

Back in the Country...
Bell Acres Stories
By Debby Rabold

Big Sewickley Creek...Fresh Air Home



It was nearly 2:30 AM on Monday August 27, 1962 when the call came for a structure fire on Hidden Valley Lane. Men from the Big Sewickley Creek Volunteer Fire Company were joined by companies from neighboring Economy and Fair Oaks in fighting flames that were consuming a 60-year-old hotel, but low water pressure hampered their efforts. While unable to save the 3-story frame structure, firefighters kept flames from spreading to four adjacent homes. The hotel, which featured a restaurant, bar and dance floor, was a complete loss for Bell Acres resident Frank Impronto who leased the property once known as the Sewickley Fresh Air Home.

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It was in 1897, in a rented house, that a group of Sewickley society women first welcomed groups of impoverished inner city children to spend two weeks of the summer in the countryside. Serving as many as sixty children and sometimes more over a ten-week period, the organizers soon realized that a larger facility was needed. Proceeds from a ball held at the Edgeworth Club along with private contributions enabled the Sewickley Fresh Air Home to purchase fifty acres of woodland overlooking Big Sewickley Creek in Economy Township, Beaver County.

Founded by Mary and Alexander Laughlin, the Sewickley Fresh Air Home was chartered in 1901. The newly built sixteen-room main house was formally opened in June 1902, enabling the organization to continue offering summer outings to city children. It was in 1907, however, that the decision was made to remain open year-round as a sanitarium for children with crippling conditions and whose families were unable to afford their needed treatment. Patients fourteen years old and younger were referred by physicians and hospitals for care that might last several years. Medical care and schooling were provided to each child free of charge.

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The Managers of the
Sewickley Fresh Air Home
ANNOUNCE

That their Home will be open after November 15th for the care of
Convalescent and Crippled Children

The managers beg your interest and assistance in maintaining this work. Contributions may be sent to the treasurer,
MRS. JAMES TODD
BEAVER ROAD, SEWICKLEY



1909 *Pittsburgh Bulletin* Fresh Air Home photo.

The following excerpts describing the Fresh Air Home are from an article found in the August 10, 1919 edition of the *Pittsburgh Press* newspaper:

“For scenic beauty, the equal of the site is hard to find in Allegheny County. About a mile back from Fair Oaks station...the Big Sewickley Creek flows along at the foot of a heavily wooded slope that extends back a half mile from the creek bed.

The home is on a cleared space on this slope. The white painted houses of the home make the glade visible for miles.

A good dirt road leads from the town of Ambridge and Leetsdale to the home site...the road to the home leads across a steel bridge over the creek and winds up to the side of the main building. Well-kept lawns extend in front and are broken by a rustic rose arbor, covered with ramble roses and honeysuckle, by a miniature merry-go-round, swings, play pavilions and formal flower beds.”

“To the sides of the home there are thick woods that merge with the heavy forest in the background. More swings are hung in the edge of the woods and at one side of the house there is an open-air play pavilion and school in the shadow of the giant oaks...”

The main building is a frame structure, three stories high. its white sides gleam through a screen of trees and stand out against the background of solid woodland on the hillside in the rear of the home. A wide veranda around two sides of the house have been enclosed in glass frame work in the front to make a school roof. A center hall running through the house on the first floor is bisected by a side hall which makes for accessibility to all the rooms...The house is wired and electric lights are used in every room. The heating system is operated by natural gas and radiators.... On the first floor is the school room...a reception room, a dining room for children and one for the nurses, a big kitchen and a pantry. The second and third floors are taken up by sleeping rooms and the dressing room...Two fire escapes, made of steel...lead from the second floor to the ground.”



Undated main house photo shows painters at work.



“In the rear of the main building is a two-story frame house in which the nurses and other employees of the home have their living quarters.”

“Cool breezes sweep up the valley of the creek from the Ohio and the temperature is always far lower than in the cities. There is not a trace of mill smoke or soot in the atmosphere... Seven hundred feet in front of the home and at the foot of the slope on which the buildings are erected is Big Sewickley Creek. Shallow pools make ideal wading places for the children. Dozens of them play in the sandy creek bed and get as much joy out of their fresh water wading as the more fortunate children do out of a seashore trip.”



View of Big Sewickley Creek from Hidden Valley Lane.



Entrance to Hidden Valley Lane over Big Sewickley Creek.



Laughlin Children's Center in Sewickley, Pennsylvania.

The Fresh Air Home closed in 1952 and the property was sold in 1957 when a nightclub opened in the main building. The acreage and buildings were again sold in 1961 with the club continuing to operate until the fire.

The Fresh Air Home organization merged with Sewickley's Child Counseling Center to create the Laughlin Children's Center. Since 1956, the Children's Center has offered a variety of educational support services for students in grades K-12.