

Back in the Country... *Bell Acres Stories*

By Debby Rabold



Monaca, Pennsylvania's 8th Street Beach (1912) (Arcadia Publishing photo)

"The favorite creek of my childhood [1890s] was Big Sewickley...In summer the small boys of nearby Old Economy would spend whole days there swimming and fishing. Bathing suits were unknown and the creek was so wild and so sparsely populated they were rarely needed.

One day a gang of us, wholly nude, wandered up stream so far that we suddenly came upon a crowd of little girls from an orphanage also swimming in the nude in the creek. On seeing us they let out a yell and hurriedly submerged with only their heads above water. We were no less abashed than they and beat a hasty retreat.

On returning a half-mile or so downstream to where we had left our clothes on the bank we found them missing. They remained missing until evening. Then the men who had stolen them as a practical joke, oil well drillers on a hill above the creek, brought them back." By Max Henrici (25 June 1957 **Sun-Telegraph**)

Big and Little Sewickley creeks and the nearby Ohio River have provided hours of entertainment for generations of Sewickley Valley children. Whether wading or swimming in Big Sewickley's deeper pools known as Barney's, Kretzer's, The Ledge, The Tower and Stone Bridge or skating on ice, there have been many happy childhood memories of those times. "Going to Turkeyfoot" once meant a day of fun for families, church and school groups that included picnics, ball games and swimming in the wooded grove at the juncture of Turkeyfoot Run and Big Sewickley Creek in future Bell Acres.

The late Floyd Eyer wrote, *"In the 1890s, I used to swim in the Big Sewickley Creek...au natural...There were no houses along the creek or paved roads or automobiles then, and one could wander up and down the stream for miles without seeing anyone. Ambridge was not in existence, and I used to collect arrowheads in plowed fields in what is now the heart of its business district."* (1 May 1948 **Sun-Telegraph**)



The late Andrew Dequasie, author of **A Lifetime Nature Walk**, wrote,

“One of our favorite swimming holes on the Big Sewickley Creek in Pennsylvania was “Stone Bridge”, named for the bridge that arched the rocky shallows just above the pool. We often lingered there at sundown in the summertime and bats would soon appear overhead, zig-zagging among the mosquitoes and other insects.”



“Stone Bridge was the biggest and deepest of the pools...The creek had a shallow rock bed under the bridge, but just downstream it dropped off to a depth over your head and hand. You could hold your breath and sink feet-first there with your hands held high above your head and feel your hands go under before your feet hit the bottom.”

“The only ‘boat’ we ever ‘sailed’ on the Big Sewickley Creek was a baker’s bread box. It was rectangular, and as nearly as I can remember, about 18 inches deep and two feet by three feet in area. When a summer storm would get the creek running high and muddy, two of us could float about one mile down the creek in that box. It was made of a waterproof fibrous material and we only got three or four voyages out of it before collisions with rocks made it unseaworthy...great fun.”

The Merriman Road stone bridge was built in 1916.
(Bruce Cridlebaugh bridge photo)

Dennis Paul remembers, *“We played in Big Sewickley Creek. Moved rocks to make a temporary dam and waded in the water. There were a couple of deep pockets where water was neck deep. We caught catfish and crayfish. We went to the Stone Bridge swimming hole a lot. Would walk barefoot on the road to get there. People came from all over to swim there. The creek froze over in winter. That’s where we ice skated. I could skate for hours. One time we got ambitious and skated all the way to Ambridge on Big Sewickley Creek. It was dangerous because there were a lot of leaves and twigs caught in the ice and if you hit one, you tumbled. There were also air pockets. If you broke through, your feet would get wet and start to freeze.”*

Les Paul recalls, *“There was a swimming hole at the Merriman Road stone bridge. Everyone worked to clear rocks and build diving boards. It was very nice. Any time my aunts came to visit, we all swam there. A couple of years after we were there, they drained the Boy Scout camp lake. The water rushed into the creek and wiped out the swimming hole. Filled it with rocks.”*



There was a swimming hole at the stone bridge that crosses Little Sewickley Creek at Woodland Road in Edgeworth (above). A 21 May 1941 **Sewickley Herald** photo (left) shows children fishing at the same bridge.

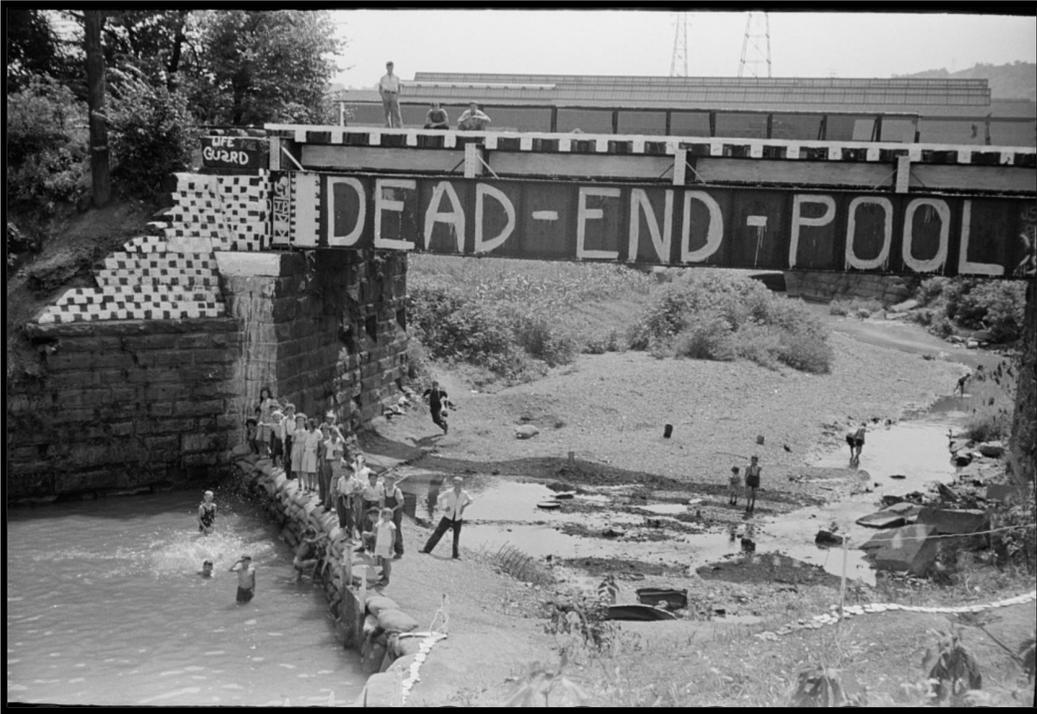
The late Joseph Rutter, author of **Wrecking Havoc: A Year in an A-20**, wrote, *“Growing up in Sewickley in the 1930s was pleasant enough, sheltered as we were from some of the worries of the depression years. We were confident that our parents would always see to it that we had comfortable quarters and food on the table. Although money was in short supply for nonessentials such as new bicycles and swimming pool memberships, my situation was no worse than that of most of my peers. Used bikes could be had for \$10 at Cleve Wallace’s shop on Division Street. Little Sewickley Creek had a great swimming hole only a couple of miles out of town on Backbone road, and when we grew older, we swam in the Ohio [River].”*

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For most Valley residents, the river and creeks were the only places available for swimming. Private pools were not an option and public pools had not yet been built, however, that did not stop a group of determined Ambridge children from building their own pool during the summer of 1938. Using sand bags, rocks and whatever materials could be scavenged, neighbor kids living on First Street along Big Sewickley Creek, dammed the creek under the railroad bridge to create the Dead End Pool, named for a film featuring a gang of neighborhood kids. Problem was, the water was polluted with sewage and river water was not any cleaner.

The pool was drained under Health Department orders, however, the youngsters were undeterred. They marched to an Ambridge council meeting where officials agreed on the need for a public pool, which was built the following year. Until then, fire department sprinklers were opened for the children to enjoy.





Built by neighborhood children, the pool was drained and replaced with a public swimming pool.  
(Library of Congress photo)

Armed with petitions, up to sixty children marched to the Ambridge borough council asking for a swimming pool, which was built the following summer.

(Press 6 August 1938 photo)



To read more about the Dead End Pool, visit:

[https://ambridgемemories.blogspot.com/search?q=dead+end+pool\\$ of x](https://ambridgемemories.blogspot.com/search?q=dead+end+pool$ of x)

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“Time was when the river and its beach were the delight of all Sewickley boys both great and small; one might say the chief delight, for strange as it may seem to the present generation, the river and its interest once occupied a foremost place in the affections of the youth of the Valley. At all seasons of the year it furnished recreation of one kind or another, swimming and rowing in the summer and skating in winter, while in spring and fall the beach with its piles of driftwood invited the enjoyment of roaring fires where potatoes were to be baked...

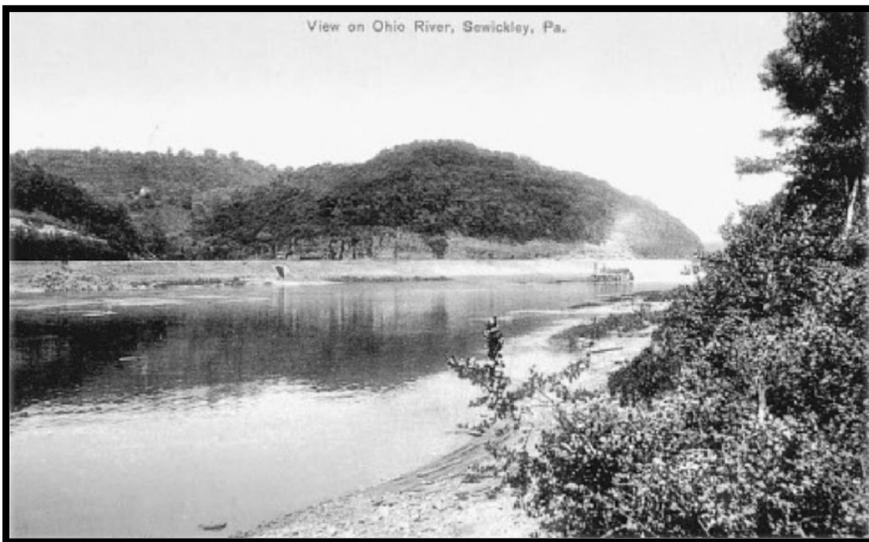
The first swim of the season sometime in May and the last usually in late September though too cold for real enjoyment, were the occasions of much pardonable boasting, while in the regular summer season no day went by, Sundays included, without its troop of youngsters splashing and shouting in the river, running up and down the beach, or diving from barge or tow boat that chanced to be tied up awaiting the return of high water. To run barefoot on those beach pebbles called for soles like shoe leather, but these were soon acquired since all boys in

those days said farewell to shoes in early spring. Bathing suits were of course unheard of, excepting when politer parties of sedate older folks resorted to the river on summer evenings...

Why, the river teemed with varied interests the year round. Its sleepy low water in summer time and its wild freshets in winter and spring, all of its moods met a response in our daily lives. It was the central fact in our boyhood existence. Whether roaming the beaches under the hot summer sun, playing Indian on the mud flats back of the dam, or in winter-time standing on the shore ice with "hawking pole" struggling to bring ashore saw-log or lumber as it floated by, the river was our great playground." Written by Franklin T. Nevin in 1928.

In the 3 July 1974 **Sewickley Herald**, Frederick Way, Jr. shared boyhood memories of times spent on Deadman's Island in the Ohio opposite Leetsdale. The island disappeared with construction of Dashiell's Lock and Dam in 1929. *"In summer, it attracted much attention, especially from boys lucky enough to have a boat. Some not so lucky simply swam...A boat was better to take along food so's you could stay the whole blessed day and not risk starvation. You could camp out on the island overnight, and many did that. If you swum out you arrived with no clothes on, no particular disadvantage, for I don't recall anybody on the island who did have clothes on. That place was a world unto its own, isolated, lightyears from civilization, not one to holler at you go do this do that, and when your lips got blue you baked on the sand, one side up and then the other by turns, watching fleecy clouds laze overhead half the time and then the other half by inspecting fascinating specimens of rounded gravel. The scrub willows were about as high as a boy's head most places, ideal for cowboys and Indians, or simply exploring all over the place, eating wild grapes as you found them, no worry about snakes for there weren't any and no poison ivy...*

The best time was evening after the sun had set downriver behind the hills at Shousetown [Glenwillard], the camp fire smoke going straight up, the river glassy and serene, no trains for the moments so's a body could hear the blump-blump of oarlocks a mile away and understand every word those in the rowboat were saying to one another, the fire flies punctuating the limp willows with illuminated commas, the ker-chunk of a bull frog along the Edgeworth shore, the bell of the Methodist Church announcing the hour, the weird cry of a loon..."



A century and more ago, the Ohio River (left) was quite different from its current appearance. The system of modern locks and dams that created a deep year-round shipping channel had not yet been built. Much of the river was shallow, especially during dry summer months. Wading from one side to the other was not uncommon. The river was well suited for recreational boating and swimming. Each river community usually had a beach where townspeople could enjoy picnics, swimming and boating.

At the time, a string of islands dotted both the Allegheny and Ohio rivers. It was on the islands and along miles of wooded river banks that camps and canoe clubs flourished. Escaping the noise and congestion of city living, visitors camped in simple cottages and canvas tents, whether for the day, the week or the entire summer season.

On the Ohio, campgrounds with names like Loret and Twi-Lite were found on Neville and Sunshine islands, the latter washed away by the 1973 flood waters of Hurricane Agnes. Men and boys might visit houseboats that lined the shore from Neville Island to Stoops Ferry opposite Sewickley where alcohol and gambling were easily found. The river offered diversions for all ages and interests.



Visitors could swim or rent canoes at Monaca's 8th Street or Water Works Beach, said to be the largest in Beaver County. The water was waist high until construction of the Montgomery Dam in 1936 deepened the river. Another beach area was located on nearby 12th Street.

(Arcadia Publishing photo)



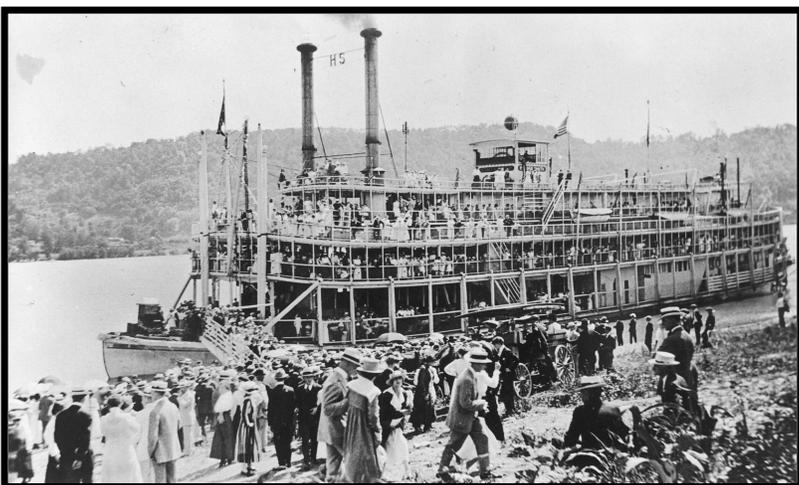
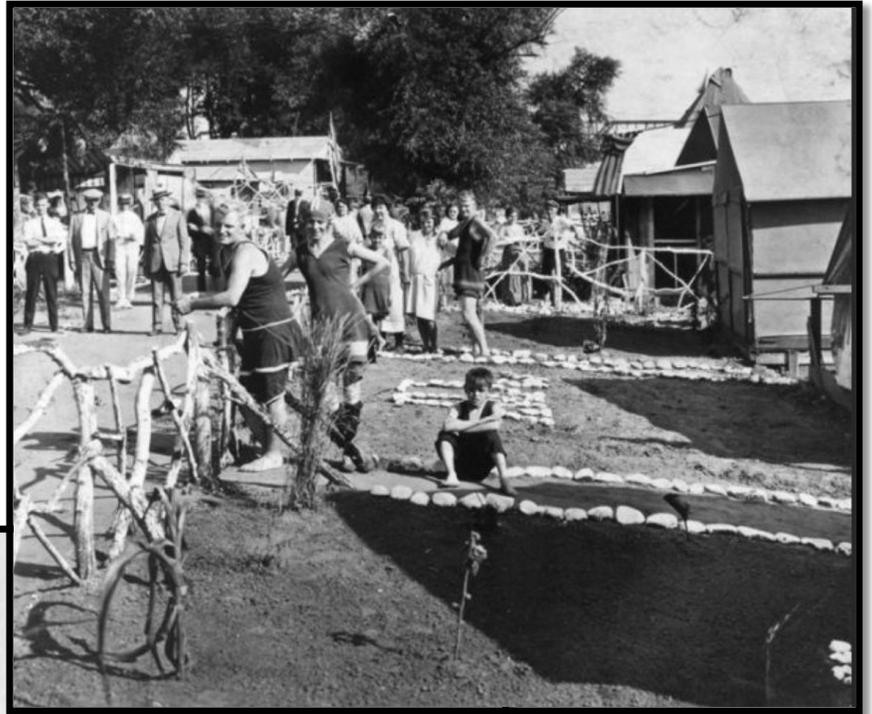
Sewickley resident Jimmy Gray was one of those people who had a hand in just about everything that happened in town. A tailor with a Broad Street shop, Gray opened Sewickley's Walnut Beach resort at his own expense "to give the people of the Valley a breathing spot...a summer resort right at home." Admission was free.

Stretching along the river's edge between Ferry Street and the bridge (above), the resort opened 5 July 1915 with the main entrance at the foot of Walnut Street. At the same time, a beach for the area's Black community was being prepared near the Ferry Street entrance. Integration had not yet arrived in the Valley.

A dance and roller skating pavilion, bath houses with swim suit rentals, picnic facilities, cottages, campsites and a ball field were enjoyed by thousands of visitors each day, including Pittsburghers who arrived by train and steamboat. A special attraction was "Shoot the Chute" on which a flat bottom boat slid down a ramp, dunking riders into the river. Water shows, boat races and Fourth of July celebrations were popular events. The resort closed in 1927 when the railroad shifted its tracks from what is now the Ohio River Boulevard to their present location along the riverbank.

Walnut Beach, also known as Sewickley Beach, was a popular summertime destination. It was sometimes referred to as the Pittsburgh area's Coney Island and could accommodate thousands of visitors.

(Sewickley Valley Historical Society photos)



EVERY SUNDAY
ALL DAY EXCURSION TO
SEWICKLEY BEACH
TWO TRIPS ON THE STEAMER
HOMERSMITH
Leaving 9 a. m. and 2 p. m. Return tickets honored on boat. Leaving beach 11:30 a. m. and 4:30 p. m. (Note—2 p. m. boat stops at Beach only for returning passengers from the 9 a. m. trip.)
Adults 50c---Children 25c ROUND TRIP
DANCING FREE—Merrill's Orchestra.
Moonlight Excursion 8:30 P. M.

The Homer Smith (above) could carry 2,500 passengers on each trip.

Cement swimming pools gradually appeared in the Sewickley Valley, however, club memberships were required, making them financially out of reach for most residents. The creeks and river remained popular alternatives.



The Valley's first swimming pool was included in the Sewickley YMCA's newly built facility that opened in May 1904 (left). At the time, membership was limited to White men and boys. Women and girls were not accepted until the late 1920s with the organization not integrating until much later.



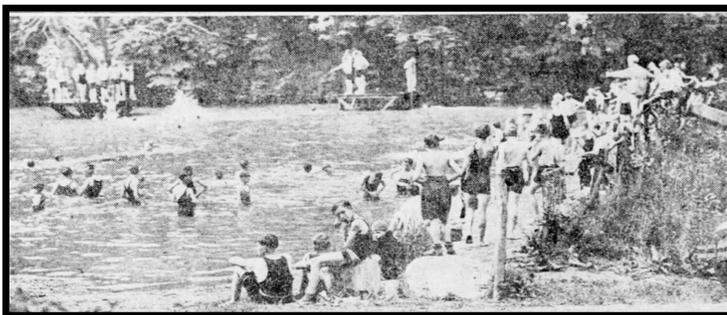
Members of the Valley's Black community organized the Walnut Street or "Colored" YMCA in 1913 using a building donated by the St. Matthew AME Zion Church (right). The modest frame structure was forerunner to the Sewickley Community Center, which now occupies a site on Chadwick Street. The Center's pool was built in 1971 and is currently Sewickley's only public swimming pool.

In 1927, Frances McKnight began construction of a swimming pool near the Woodland Road stone bridge on Little Sewickley Creek. The following summer, the 65,000-gallon pool of filtered creek water opened as the Sewickley Swimming Club, a membership only pool. In 1968, the club received non-profit status as the Woodland Swimming Club. Pictured is a member modeling 1933 swimwear.

(Press 27 August 1933 photo)

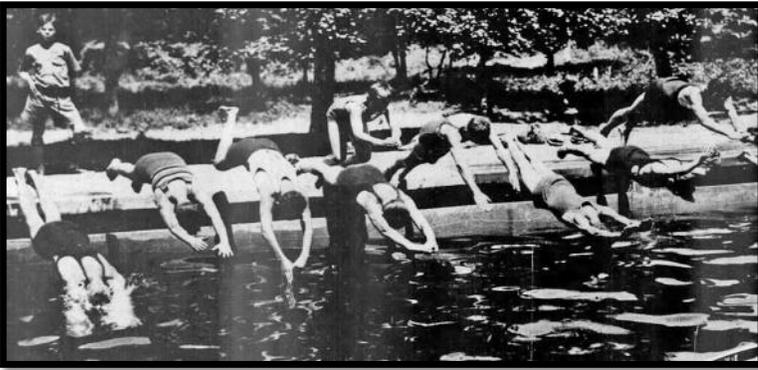


In 1924, to honor of her late husband, Wilhelmina Umbstaetter presented Allegheny County's Boy Scout Council with 105 acres in future Bell Acres Borough for use as a camp. Camp Umbstaetter occupied the hillside along Turkeyfoot Run between Camp Meeting and Big Sewickley Creek roads. The Run was dammed to create a small lake for water sports and a replica pirate ship (below). In 1930, a cement swimming pool opened on the old pageant grounds at the corner of Sevin and Turkeyfoot roads.



(Post-Gazette July 1928)

In 1949, the property was sold to Ambridge's Greek American Progressive Association (GAPA), which continued to operate the pool and park before the land was acquired by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy that in turn presented the tract and adjacent acreage to Bell Acres Borough as a nature park. The once popular pool and camp facilities are now only a memory to Valley residents who spent summers at GAPA pool.



Between 1924 and 1949, thousands of scouts enjoyed water sports in Camp Umbstaetter's lake and pool. (Press 20 July 1930 photo)

GAPA pool was used mostly by residents of Sewickley and Leet townships. It opened on Memorial Day and remained open until Labor Day when in good fun, the kids would break all the rules. It was a place where families spent the day and kids played with their friends.

Charlie Kulbacki remembers: "If enough kids were at the pool, we played Fox & Geese where the fox was on one side of the pool and everyone else on the opposite side. The goal was to make it across the pool without being caught by the fox. I later worked as a life guard after receiving training at the YMCA. I quit after a few days because while all of my friends were having fun, I had to sit on the stand and yell at them to stop doing what they were doing."

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.

(Sewickley Herald 25 August 1955)

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Founded in 1893, the Edgeworth Club built its red brick clubhouse in 1930 at the corner of Academy Avenue and Beaver Road. Built in record time using three eight hour shifts, the pool opened in July 1935. Club membership was required for pool membership. Edgeworth's was the last pool built in the Valley until the Allegheny Country Club built one for its members in the 1960s.



(Sun-Telegraph 27 July 1935)

