

The **Portage Area Historical Society**
Newsletter



814-736-9223

P. O. Box 45 Portage, PA 15946

www.portagepa.us

March 2013

The establishment of Portage began in the early 1830s with the building of the Allegheny Portage Railroad across the Allegheny Mountains. The headquarters for that operation was located just below the present site of Stagers Wrecking Company. Our hills, rich with timber, provided fuel for the locomotives and our first industry began. Later the discovery of coal created many jobs and brought people here from all over the world. Back then coal was black gold, and we had just what the nation needed for its then growing industrial revolution. Over the years nearly 60 different shaft, longwall, slope, drift, room and pillar mines operated in the Portage Area.

Steve Gavlak of Portage recently donated some wonderful mining documentation to the historical society, pages of notes written by his long-time friend **John Kovach**, now deceased. Steve, a miner himself, worked for 22 years in several mines in the area. He lost his brother Joe in the Sonman Mine Explosion, working there himself for the last eight years before the mine closed.

Steve told us that John Kovach (John's story in the next newsletter) thought someone should document our local mining history and decided to take on the task himself. Beginning in April of 1995 until his death in 1998, John wrote about our local mines, drew dozens of illustrations and collected photos. Each time he finished a page, he would give a copy to Steve. The following is taken from John Kovach's hand written notes:

During World War I almost all miners walked to work. It was dark at 5 and 6 a.m. in the winter months, so miners would light up their carbide lamps at home and head off to work. The miners from Springhill had special narrow pathways down the steep hill through the woods behind the Fiddler's Green Tavern (now RD's Tavern). The miners from Dutch Settlement walked down the hollow



July 1951 - Puritan Toilers

behind the tavern. Some miners from Martindale took short cuts through the woods going to Sonman, Benscreek and Shoemaker Mines. Streams of lights went towards all of the mines. It was a real spectacle to see the thousands of carbide miners' lamps all lit and slowly moving through the darkness.

During World War I more than 2000 men worked in one of the 34 mines "up the creek." "Up the creek" was from Blue Bird to Puritan. At starting time and quitting time there were crowds of men going to and from those mines.

Most of the hillsides near the mines were bare of trees and had little vegetation. Sparks from the steam engines and steam boilers caused fires and the toxic fumes from the smokestacks destroyed much of the vegetation. Larger trees could be seen only on the hilltops.

Miners were told to empty their carbide lamps at the mine before going home. If they forgot and emptied their lamps near their houses, their chickens would eat the carbide and die.

A steam whistle blew each evening to let miners know if there was work the next day. All of the mines had their own steam whistles. At six o'clock each evening the miners would go to a quiet area and listen for the whistles - i.e. one long blast, one short and one long or maybe two short. When my older

Miners getting food at the United Mine Workers Union Hall on Springhill. Mines did not work for almost two years. ca. 1929
 Arrow on John Petney, Sr.

Our Coal Mines



brother Joe was working in the Benscreek Mine I would stand with him in our alley in Puritan at 6 p.m. to listen for the whistles. After five or six whistles from the various mines, he knew which was coming from the Benscreek Mine and if he had work the next day.

During the Sonman Slope Mine explosion, the boiler man blew the steam whistle for a long time. When the people of Portage heard it, they knew something was wrong and went running to the mine.

During the great depression three coal miners from Martindale, William Discavage, James McCabe, and John Smetana, worked together at the Fiddler's Green No. 2 Mine. The mine worked one day in two weeks. On that day the men worked as buddies loading coal. With the buddy system they shared expenses and divided coal tonnage. When the three men arrived at the room where they worked, they were surprised to see the ground heaved up and the mine too low for the mine cars and mules to enter. So they tore up the tracks, dug up the bottom for a distance of 30 to 40 feet, then laid the tracks back down. This was called dead work; it was hard work, and the men got no pay for doing it. They ended up staying in the mine two extra hours and missed the man trip, their ride, and had to walk out of the mine. Of the three cars of coal they loaded that day only one car made it outside to the tipple. The other two remained in the mine for the next pay period. Their car of coal weighted exactly one ton for which they were paid 45¢. For all that hard work the three men made only 15¢ each for that two week pay period.

When a man got a job at a coal mine he was given a handful of brass checks, all the same number. That number he kept as long as he worked at the same mine. He put one brass check on each car of coal that he loaded. Each mine car had a nail for the check at the same location. Whenever a car of coal arrived at the tipple, it was weighed and dumped. The check-weigh-man and the tipple crew knew who loaded the car because of the number on the check. In the center of each tipple were picking tables where men called boney pickers would search through the coal for impurities. If they found slate, binder, rooster, machine cuttings or other debris, it was stored in a special wooded box. The box was then displayed at the tipple and the miner told to only load clean coal. If it happened again he was given a day off. This scene took place at all of the mines.

Double doors built in mines kept clean air in the areas where the miners worked. During and prior to WWI coal companies hired young boys ages 12 and 13 to open and close these doors. The boys were called trappers or trapper boys. With the enactment of child labor laws the mines could no longer employ the young boys.

All of the mines had sand delivered to them by gondola cars. The white sand was shipped into Cambria County from somewhere in Somerset County. It had a special hard grit. Railroad men parked the gondola car along side the mine's sand house. The sand house

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

had lots of windows facing the sand car. Mine employees would shovel 40-50 tons of sand into the building through the windows. On idle days, days that a mine was not working, the sand house was a scene of much activity. Boys and girls, ages 5-12 would spend hours playing in the giant 12' by 35' sand box. They enjoyed themselves to the fullest.



Coal companies had their hay, straw and oats delivered by railroad boxcars. The Trout Run Supply Co. (site of Caddy's on Main Street) and the Red Star Store in Puritan would have their supplies delivered the same way. The wooden boxcars delivered not only the supplies, but roaches, too. The cracks and crevices in the wooden box cars were always filled with roaches. They were brought in from far away places. During the night they would crawl out of the boxcars and invade the area. In those days many of the houses in coal country were plagued with roaches.

Every mine had a powder house located a far distance from the other mine buildings. The building held black powder, dynamite, electrical caps, and squibs. All of the coal mines, even the smallest ones also had their own mule barn, tipple, scale house, blacksmith shop, supply house, boiler house, sand house and oil house.

It was the practice of all miners to holler "fire" in the moments before blasting with dynamite or black powder. In the larger mines "shot fire" men were hired to drill all the holes, blast either the coal or rock and prepare the place before the miners came into the working place.

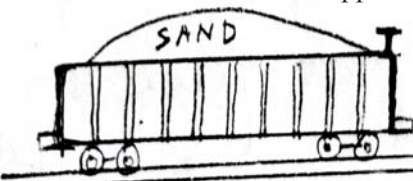
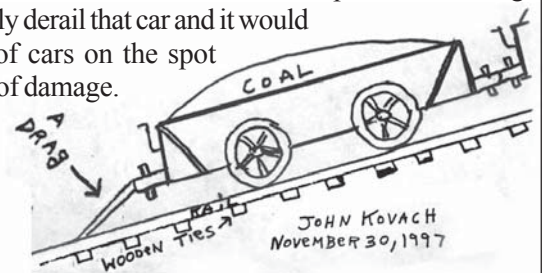
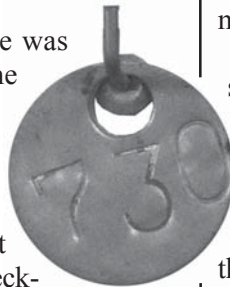
Some of the mule drivers had no mules but instead used small ponies. Ponies were shorter and were able to go into low places. Both of these animals were strenuous workers.

Mining Terms

All *slope mines* (mines that opened on a slope or an incline) had a hoist that pulled loaded coal cars up to the surface and to the tipple where the cars were unloaded into railroad cars. The last coal car always had a *drag* hitched to it, a hardened rounded steel piece about 36" to 40" long. If the hoist broke, the trip of cars would start to descend back into the slope. But the drag would immediately derail that car and it would cause a pile-up of cars on the spot with a minimum of damage.

If there were no drag on that last car, the loaded coal cars would descend down into the mine with great speed. It would break the timbers and cause rock falls; it would demolish coal cars and hurt workers. A drag was used in all the slope mines.

A *motorman* operated the trolley motor that pulled the mine cars. Before he started on a trip, he poured dry white sand into four containers, one on each wheel. As he ascended or descended steep hills, he pulled a lever that allowed a trickle of sand to fall onto the center of the rail to give traction. Without the sand, mine cars would not be able to move because the rails would be wet and slippery. At times the motorman would stop for sand from one of the sand cars located on side tracks throughout the mine.



The all wooden sand cars had wooden doors on top to keep the sand dry as wet sand would block the channel where the sand trickled onto the track.

The motorman's helper was the **brakey**. His job was to pull the hand brakes on each car as it descended a hill. As they ascended, he then released all those hand brakes. The brakey had to run along side the cars, a very dangerous job indeed. He also turned the switch to go to other tracks and opened and closed the wooded doors.

A **rope rider** was the man who rode the trips up and down the slope continuously, all day long, a very dangerous job. He would jump on the bumpers of the cars as they ascended. His job was to install the drag on the last car and to control all the hand brakes on the cars up to the tipple. In case of derailment, he would give the hoist man the signal that something was wrong by touching two special copper wires. These wires were strung all the way down the slope on the clearance side. This would ring a bell at the hoist house. When the hoist man got the signal that something was wrong, he would stop the trip.

(continued in the spring newsletter)



School Program

For the last ten years a collaboration between the historical society and the Portage School District has implemented many local history programs into the school curriculum. This year high school sophomores learned about post WWI Portage from the 1918s flu pandemic to the end of the 20s decade. Students took a virtual tour of Portage viewing almost 100 pictures assembled by the historical society. Students then dressed in period clothing and learned about 1920s clothing styles.

Portage Endowment Fund Match Challenge

The Portage Area Endowment Fund recently received a ten thousand dollar (\$10,000.00) match challenge from an anonymous donor, and the people of the Portage region are asked to help match that amount. Another \$20,000.00 added to the principal of the fund would increase the availability of grants to our community. Donations, large or small, can be made immediately as a one-time gift or pledged over several years. Your gift can also be made in honor or in memory of a friend or loved one. Go to www.portagepa.com for more information.



Great Loss

We are saddened by the passing of long time Portage resident Wally Kiel. Wally worked with the historical society sharing his Portage Bulldogs football research, pictures and memorabilia. Thanks to him we have a wonderful display at the museum, a newsletter that informed the public of the famous team, and his treasured documentation preserved for posterity.

New Board Members

The Portage Area Historical Society welcomes two new board members. **Rose Fordick Sral** was born and raised in Portage and graduated from PAHS. She retired from Stineman's



Recent Acquisition

Thanks to signal maintainer Raymond Cairns and Norfolk Southern, a vintage **bridge phone box** is now on display at our Station Museum. Used until the 1940s and before radios, this type of box hung on the side of railroad signal bridges. Train crews would stop and use the magneto phone to call ahead for instructions. By cranking the handle on the phone, messages could be sent to different stations depending on the number of cranks. The historical society is most pleased with this unique acquisition and excited to be able to display it for our many visitors

Book Sale

Because the museum gets so few visitors from January through March, the historical society moved its annual book sale from September to February. Readers seemed to be most pleased with the move and the sale has once again been a great success. We are again most appreciative to the community for their donations. The sale continues through the middle of March.

Psychic Medium Performs at Museum

On October 26 the historical society opened its doors to psychic medium Ryan Michaels. Ryan, who lives in Summerhill, appeared on the TV show *Psychic Kids: Children of the Paranormal*. He spoke to a packed museum and pleased the audience with his paranormal abilities. To make the evening more exciting, **20/20** videotaped Ryan's performance. The show aired the following Friday and Ryan and our little museum appeared on national TV.

By popular demand, Ryan will be coming back to the Station Museum on March 23 with some special stories to relate to his audience.



Ryan Michaels as he appeared on 20/20

Visit our Website at
www.portagepa.us

Carol Paterick
Web Master

Ribbon Co., South Fork in 2011. Rose is the mother of three sons: Jimmy, wife Kelly, and two children live in Lilly; Steve, wife Pam and son live in Ebensburg; and youngest son Jeff lives at home. Rose enjoys sewing, baking and doing plastic crafts, but most of all she enjoys spending time with her grandchildren.

Judy Lazration Dubreucq grew up in Ehrenfeld and moved to Portage when she married husband Bob. She is the mother of two children: Kimberly, and husband Phil Riccio live in Altoona with their three sons and son Alan lives in Portage with wife Sarah McConnel. Judy worked as an LPN at Cambria Residential Services in Portage until she retired in 2006. Judy enjoys cooking and loves spending time with her grandsons. She and Bob enjoy the outdoors and spend many hours at their property in Indiana.



Visitors

Steven Jenkins from Bonifay, FL stopped by the museum while visiting family in the area. Steven loves museums, his favorite being Fort Benning Infantry Museum in GA. He spent quite some time in our Station Museum and asked many questions. Steven absolutely loved the Miniature

Mainline Railroad display and he commented that the attention to detail was absolutely amazing.

PAHS Board - Irene Huschak-*President/Education Coordinator*; Ruth Richardson-*Vice President*; Mary Kostan-*Recording Secretary*; Barbara Havrilla-*Corresponding Secretary/Memberships*; Charles Edwards-*Miniature Mainline*; John Havrilla, Pat Fedorko, Judy Smith, Rose Sral, Judy Dubreucq and Betty Cann (HM)



Mom & Pop Store #13
Aurello "Alex" Tavernini was born in Italy and immigrated to the US in 1928. In 1937 he opened a meat market at 813 Conemaugh Avenue. Alex bought his animals at auction and with the help of his wife, Giselle, butchered them in his shop. He sold meat on Friday and Saturday. Alex passed in 1960 and Giselle kept the market open until 1962.



Students learn about Portage's past

*** Newsletter by Irene Huschak ***

2013 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 4 pm - Tuesday through Saturday

Only members receive our newsletter

Portage Area Historical Society
P.O. Box 45
400 Lee Street
Portage, PA 15946