

The *Portage Area Historical Society*
Newsletter

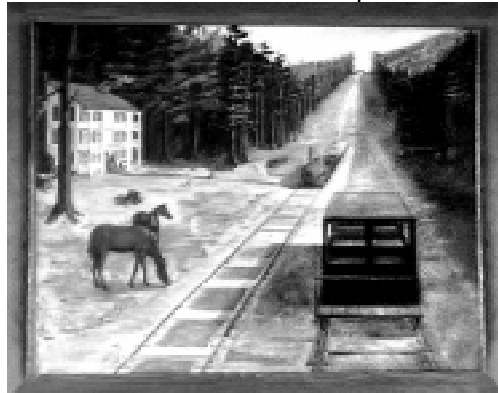


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P. O. Box 45 Portage, PA 15946

February 2008

The first-floor display this year focuses on the Allegheny Portage Railroad and its influence on the development of Portage. Barbara Yetsko's wonderful painting of the Washington House has been moved from the second floor and is the centerpiece of our 2008 display. The Blair County Historical Society loaned the museum photographs, original documents, and canal models. Also on loan are many pieces from the National Park Service.



Washington House by Barbara Yetsko

PHC Grant

Bruce Young entertained and educated Historical Society members and guests October 14 with traditional and period



Bruce Young on the fiddle.

music on fiddle, banjo, guitar and dulcimer. Through Young's antics, the audience heard about the heyday of the railroads and mines and the people who lived through it. One member of the audience, Mr. George Oravec, brought in a violin that he made. Mr. Young, an instructor and musician, played several tunes on the instrument to the delight of his listeners and especially to Mr. Oravec. Refreshments were

served as people mingled, looked at displays, and talked with Mr. Young. The event was made possible through a grant from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council.

Fashion Show

On November 4, ladies from the Blair County Historical Society presented the last in a series of four fashion shows entitled "The Edwardian Lady - 1898 to 1908 Fashions." Peggy Fields, a national expert on period clothing narrated the show while dressed in one of the elegant outfits that she created. Eighteen outfits were modeled, each with gloves, shoes, hats, and accessories. Portage Historical Society's own Ginny McDonnell filled in for one of the models who fell ill prior to the event. Although all of the



Edwardian Fashions - 1898 to 1908

outfits were amazing, none astounded the audience like the wool swimsuit with its corset, stockings and hat.

Student Volunteer

On November 15, Austin Rodgers, our community service volunteer, did his first model train presentation to about 15 museum visitors. Austin, a seventh grader at Portage High School, has taken his new responsibility very seriously, having spent months learning the system. Charles Edwards trained Austin to work the maze of controls and switches that handle the dozens of trains that travel the 225 feet of tracks. Austin's audience, mostly young viewers, was most pleased with the demonstration. Thank you Austin, for

giving up so much of your time to help with this project.

Light Tour

On December 15 about 200 people rode the buses, enjoyed hot chocolate and goodies, and listened to the wonderful music played by the Portage



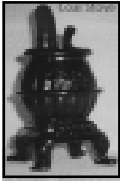
Austin sets up trains for his demonstration.

Community Band and the Portage High School Brass Choir. Santa, of course, was there for the little ones with stockings full of treats. The "Miniature Mainline" trains on the second floor ran all evening to the delight of many new visitors. This year's reservation system proved most successful as the events of the evening ran very smoothly.

Many thanks to all of the local businesses who provided the food and funding for the event and especially to Tom Gaudlip for all of his hard work on the 2007 Christmas Light Tour. Thanks also to the Winterfest committee for working with us to make the entire weekend a true Portage community event.

Gift Shop

In the last few years the gift shop on the first floor of the museum has grown into a profitable venture for the



Historical Society. Thanks to all of the efforts of Ruth Richardson, the store is now stocked with dozens of items including coal figurines, train toys for the kids, videos, historic collectibles,



Portage books, T-shirts, sweatshirts, and much more. Ruth is presently pursuing several items that will carry the Portage Station Museum name.

All Over the World with Ebay

When Robert "Bing" James donated his memorabilia to the museum, he told us to sell whatever we needed to fund the new train display. So over the last year we have sold hundreds of football programs, posters, and other items on eBay. These items went all over the world to Notre Dame, Penn State, Steelers, Pitt, and St.

Francis fans, graduates, collectors, and sport shops. A research doctor in California bought Bing's father's 1915 University of Pittsburgh yearbook as he is researching the number of African Americans attending college before the 1920s. Bing's old ceramic Notre Dame letters went to a fellow who "grew up in South Bend when Ara (Parseghian) was coach, the 'Glory Days.'" One of the old Super Bowl programs went to Great Britain and several Steelers programs to Guam. Bing's donation has opened a new door for museum fundraising efforts as several people have already followed suit by donating items to sell.



New Board Member

At its December meeting the board elected Charles Edwards

to fill a position vacated by Rose Mary Pavelko. Rosie served on the board for 2 years, one term as treasurer. Many thanks, Rosie, for your service, especially helping with the computers and finances. Charles' input is extremely important to the Historical Society as so much of our activities now center around the new model train display. Welcome Charles.

Memorial Plaque

A \$500 plaque has been added to the board honoring Carl and Ruth Richardson. Carl passed away in June 2007 and his family and friends chose the memorial as a way to honor his memory. Carl was a good friend to the museum helping with many projects over the years. Ruth works unselfishly for the good of the museum and its preservation.

Carl and Ruth have always been active members of their community. Carl was a valued member of the Portage Volunteer Fire Department and an integral part of the annual Summerfest celebration. He could usually be found at the entrance to the park where he greeted visitors with a smile, a wave, and sometimes a joke. Carl was a man who knew what things were important in life: family, friends, and his community. Portage has lost a good friend, but his memory and ideals will live on in those left behind.

What better way to remember a loved one than with a gold plaque displayed at the Station Museum. Plaques can be purchased for \$50, \$100, \$500, and \$1000.

Grand Opening

On May 17 the PAHS plans a Grand Opening for our new "Mainline Miniature" Railroad. The May newsletter will be dedicated to that event.



- | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Odenthal Hotel | 5. Madison Building | 9. Nidetch Building | 13. Lutz Hotel / Frankies Hide Away |
| 2. Bowsers Bar & Hotel | 6. Waldorf Hotel | 10. Union (Doney) House / Starlite Hotel | 14. Portage Exchange Hotel |
| 3. Short / Keystone Hotel | 7. Fisher Hotel / Elliot House | 11. Exchange Hotel | 15. Washington House |
| 4. Mountain House | 8. Pop Hotel / West End | 12. McDonnell Hotel / Portage House / Anderson House | 16. McGloghan House |

Why so many Hotels?

In the October newsletter, Jean Crichton graciously shared her research about the founding of Portage and J.C. Martin, the person largely responsible for its growth. In this article, we will examine the reason for the large number of hotels,

apartments, and boarding houses that sprung up throughout the rapidly growing town.

With the need for lumber, the mines developing as rapidly as they were, and wages very desirable for that time, workers came from all over the world to work in Portage. A 1916

Johnstown Daily Tribune article stated, "Portage has a population of over 10,000 and is growing rapidly."

Many people, the majority of them men, came to Portage to find work. Some came to stay, some to make enough money to bring their families to America, and others to save enough money to return home to a better financial lifestyle.

The flood of immigrants and other workers was so overwhelming that hotels and boarding rooms began springing up everywhere. Workers needing a temporary home might have stayed at one of a dozen hotels that had been established in the community by the early 20th century. According to "Portrait of a Town - Portage, PA 1890-1990," a room in the Portage Exchange Hotel in the 1850s cost \$2.65 a week. Boarding rooms and apartments could be rented above many stores in town. Most homes accommodated as many boarders as could fit into spare rooms, generating extra income for financially struggling families. Housewives did not need to leave home to have a second job, for they cooked, cleaned, and did laundry for their boarders.

With more than 100 mines in the area, employers needed workers and workers needed housing. Mining companies built groups of "company houses" that were usually small and identical in structure. Old-timers joked that one could look through a window of one house and see through matching windows on neighboring houses to the yard of the last.



Odenthal Hotel 1908



Mountain House 1911



Pop Hotel 20s



Starlite Hotel 20s



Washington House 1871

Robert Sease said, "Another reason for the housing demand was the railroad. Everyone traveled by rail. If going a distance, housing was necessary before heading for home. And Portage was not the only town with so many hotels and boarding houses, all of the towns along the railroad had them."

Over the years the mines closed, the jobs disappeared, and the population decreased. Cars replaced train travel.

Almost all of the hotels vanished, boarders became very scarce, and the number of apartments dwindled to the few still being rented above some existing stores.

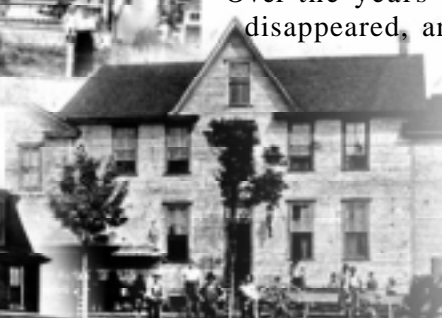
Three life-long Portage residents shared some of the story behind their family's arrival in the area:

Ann Rzeszut said, "Many people (including her mother), came to America with the help of a sponsor. It took my mother a year to pay back the money she owed. She came to America to work and stayed to marry and raise her family. When we lived in Fiddler's Green (then a small village, now part of Portage) we always had boarders, some of the times as many as six."

Sam Timura's grandfather migrated to Texas from Czechoslovakia in the early 1900s. His trips on the rails brought him to this area where many Slovakian people lived. He married, had 10 children, and worked his entire life on the railroad.

His highest wage was \$8 a week, a lucrative salary for the time. For decades the family had a boarder.

Ruth Richardson learned from her great-grandfather's naturalization papers that he migrated to the area from Durham, England in April of 1879. He brought along only his 7-year-old son, Ruth's grandfather.



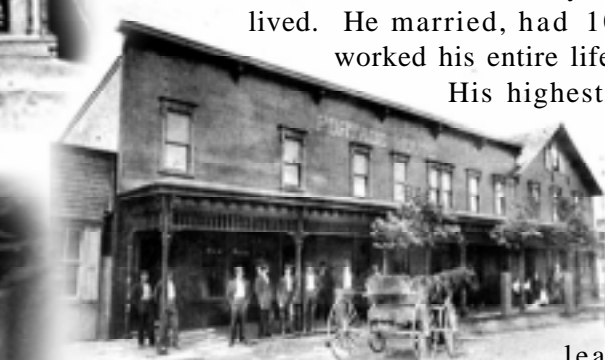
Keystone Hotel 1913



Waldorf Hotel 1910



Nidetch Building 30s



Anderson House 1890

Robert Sease spent a great deal of time searching through his albums and documents to find information about the Portage hotels. Just when we thought he was finished, he came up with more. Do you know of any others?



Spring Hill Hotel 1913

Portage Area Historical Society Board

Regis Huschak - President Ruth Richardson - Vice President
John Havrilla - Treasurer Mary Kostan - Recording Secretary
Irene Huschak - Corresponding Secretary
Mary Lou George, Barbara Havrilla, Betty Cann, Ginny McDonnell,
Linda Miko, and Charles Edwards
Newsletter by Irene Huschak

**Share your memories, photos, and
memorabilia with us and we'll share them with
the community**

Carol Paterick, PAHS Web Master redid the Portage Station Museum web site with an emphasis on the new train layout. Visit our Website at
www.portagestationmuseum.org

Museum hours: 12 pm to 5 pm - Wednesday through Saturday

2008 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Your membership is important to us, so if you have not already done so, renew your membership for 2008

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Amount Enclosed: _____

Mark the category you prefer.

() Annual Member \$6.00 () Life Member \$50.00 () Student Member \$2.00

() Life Sponsor \$100.00 () Life Benefactor \$250.00

Make all checks payable to: **Portage Area Historical Society, 400 Lee Street, Portage, PA 15946**

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