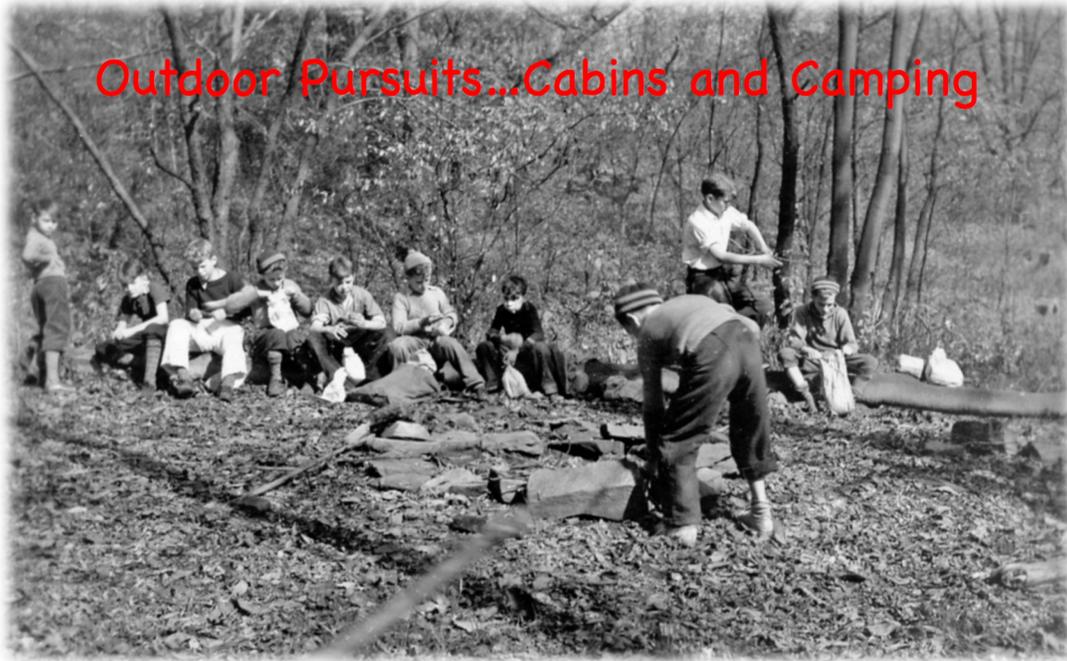


Back in the Country... Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold



Surrounded by steep wooded hillsides, the valleys of the Big and Little Sewickley creeks in Northwestern Allegheny County have retained much of their rural character. It is an area where generations of Sewickley Valley families have enjoyed a variety of outdoor recreational activities. This is the third article in the *Outdoor Pursuits* series.

(Photo courtesy of the Sewickley Valley YMCA)

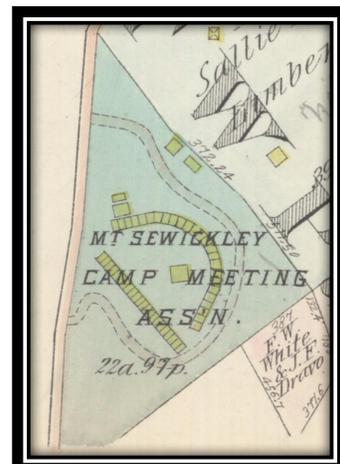
Mount Sewickley Camp Meeting Grounds

Held over ten days in August, the Mt. Sewickley Camp Meeting provided families an opportunity to enjoy a variety of outdoor activities, as well as being able to attend daily religious services. Founded in 1867-68, the Mt. Sewickley Camp Meeting Association located its twenty-three-acre facility in a heavily wooded grove on the high ridge between the two Sewickley creeks in what at the time was Sewickley Township. Organized by the Sewickley Methodist Church and two Allegheny City Methodist churches, the grounds were a mile from the Leetsdale rail station from where visitors were transported to the hilltop location via the Camp Meeting Road.



Mt. Sewickley

is a delightful place to spend a day or your entire vacation. Just fourteen miles west of Pittsburgh on the Ft. Wayne Railroad. One mile from Leetsdale Station.



Our Old-Time Camp Meetings

by Dr. F. K. White

"On Sundays, special trains ran from Allegheny and Beaver Falls...Four horse hacks were used for transportation from the Leetsdale station to the grove. An admission fee of ten cents was collected at the gate from each passenger..."

The first two years of camp, we lived in canvas tents. Then seventy-three cottages were built and a little wooden chapel...The plan of the camp was somewhat like the shape of a banjo. The boarding houses, the grocery store, and the barber shop made the handle of the instrument, and the cottages formed a circle like the drum of the banjo. At the entrance to the semi-circle of cottages was a fence with a gate in the middle over which hung a large sign "No Smoking Within the Circle."

A board fence enclosed the grounds of each cottage. The cottages, which were built of hemlock boards, had open fronts on the ground floor and contained four rooms with an adjoining building of similar size which was used as a dining room, kitchen and servant quarters. When the camp was very new, water was carried by hand...

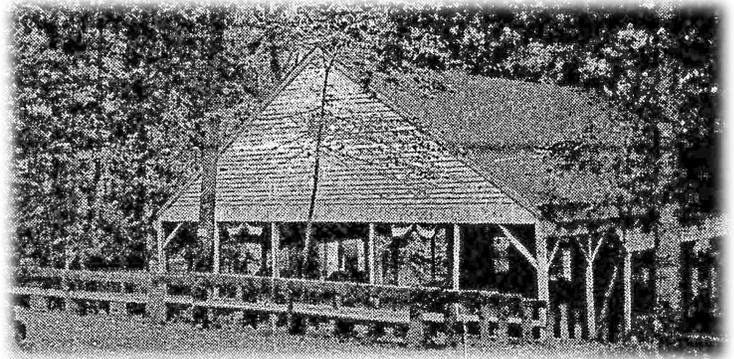
Some of the cottagers would often go to camp two weeks before the meetings started, and that was when we had most of our fun. There were picnics, taffy pulls, melon parties, and plenty of time for games of every description...

During the carefree period before the meetings began, the men young and old would slip out early in the morning or evening with their guns in hand to bag a little game...

The first few years of camp we were called to worship by the blasts of a horn, but later a bell was used...In the center of the circle was an auditorium open on all sides. At one end was the organ, the minister's pulpit and chair, and at the other end were seats for about two hundred persons. In front and outside of the auditorium there were a number of board benches...Probably four or five hundred people could be seated at these services.

The West end of the grove was used by persons who drove to camp for the day These visitors frequently brought lunch baskets and picnicked between morning and afternoon sermons."

Sewickley Herald 5 July 1935



The Simple Life *"During the summer season, beginning as early as June first and continuing as late as October first, many families occupy the cottages as summer homes. The cottages, by the way, are substantial two-story structures, seventy-five in number, built in a circle with a large tabernacle in the center...A beautiful grove of oak trees provides shelter from the sun's rays, rain and storm.*

One of the principle diversions of the male portion at camp is sleeping out at night...The song of the cricket and katydid, the hoot of the owl and the early morning chorus of the birds all contribute to the pleasure and novelty of a vacation period spent in the woods.

Two tennis courts afford those who enjoy tennis ample opportunity to try their skill...Events of special interest are introduced weekly on Saturday evening if the weather is favorable; such as taffy pulls, corn roasts, lawn fetes...

Saturday evening last...twelve hundred ears of corn were roasted in an improvised oven dug in the ground and about 400 men, women and children, provided with knives, plates, salt and butter partook of the luscious corn roasted with the husks on...The scene of the corn roast was beautifully illuminated with a hundred or more Japanese lanterns."

Altoona Tribune 26 August 1909



The camp never fully recovered from the August 1938 fire that destroyed many of its summer cottages. As the number of attendees continued to dwindle, non-denominational services were offered less frequently until the camp's closure in 1963. The buildings were razed for construction of a nine-hole golf course that opened in 1965. Today, the former camp meeting grounds are a residential subdivision opposite the D. T. Watson facility in Leet Township.

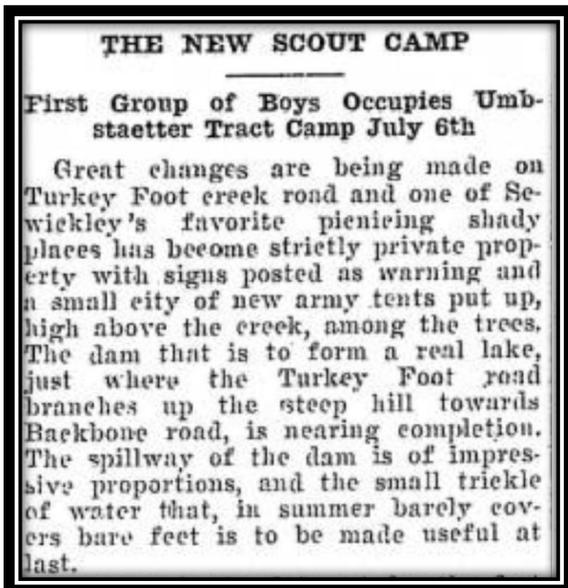
Camp Davis In 1965, twenty-five acres on the Bell Acres-Franklin Park boundary along Hopkins Church Road were donated to Franklin Park's Ingomar Methodist Church for use as a retreat center. Soon after, dormitory style accommodations were constructed for up to thirty-five overnight guests. The camp has provided visitors of all ages an opportunity to enjoy a variety of outdoor activities.



The Sewickley creeks were popular with young campers. Scout troops, YMCA and youth groups often hiked into the hills where they enjoyed overnight camping. A 1922 purpose built cabin for campers stood on the estate of Lewis A. Park, in what is today the Sewickley Heights Borough Park. Boy Scouts were also allowed use of a cabin on the Shields property on Little Sewickley Creek, while Girl Scouts had use of an older home on the Oliver property, also overlooking Little Sewickley Creek.

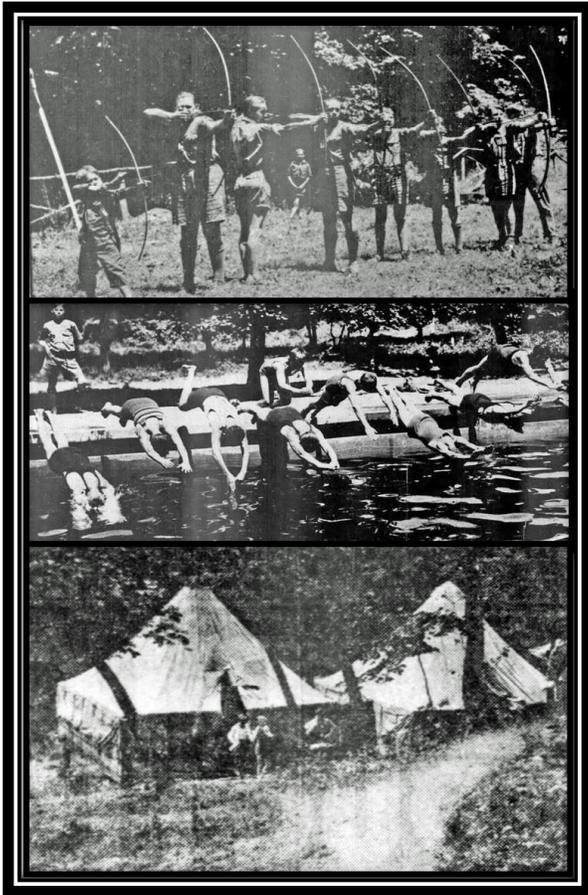


Camp Waupello on Little Sewickley Creek was a Boy Scout camp under the direction of the Sewickley Presbyterian Church.
Sewickley Herald 28 June 1924



Umbstaetter Reservation

In 1924, in memory of her husband, Edgeworth resident Wilhelmina Leet Shields Umbstaetter allowed Pittsburgh's Boy Scout Council use of a 105-acre tract along Turkey Foot Run between Camp Meeting and Big Sewickley Creek roads in then Sewickley Township. The Umbstaetter Boy Scout Reservation became a premier scout camp, providing thousands of boys from across the State an opportunity for outdoor adventures during its twenty-four years of operation.



THE BOY SCOUTS' IDEAL CAMP.

When Mrs. J. B. Umbstaetter of Shields gave a hundred acres of woodland in the valley of the Big Sewickley Creek to the Pittsburgh Council of the Boy Scouts it was generally realized that no better location for a camp could be found in Allegheny county. Several miles away from the nearest town, and with no factories of any sort in the vicinity—only farms—the tract offered admirable facilities for those romantic and adventurous sports of which youngsters are so fond. But even those most familiar with the property probably did not foresee what the Scouts would do with it. The construction of a dam has turned the shallow creek into a pond deep enough in places for high diving and spacious enough for swimming races. Trails and stockades have been built for the playing of fascinating games woven around Indian lore. One might go hundreds of miles from Pittsburgh without finding a better spot for a Scout camp.

This summer the camp is in full swing for the first time, and before the schools reopen 1,000 boys will have been there. It is a pity that every boy in Pittsburgh cannot spend at least a few weeks in a camp like this, for its benefits are numerous.

Daily Post 1 August 1925



Gapa Park

Shortly before her death in 1946, Mrs. Umbstaetter gifted the 105 acres on which the scout camp stood to the Boy Scout Council. In 1949, the Council sold the property to the Ambridge Greek American Progressive Association for use as a youth camp.

In 1977, a real estate investment group purchased the original 105-acre tract and adjoining acreage from GAPA, which was then acquired by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and is today the Bell Acres Nature Park. Mature Black Locust, Pitch Pine and Japanese Larch in today's park may be among the 1,500 trees planted by Ambridge scouts in the Spring of 1931.

JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

Swim for fun at . . .

TURKEY FOOT

Swimming Pool

AT GAPA ATHLETIC PARK



Located on Sewickley Creek Road, Fair Oaks — Turn at Turkey Foot Road for ½ mile to the pool.

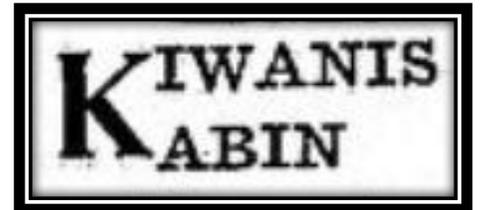
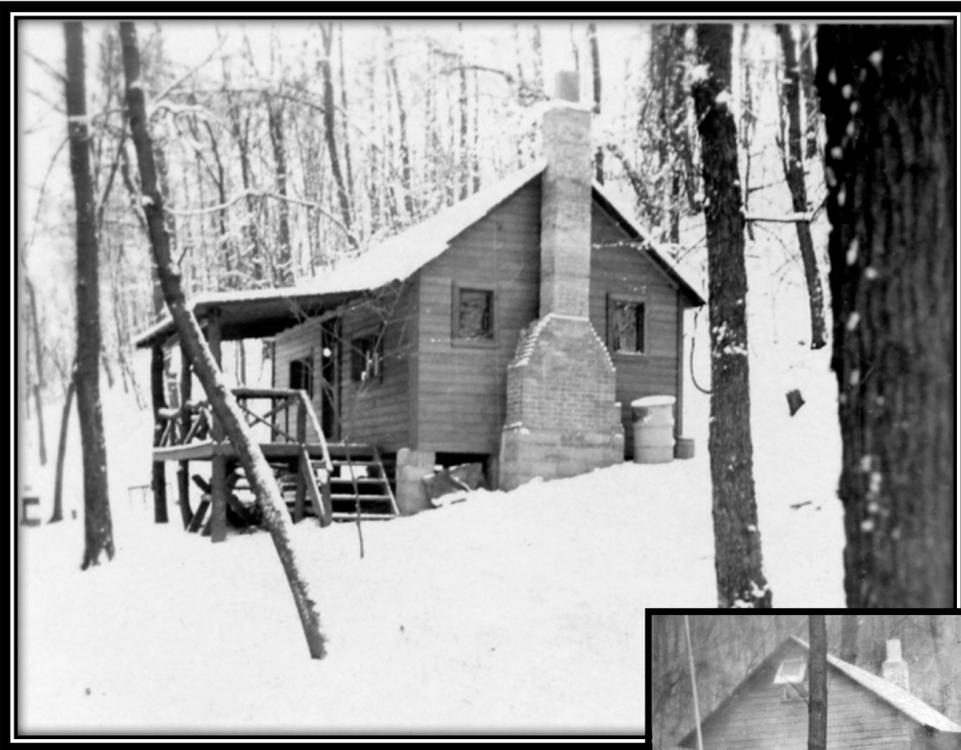
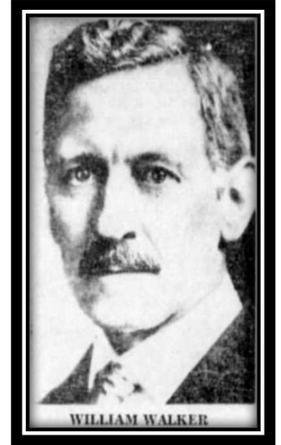
Swim in the finest deep well water in Western Pennsylvania

Special Rates for Picnic Groups
Picnic Facilities available for groups of 100 to 2500

Moonlight Swimming Every Tues. & Thurs.
or by special appointment for groups.

Walker Park and Camp Wa-Se-Ki

In 1934, wanting to preserve the natural beauty of the Little Sewickley Creek Valley, William and Jane Walker deeded eighty-one acres of woodlands to Edgeworth Borough for use as parkland. Lying on both sides of Little Sewickley Creek Road, the majority of the park is within Leet Township. Men from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) cleared sixty acres and constructed two picnic shelters along with ovens, tables and benches. They also built crossings over the creek, which runs through the park. In 1937, Sewickley Boy Scout troops, with support from the local Kiwanis Club, built a cabin high on a park hillside.



Built to accommodate a small number of overnight guests, the cabin was the hiking headquarters for both the Boy Scouts and YMCA. With supplies from the Sewickley Hunting and Fishing Club, the boys maintained wildlife feeding stations at the cabin. Due to repeated vandalism, the structure was eventually razed.



(Photos courtesy of the Sewickley Valley YMCA)

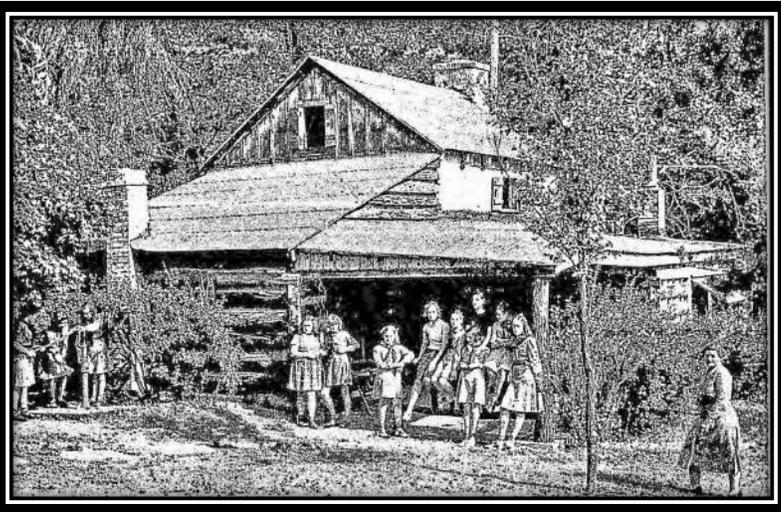


Perhaps the best remembered scout cabin was the one long known as "Peters' Cabin" that stood next to the road in Walker Park (left). The subject of numerous photographs, the early 19th century cabin was built on the David Shields estate.

When the Walkers deeded the acreage to Edgeworth Borough, it was with the stipulation that Edward and Janette Peters (below) could continue to reside in the log house for their lifetimes.

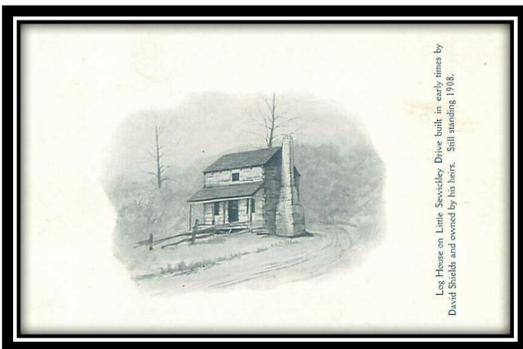


Fire destroyed the barn and outbuildings in the Spring of 1939. The following year, the Edgeworth Girl Scouts leased the cabin from the borough and began fund raising for a remodel that was completed in 1941 (below).

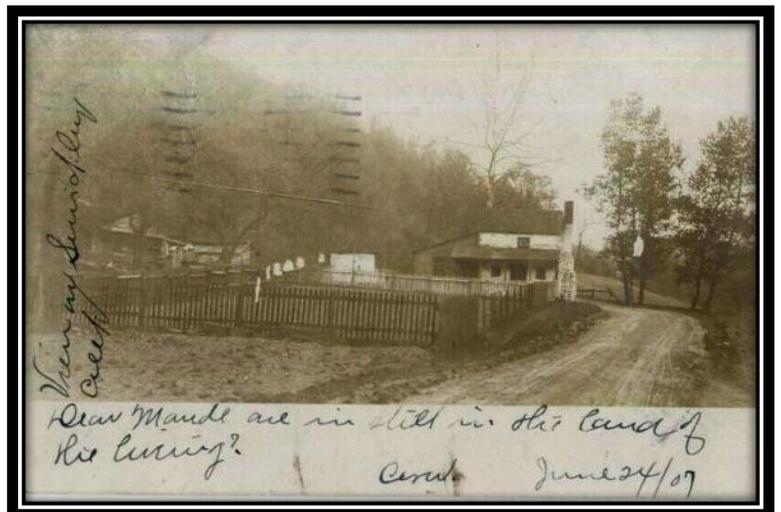


The cabin was not used during the subsequent war years, but activity resumed afterwards. By 1956, Edgeworth firemen had taken over the building with the intention of using it for community activities.

After suffering a period of vandalism and neglect, Edgeworth Borough sold the cabin to a Sewickley Heights family in 1973. The logs were dismantled and reassembled as an addition to their home.



A local landmark, the cabin was featured on post cards. During its rebuilding in 1933-34, Little Sewickley Creek Road was moved to the opposite side of the cabin, between it and barn.



~~~~~



Rev. Thomas McClelland has been credited with introducing Methodism into the Sewickley Valley. In 1810, he purchased land on Big Sewickley Creek where he built a log home for his family in which he also conducted religious services for the neighbors. The house was later occupied by his youngest son Lewis whose eight grandchildren inherited the property upon their father's death.

During the re-building of the Camp Meeting Road Extension in the 1930s, the original log house (above left as it appeared in a 1929 issue of the **Sun-Telegraph**) was dismantled. The McClellands salvaged the best logs and used them to build a summer retreat they named *Pinecroft*. Situated on a wooded hillside overlooking the Big Sewickley Creek, *Pinecroft* was used for outings by both the family and organizations.

Frequently mentioned in the Pittsburgh newspapers, sisters Amy, Elizabeth and Grace McClelland hosted club meetings, outings and nature walks at *Pinecroft*, which included the Audubon Society, Botanical Society and the National Farm and Garden Association. Elizabeth was for many years an Avonworth High School biology teacher.

**Nature.....By Max Henrici**

*"Pinecroft...farther up the creek, was another world, far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife." The cabin is built of timbers taken from a log house that Miss McClelland's great-grandfather erected at a nearby location.*

*Miss [Elizabeth] McClelland is an all-round naturalist who knows the fauna as well as the flora of the Pinecroft neighborhood. She calls our attention not only to the flowers, but to the birds and to interesting insects...*

*Miss McClelland is especially interested in ferns and showed us many species of them in the Pinecroft woods..."* **Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph** 31 May 1944

In time, younger family members decided to sell the property. Once a destination for nature enthusiasts, the log house eventually fell into disrepair with only the chimney remaining as a reminder of the McClelland family's history on Big Sewickley Creek.

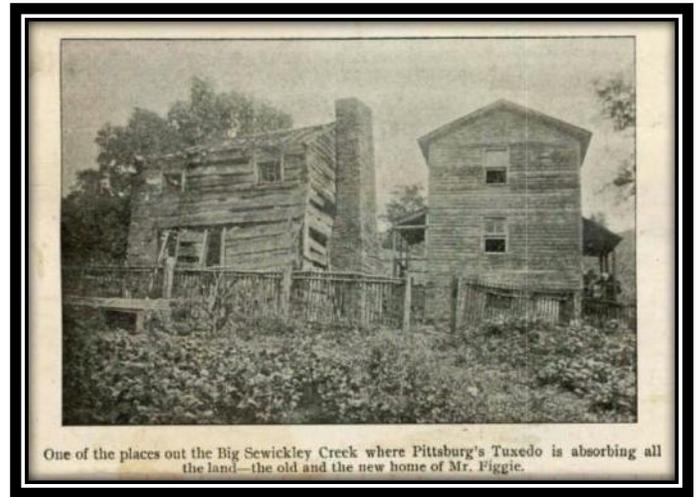
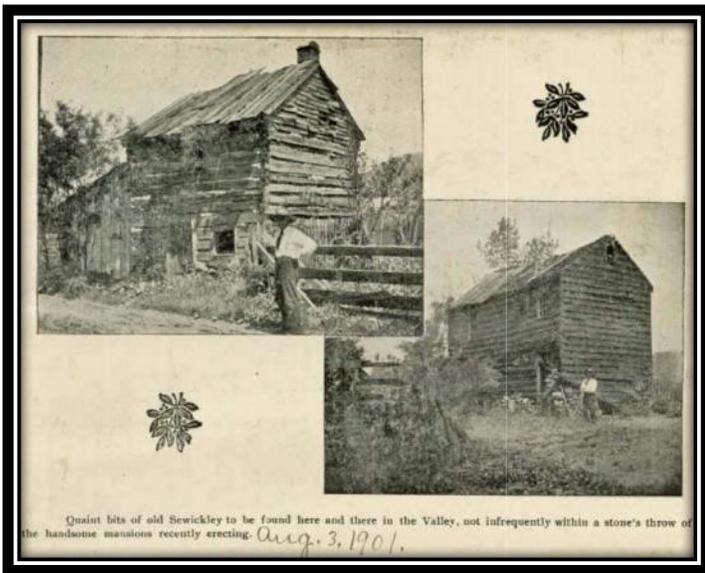


~~~~~

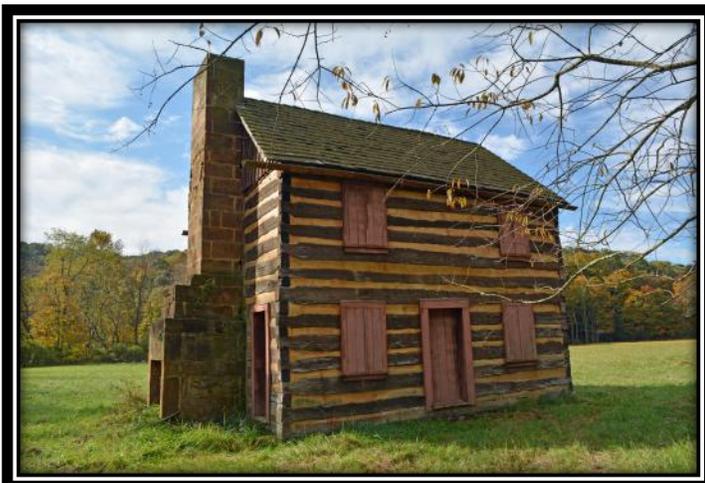
Log homes once dotted the local landscape.



Two Sewickley area log homes appear in Charles M. Stotz's 1936 *Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania*.



Additional images of area log homes appear in the Sewickley Public Library's *Scrapbook #1*.



Of the few remaining 19th century log structures, some have been incorporated into modern homes while others remain in their original form. Pictured is the Mitchell/Dickson log home on Little Sewickley Creek where the family once operated grist and saw mills.