

The
Portage Area Historical Society
Newsletter



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P. O. Box 45 Portage, PA 15946

February 2010

“Best of Local Business” Award

This summer the Portage Area Historical Society received a letter of notification and a beautiful glass award from the US Commerce Association. The award, “Best of Local Business” recognizes outstanding local businesses throughout the country. Each year the USCA identifies companies that they believe have achieved exceptional marketing and success in their local community. The many things we do with the community were noticed through our web site at www.portagepa.us by the Commerce Association. Our newsletters, posted on the web site, added details about our events and activities and the many people who visit our museum. An interview with web master, Carol Paterick, followed. What an honor to be recognized!



Winterfest Activities

It was a difficult decision for the PAHS board to give up its annual Christmas Light Tour, but a financial necessity that we do so. This year we replaced the tour with a book sale and Christmas basket raffle. Thanks to a very supportive community, we collected and filled the entire first floor of the museum with thousands of books, CDs, DVDs, and tapes. Shoppers browsed the tables all three days of the Winterfest celebration and a “bag of books” sale ran through the following week. Kandy and GeeGee Chappell designed and donated three beautiful Christmas theme baskets that we raffled off. Sassy Sisters and Box Seat Video joined in the effort by selling tickets at their businesses. The two Winterfest activities certainly proved successful and brought in many first-time visitors to the museum. Many thanks to all for two very successful Winterfest activities!



Andrea Schad, 3, pulls winning tickets for (grandma) Carol Crichton, Christine Kuisick and Phyllis Deremer.

Christmas Tree at the Mainline

With no room at the museum for a Christmas tree, we headed off to the Mainline Bank and participated in the Winterfest tree competition. We decorated Betty Cann’s 1950s silver tree with vintage steam engine ornaments. Two steam engines circled the base of the tree while passing by vintage church buildings. PAHS collectible ornaments added color to the display. The theme of course: The Mainline.

A Big Thanks to the Community

With so many non-profit organizations struggling financially, some even closing their doors, the Portage Station Museum continues to operate thanks to the continued support of the Portage

Community. The 1925 football T-shirts, Jean Crichton’s book, the Christmas raffle baskets, and the many donations, including those for the furnace, the lottery tickets, the support for our fundraisers, and other items we requested, all went together to make a successful 2009. A special thanks of course goes to the Stager family for the continued use of their building.

Folk Art Train

The Historical Society recently received a unique piece of vintage folk art. A hand-carved steam engine, coal car, passenger car and caboose, measuring 10 feet in length, are now on display on the second floor of the Station Museum. It took years for the late Bert Donahue of Richland to carve this hard wood train patterned after an authentic B&O engine with cars. The engine on this train would have been built about 1914 and withdrawn from service in the mid 1920’s. The coal tender has PRR where the original would have



had PENNSYLVANIA. Upon Bert’s passing, the train was passed on to neighbors Tony and Ida Ardire. The Ardire’s proudly displayed the train for years. After the death of Tony, Ida moved into a smaller place and could not take the train with her. So, the family contacted several organizations and museums to find a new home for the large train setup. The Ardire family was pleased with our idea for a display and the train was sent to Portage. On the wall above the train hang two paintings done by local artists Naomi Stager and Frank Serbian. This trio certainly accents the theme of the Station Museum and the “Miniature Mainline” display.

Ed McDade

In October Ed McDade performed to a standing-room-only crowd with his presentation of “Singin’ on the Rails.” Ed told wonderful stories about the railroad and sang lots of songs, many that the audience sang along with like “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Ed played several instruments as he sang and educated his audience to railroad facts and myths. A great performance by Ed and a fun day at the museum!



Field Trip for Home-Schooled Children

On October 17 a group of Mennonite home-schooled children and their parents visited from Martinsburg to learn about the rail and coal industry in our area. They toured the museum, watched the video "63 Men Down" and learned about the railroads in our area with a demonstration of the "Miniature Mainline."

Digging for Treasure - Jean Crichton

In November Jean Crichton spoke at the museum about her recently published book "Digging for Treasure: Two Pioneer Coal Developers in Portage, Pennsylvania." Jean's book contains remarkable facts about the lumber and coal industries in our area. She explained her research methods; the personal interviews, old scrapbooks of her family and friends and how she investigated courthouse records. She relied heavily on numerous documents that her father wrote and collected throughout his career. She also elaborated on the information she found on the Internet. Following a question and answer session, Jean signed books for her audience. She generously donated 100 signed books to the Historical Society. These books can be purchased at the museum, the library, from our web site, or at jeancrichton@gmail.com.



Junior Engineer's Presentation

This fall Austin Rodgers, our junior train engineer, did his first solo presentation to a group of train enthusiasts from Altoona. Austin has been working with the trains since the beginning and

Famous singer Kate Smith was a semi-annual visitor to Portage. She came to have Dr. John Logan clean and check her teeth.

Save those books, CDs, tapes & DVDs for our next big book sale!

We are looking for a picture of one of Portage's many livery stables.

knows the layout well.

Visitors were most impressed with both the layout and Austin's presentation.

Sonman Mine Disaster-1907

If you live or have ever lived in the Portage area, you certainly know about the 1940 Sonman Mine Disaster. But 103 years ago, another disaster struck the Sonman Mine and the community. On August 23, 1907, five miners were killed in a freak cage accident.

Telling readers about the 1907 Sonman Mine disaster was the idea of Walter Prozialeck, certified instructor of Labor Department Mine Health and Safety. Walter says that mine safety laws were passed from the early 1820s through the present, but there was no law enforcement until 1952. The approach was "property rights ahead of human rights." Inspectors had to get permission to enter company property, their job solely to investigate fatalities.

And there were so many fatalities they could not keep up with them. If they did get permission to inspect a mine, they had no power of enforcement. Twenty cage accidents were recorded where five or more were killed. The first on August 10, 1870 killed nine, the second on August 29, 1870 killed seven. Sonman was the tenth. The last occurred on December 15, 1942.

And there were hundreds of cage failures with less than five fatalities. It's a shame there had to be so many cage accidents before measures were taken. Many changes occurred in the mining industry over the years, here are some:

1891: Laws covering mine ventilation and employment of children under the age of 12.

1920: Bureau of Mines established.

1941: After four separate explosions killing 257 miners, including the 63 at Sonman, the Coal Mine and Safety Act was established.

Walter Prozialeck will be at the Portage Station Museum during Summerfest weekend to speak to visitors interested in local mines and mine safety. His years of experience make him a most interesting individual to a community where mining was once so important. Please join us this August.

The two **Pennsylvania Grit** articles and the photo were sent to us via email by Liesa Helfer, Bloomfield Hills, MI. Here's what she wrote: "My great Uncle



To Investigate Disaster

Sonman Catastrophe One of the Most Unusual in Mining History

August 25, 1907

SONMAN AUGUST 23 - The families of the five men who were hurled to death down a 400-foot coal shaft at Sonman, last Saturday, have retained counsel and taken other expensive steps, with the idea of showing at the coroner's inquest, to be held at Johnstown Saturday evening, that the fatalities were due to gross criminal negligence. The entirely unexpected activity on the part of relatives is the culmination of a series of sensational developments which, since Monday have led Coroner Prothero from the belief that an inquest was unnecessary to the conviction that local public sentiment demanded it. Under the instructions from the county commissioners, the coroner is authorized to hold an inquest only when it is reported to him by some reputable person that either foul play or criminal negligence is suspected. The Sonman disaster was reported early last Saturday evening as "an accident," and the coroner decided at once that investigation was unnecessary. On Monday, William Curry, of Lilly, president of the local subdistrict of the United Mine Workers, came out with a statement in which he declared that, for the satisfaction of all concerned, responsibility

for the accident should be officially fixed. The coroner spent Monday night at Sonman examining the scene of the disaster and questioning witnesses. When he returned to Johnstown, Tuesday, he said he believed a public inquiry should be held, but could not act for lack of proper notification. District Attorney Leech took a vigorous hand in the muddle, Wednesday, and straightened things out by calling upon the coroner to investigate a spreading rumor of negligence. Thursday, Coroner Prothero's announcement was made of the action taken by relatives of the victims. The accident was one of the most appalling in the history of local mining. Eight employees of the Sonman Coal Company stood in the cage at the opening of the pit, waiting to be lowered to the coal. The signal was given. The engine started, but instead of lowering the cage, it shot the car upward to the tippie, automatically dumped it, and sent its human freight pitching down the shaft. John McCallister, Frank Ritchey, Russell Hollern, Adam Kunko, and Oscar Groke were killed. Three other men caught on the tippie and were saved. Engineer E. D. B. Holmes cannot explain how the mistake was made, and lies at his home prostrated with grief.

**Oscar J. Groke Killed
Young Law Student, Working in Mine, Fatally Injured**

August 25, 1907

Portage August 23 - The accompanying portrait is of Oscar J. Groke, one of the men who met a tragic death at the Sonman shaft, a short distance from Portage on Saturday morning, Aug. 17. The unfortunate young man was a son of Mr. And Mrs. G. H. R. Groke, and was reared in this town, where he was liked and respected by young and old. Mr. Groke was 22 years of age, a student at Dickinson Law School at Carlisle, and a member of the Sigma Chi fraternity. He was studying law as a profession and expected to return to school in a short-time. He was employed during a portion of his vacation in looking after some machinery about the mine, and was going on duty when he met his death. Mr. Groke was an enthusiastic football player and athlete, and was a fine specimen of physical manhood. After funeral services in the Lutheran church, the remains were buried in Prospect cemetery, on Monday morning. None of the mines in the locality worked on Monday, and the doors of business houses were closed a portion of the day, out of respect for the

dead men and their friends.



The Late Oscar J. Groke

Oscar had begged his father's permission to take one last outdoor summer job. In college he was very involved in sports, football, basketball, and baseball and loved being out of doors. He was studying law and the next summer would be required to work in a law office for practical experience, so this was his last chance to work outside. His father finally agreed. I cannot substantiate the following, other than to say it was passed down to me from my great Aunt Laura (only known as 'Tuts'). The story is that after Oscar's death my g'grandfather set to work and created a safety mechanism to prevent such an accident from ever happening in the future. He was told to patent it, but his response was an adamant 'NO.' He wanted the mechanism to be as cheap as possible so it would be used by every mining company, 'so that no other mother would have to go through the horrific grief my wife was suffering.' I was told the mechanism was still in use in the 1960s.

Sadly to say, the family lost another son, Alf, 11 years later during the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic. Family oral history is that he became ill as a result of daily delivering of food baskets to his employees and their families who were quarantined and could not go out to get groceries. A bit more information: Gustav and Alvena, nee Bruening were both German immigrants, coming to Portage about 1879. 'Gus' was the only Groke to emigrate, but most of Alvena's family including her parents emigrated to the Portage area."

Another Mom and Pop Store (No. 6)

Michael J. Toth of Harrisburg, PA, sent us this information: "I read in the online version of the February 2009 newsletter that you are looking for information on 'mom and pop' stores. So, I thought I would forward some information. My grandparents, Mike and Katie

Toth, ran a store on the northeast corner of Gillespie Avenue and Vine Street. In the picture, Mike is standing at the corner of the store and Katie is sitting at the entrance holding a young boy. The children in the picture are most likely their two sons, Joe (Butch) and Albert and the four Evanisko children, Ann, Julia, Michael and Mary, for whom my grandparents were guardians. The other adults are unidentified. Digital examination of the picture reveals that the signs in the window were of the National Recovery Act (NRA) Eagle, that places the picture between 1933 and 1935. Many items sold in the store were produced in their backyard (fruits, vegetables, eggs, and chickens) and they made and smoked their own sausage. Mike and Katie ran the store until Mike's death in 1937, after which Katie ran the store with the help of the children

until her death in 1961, when the store closed forever.

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

One of the interesting things about the Toth's store was that they delivered. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, they would load a truck and deliver groceries 'up the creek.' That is, they would deliver to the mining families in the settlements along Trout Run as far up as Martindale. Albert continued this practice until the closing of the store in 1961. The buildings have since been razed and the lot is now a part of the adjacent lot.

We emailed Mike to ask about the blurred figure on the bottom right of this very clear picture. Here's what he replied:

Congratulations, you found Uncle John! But I was hoping that you wouldn't, so now I need to tell you 'the rest of the story.' The picture is infamously known in the Toth family as 'The Ghost Picture.' Mike and Katie Toth had a third child, John, who died tragically at the age of 4-1/2. Some people in our family believe that it is the ghost of John in the picture. If you use the zoom feature on a computer, you can count the cans on the shelves inside the store. So when zooming in on the blur, enough 'human features' appear as not to dissuade some of my relatives."



Visit our Website at
or www.portagepa.us

Carol Paterick, Web Master

Want your graduating class to receive a complimentary copy of the newsletter, then send us your class roster.

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.

April is Ladies Tea Time! If you can help with plants, cookies, or sandwiches call 736-8010 or 9223.

Will Be Missed

We are saddened by the passing of Tom Wilson, Margery Orlowsky, and Chester Stager Jr. All three helped to make the museum a special place to visit. Tom was a knowledgeable historian, helped with displays, and volunteered as a greeter for many years. Margery was associate producer on the film "63 Men Down" and donated her painting titled "Never Sees Daylight" which shows a miner emerging from a coal mine. She assisted in painting the three first floor windows now blocked



Firewagon July 4th parade preparation P. Hershberger top left 1918

by the building next door. The paintings depict Portage as visitors might see if looking out those windows during the 1920s. It is through the generosity of Stager Enterprises, of which Chet was part owner, that the Historical Society was able to establish and then maintain the Portage Station Museum. Their memories remain with us in so many ways.

**1918 Flu Epidemic
Alfred Groke's
backyard at
621 Orchard St.**

Photos submitted
by Liesa Helfer



2010 Events Schedule (Tentative)

- Apr - Ladies Spring Tea Oct - Paranormal Investigators
- Jun - Community Yard Sale Nov - Annual Book Sale
- Aug - Summerfest - Mining Dec - SPLAT-Apparition Technologists

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

Due to the large number of newsletters we now send, anyone not paying a membership fee will be taken from the mailing roster.

2010 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

Your memberships help
keep our doors open

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

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