

# *Back in the Country...*

## *Bell Acres Stories*

By Debby Rabold

### **Valley Homes Defense Housing (1943-1954)**



Affordable housing was already in short supply and only made worse with the nation's entry into World War II. The influx of defense workers and their families relocating to be near jobs in factories, mills and shipyards contributed to a severe housing shortage that was beyond the private sector's ability to solve. Government help was needed.

Established in 1940, the Lanham Act provided federal funding for a broad range of public works projects, including housing, child care centers, schools and hospitals. During the war, aid was given to communities whose populations were swollen by the influx of defense workers' families. Nationwide, 1.9 million wartime housing units would be built.

The Pennsylvania cities of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Erie, Allentown, Bethlehem and Johnstown all received Lanham defense housing projects with the Pittsburgh area receiving the greatest number. Beginning in 1942, fourteen permanent and two temporary projects were built within a fifteen-mile radius of the city. The intention was to convert the permanent buildings into either co-ops or public housing at war's end. The temporary projects were meant to be razed after five years.

While Pittsburgh area projects were built with federal dollars, they were managed by the Allegheny County Housing Authority. Permanent complexes were located in Moon, Scott and Shaler townships as well as in Clairton, Turtle Creek and Braddock among others. Last to be built were the two temporary projects, Sewickley Township's Valley Homes and Victory Village in adjacent Leet Township.

The Ambridge/Neville Island industrial area, which covered portions of Allegheny and Beaver counties, was home to numerous mills, factories and shipyards that lined the Ohio River. Prominent among these was Dravo Corporation's Neville Island shipyard that built L(anding)S(hip)T(anks) for the Navy. With over 16,000 workers in this one company alone, affordable housing within the area was sorely needed.

In 1943, the 380-unit Valley Homes and 200-unit Victory Village were built less than a mile apart on Big Sewickley Creek Road and within two miles of Ambridge.



Dravo Corporation's Neville Island shipyard.  
(undated photo from **Historic Pittsburgh**)



Wartime housing was in such short supply that government built dormitories for factory workers were opened on Neville Island and trailer homes (pictured left) were moved to Ambridge.

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Henry Anderson was a veteran of the Civil War's early days. Harry, as he was known, enlisted in one of Allegheny County's first companies to form following the outbreak of hostilities in April 1861. His company had a three-month enlistment from April into July and served by protecting federal rail lines in Maryland. By 1870, the Anderson family was farming along Big Sewickley Creek in what is now Bell Acres Borough.

Flowing through the former Anderson farm from the hills above is Turkey Foot Run. The run drains into the larger Big Sewickley Creek that serves as the boundary between Allegheny and Beaver counties. From here, Big Sewickley meanders another two miles before emptying into the Ohio River between Leetsdale and Ambridge.

The farm was sold shortly after Anderson's death in 1901 and the property remained in use as farmland until being purchased by the Federal government for the Valley Homes project. The purchase price was \$25,000.



1938 aerial view of the future Valley Homes site. Big Sewickley Creek Road appears as a white ribbon. Turkey Foot Run flows right to left into Big Sewickley Creek. The Good Samaritan Catholic Cemetery is in the bottom left corner.

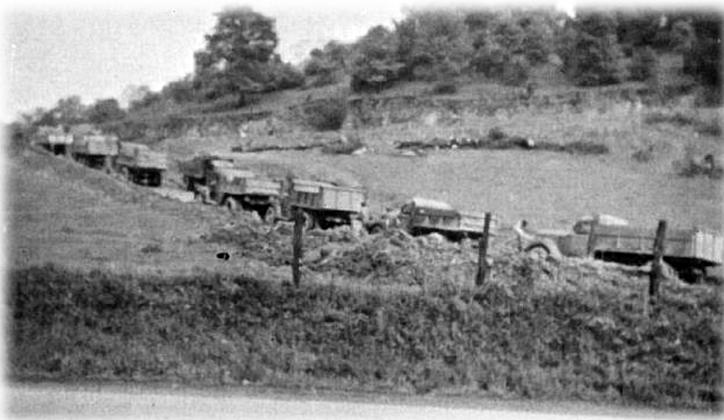
(Geological Survey Photo)



By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the 1920s, Turkey Foot Grove on the Big Sewickley Creek was a popular destination where Sewickley Valley residents enjoyed school, church and family picnics.

It was during World War I that George and Johanna Steebner purchased a home on Ambridge Avenue in the Fair Oaks section of Leet Township. They operated a dairy farm near East Liverpool, Ohio before moving to Fair Oaks where they established the Steebner Dairy. Following their deaths in 1938 and 1939 respectively, the acreage where dairy cows once grazed was purchased by the federal government for construction of the fifteen building 200 apartment unit Victory Village. The project was built by Pittsburgh's Trimble Company.

(Photos courtesy of Leet Township.)

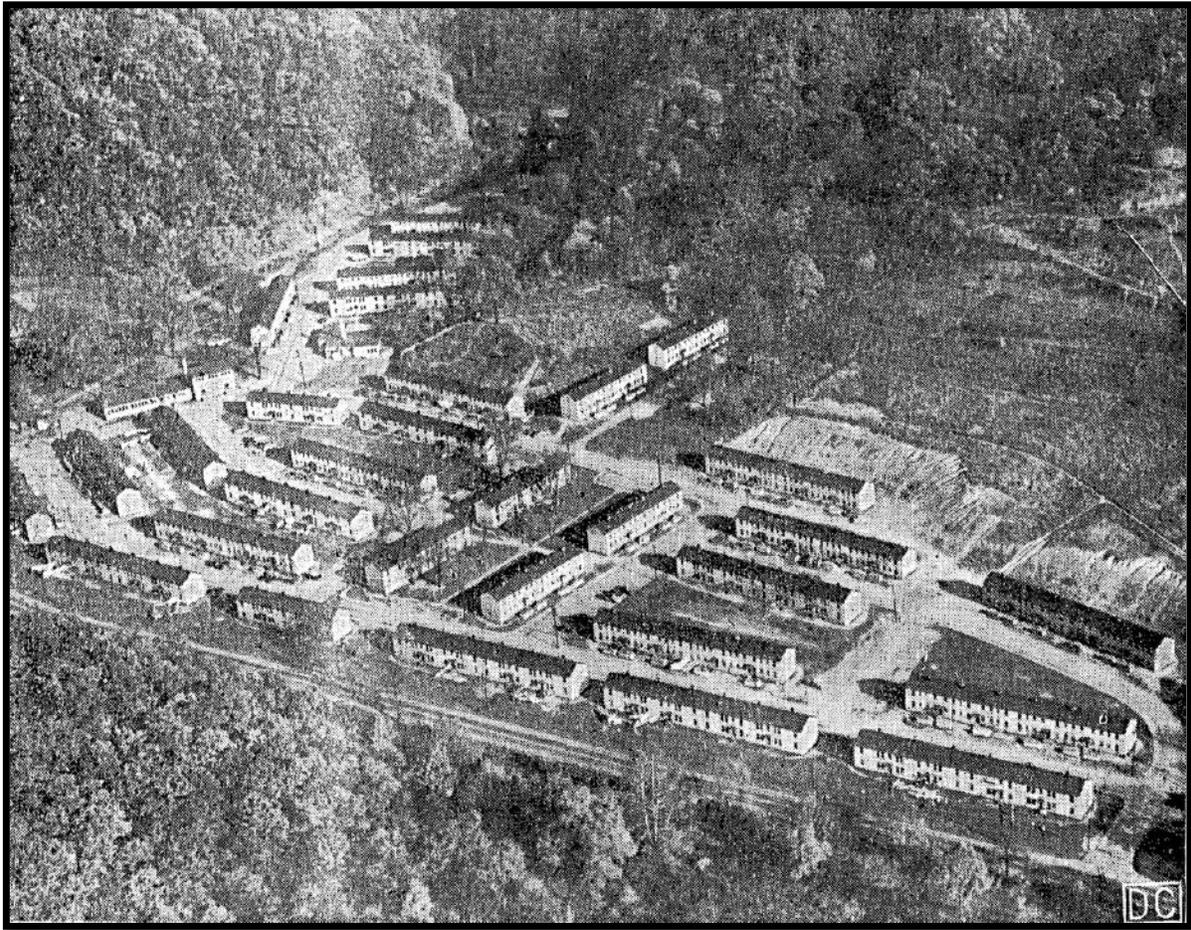


Monthly rent for 1, 2 & 3 bedroom apartments in both Valley Homes and Victory Village ranged from \$26.50 to \$32.50 with electricity and water included. Because Valley Homes tenants were provided with ice boxes instead of electric refrigerators, their rent was 50 cents less each month.

Allegheny County's 1947 housing report shows that during the previous year, 345 families occupied Valley Homes and had an average yearly income of \$2,304. All 200 units in Victory Village were occupied by families with an average annual income of \$2,256. Victory Village was an all-white community while Valley Homes was integrated with nine apartment blocks for African American workers and their families.



Victory Village apartment (Post-Gazette 1946)



Valley Homes occupied 92 acres at the corner of Turkeyfoot and Big Sewickley Creek roads.  
(Undated **Daily Citizen** photo)

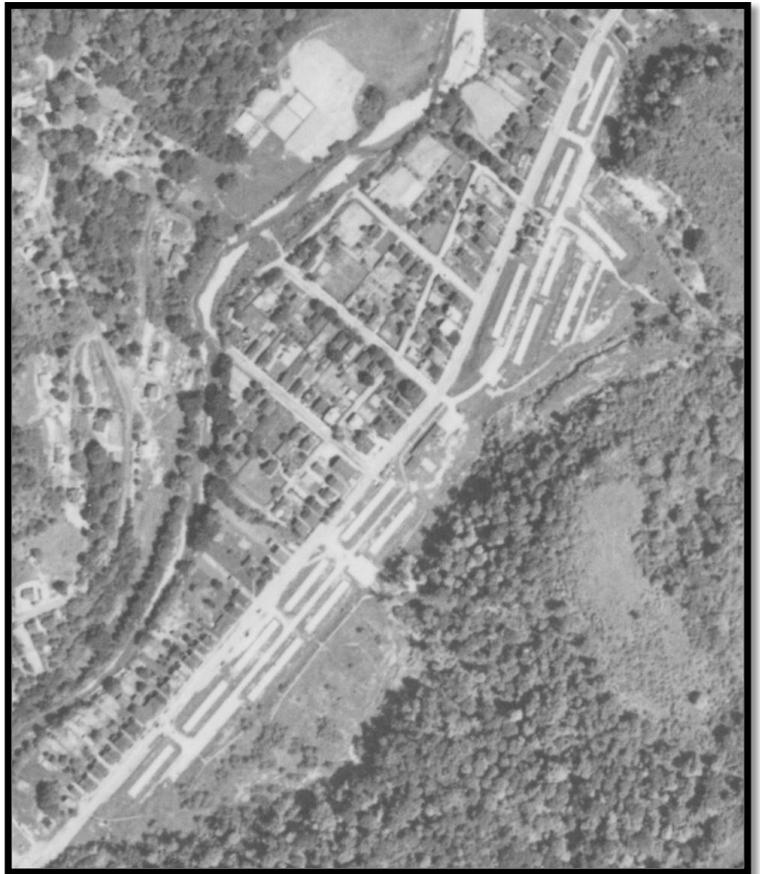


Due to limited electrical service, large appliances were not permitted in Valley Homes apartments. There were no washing machines or refrigerators. Tenants instead purchased blocks of ice for ice boxes and coal for cooking and heating. Laundry was washed by hand. Coal bins lined the paved streets (left).

(Bell Acres History)

This 1957 aerial photo of Fair Oaks shows the concrete pads on which Victory Village apartments once stood. Ambridge Avenue appears diagonally with winding Big Sewickley Creek on the far left.

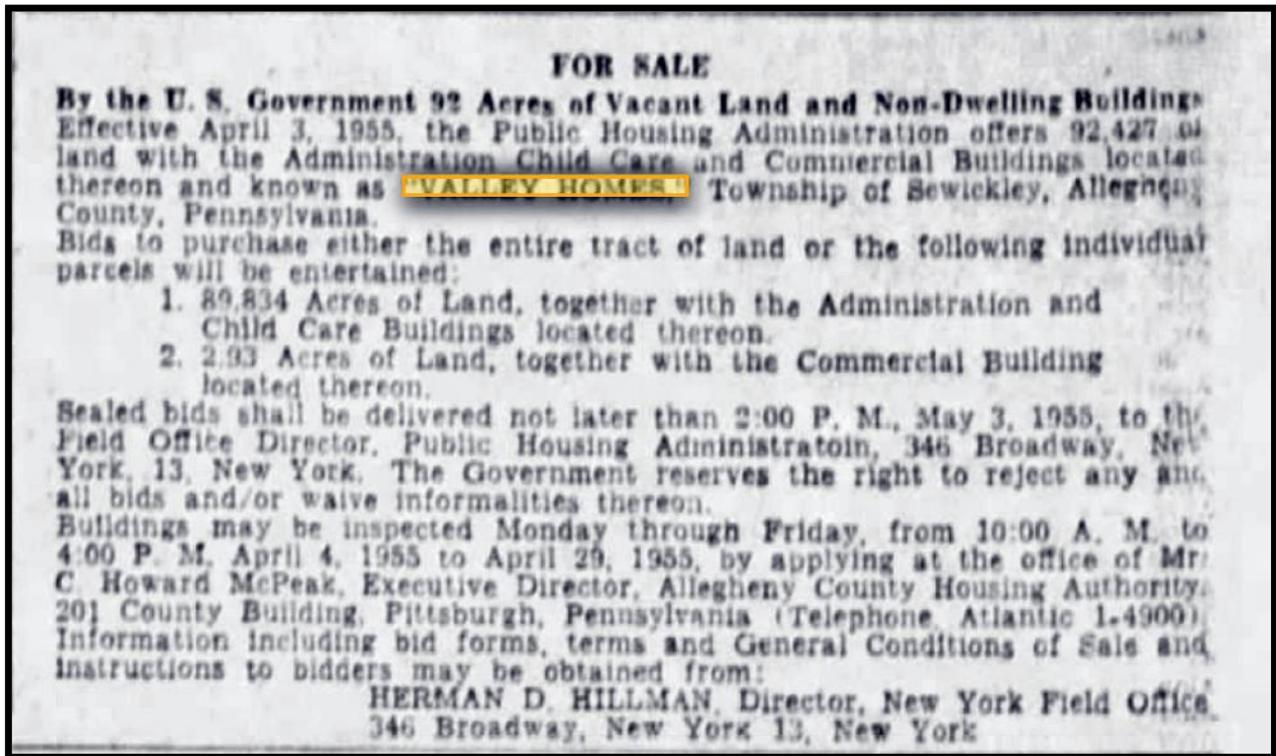
Victory Village provided an assembly hall, club room and library for residents as well as use of the Union Supply store in nearby Valley Homes.



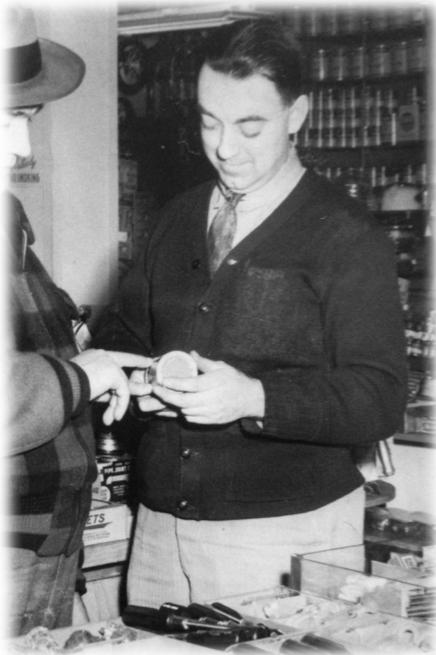
This 1957 aerial photo shows the remaining concrete slabs on which Valley Homes apartments once stood. The three surviving structures were the Union Supply store at the corner of Turkeyfoot and Big Sewickley Creek roads along with the administrative and child care buildings on the opposite side of Turkeyfoot.

The administrative building included offices and a small auditorium that was used by Sewickley Township officials for public meetings. The township considered purchasing the entire site for one dollar and the original purchase price of the land, however, declined to do so after vocal opposition from a citizens' group.

(Geological Survey Photos)



Ohio native Ralph Holzbach (pictured) purchased the administrative and child care buildings in 1958 where he relocated his Baden Steelbar and Bolt manufacturing company.



The former Valley Homes administration building as it now appears.  
(Bell Acres History)

Ralph and Geraldine Holzbach relocated to Baden, Pennsylvania from their native Ohio when Ralph took a position with A M Byer Company. Following WWII, he opened Baden Hardware where he began manufacturing metal bolts, brackets, bars and threaded rods in the basement workshop for home do-it-yourself building projects. Standing in the path of an Ohio River Boulevard expansion project, the company moved to the Big Sewickley Creek Road location where it manufactures specialty anchor bolts for industrial use.



Automobiles are shown parked in front of the Valley Homes child care center in this undated photo. Federally sponsored child care centers first appeared during WWII. Apartment buildings can be seen behind the center. On the left is a corner of the administration building.

(Bell Acres History)

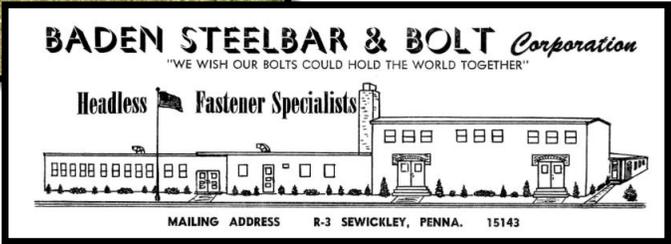


(Holzbach Family)



Yellow and brown was one of Ralph Holzbach's favorite color schemes. Valley Homes buildings were originally unpainted cinder block.

The former child care center as it now appears.  
(Bell Acres History)





(Bell Acres History)



(Bell Acres History)

In 1998, Al Sciulli acquired a portion of the Valley Homes site along Turkeyfoot Road from Beaver Valley Builders Supply, a road construction company. Sciulli's Sewickley Construction Products, Inc. manufactures plastic, corrugated metal and concrete drainage products and systems.



(Sewickley Construction Products, Inc.)

After immigrating from his native Italy, cement mason Vincent Sacco established the Beaver Valley Builders Supply company in 1947. By the early 1970s, the Ambridge company had relocated to the former Valley Homes site in Bell Acres and would become Western Pennsylvania's largest concrete supplier. In 1992, the company helped build Greater Pittsburgh Airport's midfield terminal.



Beaver Valley Builders folded during the 1990s. The property was then divided and eventually sold to the Sewickley Construction and Wine Concrete companies, which continue to operate on the original Valley Homes site.

Wine Concrete Products (white roof in upper right corner) occupies the former site of the Union Supply Store. The original administration building and child care center under the black roofs are now part of Baden Steelbar & Bolt. Sewickley Construction Products stands adjacent to Baden Steelbar & Bolt on Turkeyfoot Road.

(Zoom Earth)



(Bell Acres History photos)



To read about life in Valley Homes, visit:

<http://bellacresborough.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Valley-Homes-Memories.pdf>



Valley Homes is a temporary war housing project for shipyard workers and, under present law, is to be removed. It is ideally located in a rustic setting and the site improvements already made will be of benefit to private home builders.



HERMAN J. APEL  
Manager

Manager Herman J. Apel was in business for more than 25 years before he entered the public service. He was supervisor of the South Park Pool and former manager of the Neville Island Dormitories before his promotion to Valley Homes.

## Valley Homes

SEWICKLEY TOWNSHIP

### Temporary War Housing Project

Owned by FPHA

Built by ACHA

Managed by ACHA

380 Units

93 Acres

Population: 659

Occupancy: Mixed

Furnished Units

#### COSTS:

|                     |              |
|---------------------|--------------|
| Cost .....          | \$922,100.00 |
| Per Unit .....      | 2,427.00     |
| Land Cost .....     | 26,000.00    |
| Per Acre .....      | 270.00       |
| Per Unit .....      | 68.00        |
| Site Per Unit ..... | 613.00       |

Community Building  
Administration Building  
Commercial Building

129 units of 3 rooms  
180 units of 4 rooms  
80 units of 5 rooms  
Total rooms - - 1,400

Average Family Income ..... 2,316.00

