

# *Back in the Country...*

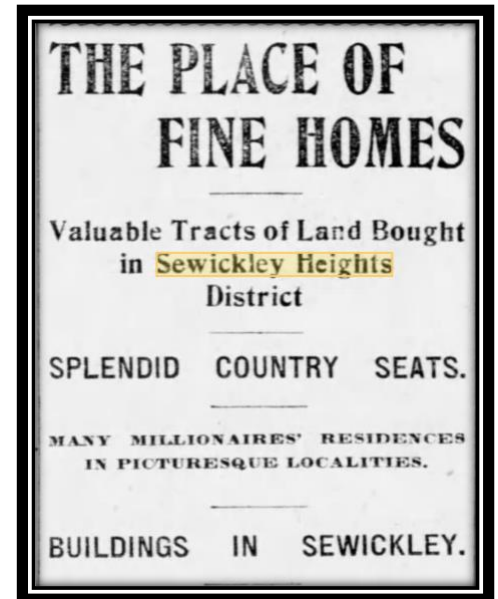
## *Bell Acres Stories*

by Debby Rabold

### The Hills Back of Sewickley

*"It would be difficult to find anywhere in the United States a locality more delightful for country homes than in the Sewickley Heights district and at this time of the year it is especially attractive and interesting. Out from the pleasant town of Sewickley, where thus far the clang of bells and the crash of the wheels of the trolley cars have not been permitted to disturb the nerves, stretch in picturesque irregularity the green capped hills and the grassy and wooded slopes with charming country homes peeping out from among fine old trees whose shade is particularly comforting these torrid days.....Around about for miles are fine country seats, many of them looking like the manor homes that beautify the country districts of England."*

(Post-Gazette 15 July 1906)



The "hills back of Sewickley" was an expression used to describe the sparsely populated countryside behind the village of Sewickley that stood fifteen miles below Pittsburgh on the Ohio River. Situated between Kilbuck Run and Big Sewickley Creek, the area featured heavily wooded hillsides and deep ravines. Also referred to as the "Sewickley Heights", the same area today encompasses Aleppo and Leet townships along with Bell Acres, Sewickley Hills and Sewickley Heights boroughs.



Until the railroad arrived in 1851 (depot shown left), the Sewickley Valley was isolated just enough to avoid unwanted growth. Despite opposition from those wishing to maintain their distance from the urban centers of Allegheny City and Pittsburgh, rail lines were built and travel time between the cities and Sewickley was now a mere half hour, opening the Valley to residential growth. Sewickley Borough (1853) and its neighbors would soon become suburban residential communities.

Many new arrivals were families of great wealth hoping to escape the noise, grime and congestion of urban living. Industrialists, professionals and businessmen from Allegheny City were soon joined by others from Pittsburgh's East End in building new homes. Together, they created a socially elite enclave, enabling themselves through wealth and influence to shape the community to their liking.

The first significant real estate activity in the "Heights" occurred in 1889 when over 2,000 acres in then Sewickley Township were purchased for the showcase Sewickley Dairy Company. No expense was spared in building modern stables and dairy facilities for a herd of prime Vermont dairy cattle, however, the operation quickly folded. For a time, the acreage was considered as a possible site for Pittsburgh's poor farm, but was ultimately rejected by city officials. Eventually, a 150-acre section of the former dairy was purchased by the Allegheny Country Club, which had a lasting influence on the area's future development.



Founded in 1895, the ACC operated the Pittsburgh area's first golf course. It was a nine-hole course bounded by California Avenue, Benton Avenue and Brighton Road in Allegheny City's Brighton Heights neighborhood. As the club grew, a search was made for more acreage. In 1901, the club purchased 150 acres of the former Sewickley Dairy where a clubhouse (shown left), 18-hole course and tennis courts were built. The club opened in May 1902.

*"One hundred fifty acres in the heart of a hilly farming district, offering the best of the beauties so typical of Western Pennsylvania, from this tract which the Country club purchased for its summer home. Absolutely wild and rural, no sign of urban civilization greets the eye in any quarter except where the homes of some of Pittsburg's wealthiest men, crown the hills in the distance out beyond the first nine holes of the golf course. These homes, the owners of which are members of the club, for the most part, are so widely scattered as not to interfere with the rural harmony of the landscape, which otherwise presents nothing but wooded hills, ploughed fields, wormwood fences and grazing cattle."*

*"Here within a little over a half hour's time by train, speedy horse or automobile, the Pittsburg business men, who form the membership of this organization, can whirl away from the heat and bustle of the Smoky City and while the cries of the newsboy are still echoing in their ears, be accosted with the "want a caddie, mister" of the golf bag urchin."*

*"Here the business man, who is also an ardent follower of the bewitching summer pastime which has made so many captive, will find something besides golf, raised to a plane of perfection never before enjoyed about Pittsburg. The summer home back on the hills-for home it will be for many during a long period of the summer's heat, will offer advantages of country club life, such as never before enjoyed."*

*"The club can also be reached by means of another road termed the "backbone" which is much steeper and approaches the club from the rear. This road continues out past the rear of the clubhouse to the beautiful Little Sewickley creek valley, which offers probably the prettiest drive about Pittsburg. The beautiful drives available to the members form one of the great features of the new location as the Little Sewickley road can be reached in about 15 minutes after leaving the clubhouse."*

(Pittsburgh Daily Post 12 May 1902)

At the same time, a small group of businessmen chartered the Tuxedo Land Company, which purchased the remaining acreage of the former Sewickley Dairy. The intention was to create a community of country estates whose social life would center on the new club. While properties in the "Heights" were already being purchased for summer homes and investment purposes, the pace quickened after the club opened. Estates lined Camp Meeting, Backbone and Blackburn roads as well as the web of less travelled connecting roads. Reportedly, land prices rose 1,000% between 1900 and 1916. Buyers were paying up to \$1,000/acre to buy into the area. The real estate market flourished.

*"Wealthy men whose interests keep them near Pittsburg are building magnificent residences there in the midst of large grounds. Some of the houses are almost castles in their grandeur. That district will soon be like the banks of the Hudson above New York. For a desirable site for a residence in that locality fancy prices are often paid."*

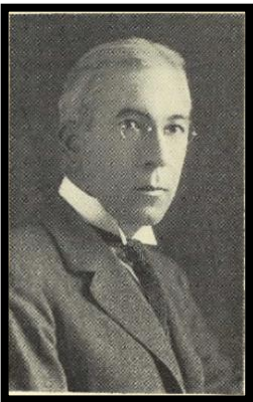
(Daily Post 13 January 1900)



*Hohenberg* (1900) once stood on Backbone Road. It was the summer home of the Russell Boggs family of Allegheny City. Boggs was a partner with his brother-in-law Henry Buhl in the Boggs and Buhl Department Store. Buhl's estate *Cloverton Hills* stood on Camp Meeting Road in Leet Township.

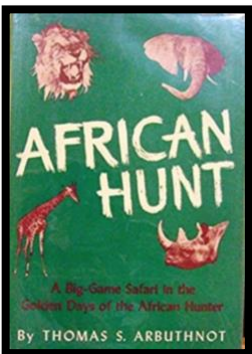
Summer "cottages" were soon transformed into year round residences. In 1904, property owners in Sewickley, Leet, Aleppo and Ohio townships voted to create the new Sewickley Heights Township [today Sewickley Heights and Sewickley Hills boroughs] so they could control future development. Sewickley Township [Bell Acres] lost over four square miles and nearly \$300,000 of taxable property, leaving it with five square miles and a \$141,000 tax base.

By 1906, much of what is now Bell Acres was owned by summer residents and investors, but occupied by tenant farmers. Prominent among investors were Sewickley resident W. D. George, President of George Brothers Realty and D. H. Wallace, the firm's vice-president. The firm of George Brothers Realty, with offices in Pittsburgh, was especially active in the Sewickley area. Both men owned considerable acreage along Camp Meeting, Big Sewickley Creek and Hitzel Hill roads.

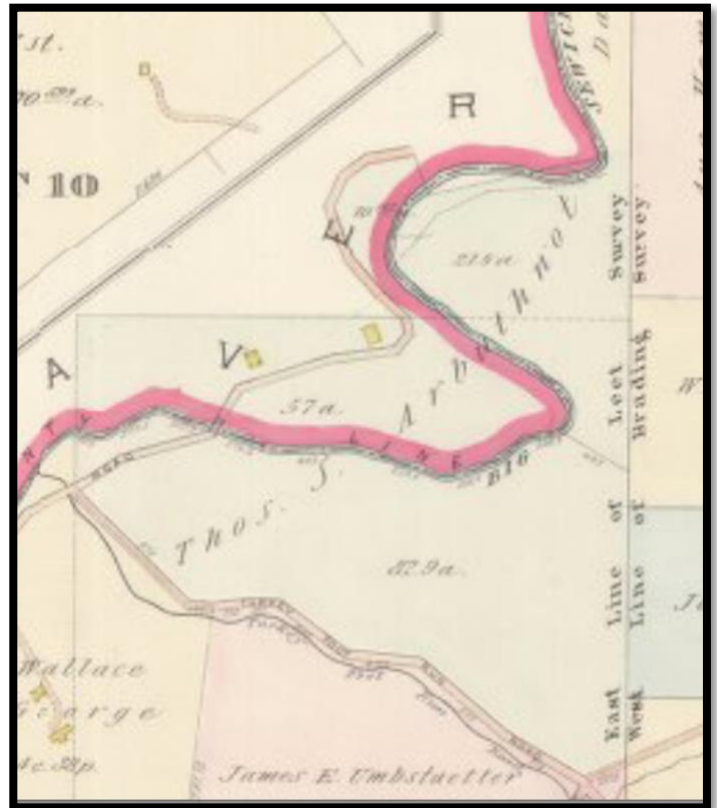


**Dr. Thomas S. Arbuthnot**

In 1900, Dr. Thomas Arbuthnot of Shadyside purchased the 170-acre tract bounded by Beadnell, Turkeyfoot and Big Sewickley Creek roads (pictured right) from the Bradford heirs. Big Sewickley Creek, marked in red, flowed through the tract that extended into Economy Township, Beaver County.



While serving as Dean of the University of Pittsburgh Medical School (1908-1917), Dr. Arbuthnot began the process of creating the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center before joining the WWI Medical Corps in France where he



operated a base hospital with medical students and nurses from Pittsburgh. After the war, he became the longtime president of the Carnegie Hero Commission and the Pittsburgh Arts Society, as well as continuing with his medical career.

In addition to his numerous professional and civic interests, Dr. Arbuthnot was a big game hunter who provided trophies to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. He was a noted lecturer and author of several books on the subject.

Following Dr. Arbuthnot's death in 1956, his Shadyside estate became the new home of the Ellis School that stands opposite Mellon Park on Fifth Avenue. Dr. Arbuthnot never built a summer home on his Sewickley Township property, but instead rented to a tenant.

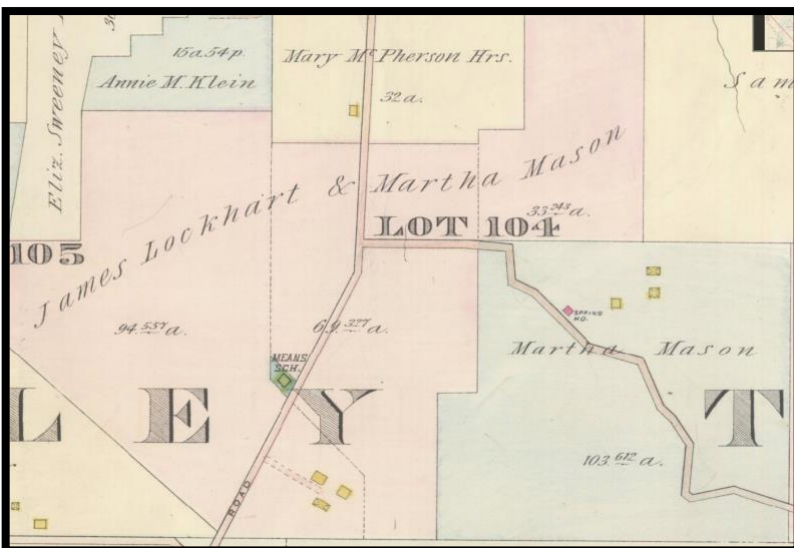


### ***James Lockhart & Martha Lockhart Mason***

James Lockhart and his sister Martha Mason were the children of Charles Lockhart, banker and founder of the Standard Oil and Lockhart Iron and Steel companies. The family resided in Pittsburgh's East End. James Lockhart was VP of Lockhart Iron and Steel, a Mellon Bank director, and trustee of numerous institutions that included the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Tech, Mellon Institute and the YMCA among others.

*"Two sales of suburban real estate reported yesterday show the encroachments that wealthy home hunters are making on districts hitherto devoted exclusively to farming and how scarce really desirable country sites are in the vicinity of Pittsburgh. The two sales were made by George Bros. the total amount involved being \$48,600. One farm sold was that of Mrs. Jane Jenny, 94 acres, situated on the Camp Meeting Road on Sewickley Heights. It is 3.5 miles distant from both Sewickley and Leetsdale. The other property is the Hockenberger farm, adjoining and containing 68 acres. The buyer is James H. Lockhart, who proposes to turn the farms into a handsome country place. The price paid, \$300 an acre, is the highest figure yet offered for land so far back from the river. Adjoining these properties is the old dairy farm bought two years ago by William Witherow and others, and which is also to be marketed for home sites."*

**(Weekly Gazette 21 March 1903)**



The Lockhart/Mason property fronted onto Camp Meeting and the Camp Meeting-Duff City roads as seen on this 1906 Sewickley Township map. [The former Jenny (Means) School shown on the map at the tip of the "Y" is now the Bell Acres Borough Municipal Building.] Lockhart and Mason never built summer homes on the property. Instead, much of it was sold c1917 to George E. Tener of Sewickley.

### ***George E. Tener***

George Evans Tener was an Irish émigré who became associated with the iron and steel industry. His younger brother John Tener was once governor of Pennsylvania and president of the National Baseball League. The George Tener family estate was *Ardarra* on Grove Street in Sewickley [shown right]. Following his retirement in 1918, Mr. Tener devoted most of his time to the Sewickley Township farm that was noted for its Short Horn dairy herd.



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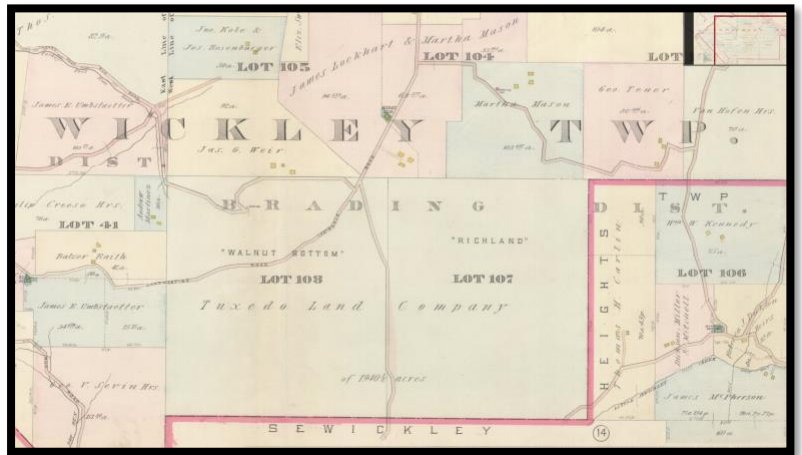
Soon after arriving in the Sewickley Valley from his native England, Joseph Rutter found employment as the Teners' coachman/chauffeur. His future wife, also an English émigré, was in service with another family when they first met. Following their 1913 marriage, the Rutters made their home in an apartment above the garage at *Ardarra*, where they raised two sons.

In time, Mr. Rutter began working on the farm with George Goubeaud, the Teners' resident farmer. Following Mr. Tener's death (1923), the Tener family requested that Mr. Rutter manage the farm, prompting the Rutters' move to the country. Mr. Rutter continued in the Teners' employ until 1931 when, as a result of the Depression, Mr. Rutter and Mr. Goubeaud no longer received wages. Instead, the men were permitted to make a living from the farm while the Teners continued to pay the taxes. This arrangement ended in 1935 when the farm was sold to John A. Bell, Jr. of Edgeworth. Mr. Rutter was able to find employment on the nearby W. P. Snyder estate while Mr. Goubeaud remained to manage the newly named Jonabell Farm.



### ***William P. Witherow***

William P. Witherow was a Pittsburgh civic and business leader who with D. T. Watson and two others, chartered the Tuxedo Land Company (1902). The group's aim was to preserve the "Heights" by limiting development



to large estates. The company dissolved in 1921, but not before selling 1,100 acres along Little Sewickley Creek and Fern Hollow roads to Witherow. His holdings also included roughly 600 acres bisected by Backbone Road in what is now Bell Acres (shown above). Eventually, much of the property was acquired by Sewickley Heights Borough for greenspace and his Bell Acres property became part of the Sewickley Heights Estates that includes the Sewickley Heights Golf Club. He and his wife were the namesakes of Witherow and Dilworth roads.



**John A. Friday**

In 1916, the Fridays purchased 27 acres at the corner of Camp Meeting and Sevins roads, the current location of Pine Manor. The adjacent one-room township school became known as the Friday School in recognition of its new neighbor.

With his father, brothers and son, John A. Friday was active in Pittsburgh's brewing industry. He became president of a reorganized Duquesne Brewery in 1932, the position later held by his son. Duquesne became the sixth largest brewery in the United States, known for *Duke* and *Silver Top* brand beers. It was under Mr. Friday's leadership that canned beer was first introduced to the Pittsburgh market in 1936 (shown right).



**John S. Graham**

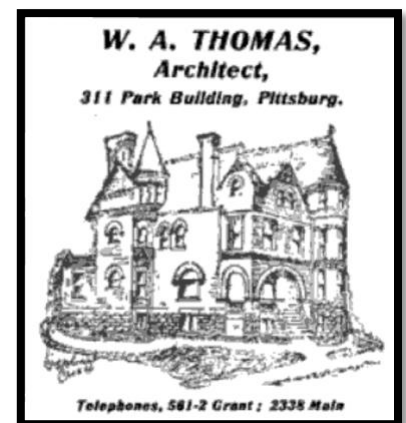
Born in Allegheny City, John Graham was the son of Senator James Graham and partner in the Baldwin & Graham stove manufacturing company. In 1899, Graham purchased both a home on Academy Avenue in Sewickley and a 106-acre Sewickley Township farm on Camp Meeting Road. This was the same year his company was consolidated with eight other Pittsburgh and Allegheny City foundries to create the Pittsburgh Stove and Range Company, for which he became Treasurer. His sister Ella Graham, an Allegheny City resident, purchased an adjoining 15-acre tract on Camp Meeting Road. The former Graham properties extended from Sevins Road into Leet Township to include Skrabut Lane.



**William A. Thomas**



Born in Wales, William Thomas earned a degree in architecture from Kings College in London, England before arriving in Pittsburgh in 1888. He became a leading architect and developer in the city, designing both residential and commercial buildings. The Squirrel Hill resident once owned 58 acres of the former Blum farm on Camp Meeting Road as a summer retreat. Sevins Road, Cherry and Summerlawn drives now occupy the site.



**James E. Umbstaetter &  
Wilhelmina Leet Shields Umbstaetter**



Born in Allegheny City, James E. Umbstaetter was the son of attorney Theobald Umbstaetter, an early law partner of Edwin Stanton who became President Lincoln's Secretary of War. James was a banker who was also active in the oil and gas industry and in glass manufacturing. Known for his interest in art, music and books, James married Wilhelmina Leet Shields (1896) whose ancestors arrived in the Sewickley Valley at the time of the American Revolution. The couple made their home on Beaver Road in the Shields section of Edgeworth.

*"He was interested in good roads and did much to promote and extend them back of Sewickley, being particularly active in getting the Turkeyfoot and Camp Meeting roads through, and was heavily interested in farm properties back of Sewickley."*  
(Gazette Times 25 August 1908)

The Umbstaetters owned several large tracts of land in the nearby countryside, including ones on Camp Meeting, Turkeyfoot, Little and Big Sewickley Creek roads in Sewickley Township. The Umbstaetter name is best remembered for the boy scout camp that once stood on the 105-acre Turkeyfoot Road tract deeded to the scouts by Mrs. Umbstaetter in memory of her husband. The tract is now part of the Bell Acres Nature Park.

To learn more, visit **Camp Umbstaetter**, **Cochran Fleming**, **Jonabell Farm**, **Signal Farm** and others at <http://bellacresborough.org/community/history/>

FOR SALE

**Turkey-Foot Creek  
Land**

Beautiful tract of 107 acres of hill and valley land, bordering on Turkey-Foot Creek, is now for sale. Suitable for group of small country homes, or for amusement or recreation park. Convenient to Sewickley, Leetsdale and Ambridge. One of the most picturesque and most popular spots in this vicinity.

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Neighboring Economy-Ambridge developed at the time as the "Sewickley Heights" district.



Golf at the Allegheny Country Club (1906)