

The
Portage Area Historical Society
Newsletter



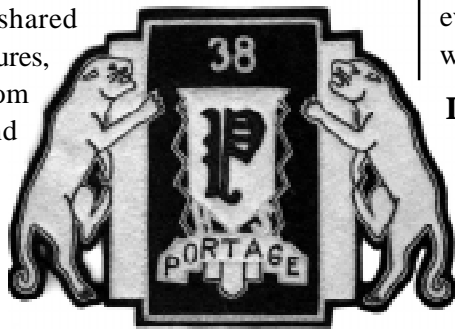
814-736-9223

P. O. Box 45 Portage, PA 15946

June 2009

The first floor displays for 2009 are all school related.

Mrs. Stella Jenkins shared her collection of school pictures, every class she taught from 1933 to 1974. The second display centers around sports banners, emblems, and uniforms dating back to the 1930s. Most were donated by Tom and Mary Lou Giles, Marie Johnston,



Pauline's 1938 blue & gold emblem

and Bill Belovsky, but several are from the estate of Pauline Gigliello (on loan from Earl Sease). Research done by several his-

torical society members found that until 1948, the Boro and Township were two separate schools that used class colors for their sports banners. In 1948, with the jointure of the two schools, green and white became the standard school colors and the Mustang the school mascot.

Community Yard Sale

Don't forget the big community yard sale coming on June 13th. We are now accepting donations of items that we can sell at the museum for our yard sale. Also coming June 18-20, our big rummage sale. We would appreciate any volunteers who might have some time to help setup for this event. Call 736-8679.

A Paranormal Fundraiser!

They filled the museum and some had to be turned away. Such was the number of people interested in the presentation done by SPLAT Investigations on March 15. The nonprofit organization headed by Jason Thornton volunteered its services

to the Portage Historical Society for a unique fundraiser. Though the group, which includes Thornton, Walter Hutsky, and Jamie and Anthony Muscatello, found nothing during its search for the paranormal at the museum last



year, many people in the audience had unsettling supernatural events that they wanted to talk about. The interaction was wonderful and the presentation ever so interesting!

Ladies Spring Tea

After only three years, the popularity of the Ladies Spring Tea has grown so much that the event was sold-out without advertising. We also had many volunteers who helped with baked goods and donations. Three courses were served by historical society ladies dressed in 1800s-period clothing. They served scones with jellies and butters, five tea sandwiches, and a wonderful selection of candies and pastries, along with a variety of teas. Edna Cook entertained the group with a humorous monologue. Many thanks to everyone who helped make this event such a great

success.



Miniature Mainline

The model train display continues to be a big draw for the museum. Not only are model train enthusiasts coming from around the country, but several local families with young children come on a regular basis. Charles Edwards has been working diligently to perfect the setup as a national model train magazine has offered to do a story on the display. Al Moore, who makes the miniature buildings, and artist Frank Serbian continue to contribute to and perfect the layout. Charles also runs a model train club that meets on Tuesday evenings at 6 p.m.

Museum Worker

For the last several years we have been fortunate to be a training site for the Senior Community Service Employment Program. Through the program, a person works at the museum 20 hours a week for one year. This past year Joanne Slebodnik has done an outstanding job greeting visitors, documenting donations, helping with programs, and doing anything needed to keep the doors of the museum open. SCSEP does find employment for those who complete their year of training.

But now we need to find someone for the coming year. To qualify for the program, an individual must be 55 years or older with a minimum income. If interested, call 736-8679.

Collectible

After many requests and years of searching, Gregg Bandzuh found and sent us a clear, front view picture of the Jones News Agency. It's not the older view with the neon sign, but the newer version, much as it looks today. The beautiful wooden collectible is now on sale for \$16 at both the museum and the library. It can also be purchased through our web site. If you have an idea for next year's collectible, let us know.



School Projects

For many years the Portage Area Historical Society has worked with the Portage Area School District initiating programs to teach students about the rich history of their town. Following are some of those projects.

Grade 2: Each year the second graders do a walking tour of Portage. Several years ago the historical society added a "Then and Now" activity to their experience. Before students begin their walk, they are introduced to a series of poster-sized pictures showing places they will visit and what those places once were. Caddy's was at one time the Trout Run Supply Store, the Mainline Bank parking lot was the Rivoli Theater, and Beck's parking lot the site of Portage's first church. Accompanying information tells students that the original Lutheran Church building was moved down the road and now stands across from Sassy Sisters (where they stop for lunch), the original bell in the steeple still works. This year we added the Rotary / Senior Citizen Center. The write-up is

"When you visit the Senior Center, you will be standing in a portion of the old Pringle Opera House (a place for plays and entertainment) that once stood to the left of the school on Caldwell Avenue. It was moved behind the school and used for classrooms, then moved again to its present location."

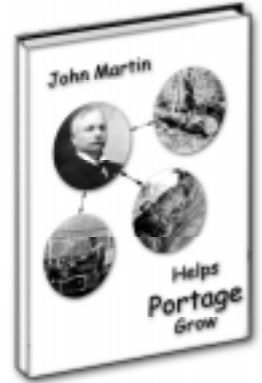


Third grade winners receive a Mountain House Hotel collectible

Grade 3: These students learn about the hotels that Portage once had along with some other local history. They are given a black and white picture of the mural painted on the building next to the Museum. As they color the picture, their

teachers tell them why Portage had so many hotels, placing specific emphasis on the Mountain House Hotel and the Keystone Hotel. Students finish by sharing this information with family and friends, then writing a short essay about what they have learned. Their stories are always delightful!

Grade 4: Several years ago Jean Crichton sent the historical society a copy of a book she wrote about her father, Andrew Crichton. She began her book by talking about Portage's rapid growth, ignited by the coal and lumber industries controlled by J. C. Martin. So impressive was her book that we asked her for permission to use parts of it as a teaching tool. So, with Jean's help, a story was written called, "John Martin helps Portage Grow." The story tells about an area rich in valuable lumber and coal, the Martin Branch of the railroad, and how Portage grew to a town of more than 16,000 people. Each year the story is read to students as they follow along in a book that they get to keep. Their follow-up assignment is to read the book to their parents.



Grade 5: With financial help from the Portage Rotary, all fifth graders visit the Station Museum where they



learn about the early days in Portage history and the importance of the railroad to our town. The Allegheny Portage Railroad is emphasized, using Barbara Yetsko's Washington House painting, the displays of canal boats and other models, a short video, and a trip up Route 53 and Plane Road where the canal boats were once transported. Students are also treated to a demonstration of the "Miniature Mainline." A fun teaching tool, it focuses on the influence the railroad had on Portage and the entire region.

Grade 1: This year the historical society focused on a project for first graders. At that age, history has little meaning, so finding a project to teach students about the history of their town

From 8th grader Melanie Duffy's interview with her grandfather My grandfather, Joseph Duffy, was in his 20s when he first used the Portage Railroad Station and rode the train. He said there were fast trains and local trains. The fast trains only went to the big cities and stopped in Johnstown and Altoona. The local trains went to the small towns and made stops in Gallitzin, Cresson, Lilly, Portage, Wilmore, Summerhill, South Fork, and Conemaugh...

took quite a bit of thought. We started last fall by having Mr. Jubina's 8th graders interview people who once used the railroad station and rode the trains. Their essays were sent to Ms. Dobrowolsky's 9th grade creative writing students who researched life in the late 1920s, when the train station first opened. Their stories needed to include small children go-

ing to the railroad station to buy tickets, going through the underpass to the waiting area, and then going somewhere by train. Everything needed to be historically accurate. Mrs. Bechel's home economics students, Nicole Ramus and James Stewart, made 1920's outfits for the youngsters to model. On May 26th, two stories were read to the first graders as classmates stood before them dressed as the characters in the books. Emily Canavan, Connor Price, Chelsea Moschgat, and Ian Swope braved the stares of classmates as they modeled their outfits and acted out their parts. The first story, **"My Sunday Clothes"** written by Victoria Kissell, Lindsey Jubina, and Taylor Barton was read using props like the round metal bath tub that the entire family might have bathed in. The second story of a little girl who got on the **"Wrong Train,"** written by Katilyn Dividock, Ashley Crum, and Sam Costo, held the students' attention throughout the reading! We are presently working on getting these two stories illustrated then published so future first graders can also enjoy and learn from them.

Parental involvement is an important part of each of the school projects. One write-up of special interest came from Linda Miko, grandmother of third grader, Lucas Miko. This is what Linda wrote:

"One of my best memories of childhood was when the 'Human Fly' came to the Mountain House. The whole town was buzzing with excitement over the event. My mother wouldn't take me saying it was too dangerous to watch, but

my Uncle Tubby gave in to the whining of a little girl and took me. He sat me on top of a mailbox and I had a great view and was thrilled to see the 'Human Fly' buzz around the edge of the roof of the Mountain House on his motorcycle. The crowd shrieked in terror as he dared to get so close to the edge that we all thought he would surely fall to his death. Around and around he went to the delight of the huge crowd and he never fell off. I was so excited

to see all of this that I will never forget my Uncle Tubby for taking me."

Jack Stefanko, son of the former owner of the Mountain House Hotel, said the 'Human Fly' was brought to town in the early 50s as a fundraiser for the Portage Volunteer Fire Company. They passed around a hat to collect money. Would anyone have a picture of this big event?

During this same project, several questions arose about a mass grave. The following information was provided by Mary Lou George and Linda Miko, both of the Cemetery Association.

A mass grave is located in the center section of Prospect Cemetery. There are 108 people interred in the grave. Current records reveal only one name, as all records before mid 1919 were destroyed in a fire. (If you know someone buried in the grave, please contact the Cemetery Association). The only records before 1919 are available on tombstones. The grave was dug in response to the flu epidemic that swept through the area from September 1918 into February 1919.

World-wide, it claimed between 20-40 million lives. It seems as though every family had someone sick. Most graves were dug by hand. The grave diggers could not keep up with what was a daily demand for more graves, some dying of the virus themselves. There are several local cemeteries, including Prospect that have entire rows where people were buried in 1918 after falling victim to the outbreak of influenza. During this epidemic, the Mountain House Hotel served as a hospital.

The following interview with Tom Gaudlip appeared in the Tribune Democrat in May of 1998.

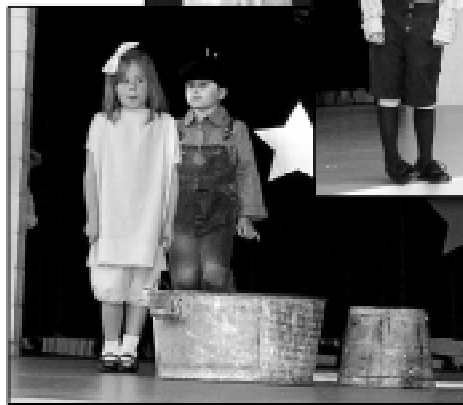
"In Portage, the four story Mountain House Hotel housed the most severe cases," Gaudlip said. "As close as we can figure,

A paragraph from "Wrong Train"

"Since you and Charlie have not finished your chores, you can finish them, then take a later train and join us at Aunt Betty's." I nodded my head and ran outside to find my brother. "Hey Charlie, did you hear what mother said?" I asked. He sighed and said, "Yes Anna, I have to milk the cows and you have to take the clothes off of the line and finish making the butter."

A paragraph from "My Sunday Clothes"

When it was our turn, I handed the man my quarter and he handed me three tickets. We left the railroad station and headed to the underpass. I raced Emily up the stairs to the waiting area.



"I climbed into the wash tub. Since I was the youngest, I always went last and had to carry the bath water outside when everyone was finished."

Visit our Website at
www.portagestationmuseum.org
 or www.portagepa.us

Carol Paterick, Web Master

there were 253 deaths in Portage alone. A mass grave means no funerals, no headstones, and no caskets. Bodies that were not claimed or were unknown were the ones dumped in the mass grave. There were cases when both parents died leaving as many as six children," he said. "These children had no resources to claim the bodies. The parents had to be buried in a paupers' grave."

Gaudlip continued, "Things were so bad during the day that bodies were wrapped in linen and stacked in an upstairs hallway to hide them from the public. Under the cover of dark-

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

ness, officials would load the bodies onto a buckboard and the horse-drawn wagon would

make its nightly trip to the cemetery. The bodies were thrown into the hole and covered with blankets. It was done in this fashion to avoid panic among the people. There were as many as six bodies a night tossed into the grave."

"Portage was under a federally ordered quarantine for six months. No schools or churches were open and the only reason a person could be in town was to get essential supplies," Gaudlip said. "If people were caught even talking to each other on the street, they faced penalties under the quarantine law. The epidemic was so bad that the town ran out of wooden caskets."

In 1998, members of the Portage Area Historical Society placed a monument in the cemetery that marks the mass grave and had a non-denominational ceremony to dedicate it to the victims of the flu. The marker is a podium-style marker with a dedication plaque on the top.



2009 Schedule of Events

June 13 - Community Yard Sale
June 18-20 - Rummage Sale
August 7-9 - Summerfest - PAHS Celebrates 25 Years
October 18 - Pennsylvania Humanities Council Program
December 12 - Winterfest

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, Rose Pfeilstucker

Newsletter by Irene Huschak

2009 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Your membership helps
keep our doors open

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

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