged in the study of literature and history.

Another smaller group was led by that dear friend of happy memories, Dr. Van Cleve, where we studied English History most informally and energetically. One of the most amusing recollections of those days was the habit our wise teacher had, when interest was flagging a little, to ask some question concerning Cromwell. That was enough: off we went. Liberals and Conservatives were just as different then as they are now.

The Dramatic Club was organized in 1886, which entertained its members with several plays each year: how we looked forward to these events! "Courtesy Cards" were issued and guests from the city were invited to dinner and the play, and what cared we for muddy roads as we drove to Choral Hall to see our friends perform, and to watch the young people dance afterwards, or, if one was so inclined, take part in these festivities. One feature of these evenings always brought forth approbation and applause. Of course, the performance nearly always continued until the last train to the city was due—and the railroad was our only means of traveling at that time. When lateness seemed imminent, Mr. Oliver Richardson or Mr. A. B. Starr, a Railroad official, would announce that our guests need not be uneasy, for the train would wait at Sewickley Station until the play was over. Even a great organization like the Penna. awaited our convenience!

Another organization that was interesting to a chosen few was a Current Topics Class, led by Mrs. M. I. Coffin Graff. "Woman's place was in the home" in those days, and it was quite an experience to have Mrs. Graff give us an idea of what was going on in the world about us. Some of us may owe our devotion to the daily papers and our interest in world politics to that class. Mrs. Graff had also a small class to which she tried to teach some French, with rather poor results, but another class, with the same object in view, was organized in 1892 and for thirty-four years met more or less regularly once a week, winter and summer. There were three or four French teachers engaged during that time, who managed

to give the class some idea of grammar and pronunciation, but the real result was the reading of a large number of French books, more or less intimacy with a French grammar and a fondness for a French Bible with which to compare our King James version.

Another delightful class met in the old Academy Building, which stood on this property [the Edgeworth Club] where the tennis courts are now. One of the Professors there taught Shakespeare in one of the class rooms. Hamlet made the deepest impression on my mind, but the class itself remains a delightful memory.

During all of this time there was always great interest in music: the Choral Club for years gave most attractive concerts, and many fine voices were cultivated in Sewickley.

Another organization that played an important part in Sewickley life was Miss Chaplin's Dancing Class. No child's education was considered finished until he or she had taken part in the Annual Cotillion and had been kept up to the highest standard of good manners in the dancing class, and some who were not children enjoyed many evenings under the capable leadership of this graceful teacher.

Then came the "Wheel", a class led by Mrs. Charles Bassett, a stranger in our midst, full of energy and organizing ability. We read and studied many subjects, and listened with the deepest interest to the leader's expositions concerning them. This class was the real cornerstone of the Woman's Club, and its members were charter members of the new organization.

But one may ask—What else did Sewickley people do, as well as follow all of these more or less intellectual pursuits? Well, among our amusements, many of you will remember, picnics were one of our standard performances. There was no bridge across the river at the time of which I write, but there were two ferries, Stoops, about one-half mile down the river from Sewickley Station, and Lashiel's, which crossed the river from the foot of Chestnut Street. What fun we had crossing at either place and climbing the hills on the other side, loaded with baskets and the paraphernalia of our excursion. One of the well-known places, near a spring, was called "Camel Back" whence we had a magnificent view of the Sewickley Valley. The Monday picnics at this spot were a feature for many summers

It was after crossing one of these ferries that one of our most delightful excursions was taken—to Frankfort Springs. This is a question of a few hours now, but in the Eighties it meant horses to ride, buggies to drive, and a few hardy souls walked. It meant a supper and a night at the hotel, always properly chaperoned, and always too, an enthusiastic jollification.

(Continued on next page)

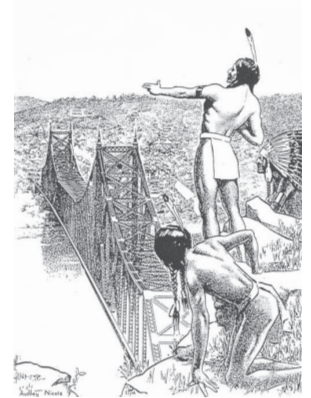


Mrs. Robert Wardrop

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
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Sewickley, PA 15143

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March 2011



(Sewickley in 1897, continued)

Another delightful spot, where picnics were a joy, was called “Turkey Foot”, where the Umbstaetter Camp for Boy Scouts is now. And Winter as well as Summer, we went to old Economy, where we experienced the rather grudging hospitality of the Economites, ate their ginger cakes and looked at their beautiful gardens and quaint houses.

And then in the early ‘90s came the bicycle. It is amusing now to recall how we thought space was annihilated by bicycles; before that epoch, almost everyone that could went driving Summer evenings, and to go to the junction of the roads, where the Darlington house now stands, and home again, was considered a reasonable performance for one evening, and that was only possible in dry weather, as we had only dirt roads then.

We had our own customs in those days, among them calls of various kinds. In the Spring, when the new suit was fresh, afternoons were spent returning calls, and a great acquaintance was kept up. One always called on new neighbors, and always made party calls; a reasonable time after a dinner or a luncheon, a call was made upon one’s hostess; but the custom died a natural death after automobiles made parties and festivities of various kinds so frequent it was impossible to keep up these formalities.

We have all grown so accustomed to comforts here in this village that it is well sometimes to recall the days when we had no running water, but used cisterns; when we had no electricity and, in some parts of the valley, no gas, so used oil lamps when we had no fuel gas, and used coal; when we remember that sometimes the cistern was dry. Also, sometimes the ‘hired man’ fell down the back stairs carrying the ash pan. We wonder why we look back with so many happy memories, but we never felt sorry for ourselves. Sewickley was always contented with Sewickley. We knew all “these things would be added to us” sometime, and we were young, and youth generally takes things lightly.

I make no pretensions to critical judgment where our valley is concerned: from the first week that I spent in it, I have been absolutely prejudiced in its favor, and when some dear lady who has just come here, homesick for her own friends and place, makes a derogatory remark about Sewickley, I listen with astonishment: she nearly always joins the chorus later, if she stays long enough, for we are a friendly folk and we soon take her to our hearts and show her what real suburban life is; where neighbors mean friends who rejoice with each other in prosperity, sympathize with each other in sorrow, and help each other, and enjoy each other at all times.