1500

Our collection of Sharpsville history now contains over 1,500 photographs, documents, and artifacts. The steady growth of our archives is due to the generosity of over one hundred donors who have given us collections ranging from a single item to those that are measured in cubic feet.

As always, if you aren’t quite ready to part with a treasured photograph, we are happy to scan it so you can keep the original. (We prefer to make our own scans to ensure a high resolution image.)

About 80% of our collection has been catalogued and entered into Adlib Museum software. This will allow searching across many fields as well as access to digital images. (About three-fifths of the collection has been digitized.) Once cataloguing is completed, we envision making it available for use at our headquarters, and possibly at schools and libraries. Down the road, internet access to the catalog is an option, though that would require funding for a software upgrade and server space.

The cataloging project also involves physically organizing the objects in vertical files (while those suitable for display are on exhibit at our headquarters). Oversized items, however, will require a map or blueprint case, for which we are currently seeking funding.

Regardless of the organization of our collection, we aim to make the archives more accessible—by this newsletter, DVDs, brochures, our website—and, once renovations at our historic headquarters are completed, an expansion of our existing displays there.

So despite reaching an impressive number, we know there is still more out there, and would especially like items pertaining to ethnic history, businesses of the town, labor, and glimpses of everyday life. So, before you throw items from Aunt Millie’s attic in the trash, give us a call to see if something we could use. (Though as a general rule, we want things that relate to Sharpsville’s history not things that are merely old.)

After all, these items represent your history.

Collections Update

The following have been recently added to our collections:

The Sharpsville High Class of 1952 donated a pint milk bottle from the C.E. Dixon Dairy of Sharpsville, a 1915 pamphlet of the by-laws of the Sharpsville lodge of the Knights of Pythias, and several postcards from ca. 1907-1940 depicting various scenes around town.

Laura Antos donated a long-spouted oil-can from the New York Central System (Railroad).

Rod Alexander donated a felt banner and a felt pennant from the Class of 1924.

Gregg Smith donated five Sharpsville Advertiser newspapers dating from the 1878 to 1914.

Mary Stahl donated Sharpsville school diplomas, certificates and programs from the 1920s.

Upcoming Events

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS
Mountaineer Race Track & Casino (with a stop at the Fiesta Ware Outlet) March 18th
Presque Isle Downs & Casino (with a stop at the Wegman’s Market) April 22nd
Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations

Please also support the quality productions of Area Community Theatre of Sharpsville, showcasing local talent.

a favorite Broadway classic

Fiddler on the Roof
March 13-15th and 20-22nd
Pierce Opera House
call 724-815-4388 or go to actssharpsville.org
The Elastic Enamel Plant

The first decade of the twentieth century saw an uneasy business climate in Sharpsville. To be sure, Thomas D. West had built a thriving foundry (which would also encompass the Alice Furnace), specializing in ingot moulds and other large castings. His firm would become Valley Mould & Iron. Up on the hill, William P. Snyder was busy consolidating the furnaces there and would soon make the Shenango Furnace Co. an industrial powerhouse. Yet, the townsfolk could not help but feel the borough’s best days were behind it. The optimism of the 1870s—when Sharpsville stood at the forefront of the American iron industry—had long passed. The shipments of block coal from Hickory, Neshannock and Bethel had dwindled as the mines were played out. The town’s blast furnaces, always subject to boom and bust, had suffered greatly in the Panic of 1893.

So, with eagerness the town embraced plans to build a new factory here. A new area, along the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad line, would be developed, possibly luring other industry there. In 1907, Pittsburgh industrialists along with a number of local subscribers financed the construction of the Pittsburg Elastic Enamel Works. (This was back when the “h” in Pittsburgh was optional.)

The plant made enameled metal kitchenware, with the “elastic” part being the special chemical composition which allowed the enamel coating to expand and contract at the same rate as the steel it was applied to. Otherwise, the enamel would chip and crack as the item was heated or cooled.

Production is likely to have started in early 1908, and by July of that year they had a three-month backlog of new orders. In February of 1909, the shareholders voted to double its capacity. Yet by November of that year, they were in bankruptcy.

With the bankruptcy, creditors got paid 60 cents on the dollar; the stockholders lost their entire investment. Samuel Hughes was among the many local citizens who lost out.

Hughes had come here from Burgettstown, Pa. a few years earlier to serve as the first president of the new Sharpsville National Bank. This was the town’s second bank, after the First National Bank of Sharpsville. (The First National was founded in 1873 as the Iron Banking Company and was eventually absorbed by McDowell National Bank in 1964.) The Sharpsville National, long since forgotten, was located on the corner in a block where Palo Floral now stands. Board minutes from the First National show they were keeping a close eye on this new competitor. However, the competition did not last long.

Hughes, it turns out, had heavily invested in the Enamel Works, and in order to cover his losses, he embezzled from the bank, leading to its collapse. Hughes fled to his wife’s hometown of Indiana, Pa. and then to Harrisburg, though somehow the long arm of the law was unable to reach that far.

Meanwhile, the Elastic Enamel plant stood idle. In March 1910, T.M. Garvin of Wheeling, W.Va. bid $17,600 for it and laid out plans to restart operations here. Three months later, however, there was talk of moving the operation to Monongehela, Pa. This raised the ire of the people of Sharpsville who not only lost out on the investment scheme, but were now in danger of losing the plant.

Garvin’s firm, now called the Keystone Enameling Works, did stay here and production resumed in mid-January 1911. They appeared to have as much success as the prior owners. A May 1912 fire insurance map noted the plant was closed at the time of the survey. In October of that year, suit was brought against Garvin by the Keystone company, G.E. Abersold (its general superintendent) and W.H. Cochrane (the original promoter of Pittsburg Elastic Enamel).

Two years later, the company was again reorganized and was now known as the Fort Pitt Stamping & Enameling Works. Notice was published that the plant was to be repaired and put in operation in a short time, with Abersold...
The Elastic Enamel Plant, cont’d from page 2

continuing on as superintendent and J.C. Bredin, Pittsburgh, as business manager. The next month, Bredin, now termed the firm’s president and general manager, arrived in Sharon with his family soon to follow. A force of twenty men was put to work.

On February 22, 1915, notice was given of an increase in their capital stock from $30,000 to $150,000. Three days later, however, it was reported that the company was moving the plant from Sharpsville to Leechburg, Armstrong Co., Pa. Around the time of the move, the factory listed employment of 23 males and 8 females.

Despite the move out of town, disputes over the plant were still being litigated. The original promoter, W.H. Cochrane, and his wife sued Frank Pierce of Sharpsville for “conspir[ing] together to wickedly extort from plaintiffs a large sum of money.” The alleged wickedness involved an alleged threat of arrest Pierce made unless Cochrane immediately produced $20,000 and his wife cancelled an $11,000 mortgage against the plant. A sum of $50,000 was demanded. The jury, however, found that the threats from six years prior had never been made nor any money paid, and testimony further revealed how Cochrane had concealed from his investors the plant’s persistent unprofitability and misrepresented the amount of his own investment.

An interesting coda to this firm’s tumultuous history was recently brought to our attention by a biographer researching his subject. After the firm moved to Leechburg, it was beset by labor troubles and ended up closing for good in 1919. This made a great impression on a young chemist who worked there, fresh out of Swarthmore. When this chemist later switched fields to investment analysis, the experience motivated him to pay close attention to the quality of a company’s management in his selection of stocks, with particular scrutiny of its labor relations. What started in 1937 as a three-man office and an against-the-grain investment strategy later grew to be a large, well respected investment house, with this one-time employee of the Enamel Works being T. Rowe Price.

From the Collections

Newsmaps

An intriguing part of our collection are 80 government posters from the Second World War. Known as Newsmaps, these were published by the War Department and distributed to military installations, government and civilian groups working on defense projects, certain depository libraries, and Congressmen. Besides a domestic version, a smaller overseas version was sent to field units in theatres of conflict. A third, industrial version, was displayed in war production facilities around the country. They were produced weekly from April 1942 to March 1946, after which an additional eight issues were published. Our collection of the industrial version was included with a large trove of documents from the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators. They represent nearly 40% of the total editions published and are large posters measuring 34 ½” x 47”.

During most of the war, Newsmaps typically featured maps of the world and of local areas seeing fighting, brief summaries of military action during the week, and photographs of troops and materiel. As hostilities came to a close, Newsmap content switched to revelations of enemy atrocities and to information on the peace process and reconstruction efforts around the world.

The Sharpsville Steel Fabricators made significant contributions to the war effort in their production of fuel storage tanks for overseas and domestic airfields as well as fabrications for amphibious landing ships (LSTs) and dry docks. At least 65 men from the plant enlisted in the Armed Forces during the war.
While most of us impatiently await Winter’s end, kids, at least, are hoping to get a couple more weeks to go sledding before the snow is gone for good. Of course sledding has long been popular, as described in brief reports in 1920s editions of Sharpsville High’s newspaper, The Blue and White.

Back then, “coasting” was the more usual term, and some of the popular hills were: the Seventh Street hill (which remained popular for another couple decades), Ridge Avenue across Walnut Street (“you go down one hill and part way up the other”), and the hill on Buckeye Drive coming back down from Stambaugh’s Corners at the intersection of Ivanhoe (where it was said a ¾ mile run was possible). Granted, automobile traffic was much less in those days, but these routes seem to have added unnecessary peril to the thrill of sled-riding. Indeed, well into the 1950s, local newspapers include frequent mention of serious injury, even death, as a result of coasting accidents. (One 1930 paper notes the death of a Sharon boy as the “first fatal coasting accident of the year,” as if more were a matter of course.)

In neighboring towns at least, ordinances forbidding coasting on sidewalks had long been in place, mainly to protect pedestrians from the menace of sleds whizzing by; they were largely ignored by kids who would call out “track” to claim their right of way. While some communities like Sharon would later enact outright (though hard-to-enforce) bans on sled-riding on the streets, Sharpsville did end up barricading Seventh and Fifth Streets for the kids to use at select times. (Mayfield was so jammed with sledders, it was essentially blocked to traffic.) Eventually, though, coasting on streets has become but a distant memory.

Contact Us
website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org
email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com
see our website for officers’ phone numbers

Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm at our headquarters

A Look Back
Coasting

Buhl Farm Park will be celebrating its centenary this year, with a number of events and displays of the history of the Park planned.

Our collection includes several photos of Buhl Park, including this aerial shot from the 1930s. While the general lay-out is familiar, much of the Country Club and Dum-Dum Golf Courses is treeless. And, of course Hazen has only a few houses built on it. A strange sight is an additional pond across from the Casino. This has since been filled in and made into a parking lot.

With Gratitude
A significant donation that will allow us to continue the restoration of our historic headquarters was made by:

Ralph & Carol Mehler

Roland Barksdale-Hall shared his time and expertise with an informative talk on the African-American experience in the Shenango Valley at our February meeting.

Contact Us
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Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane, Sharpsville, Pa. 16150

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Newmaps, cont’d from page 3

Two samples, from October 1943 and April 1944, from our collection are given here. (Zoom in with your browser to see the detail.)