

The *Portage Area Historical Society*
Newsletter



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P. O. Box 45 Portage, PA 15946

October 2008

For the first three weeks in June something new and unusual could be seen at the Portage Station Museum. Tables full of items donated by the generous people of the community for the historical society's participation in the **Great Portage Yard Sale** filled the room and covered the display cases. The first floor of the museum was packed wall to wall. The results were amazing, and it was the most successful sale the museum has ever had.

June 21, the day of the community yard sale, proved to be a great day all around, as the weather was perfect, sunny and not too hot. Shoppers came from as far away as Maryland and Ohio to find bargains at the more than 100 participating sites. The community was busy all day with traffic jams a common occurrence. The Winterfest committee was most pleased with the tremendous numbers of Christmas items donated for their fundraiser. They were also pleased with the number of shoppers and with the success of their Chinese auctions. Thanks everyone, what a day!

Labor and Industry Demands

The repairs and renovations required by the state Department of Labor and Industry are still being done. Dozens of projects are finished, including crash doors, new lights, railings on the outside steps, a sprinkler system, and a sump pump, to mention a few.

A new hallway was built on the second floor, walls around the furnace area are in the construction phase, and fire glass is being put in the windows. All of the work is focused on fire prevention and safety. Immediate action was necessary for the

museum doors to stay open. Without time to write for grant money, repair costs were taken from museum savings. These unexpected expenditures have strained the society's finances tremendously. Donations of any amount would be greatly appreciated so that the PAHS can continue to provide programs for the school and community.



The Mini-Mall was the site of several tables including a large sale by the Portage Majorettes

Rummage Sale:
25¢ /item or \$2 a bag



Rummage Sale

Challenged by the cost of the repairs and renovations required by the state, the Historical Society agreed that another fundraiser of some kind was a necessity. So, following the yard sale, we tried a rummage sale. Yard sale participants were asked to drop off unsold items at the Church of God on Hammers Street, and they seemed most pleased to do so. Tim Price said, "We boxed it and dropped it off. It was great to finish the sale so quickly and not have to travel to a Thrift Store in another town."

Historical Society members then teamed with Church of God parishioners to organize the mountains of bags and boxes that filled the church hall and basement. Following a week of hard work, the doors opened to hundreds of shoppers who delighted in the amount of items on sale. It was a gamble we took, but the efforts proved to be most profitable. Although this was to be a one-time endeavor, plans are already underway for next year's sale.

Football Stadium Collectible

The Portage Area Football Stadium is the Hometowne Collectibles item for 2008. Requested by more than 60 percent of the public in last year's survey, sales have been excellent thus far. On the back of the wooden form can be found this information: "In 1911 the first Portage Borough football team was organized and coached by Mr. B. N. Palmer. Games were played at Redman's Grove, a popular picnic and social area on lower Caldwell Avenue. In 1937 the school board acquired the

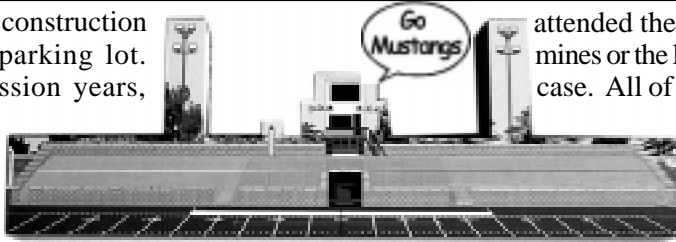


Paul Maul installing a fire glass window



Visitor Margie Sitar Wood, Victor, NY stands in front of the new second floor hallway

property and began construction of a stadium and parking lot. These were Depression years, and in 1939 the Workers Progress Administration had 50 workers, using the natural stone



from the area, begin construction. Cement bleachers were installed to seat 5,200 fans. Completion was in 1942. With the combining of Portage Borough and Portage Township schools it is now the Portage Area stadium. It is considered one of the nicest in the area and stands as a symbol of Portage pride and spirit.” The stadium collectible can be purchased at the museum, the Portage Library, and online at WWW.PortageStationMuseum.org.

Emails From our Web Site:

Michelle Cutler - Milltown, N.J.

It was great to see the items in the museum, including the trains upstairs, and I enjoyed the old coal mining gear, coming from a local coal mining family, first in Martindale, then to Prospect Street in Portage.

I'm attaching a 1942 photo of Martindale, I believe it was called "Main Road" at that time, today it's called Storm Street.



Martindale's Main Road 1942

John and Joseph Soroka, I think in front of Lukasavich's Store located at 710 Prospect Street



When my family lived there the houses didn't have numbers. I believe their house was behind the person who took that photo.

There is actually a story behind this photo, so here's a bit of history: When my great grandmother, Rose Soroka, arrived in the U.S., her destination was Puritan, Pa., to meet her husband, John, who had gone ahead of her. She was bringing their son, Charles, who was born in Lithuania. Their next seven children were born in Martindale, their ninth child was born on Johnson Avenue.

If my memory serves me correct, they were born at home assisted by Mrs. Markevich, who was midwife, friend of the family, and resident of Martindale. All but the youngest child

attended the Salt Block school until they went to work in the mines or the local silk mill, the fourth grade in my Grandmother's case. All of the children eventually left the area to find better jobs. Rose had married a second time to John Kusene who was later killed in the Sonman Mine Explosion, and she stayed right on Prospect Street in Portage until her death on May 25, 1942. All of the children came back to Portage

when their mother was dying. Vito, the youngest, arrived a day too late because he was serving overseas. All of the brothers and sisters stayed in town for a few days, went all over Portage and back to Martindale to check out their old haunts, see old friends, etc., taking lots of pictures while they were all together. In fact, it was the last time they were all in the Portage area together. The pictures are very special to my family.

Many of us met in Portage this past May 24 to lay Vito to rest, the last of those Soroka children. He died nearly 66 years to the day that Rose Soroka passed. All but four of those kids are buried in the family plot at Sacred Heart Cemetery with my great-grandparents.

While in the area in May, the whole family drove over to Martindale and we tried to use those photographs from 1942 to figure out where the houses were located and where the Soroka kids were taking these pictures in 1942. It was very interesting to all of us — this is what it looked like, this is where they were born, where they played and went to school.

I just took my second trip out there this year to do some research. Before that I had been to Portage once, about 18 years ago. I'll be back in the spring to continue to search for clues about my family and their life in the Portage area.

Mike Toth - Harrisburg, PA

I have recently re-discovered your revised web site, and let me complement you how nice it is and how easy it is to use. I do have a question, however, on the February 2008 newsletter.

In the article entitled "Why So Many Hotels?" one hotel was identified as "Pop Hotel/West End." Since I was reading on a computer monitor, I could not easily discern the site of the hotel. Was this the hotel formerly located at 1000 Caldwell Ave., on the northwest corner of Caldwell Avenue and Blair Street? If so, I have a few comments. First, the correct spelling should be Popp, after John Popp, one of the early owners. Second, the identified picture is probably not the Popp/West End Hotel as it bears little resemblance to the building that was actually there. I know this because my parents were the last people to operate the West End Hotel. In fact, here are



some additional facts as I remember them. These are in addition to the information on page 182 of Portrait of a Town.

During the 1950s, The West End Hotel was also known as "Colonel's." In 1966, Butch and Peg Toth purchased it from the Pinkshaw estate after the death of Irene Pinkshaw. Because of Butch's failing health, they closed The West End Hotel in the early 1970s. Shortly after, Ed Kline bought the empty building and a fire resulted in the building being razed.

Memorial Plaque

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 \$1,000. Two names recently added to the board are **Paul A. Leap** and **Samuel M. Abbott**.

Donations - 2008

Donations to the museum this year have been most exciting, with everything from old sports banners and uniforms to railroad and historical memorabilia. All items donated have been put on display on the first floor of the museum. Stop by and check out



Know anything about the Portage school colors? We'd love to hear from you.

Bob and Barbara Yetzko will become a permanent display and other Mountain House items have been taken out of storage and set up on and around the table. If anyone has anything original to the Mountain House, we certainly would love to display your items.

Also on display, Arnie Calaba's manuscript with thank-you letters from Presidents Bush and Reagan.

One of Arnie's poems:

Down under

The world of the coal miner has much dampness,
Also dust / dirt and can be hazardous,
For the risk of injury / explosion can be constant,
While earning their living down under – employment.

And it takes that certain kind of man,
To endure the rigors of the coal mine – a cloistered clan,
For our U.S.A. needs that required mineral,
To sustain the economic life chain – industrial.

"Ghost Busters"

For years rumors have surfaced about noises, shadows, and apparitions heard and seen at the museum. So when a paranormal team approached the board about investigating these supernatural activities, board members jumped at the chance to find the truth behind the rumors. On August 29, six SPLAT (Southwestern PA League of Apparition Technologists) members spent



The SPLAT team: Jason Thornton, Davey Debevits, Todd Sutt, Tony Muscatello, Wally Hutsky, (sitting) Jamie Muscatello

the night at the museum. Armed with a van load of high-tech equipment, they covered the windows, locked the doors and went to work. Their night of listening, watching, investigating, and recording, was followed by weeks of data review. Their findings confirmed that *no one* else can be found at the museum besides the frequent visitors who walk through the doors. Thank you SPLAT for your time, dedication, and expertise in helping to find the truth about "our ghost."

Visitors - in just one week!

Our little museum has become quite "the place" to visit! On Sept. 17, Bill and Christine Heeks from Hicton, N.Y. stopped by to check out our train station. A life-long train engineer, Bill's train cars carry salt from the New York salt mines to the rest of the state. Within a few minutes, Bob and Joyce Miller from Vinco joined them. Bob, a retired U.S. Steel worker shared many interesting stories as he surveyed the displays. He remembered as a child he and his father going to Ehrenfeld to sell chickens to the miners. They did it secretly at night because most miners were tied to the company store and were not permitted to buy elsewhere. Bob sang a few lines from Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons" – I owe my soul to the company store. He also saw small pliers in our medical display and remembered at age 12 when his father used a pair just like them to pull a molar that was causing him pain! Next visitors, Bob and Marilyn Killian, from Boyne Falls, MI. Both retired teachers, they were following the path of the Allegheny Portage Railroad. Thursday brought a group of senior citizens from the Church of God in



Bob & Joyce Miller - Bill & Christine Heeks

Altoona. Friday's local traffic was complimented by visitors from Middletown, NY, Bellwood and Altoona. Saturday of course, always brings

Bob Killian knew all about the rail carrier in the ticket office.



in the Miniature Train traffic. It's amazing to see people from all over the country in our Portage Station Museum!

Changes in Personnel

In September the PAHS accepted the resignation of **Linda Miko**. Thank you Linda for your service to the organization. We valued your opinions, loved your baked goods, and appreciated your involvement with all of our projects. You will be missed.

In June, our devoted museum worker, **Frances Berzinsky**, moved on. Frances came to

us through the National Council on the Aging's Senior Community Service and Employment Program. Although not originally from Portage, Frances read every document, book, and article in the museum to inform herself about the area. She loved sharing her knowledge with visitors and she took great pride in keeping the museum neat and tidy. Frances, thanks for your years of service. The board and so many of our visitors sure do miss you.

We welcome **Joanne Slebodnik** as our new museum worker. Joanne is a native of Portage and easily moved right into the position. She enjoys all of the visitors, especially the youngsters who come to see the trains. We welcome Joanne and feel most fortunate to have her with us.

We also welcome two new members to the board. Born and raised in Portage, **Gloria Jean Yarosh Perry** attended PAHS

and graduated in 1964. She entered the work force as a federal employee and worked for the Navy's bureau of personnel in Arlington, Va. While raising a family, she was a den mother and worked in the concession stand at Little League baseball games. Jeannie then worked in Country Manor Rest Home in Ebensburg. She furthered her education and received certification as a medical secretary and medical transcriber. Jeannie then moved to New Jersey where she was employed at St. Elizabeth Hospital. For the past 13 years, she displayed and sold handcrafted items at various craft shows in the area. In 2005, she was elected chairperson of the Family Readiness Group of the Armory located on Walters Avenue, Johnstown, where she organized two homecomings for our troops and organized a memorial service for a fallen soldier. Jeannie is also treasurer for the Ladies Auxiliary, Benscreek Social Club.

Rosemary Burda Pfeilstucker has lived in the Portage area her whole life and wouldn't have it any other way. She is a 1973 graduate of Portage Area, and received her Bachelor of Science degree in accounting from St. Francis University in 1995. Her career highlights include serving as bookstore manager at St. Francis and her work as an accountant for L. Robert Kimball & Associates, Inc., Ebensburg. Rose married her high school sweetheart, Pat Pfeilstucker in 1976 and they have enjoyed being involved in the lives of their 29 nieces and nephews, and are very proud of each and everyone of them. Even now they enjoy spending as much time as they can with their 34 great nieces and nephews. In her spare time, Rose enjoys doing genealogy research, taking photographs and doing a variety of craft projects.

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, Charles Edwards, Jeannie Perry, Rose Pfeilstucker

Newsletter by Irene Huschak

2009 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name: _____ Phone _____

Address: _____

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

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

Museum hours: 12 pm to 5 pm - Wednesday through Saturday - Visit our Website @ www.portagestationmuseum.org

