

The *Portage Area Historical Society*
Newsletter



814-736-9223

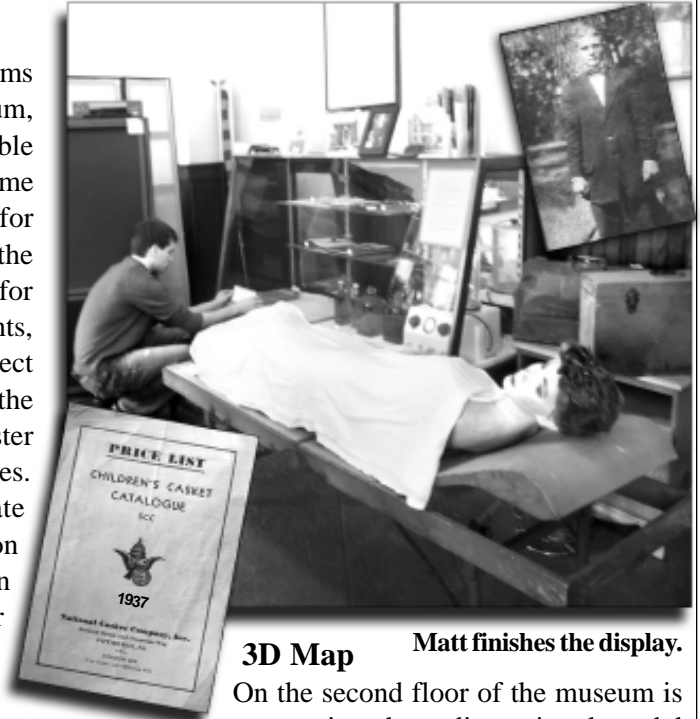
P. O. Box 45 Portage, PA 15946

May 2011

New Display

The new 2011 display, "Mortuary Memorabilia," features numerous items once used in funeral homes around our area. Upon entering the museum, visitors can not help but notice a body laying on an old embalming table (it's only a mannequin - the table is on loan from the Price Funeral Home in Meyersdale). This table folded into a lightweight carrying case for easy portability. Years ago embalming was done in the home of the deceased, as was the viewing and visitation. Also taken to the home for preparing the body would be the mortician's bag filled with instruments, the embalming machine, and embalming fluid bottles (used to collect drainage). Some other items in the display, a 1940s Neon sign from the Beck Funeral Home (now the Decort Funeral Home), a 1930s register book, prayer cards and vintage invoices from various supply companies.

Prior to being the Serenko Claar Funeral Home, this was the private residence and office of Dr. Buzzard. The display features information about Dr. Buzzard (who treated victims of the Waldorf Hotel train wreck) along with a pair of his glasses. We thank board member Matt Decort for collecting the items and setting up this unique display. Stop by the museum and check it out.



3D Map Matt finishes the display.

On the second floor of the museum is an amazing three-dimensional model that shows all of the mines that were once scattered throughout our area. This large display came about as a collaborative community effort, but Stanley Stovich was the backbone behind the project. Decades ago, Stanley began searching for mining maps that gave the exact locations of all of the mines in the Portage area. He worked for years in the basement of his home converting those two-dimensional maps into a three-dimensional display. Stanley collected evergreens from his back yard for the trees and worked diligently to create all of the little houses, the roads, telephones poles, railroad tracks, and of course the mines. During this time, Stanley's five-year old granddaughter, Courtney Jones, spent hours with her grandfather, watching as he built his display. Stanley let Courtney's little fingers put together trees by wrapping the evergreens around toothpicks. His friend, Walter Dutkosky, visited many times to help with the display. The large model was created in pieces then assembled and first put on display at the Portage National (now Mainline) Bank. It was later moved to the Portage Station Museum where it remains today.



Ladies Tea

For this year's Ladies Spring Tea, we added a "Colonial Touch." Ladies from the historical society wore period clothing and we treated our guests to some colonial treats: Cayenne Pepper Chocolate, candied nuts, hoof jello, sweetbreads, and smoked venison. Regis Huschak did a bit of reenacting as he told our guests about men's clothing and life back in the 1700s. A great time was had by all.



The display shows dozens of mines, including the 34 going “up the creek” through Miller Shaft, Redbird, Fiddler’s Green, Puritan, and Martindale. It is unbelievable that today only the Sonman Mine remains in operation. But even at Sonman, mining is no longer done, the site is used for cleaning and sorting coal brought from other areas. Stanley Stovich and all those involved documented an important part of our local

history and we are proud to display this 3D-model. It’s enjoyable to watch visitors search for their homes and other familiar areas on the map and to listen to their comments about our many mines.



This sign is on the bottom of the map: Map Model By: S. L. Stovich & Walter Dutkosky Map Topography: U.S.G.S. Quadrangles Mine Historians: John Kovach & John

Orlosky, Sponsors: Portage Rotary Club, Portage Women’s Club, Portage National Bank, & Damin Printing.

Kudos to John

Board member John Havrilla, working with three other UPI professors, recently completed a book titled *An Integrated Approach to Health Sciences, Second Edition*. The book contains chapters on anatomy and physiology, math, chemistry, and medical microbiology and is intended to be used by high school students interested in the allied health field. It took over a year and a half to complete the book which was printed in mid March 2011. In addition to writing the seven chemistry chapters, John developed a PowerPoint presentation and the test bank for the entire text.

Gerber’s Market (Mom & Pop Store#10)

Today the building is The Tire Shop, but for many years, Carl



Gerber operated a grocery store and butcher shop in the building on the corner of Main Street and Johnson Avenue. John Risko was the butcher there for many years. In the 1950s a small group composed of six families

rented a storeroom in the Gerber building. Under the direction of Rev. Cecil Cook, assistant pastor of the Maple Avenue Church of God in Johnstown, they held regular church services and Sunday school there. The group later built the Hammers Street Church of God.

A retired butcher (who did not work at Gerber’s) told us: Today they sometimes add water to our meats to up the price. Back then butchers occasionally put a thumb on the scale or stuck hamburger under the scale to add extra weight to the better cuts of meat.

June 11 - Great Portage Community Yard Sale

Not having a yard sale - donate those unwanted items to the historical society – 736-8679.

From Our Readers

Lots of feedback from the Bill Carpenter story and we thank you all. Here are a few of the comments:

I remember watching with other kids as they worked on Bill’s little house. I also remember that anytime I visited Bill, his radio was playing Gospel music. *Ray Rzeszut - Anchorage, Alaska*

Bill always had candy for us kids, a real treat back then. He once bought me a swimsuit. I still remember how excited I was. And my parents never worried about me being alone with Bill, something that would be unheard of today. *Shirley Batche Phillips - Portage*

Bill, who lived just down the alley from us, always had beautiful Madonna lilies growing in front of his little cottage. There were lots of kids in the neighborhood back then and from time to time we all ended up at Bill’s. After his passing, the little cottage remained for years, reminding us of him. *Ruby Chelednik Moore - Portage*

Before moving into his little house, Bill had a place at the bottom of Springhill in a building that once stood between NAPA and the Nazarene Church. I saw him there sometimes on my way to school. His last days were spent at the County Home (now Cambria Care Center). He sent me a letter from there. *Rita Timura Thornton - Portage*

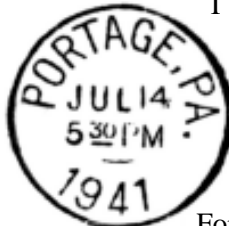
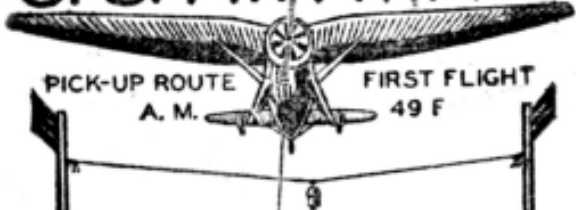
When **Walter “Wally” Kiel** was a youngster, his sister Florence (Frogatt) worked in the office of the Portage Railroad Station (our Station Museum). Wally often spent time at the station scampering around the building. He remembers once that Florence locked the door of the first floor office and could not find her key. Back then there were bars on our ticket window and people slid their hands under the bars to pay for and get their tickets. Florence pushed young Wally under those bars to get him into the office so he could open the door. Wally also remembers watching as the cargo was brought to the second floor of the station. He said, “When the train stopped at the station, they loaded a wagon with boxes, mailbags, and other commodities. The wagon was then pulled



across the tracks to the second floor of the railroad station where pick-ups and deliveries were handled. The museum office was once the office of the Railway Express.”

If you look at the back wall on the second floor today, you will see where that entrance way was covered.

U. S. AIR MAIL



Beginning on July 14, 1941, Portage was one of the first, if not the first, town of its size in the nation to have air mail pick-up. Airmail could be in Portage 22 hours after being post-marked from locations in California. The service lasted for five years, ending March 26, 1946. (for more information, read the full story in Portrait of a Town.) Here are some stories about that air mail pick-up:

Bob Yetsko grew up near the airmail pickup area and remembers it well. He says, “There was a high knoll on Springhill in an area right above where Maple Winds Care Center is today. Back then the Piatak farm house, barn, and other farm buildings were just across the road. There must have been a thousand people to watch that first mail pick-up. With cars parked everywhere, it was difficult to walk around. I remember the plane coming in slow and low. A large hook dropped from its bottom, snagged the rope that hung between two tall poles and picked up that outgoing mail. The plane then circled around dropping off incoming mail at the same location. One time during those first few pickups, the mail bag was not dropped soon enough and the pilot missed his target. That mail bag hit like a bullet and shot across the ground like a sled! In the beginning the mail pick-up was done twice a day and then reduced to just once a day. Back then this was such a big event that when people saw a plane of any kind, they often headed off to watch for a pick-up.

Growing up, **Betty Cann** lived in Portage on Cambria Street where she still resides in her family home. Betty related this story to us:

When I was a little girl, one of my favorite places to go was to watch the big plane pick up the airmail. My mother or brother would put me in our '37 Ford (yes, it had running boards) and we would go up a high hill, drive for miles, and then turn into a large field where there were two tall poles with a bag hanging between them. We would get out of the car and wait for the sound of an engine. As the plane neared the field, an opening would

appear on the bottom of that plane and a rope with a hook on the end would descend. The pilot would fly over the pole, hook the bag handle, and pull it into the opening. From the memory of a child, that’s how I recalled the event. In time, Springhill did not seem so high, the drive not so long, and I know now that the plane was not as big as my childish eyes saw it.

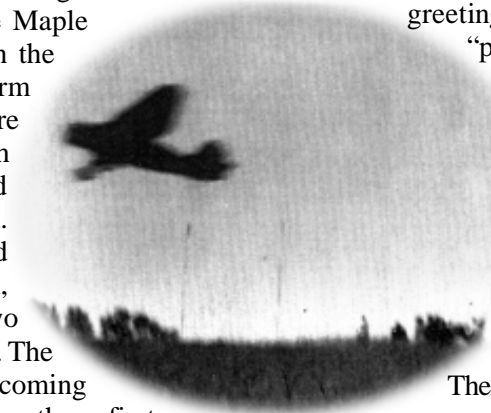
I do not remember how long the Springhill mail pick-up lasted. However long it was, I still marvel at the skill of the pilots who could aim a rope with a hook and latch onto a bag handle, and they did their job in our difficult Portage weather.

Louise Winder Yuntz of Richmond, VA lived in South Fork as a child. Louise emailed us this story:

When I was about five years old, my dad would put my mom, my sister, Jeanne and me into the car in the late afternoon and we would go to “watch the mail pickup” in Portage. Dad would drive through the rolling hills of Pennsylvania farm country to a hilltop near Portage. Our destination was a farm outside of town. We drove to a clearing across the road from a barn and outbuildings. Somewhere near that area we would pull our car off on one side of the road and park among the other cars. Some folks would get out of their cars and wander around greeting friends as they waited for the arrival of the “postal” car. Soon a car would pull up and one of the postal workers would get out with a nylon mail pouch. The pouch was loaded into the pick-up container and suspended from a rope. Then the serious waiting began.

It would get very quiet and our ears would strain to be the first to hear the sound of an airplane engine. Children were hushed and we waited for someone to shout, “I hear an airplane!” The engine noise would grow louder and louder as our eyes searched the skies for the first sighting of the plane.

Soon an aircraft would emerge out from a distance and approach the poles, rope, and container which hung high above the ground. A hook on the bottom of the plane snagged the rope and the container was lifted into the plane. Incoming mail



At that first pick-up: 1st row C. Walton, E. Green, James Ferguson, Dispatch editor, J. Ed Farren, assistant postmaster, Donald Shaffer, mail messenger, F. Piatak Sr. 2nd row: F. Piatak, Tom Madigan, fire chief, C. Himes, E. Bishop, James W. Nash, local postmaster directly responsible in obtaining this service for Portage, Rev. Habrowski, John Mayers, police chief, A. Piatak 3rd row: Frank McDonnell RD carrier, C. Tobin, M. Schettig, A. Schettig, G. Jones, A. Carney, unidentified.

Carol Paterick
Web master Visit our Website @
www.portagepa.us

was dropped into a similar container. We would then watch as the plane slowly diminished in size as it sped off

in the distance. As the sound faded, someone started a car, and then one after another, we would all pull away.

Louise's maternal grandparents, Alonzo Shaw and Ellen (Anderson) Shaw, lived all their lives in Portage. Their first home was above the old 5 & 10 Cent Store on Main Street and later they lived just off Main on Mountain Avenue. Louise's parents were Willard and Ruth (Shaw) Winder. When they moved to Portage in 1965 they lived above Abe Anis' Store. They later moved to Gillespie Avenue where they lived until Louise's Mom died in 1998.

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 new memorial plaques have been posted for **Anna B. Rzeszut** and **David L. Kriss**.

Special thanks to local historian, **Mr. Robert Sease**, for all of the photos and information he has collected over the years and shared with the community. Every newsletter has had photos provided by Bob (including the airmail pick-up photos). The historical society uses him as a resource for information and he assisted with photos for last fall's "Our Town" video. Bob has been invaluable in helping preserve the history of Portage.

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

1936 Flood

This past March marked the the 75th anniversary of the 1936 flood. We all know of the devastation in the Johnstown area, but the '36 flood took its toll in our area, too. Thanks to Jason Richardson for sharing these pictures with us. (More '36 flood photos in *Portrait of a Town*)



2011 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 - Tuesday through Saturday

Your memberships help
keep our doors open

U.S. POSTAGE PAID
Permit No. 2
NON-PROFIT ORG.
Standard Mail
Portage, PA