

The *Portage Area Historical Society*
Newsletter



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P. O. Box 45 Portage, PA 15946

June 2012

www.portagepa.us

Portage Bulldogs

Semi-Pro Football Team - 1920-1956



Acquisitions from Wally Kiel of Portage set the foundation for the feature story of our June newsletter. Wally, who once played for the Portage Bulldogs football team, researched, collected data, documented it all and donated his work along with some of his personal memorabilia to the museum. (Read in "Portrait of a Town" for more about the Bulldogs.)

If you think Portage is a football town today, back in the 20s and 30s it was even more so. Not only did we have two high school football teams, a Portage Township Red and Blue Dragons team and a Portage Borough Bulldogs team, but there were three semi-pro teams, the Quakers, the Light Olympics, and the Portage Bulldogs. Teams played at one of our many fields: Red Man's Grove – now the high school stadium, the Cinder Bowl, a field across the tracks from Lemam Machine Co., the Moose Field, behind the Conemaugh Health



Right: **The Moose Field was one of the finest fields in the area with a large grandstand.** Below: **Bulldogs pose at Moose Field. Munster Road runs behind them. Grandstand would be off to their left.**



Center on Route 53, the Jamestown Field, off of Front Street and the Little League Field at the Crichton McCormick Park.

Of course the most famous and long lasting of the three semi-pro teams was our famous Bulldogs. The team organized after WWI and played until 1956. Originally made up of players who worked full-time in the mines and steel mills, work schedules prevented the men from playing during the week so they played their games on Sundays. During their early years they played at the Moose Field. The 1938-40 season was sponsored by the UMWA and from 1946 until they disbanded, the team was sponsored by the Legion. For quite some time, proceeds from the games were used as fundraisers that benefited

Wally Kiel



1950

local organizations. Though they did not lose one game in their first eight years, the Bulldogs are probably most remembered for playing against the Pittsburgh Steelers (back then they were called the Pirates).

Wally Kiel is considered the local "expert" by anyone who says Bulldogs! His eyes just sparkle when he talks about football. Having been a star athlete in high school he states with pride that he played first

team center in the Western Conference and was honored as an All State Team player.

In 1941 Wally was working in East Pittsburgh and playing for the Trafford team. On an afternoon when Trafford had no game, Wally and a friend traveled to Portage to watch the Bulldogs. When they arrived at the field, Wally was asked to "jersey up" and play for Portage, which he did, for the first three-quarters of the game. In the beginning of the fourth quarter, an Altoona player was hurt and taken to the

hospital. Short one player, Altoona would have had to forfeit the game, but the Bulldogs sent Wally over to play the fourth quarter for the Altoona team. Some of the Bulldogs questioned whose decision it was to send one of the team's best players to the other side. That game got Wally started with our Bulldogs.

Wally has so many stories: When the

Bulldogs played at Osceola Mills, the temperature was below 0 degrees. At halftime they had no shelter, so Lou Sensy provided the team with a gallon of wine which they drank as they huddled against a fence.

During one game George "Polish Hall" Fetchkan caused a 15-yard penalty during the first play, a 15-yard penalty during the second play, and a 15-yard penalty during the third play. When asked what he thought he was doing, he said, "Just backing us up to give the other team a chance!"

After a St. Michael game where two players broke bones, Wally ran into the agent who insured the team. That agent said he would never insure the Bulldogs again, they were just too rough.



Wally said, "Back then there was no grass on the high school field, it was all dirt. Players would throw rocks off the field before games and firemen would hose it down so it wouldn't be so dusty."



Stop by the Station Museum to look at our new Bulldogs display. See some of the old sports ware and photos of the players who shared their stories.

On the way to a game in Cumberland, Md, the players stopped and jumped a farmer's fence to pick some apples. They laughed because Referee Izy Goldstein, who was older than the players, couldn't make it back over the fence. When they got to Cumberland, there was no team to play. The Portage business manager had messed up the dates.

Once when Wally was blocking, a fellow came through the line and hit him in the face so hard that Wally fell to the ground. As Wally came to his senses he found himself searching in the grass. When the referee asked what he was doing, he said, "Looking for my eye!"

A while back, Wally was at Benzels Pretzels in Altoona wearing the Bulldogs hat his family had made for him. A gentleman approached pointing to his hat and said that his father once played against the Portage Bulldogs. In 1932 the team rode the train from Altoona to Portage but didn't get paid their \$100 for playing the game. He said they had a heck of a time getting back home.

Wally usually played center and end tackle but filled in for any position, as did most of the other players. He says, "Today's football is just a push and shove game, not like the good old days."

Wally's wife Viola added, "I remember soaking bloody white football pants in the tub before rubbing them with peroxide to get out the stains. The players were so rough," Vi said. "Wally's clothes were always stained with grass and blood."

Bulldogs didn't like to wear their protective padding as most players thought it slowed them down.

Anthony (Tony) Mignogna, the oldest living member of the Portage Bulldogs, started playing with the team in 1939. Tony played the position of guard. He said the team practiced on the lot next to Sassy Sisters. Games were played in Jamestown and at the Moose Field. He remembers traveling to Rockview to play against the prisoners housed there. He says they were in good shape and beat the Bulldogs 6-0. Tony's team was the last to play against Altoona High and at that game he played against his cousin. Wally tells us it was a pleasure playing along side such a good friend and quiet gentleman.

Ed Layo played for the Bulldogs for ten years from 1946 to 1955. He joined the team when it reorganized after WWII; the team didn't play during the war. But he attended the games at the Moose Field and followed the team from the time he was seven as his

two older brothers, John and Joe, played for the Bulldogs. He remembers the large crowds that attended those games and that the bleachers were always packed. From 1938 to 40 the team was sponsored by the UMWA and played its games at the Jamestown baseball field. His brother Fred played for the Bulldogs during this period of time. When Ed started with the team, they played at the Little League Field at the Crichton McCormick Park then later moved to the high school football field, holding practices behind the field. At first the team used the Moose for its locker room, but it only had one shower, so they moved to the Legion. Most of their games were played away and in the Pittsburgh area, Swickley, Shaler, Trafford, as the players got paid for away games – a whopping \$2 for some. Ed said that the most he ever got paid as a semi-pro player was \$17. The team carried an average of maybe 14 guys and since the team was always needing new players, fellows from the Air Force Base at Blue Knob occasionally joined the team. Ed remembered many of the players: Dr. Ester Cullen, Moxie Bryja, Ben Scipione, Ack Gentile, and so many more. WOW - what great memories!

Bob Yetsko played with the Bulldogs for almost five years, joining the team right out of high school and playing until he went to fight in the Korean War. Bob still remembers coaches Steese Brubaker and Les Lynch. He remembers playing the Bloomfield Rams and winning until the famous Johnny Unitas got on the field. Unitas monopolized the plays and the Bulldogs ended up losing that game. Bob says the team was rough and tough. When Tony Kiel got his teeth knocked out, Bulldogs player Berkebile lifted up the helmet of the fellow who hit Tony and knocked him flat. During one game Bob had his shoulder dislocated. Dr. Burkett just yanked it back into place. Once a group of fellows came down from St. Francis to try out for the team but ended up going home saying the Bulldogs were just way too rough. The last game Bob played was against the Johnstown Clippers. It was Thanksgiving Day and they played in snow up to their knees. When asked what position Bob played, he told us he started out as the kicker

On April 29th, the Historical Society catered to diners with an afternoon tea party. Dressed in Roaring Twenties fashions, Judy Smith, Barb Havrilla,

Pat Fedorko, and Irene Huschak, along with junior models Olivia Burk and Bella Single, modeled clothing from the 1920s.



Ladies' Spring Tea

with a glance back to the Roaring Twenties

then played tackle or fullback or whatever position they needed him to play.

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Carol Paterick
Web Master

Jerome Yetsko, Bob's younger brother, was on full football scholarship to St. Francis when the college president decided to discontinue football at the school. So after Jerome's sophomore year, while still attending college classes, he started to play with the Portage Bulldogs. He has the same great memories of the games and coaches as the others, but says he was "one of the quiet ones on the team." As soon as Jerome graduated from St. Francis, he was drafted and sent off to Korea, thus ending his Bulldogs career. In Korea, the U.S. Army put him on special duty for the purpose of playing and coaching for the 31st Infantry football team. A superior player, he was chosen to play on the Far East Football Team. Jerome received a letter from the Pittsburgh Steelers inviting him to try out for its team, but to his dismay, an ankle injury prevented him from going to that Steelers tryout.

Jerry Boucher from Indiana said he couldn't wait until he graduated from high school so he could join the Tomy Hawks, the semi-pro team in his area. He couldn't wait to play against the Bulldogs. He said, "The Bulldogs had a reputation for being really rough. They had an amazing kicker who consistently placed the ball the whole way down the field to the goal post." We later learned that kicker was Bob Yetsko. The year Jerry graduated high school the Bulldogs disbanded. Jerry laughed while saying, "It probably saved my life that I never got to play against them!"

So what about the Steelers? In 1933 the Pittsburgh Steelers came to the Moose Field in Portage for a pre-season exhibition game. The Moose Field back then was one of the finest fields in the area. Called the Pirates until 1942, the Pittsburgh team did its training at St. Francis College. The professional players were big at 210 to 215 lbs and the team had four former college All-Americans on its roster. Even at that, the Bulldogs played a good game.

The first half the game was played by "independent rules" where a player could only pass the ball if he were at least five yards behind the scrimmage line. The second half of the game was played by today's "professional rules" that let a player pass as long as he was behind the line of scrimmage. The size advantage and change of rules hurt the Bulldogs and they lost that game to the future Steelers at 35-14.



New Collectible

The 2012 collectible, the Waldorf Hotel, is now on sale at the Museum, the Portage Library and online at www.portagepa.us. Lost to a fire in February of 2012, this unusually shaped three-story building sat on the corner of Main Street and Caldwell Avenue for over 100 years.

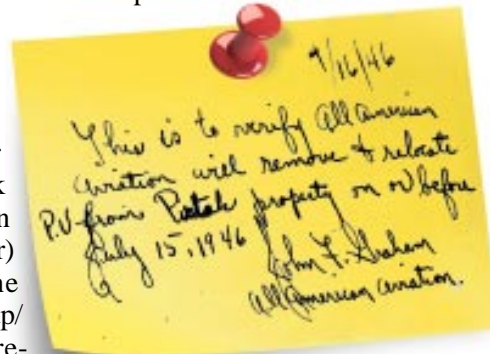


When Ron Mihalko from Sykesville, MD, stopped by for his 2012 collectible, he said, "So many buildings are gone from Portage that the collectibles will soon be the only way to remember our town."

From Our Readers

Jack Piatak Portage: "Thanks for alerting me concerning the possibility of my having some family connections in an article in the May 2011 newsletter. I found the following relatives in the photograph of the people "at the site of the US Airmail Pickup": 1st row

F. Piatak Grandfather - 2nd row F. Piatak father, A. Piatak Aunt Agnes. I also have an answer to the question/remark made by Betty Cann (May 2011 newsletter) as to how long the Springhill mail pickup/delivery lasted. I recently came across a memo from *All American Aviation* to my grand-parents dated 4/16/46. Looks like the airmail pickup/delivery was a five-year deal beginning 7/14/41 and ending on or before 7/15/46. Hope this tidbit of info adds to your historical files.



Visitors

On April 12, a bus from Brooklyn, NY touring PA stopped by the museum. The Catholic Adult Community (CAC) group was impressed with our little museum, especially the "Miniature Mainline" display. They were quite excited when the HO train went around the Horseshoe Curve and through the Gallitzin Tunnel since they had just come from visiting those sites. They were also thrilled to be so close to two passing trains as they watched from our platform.

Ed, Chris and Patrick Hyland from Kensington, MD stopped by the museum on their travels to different railroad locations throughout our area. The 3D mining display on the second floor initiated a conversation that brought about something to share with our readers. Almost 800 coal trucks a day travel through the intersection at Main Street heading to or returning from the Sonman mines. The coal is trucked in from many local mines and hauled out in Norfolk Southern hopper cars. Amfire Mines in Ehrenfeld and Indiana sends coal to be cleaned and then it is shipped off to China. From the Rox Mines in Somerset the coal goes off to Russia and from Rosebud Mines in Windber, it is shipped to Korea.



Rob and Diane West of Lansing, NY noticed right away that

the bricks in the road in front of the museum were an unusual shape. The road has a grade so the bricks were made with ridges for horses' hoofs to grab as they went up and down the slope.

Labor and Industry - Again

Labor and Industry once again hit us with a list of repairs, this time almost a thousand dollars in switches and vents. We ventilated our basement, a basement that has not needed ventilation for the last 90 years, and put a switch upstairs to shut off the furnace in case it malfunctions. In five years it has cost us almost \$17,000 to maintain our building.



Achsinnessink Rock

The Cambria County Historical Society has the Achsinnessink Rock on display at the Cambria County Museum. Board member David Huber brought it to our attention that a mark on the bottom of the rock resembling a flower has never been mentioned anywhere.

Many stories are coming in about Indian relics found in the area. If you have a story, please share it with us.

Chatter Box Fundraiser

During the 1st Birthday Celebration of the Chatter Box, owners Bob and Bonnie Fox set up a table for the Historical Society to sell Chatterbox T-shirts. All proceeds were donated to our organization. What a wonderful gesture and great fundraiser. Thank you Bob and Bonnie and congratulations on a successful first year.

Community Yard Sale

The 16th Annual Great Portage Community Yard Sale once again was a great success. As our biggest fundraiser, we are most appreciative of the ads taken out by local businesses and all of the yard sale participants. The event continues to be the largest in the area ending again with almost 120 sites.



Corey Niper holds one of the yard sale signs he made for the historical society for his high school senior project.

**We are looking for pictures of the old Ss. Peter and Paul Church.

2012 Scheduled Events:

August 10-12 - **Summerfest - Paintings, Jewelry, Etched glass, Woodworks**
by local artists **Jon & Kim Lassak**
September - **Annual Book Sale**

PAHS Board - Irene Huschak-*President/Education Coordinator*, Ruth Richardson-*Vice President*, John Havrilla-*Treasurer*, Mary Kostan-*Recording Secretary*, Barbara Havrilla-*Corresponding Secretary*, Mary Lou George-*Communications & Advertising*, Betty Cann (HM), Charles Edwards, Pat Fedorko and Judy Smith

*** Newsletter by Irene Huschak ***

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Only members receive newsletters

Name: _____ Phone _____

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() 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 4 pm - Tuesday through Saturday

Your memberships help keep our doors open