

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

By Debby Rabold

**Valley Homes Remembered (1946-1950)**  
*told by Les and Dennis Paul*



Brothers Dennis and Les Paul stand on the right in this undated photo.

Mr. Lester Paul, Sr. received a WWII draft notice while employed as a diesel mechanic by the Dravo Corporation. He worked on towboats that powered coal filled barges destined for Pittsburgh area mills. Because of his expertise, Mr. Paul was not drafted into the army, but was instead hired by the Santa Fe Railroad, which played a vital role in transporting both troops and supplies. Mr. Paul was sent to the sprawling railroad maintenance yard in the Mojave Desert community of Needles, California located on the Colorado River.



Santa Fe RR Maintenance Yard, Needles, California  
(Jack Delano, 1943)

Having lived in Charleroi, Pennsylvania with their mother's large extended family, Les and his younger brother Dennis were in third and second grades respectively when they and their mother joined their father in California.

The family was to be provided a trailer in which to live, however, the facilities were not yet completed by the time Mrs. Paul and the boys arrived. Instead, the Pauls were sent to San Bernardino before being moved to Winslow, Arizona where Mr. Paul worked in the Santa Fe maintenance yard. While there, Les and Dennis attended school with Native American youngsters. After three months, the family returned to Needles to be housed in a trailer until apartments were built for defense workers and their families. *"It was really hot in the summer and really cold in the winter,"* recalls Dennis. The boys attended school in three different states that year.

Needles sits on the iconic Route 66 close to the tip of Nevada at the California/Arizona border. The small town played a role in John Steinbeck's Great Depression novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Between 1942 and 1944, the town was part of the U. S. Army's Desert Training Center that covered much of Southern California and Western Arizona. The training center prepared soldiers for desert warfare in North Africa and was home to General Patten's 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division.

The family returned home to Charleroi after the war and Mr. Paul resumed working for Dravo. Because of the post-war housing shortage, the Pauls lived with one of Mrs. Paul's sisters until the Fall of 1946 when they secured an apartment at Valley Homes in Sewickley Township, which is now Bell Acres Borough.

Les was eleven years old and Dennis almost ten when they arrived at Valley Homes. By then, Sewickley Township had closed its two one-room schools and was sending youngsters to schools in neighboring communities as tuition students. The Paul brothers were assigned to the fifth and sixth grades at First Ward School in Ambridge.



Valley Homes (1943-1954) was built as temporary wartime housing for defense workers in the nearby mills of Ambridge and Neville Island. Three hundred and eighty units were constructed by the federal government on ninety-three acres at the corner of Big Sewickley Creek and Turkeyfoot roads. The original plan was to keep Valley Homes open for five years, however, it stood longer in order to provide much needed post-war housing.

Les: *"We were shocked when we saw the apartment. The floor was a concrete slab and the walls were cinder blocks. We returned home to Charleroi the first day."*

Coal bins lined paved streets in Valley Homes.





Big Sewickley Creek Road appears in the lower half of the photo with Turkeyfoot Road in the upper left corner. Unit 1A is indicated. The buildings were razed in 1954. (Undated **Daily Citizen** photo)

The Pauls moved into Unit 1A in September 1946. The first-floor apartment shared an outside door with the apartment across the hall. Two second-floor apartments shared an entrance on the opposite side of the building. An upright piano sat in the narrow hall between the first-floor apartments, leaving just enough space for Mrs. Paul to stand while playing.

Dennis: *"The apartment door opened into the kitchen where we had our dining room table. On the left was the ice box and sink. Straight ahead was the coal cook stove. On the right was the opening into the living room where we had a couch. Whenever we had company, that's where my brother and I slept. In the hall was a storage area where we kept our bikes. On the left was the bathroom and next to it was the master bedroom. Then a smaller bedroom. A pot belly stove for heating sat in the hallway."*

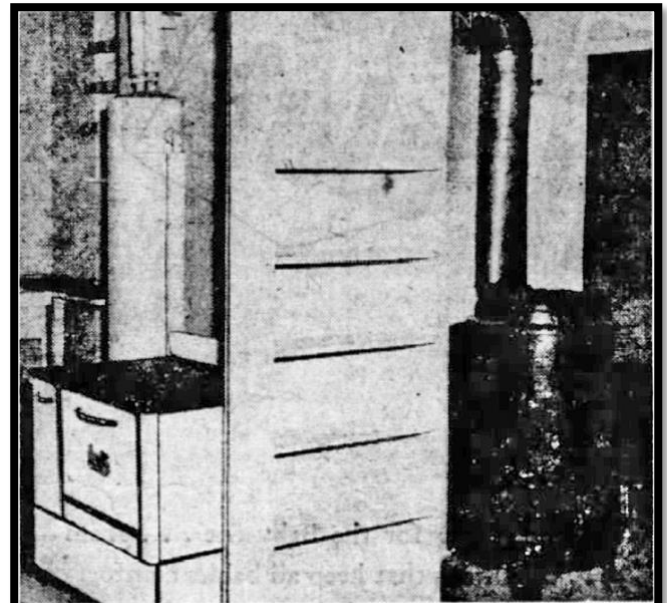
Other than lighting and a few small items, electrical appliances were not allowed. There were no electric refrigerators or washing machines. Ice boxes kept food cold. The housewife placed a card in her window to alert the deliveryman that ice was needed. Laundry was washed by hand in the kitchen sink and hung to dry. Tenants also purchased the coal needed for cooking and heating.



Dennis: "Coal always came in chunks, maybe a foot across. My dad gave me a hammer and said my job was to break it into smaller pieces on the concrete so it was easier for my mother to handle. I remember seeing the pot belly stove glowing red in the winter."

Dennis: "We cooked and heated with coal. Water pipes ran through the stove and went directly to the shower head. On Saturday nights, after dinner, we would take quick showers while the water was hot."

Dennis: "We kids would throw pieces of coal and rocks at each other. After our "battles", I would fill a bucket with the coal and take it home. My dad would commend me for collecting free coal!"



Valley Homes coal fired stoves. [Pittsburgh Press 9/7/1952]

Les: "Most of the men living in Valley Homes worked in the nearby steel industry: American Bridge, Spangs Pipe, Byers Steel and J&L Steel. There were several segregated units for Black families and a mix of nationalities, but everyone seemed to get along."

Dennis: "It wasn't a bad experience for kids other than some fights. We made a lot of friends."

Mr. Paul was regularly gone for two or three weeks at a time while working on the rivers, leaving Mrs. Paul at home with the boys. "My mother usually let us do what we wanted, but we had to be home for dinner," said Dennis.

#### Les remembers....

"You were allowed very few electronics. We had a clock radio and listened to **Inner Sanctum**, **Lone Ranger** and country music shows, including **Slim Bryant and the Wildcats**. Knew of no one in Valley Homes with a television set. If we were in Ambridge, we could see TV in the furniture store window on Merchant Street."

"We were amazed the first time we went to Brookside Drive-In."

"My mother did laundry in the sink with a wringer clamped to the side."

"My mother would put a sign in the window showing how many pounds of ice she wanted. It was delivered in a dump truck. They chopped off a piece and carried it in on their shoulders."

"Union Supply was a one-story concrete block building across from Turkeyfoot, next to the creek. It sold a little bit of everything. Our dad bought us Red Ryder BB guns there for \$2.75. We went to the stone quarry up on the hill and shot cans."



*"Every summer, there were brush fires. Firemen would strap water tanks on our backs to help fight the fires."*

*"We often explored the woods. We started building a log cabin in the woods, until our parents found out and put a stop to it."*

*"Some of the parents hired someone to build a ballfield at our end of the project. It was rough. Had to go uphill to the outfield."*

*"We rode bikes. On some summer days, we rode fifty miles. We went up Sewickley Creek Road towards Brookside and up Wallrose down to Freedom then up the river to Rochester and back. Didn't have anything to eat or drink the whole time."*

**Big Sewickley Creek:**

*"We spent a lot of time there. We hunted crayfish. We built a dam across the road from us to make a place to ice skate. The water was about two feet deep."*

*"Someone built a little shack on the opposite side of the creek. You could go there to get away from everyone."*



*"We would walk in the water as far as we could go in either direction to explore."*

*"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."*

This is the site of the former stone bridge swimming hole as it appeared in Spring 2020.

**Dennis remembers....**

*"We were very fortunate to have good neighbors. Across the hall from us was a couple with older kids. The parents became good friends with our parents. He was a state liquor inspector whose job was to go to bars and taverns and make sure all the liquor they were selling had a tax stamp and to make sure they weren't gambling on pinball machines, which was illegal. He always had whiskey. If they went to court, they only needed one bottle as evidence. The rest was divided among the cops."*

*"Seems like in good weather, they always had some sort of event at the general store [Union Supply]. Sometimes people living here would have a little carnival and sometimes they would bring in activities. They made popcorn and that sort of thing."*

*"I went to First Methodist in Ambridge. I never had money for the bus fare, so I hitch hiked as far as the Duquesne power plant then walked. I got a medal from the church as the boy who never missed."*

*"We never had much crime, except one time. We were eating dinner and a hand reached around the door to open the chain latch. My dad stabbed the guy's hand and we never heard anything more about it. You called the state police if needed."*

*"The family upstairs had a large hot plate and blew fuses all the time."*

*"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."*

*"There was a nice woman half way up the hill who ran a clothesline in her yard once a week and would show a movie on the sheet."*

*"I listened to **Pirates** baseball on the radio. We played baseball in a field next to Zassick's garage. There was a field between Valley Homes and the cemetery, but it wasn't as nice. The nearest Little League was in Leetsdale. Zassicks also rented horses to ride."*



*"During the winter, there was so much soot in the air [from the coal burning stoves] that washing laundry was a repetitive process."*

This undated photo shows laundry drying outside Unit 1A. Big Sewickley Creek Road is on the left.

### **Moving On**

Mr. Paul bought the boys a \$10 trumpet at a pawn shop that led to their taking music lessons in school. At noon, Les carried the instrument from the junior high to the First Ward School so that Dennis could take an afternoon lesson. This arrangement lasted until Dennis decided to play trombone.





Les: *"On weekends, my mother would take me around to the neighbors and ask if they wanted to hear me play the trumpet. No one ever objected and it increased my interest in performing."*

At age fifteen, Les began travelling to Pittsburgh on weekends to play with the Tommy Carlyn dance band. After graduating from Ambridge High School in 1953, he joined the Marines where he served as a bandsman. Les went on to earn a degree in music education and continues to both perform and teach trumpet in Ohio.



At age thirteen, Dennis spent his first summer working on the river with his dad. Mr. Paul was chief engineer on the *Betty*, a Dravo double sternwheel towboat. In 1946/47, the boat was purchased by another company and renamed the **Jos. Smith** after the owner's father. Mr. Paul continued as chief engineer for the new owner.



The crew worked six hours on and six hours off for twenty days then ten days off. The **Jos. Smith** pushed as many as eight coal filled barges from as far as Fairmont, West Virginia to Pittsburgh on the Monongahela River. The work was hard, but Dennis found it exciting. His job included powering the searchlights, lubing the paddlewheels and making certain there was enough compressed air, which was needed to steer the boat. His work also included cleaning the bilges.

After graduating from Ambridge High School in 1954, Dennis joined the Navy and served as a radioman in a flight transport squadron. He would later earn an MBA and have a 32-year career with the Hewlett-Packard Company before retiring. When not travelling, Dennis is at home in California.

The family left Valley Homes in September 1950 after Mr. and Mrs. Paul purchased land in nearby Economy Borough on which they built a home.

*"Valley Homes had a great influence on my life. At the time, I didn't realize that. There were so many great people there."*

Les Paul

