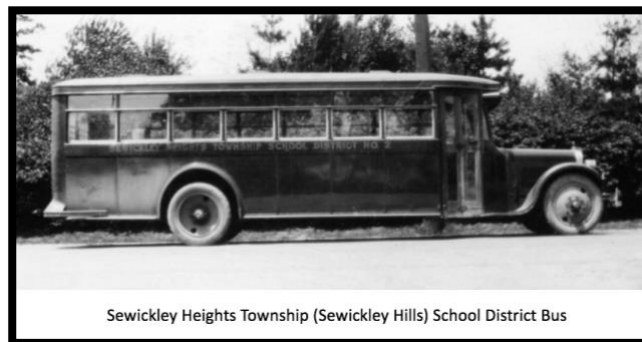


Back in the Country...

Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold



Country Schools

Following paths once used by native peoples, it was during the late 1790s and early 1800s that families began venturing into the wilderness North of the Ohio River.

There were no schools, churches or stores among the isolated farmsteads. Schooling might consist of simple lessons in reading and writing taught by parents who themselves often had a limited formal education. At a time when printed materials were scarce and costly, the family Bible was often the only reading material found in homes.

The earliest rural schools were subscription schools. This type of school was operated by an individual who collected a fee for each child who attended classes, which were usually offered for four months during the winter when children were not needed to work in the fields. The quality of teaching and content varied from school to school as there were no standards or oversight.

The Big Sewickley Creek Valley's first school was a subscription school opened by Squire John Neely circa 1820. Class was taught in a crude log building opposite what is now Linbrook Park for students who lived as far as "six to eight miles in every direction..." Subjects were limited to spelling, New Testament readings and arithmetic. Penmanship was practiced with sharpened goose quills and pokeberry juice. Squire Neely's successors would add grammar and geography to the curriculum. For many years, this was the extent of formal schooling available to children fortunate enough to have parents who could afford the subscription fees.

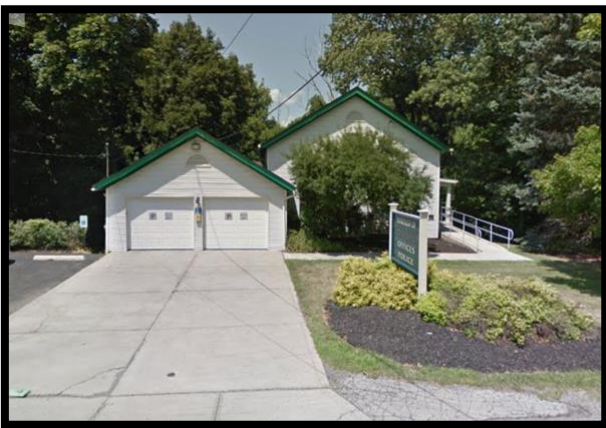


Squire Neely's log school on Big Sewickley Creek Road would have appeared much the same as this 1780s-era log academy that opened near Canonsburg, Pennsylvania and later became Jefferson College. Now restored, the building stands on the campus of Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania.

Realizing the need for educated citizens, Pennsylvania passed legislation in 1834 that allowed municipalities to levy taxes for the purpose of building public schools. Until the mid-twentieth century, when consolidations became the norm, each township and borough was its own school district with its own school directors. Beginning in 1854, in an attempt to bring a level of uniformity to public education, Allegheny County appointed a superintendent to oversee the large number of municipal school districts within its borders. Interestingly, the majority of teachers at the time were male. Only later, did women begin to dominate the teaching field.

One superintendent wrote, *“Female teachers - It affords me pleasure to say, that generally our females are succeeding very well, and are rapidly gaining favor with the public, and are receiving that encouragement which is absolutely necessary for them to succeed, doubt not that in the future they will be a very strong and efficient element in the teaching force of our country.”*

The first evidence of a school in what later became Bell Acres Borough appears on an 1851 Ohio Township map. An un-named school house is shown at the corner of Backbone and Camp Meeting roads. In 1854, the newly created Sewickley Township sought permission from the State to sell a schoolhouse, presumably the same one.



A different Camp Meeting Road schoolhouse appears on an 1862 map. Most often, schools took the name of a nearby property owner and this particular school, which was once known as the Means or Hockenberger school, is today remembered as the Jenny School. The remodeled schoolhouse is currently the Bell Acres Municipal Building (left).

By 1876, a second school had been built on Camp Meeting, near the Sevin Road intersection. Once known as the Creese School, it was renamed the Friday School and is today a remodeled private residence (right).



In 1933, the Jenny and Friday schools were among forty-three remaining one-room schools in Allegheny County. Students in grades one through four attended the Jenny School while older students in grades five through eight attended the Friday School. Upon completing the eighth grade, students were given a county administered exam to determine if they would graduate. After receiving a diploma, the student had no further obligation to attend school. If, however, he or she wished to go on to high school, it was as a tuition student with the home district covering the cost and the family providing transportation. Sewickley Township students had the choice of attending Sewickley, Leetsdale or Ambridge high schools. Unfortunately, it was the lack of transportation that prevented many young people from continuing their education.

Municipalities gradually replaced their aged one-room schools with new multi-room schools in which each grade level not only enjoyed its own classroom and teacher, but also had the benefit of indoor plumbing! Despite its advantages, consolidation was often opposed by taxpayers who felt one-room schools were perfectly fine. Facing years of opposition, it was not until the 1936-37 school year that school directors in Franklin Township [Franklin Park] with the help of federal funding were able to close their five one-room schools and open a consolidated school. Before then, some Franklin families chose to enroll their children as tuition students in McCandless Township's consolidated Ingomar School where there were only two grades in each classroom, instead of the usual eight found in the one-room schools.

Because a majority of school districts did not have high schools and lacked the resources to offer anything more than a rudimentary education, the State Legislature passed a bill in 1947 requiring counties to create administrative units for public schools, thus enabling districts to better utilize their combined facilities and

resources to provide students with more educational opportunities. Allegheny County was charged with the task of organizing 130+ independent school districts into forty administrative units.

As early as 1952, Allegheny County and the State Board of Education indicated they wanted the eleven Sewickley Valley communities and their ten school districts to become one administrative school district. The plan included Sewickley, Leetsdale, Edgeworth, Osborne, Haysville, Glenfield and Sewickley Heights boroughs with Aleppo, Leet, Sewickley [Bell Acres] and Sewickley Heights [Sewickley Hills] townships. The idea was not well received by the districts and could not be implemented without their unanimous approval.

The issue facing most districts was whether to come together as a Jointure or a Union. Jointures meant districts would share facilities and resources while keeping their own school boards and control of their taxes. One member from each of the districts would sit on a joint board. A Union meant there would be only one school board, which would set a uniform tax for the entire district. Arriving at a decision was a long and difficult process. Change was hard.

Both Sewickley and Leetsdale had high schools as well as a long standing civic rivalry. Sewickley's proposal to form a Union district and raise taxes to build a new high school was rejected by others whose taxes would have as much as doubled. Under this plan, Sewickley Township's taxes would have risen by 60%.

Leetsdale countered by proposing a five-district jointure of itself and Edgeworth with Sewickley, Leet and Sewickley Heights townships. This proposal was rejected by the County since any plan had to include all ten districts in order to receive State and County approval.

It was in July 1956 that the Quaker Valley Joint School District became Allegheny County's tenth jointure. Sewickley, Leetsdale, Sewickley Heights, Edgeworth-Heights, Glenfield, and Osborne created an "open ended" jointure meaning others could join at a later time. Each retained its own school board with operating costs apportioned by assessed property valuations and the number of pupils from each community. Leetsdale High School (right) became the new Quaker Valley High School and the former Sewickley High School (below) became a junior high. Haysville joined the district in September after closing the last one-room school in all of Allegheny County.



Sewickley, Aleppo, Leet Townships in Quaker Valley Pact

At the same time, the new district agreed to accept tuition students from Leet, Aleppo and Sewickley townships. Not until April 1958 did the townships join the district as members, thus completing the Quaker Valley School District.

School Stories

When it ceded from Ohio Township in 1854, Sewickley Township included all of what is now Bell Acres, Edgeworth, Leet and Leetsdale as well as portions of Sewickley Heights and Sewickley Hills. Sewickley Borough left Ohio Township the previous year.

Allegheny County's report for the school year ending June 6, 1859, provides the following information:

Sewickley Township School District:

- 6 schools averaging 4 months of classes
- 5 male teachers earning an average \$25/month
- 1 female teacher earning \$20/month
- 101 male students and 68 female students

Sewickley Borough School District:

- 3 schools averaging 6 months of classes
- 1 male teacher earning \$40.00/month
- 2 female teachers earning \$22.50/month
- 107 male students and 96 female students

TEACHERS WANTED
FOUR TEACHERS WANTED IN
 Franklin Township...Four months
 tuition to commence November
 1st, 1866. Salary, \$30.00 per
 month.

Haysville School

Until 1937, Haysville's original one-room schoolhouse sat perched on the hillside overlooking the Beaver Road (top). It was during construction of the Ohio River Boulevard that Allegheny County razed the school and replaced it with a new brick building a short distance away (bottom).

The school continued to operate until September 1956 when Haysville formally joined the new Quaker Valley Joint School District and students were bussed to Osborne Elementary and Sewickley Junior-High. Haysville School had the distinction of being the last one-room school in Allegheny County to close.



Magee & Blackburn Two-Room Schools

Until Sewickley Heights Township (Sewickley Hills) and Edgeworth Borough formed the Edgeworth-Sewickley Heights School District in 1950, students attended schools on Magee and Blackburn roads in Sewickley Heights Township. Magee School, which housed grades five through eight, closed in 1949. Blackburn School, which housed the younger students closed the following year. Taxes were then increased to pay for two buses needed to transport pupils to Edgeworth School, which featured ten classrooms and an auditorium. During the 1950s, Sewickley Heights Borough annexed acreage from adjacent municipalities, which is why the Blackburn School site is now located within that borough. The former site of the Magee School is now part of the Sewickley Hills Borough Park. The Blackburn School site is currently used for church parking.



Magee School



Blackburn students standing in their schoolyard opposite the Blackburn Methodist Church.

"We moved to Camp Meeting Road [Franklin Township] in the Spring of 1936 and my mother and great-uncle drove me to the McDevitt School for my first day of school. Prior to this, I attended the school in Edgeworth where I dressed in knickers, a white shirt, white socks and dress shoes. After seeing the country one-room school and the boys dressed in boots, jeans and t-shirts, my mother went home and cried all day. I loved it there. We tried to throw snowballs down the chimney to put out the fire, which meant we would delay the start of school. We also tried to trap the girls in the outhouse."

Bill Hoffman

Glen Mitchell School

By 1933, the Glen Mitchell School on Glen Mitchell Road in Alleppo Township was one of the few remaining one-room schools in



Allegheny County. There was one first grader and two eighth graders out of twenty-five students that year. The school had no plumbing and water had to be carried from a nearby farm. Reportedly, many of the parents were jobless because of the Great Depression.

Jenny and Friday Schools

As new municipalities were created from the original Sewickley Township, schools once belonging to the township became the property of the newly created school districts in which they were located. The Jenny and Friday schools stood in what remained of Sewickley Township [Bell Acres].

Box Socials were popular community events that were used as fundraisers for schools and churches. They involved young women preparing a picnic style meal for two that was placed into a decorated shoe box along with the young lady's name. The colorful boxes were then auctioned to the young men in the audience. Spirited bidding ensued, with shouts and cheers urging higher and higher bids. Only after opening his chosen box, did the young man discover with whom he would be sharing his meal.

Social a Success

A box and pie social was held by the pupils of the Jenny School Monday evening...The net proceeds of the social amounted to \$56. This money is to be used by the pupils to purchase a new bell for their school.

Pittsburgh Press March 17, 1920

Box and Pie Social at Jenny School

On Friday evening, April 30, the pupils of the Jenny School, with the assistance of their teacher, Samuel H. Kennedy, held a box and pie social. This is the second social the pupils of this school have held this term. The proceeds of the social are to be used to purchase a stage curtain for the class plays and entertainments. A 500-pound bell was purchased with the proceeds obtained from the first social which was held in March. Owing to the railroad strike the bell has not been received yet.

The pupils hope to have enough money left after buying the curtain to purchase pictures for the school and ice cream for their picnic.

Pittsburgh Press May 1, 1920



Jenny School students

Box Social at Jenny School

A large crowd attended the Box Social and entertainment held in the Jenny School Friday evening, December 14th. A number of people from Sewickley, Edgeworth, Leetsdale and Ambridge motored out to the school and participated in the social activities of the evening. Miss Gladys Grine the charming and popular teacher of the school arranged the social and entertainment.

Benjamin Holman...auctioned off the boxes. Ben was quite successful as an auctioneer and succeeded in making the boys pay a liberal price for the boxes...

Pittsburgh Press December 22, 1923

Constable Spends Time Annoying 'Petters'

In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love – but in Sewickley Twp. those troubled thusly are learning to be careful as the result of an edict passed recently by the school board ordering Constable C. W. Profater to keep the "petters" out of the Jenny school yard.

The board was forced to adopt this policy as the result of complaints on the part of those residing in the neighborhood of the building. The dark playground made a perfect rendezvous...

About 18 couples have been apprehended so far and a number will get hearings in Sewickley...They will be charged with trespassing. A few are Pittsburgh couples.

"It beats me why young folks from Pittsburgh would desert havens like Schenley and Highland parks for a two-by-four schoolyard," said Profater.

Post-Gazette April 25, 1930

"Moving to the [Bell] farm was just another adventure for me, a nine-year-old, with the advantages of having a pony to ride and woods and fields in which to roam. The ways of farm kids were somewhat different from those living in the [Sewickley] village, but kids adapt, and besides, the school vacations were longer. The Jenny School, out on Campmeeting Road near where we lived, was for kids in grades one through four. The school had only one teacher, a pot-bellied stove for heat, and drinking water had to be carried from our springhouse in a five-gallon milk can. Friday School, located about two or three miles away, was similar except that kids in grades five through eight went there."

Joseph W. Rutter

"The Jenny School had two doors and a porch facing the road. There were two outhouses behind the school, one for the boys and one for the girls. We carried water from Bell's horse farm and we each had our own cups."

"Henry Hopkins drove a bus for the Jenny and Friday schools. He started on Big Sewickley and would drop everyone off at the Jenny School, including the Friday kids. He then went as far as Holman's Corner before coming back to Jenny where he dropped off the Jenny kids and picked up the Friday kids before ending at Friday School."

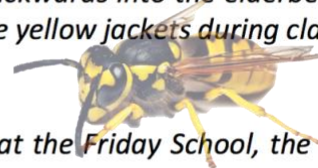
Harry Lavelle

"The one-room school teaching procedures and materials weren't very sophisticated, even by the standards of the times, but I don't recall anybody escaping from the eighth grade without being able to read and write, or add a column of figures."

"Facing the blackboard, the classes were arranged in rows in ascending order from the left to right. It is small wonder that we all were well grounded in the basics since we could hear them presented four times during our career at the [Friday] school. If a student was just a little curious, and maybe a little bored with his own assignments, he could listen in on what was being discussed to his right."

Joseph W. Rutter

"Around 1940, when I was attending the Friday School...a friend and I discovered that it was easy to capture yellow jackets that were feeding on fruit lying around the schoolyard. One could cut off a piece of elderberry stalk, push the pith back to form a hollow space, then approach the target yellow jacket with the chamber and a small stick suitable for a cork. One could nudge the preoccupied yellow jacket backwards into the elderberry chamber and plug it with the stick. We entertained diabolical schemes to release the yellow jackets during class, but never did."



"Crab apples are another story...They make excellent missiles...During one recess at the Friday School, the air was suddenly full of flying crab apples. When the teacher finally restored order, we all had the same story, 'I didn't start it. I just flung back the apples that hit me.'"

Andrew Dequasie from **A Lifetime Nature Walk: Always a Babe in the Woods**



One teacher and more than 50 students at the Friday School

Friday School Box Social

Miss Mary Harrison, the popular and charming teacher of the Friday School...opened the social season of the district with a box social and dance in the school building Saturday evening. A happy and large crowd of young and elderly people from the country districts and surrounding towns were present.

There was a huge pyramid of boxes and pies, with all the trimmings and decorations, stacked up on a large table...

After the boxes and pies had been auctioned off, the young people danced until a late hour...The proceeds obtained from the social...will be devoted to placing electric lights in the school building.

Sewickley Herald c1940

Sewickley Township School Claims Record

Pupils of Friday School in Sewickley Township yesterday claimed a record in the recent school scrap drive, their report indicating that they collected 277.3 pounds per pupil.

The campaign was conducted under the supervision of Viola C. Stevenson, a school instructor and also a salvage chairman for the township. Proceeds of the scrap collection were used to purchase some school equipment and the remainder was used to buy war stamps.

Post-Gazette December 9, 1942

"We would walk over the hill to Walker Park on Little Sewickley Creek and have our lunch before returning to Friday School."

"There was a path through the woods from the Sands Plan to Sevin Road that we used to reach Friday School."

"The older kids would go to Hopkins farm for drinking water."

"At Friday School, we could hear them blasting at the [Sevin Road] quarry."

Harry Lavelle

A serious issue facing Sewickley Township was the cost of educating the students living in Valley Homes. Built in 1943 as temporary wartime housing for defense workers and their families, the 372-unit facility stood at the corner of Turkeyfoot and Big Sewickley Creek roads. It was a federal housing project administered by the Allegheny County Housing Authority. In lieu of paying taxes, government aid was pledged to help with the cost of educating Valley Homes students.

Sewickley Township closed the Jenny and Friday schools in 1946 and began sending township children to neighboring school districts as tuition students, including approximately 300 Valley Homes youngsters. In 1951 government subsidies were reduced, pushing the school district into bankruptcy. At a time when tuition owed Ambridge High School alone amounted to \$40,000 annually, Sewickley Township received \$18,000 towards tuition and transportation costs for Valley Homes students. The financial situation improved, however, once Valley Homes closed in 1954. In 1956, the township began sending its children to schools in the newly organized Quaker Valley School District as tuition students before joining the district two years later.



First Ward School



Ambridge Junior-Senior High School

Hot Dog Day

"There were two groups of students at Fair Oaks Elementary School, those who lived close enough to walk home for lunch and those who rode a bus and carried a lunch. I rode the bus and my lunch usually consisted of peanut butter and jelly or sometimes chipped ham. Needless to say, bagged lunches were boring with the same thing every day, but the PTA sometimes livened our school days with Hot Dog Day.

Tickets costing five or ten cents were sold in advance and on the big day, our mothers came to school and cooked. Mustard, ketchup and onions sat on tables for us to use. What a treat! The girls usually bought one or two hot dogs, but not us boys. In our minds, we had to have three or four to show what big men we were. Afterwards, we headed to the playground for a game of kickball before returning indoors for class. Today, when hot lunches in school cafeterias are the norm, it's amusing to think how a simple hot dog brought so much joy into children's lives." Charlie Kulbacki

The Paul Brothers

Les Paul and his younger brother Dennis lived in Valley Homes from 1946 to 1950 while their father was employed at Dravo. During that time, they were bussed to school in Ambridge.

Mr. Paul paid ten dollars for a used trumpet that the boys shared. Les recalls how at noon, after his morning music lesson at the junior-high, he would carry the trumpet to the First Ward School for his brother's afternoon lesson.

Les credits his sixth-grade teacher at the First Ward school for encouraging his interest in music. During high school, he performed with the Tommy Carlyn Band in and around Pittsburgh. Because of his musical ability, he was assigned to a Marine band during his time in the military, which led to his becoming a professional musician and educator in civilian life.



Sewickley Township students once attended Fair Oaks Elementary in neighboring Leet Township. The school was located on Mound Street before being razed.

