

Back in the Country...

Bell Acres Stories

(1 of 6)

By Debby Rabold

BEGINNINGS

The Creeks

Bell Acres is framed by the Big Sewickley and Little Sewickley creeks watersheds. At forty-six square miles, the Big Sewickley watershed flows through ten municipalities and three counties, marking the boundary between Beaver and Allegheny counties, Bell Acres and Economy boroughs before emptying into the Ohio River at Ambridge.

Covering nearly ten square miles of seven Allegheny County municipalities, the Little Sewickley Creek flows into the Ohio River two miles above Big Sewickley Creek in Edgeworth. In the late 1800s, a channel was cut for the creek to empty directly into the river rather than taking a circuitous path through Edgeworth.



Native American paths once crisscrossed Western Pennsylvania as part of a network that covered eastern North America. Long before the arrival of European settlers, an unnamed path connecting the Allegheny River at Etna with the Ohio at Ambridge was used a shortcut between the two rivers. From the Allegheny, the path followed Pine Creek through what is now North Park, leading travelers to the headwaters of Big Sewickley Creek in Franklin Park. From there, the path made its way through the Big Sewickley Creek Valley to the Ohio and the path running along its north shore that led into the Ohio country.

These are not Western Pennsylvania's original Big and Little Sewickley creeks, nor were we the first Sewickley Township. The first Sewickley Township (1835) is in Westmoreland County through which the Sewickley creeks flow from Chestnut Ridge into the Youghiogheny River.



Little Sewickley Creek in Acorn Park.

Early settlers entered the "hills back of Sewickley" through these valleys. It was wilderness, but in time, farmsteads dotted the hillsides. David Duff's grist mill began operating on the East Branch of Big Sewickley Creek in 1812 with the first crude school house opening a few years later. Mitchell's grist and saw mills were built on Little Sewickley Creek in 1835. Though sparsely populated throughout their history, the Big and Little Sewickley Creek valleys and surrounding hillsides have been home to generations of families who have always appreciated their natural beauty.

The River

...has some ugly rifts and shoals which we found somewhat difficult to pass...The water is rapid in some places, gliding gently in others, and quite still in others.
(George Washington 1770)

It was not until the Army Corp of Engineers completed its locks and dam projects in the 1920s, that the Ohio River appeared as it does today; a broad, deep channel that allows for year round navigation. Throughout much of its history, the rock and sandbar filled riverbed was not navigational during dry summer months when it was sometimes possible to walk from one shore to the other, nor during winter months when covered in ice. There was always the danger of ships striking one of the many sandbars or mounds of driftwood and debris deposited by flood waters. In time, sand and gravel were removed, channels deepened, islands covered and currents slowed, making river travel easier and safer.

Songs of Every Day

by Arthur Burgoyne (1900)

[Merriman's sandbar was located in the Ohio River near Haysville.]

Merriman's Bar -- *Who has not heard tell of the ill-omened spot with its evil spell?
When the water is low, its white sands gleam 'mid the waters swift of Ohio's stream.
When the water is high 'tis lost to sight, like a thief that's hid in the shades of night.
And then neither sunshine nor friendly star betrays the location of Merriman's Bar.*

*'Tis a gallant sight when the coal boats gay from the Pittsburg landings sail away.
Mothers and wives, with a furtive tear, watch the lordly vessels disappear.
And with quivering lips and long-drawn sigh those dear ones murmur a last "Good-bye!"
Well do they know that the bold Jack Tar may go down to his ruin at Merriman's Bar.*



Undated post card showing the Ohio River at Sewickley before locks and dams were built.

In her delightful 1893 book *Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life*, Agnes L. Ellis shares a story about the first steamships to arrive in the Sewickley Valley.

Steamboats were used in 1817. The first one that came to this place from Cincinnati was the "Constitution," but it never reached Pittsburg, as it ran aground on the bar at "Dead Man." Two years afterwards the machinery was hauled away.

The first boat with a whistle passed Sewickley in 1837. It was called the "Uncle Sam" and there are still some of the early residents left who remember the excitement in Sewickley and vicinity when its shrill tones were first heard.

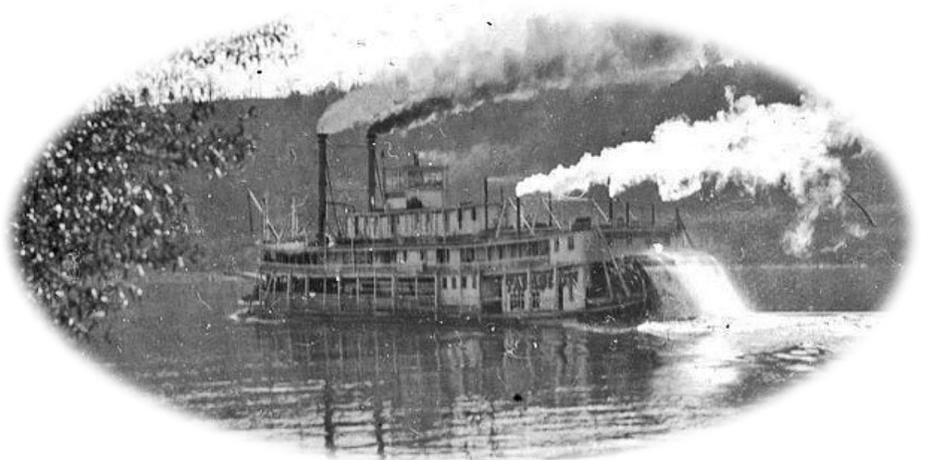
Mr. Cadwallader Evans...had worked for years and at last received a patent for the steam-whistle. It was arranged above the boiler, so that the engineer could control it.

The boat ran aground in "White's Riffle," near the old Tracy Landing, and the whistle was blown again and again. Through the valley and over the hilltop it echoed and re-echoed, causing a feeling of terror and alarm. Mr. Jacob Fry announced to his family and neighbors that the end of the world had come, and Gabriel was blowing his trumpet, telling them to fall on their knees and improve the short time left in prayer.

A general belief was that it was the cry of a wildcat, so some of the men left their sugar making and ran here and there with pitchforks, while Moses Hendricks, accompanied by a friend, took his gun and went as far as "Crow's Run" to shoot the animal. At last word was brought from the neighbors near the river what was the cause of the outcry, and quiet and peace were restored.

During his 1842 American tour, English novelist Charles Dickens spent three days in Pittsburgh before traveling to Cincinnati on the steamboat "Messenger". The following is his description of the Ohio River.

A fine broad river always, but in some parts much wider than others, and then there is usually a green island covered with trees, dividing it into two streams. Occasionally we stopped for a few minutes, maybe to take in wood, maybe for passengers at some small town or village, but the banks are for the most part deep solitude, overgrown with trees which are already in leaf and very green. For miles and miles and miles, these solitudes are unbroken by any sign of human life or a trace of human



footsteps, nor is anything seen to hover about them but the blue jay, whose color is so bright and yet so delicate that it looks like a flying flower. At lengthened intervals, a log cabin with its little space of cleared land about it, nestles under a rising ground and sends its thread of blue smoke curling up into the sky...Sometimes the ground is only just now cleared, the felled trees lying upon the soil, and the log house only this morning begun...The river has washed away its banks and stately trees have fallen down into the stream. Some have been there so long that they are mere dry, grisly skeletons. Some have just toppled over and, having earth yet about their roots, are bathing their green heads in the river and putting forth new shoots and branches. Some are almost sliding down, as you look at them, and some were drowned so long ago that their bleached arms start out from the middle of the current, and seem to try to grasp the boat and drag it under water.

The Land

The Sewickley Valley is a narrow stretch of bottom land between Glenfield and Big Sewickley Creek backed by steep hills and deep ravines. Like the rest of the Upper Ohio River Valley, the hills and valley of Sewickley were once heavily wooded with stands of hardwoods, hemlocks and pine whose thick canopies, entangled with wild grape vines, blocked sunlight from reaching the ground below. One early visitor wrote *the vines twine around the trees to the very top and the branches of those trees are so covered with grapes that one would take the grape to be the fruit of the tree*. Without sunlight, forests were deep in shadows and bare of vegetation. Early travelers were struck by the solitude.

Henry Brackenridge shared a childhood memory of floating down the Ohio in 1793: *I have no distinct recollection of the appearance of the Ohio River in the course of our descent, except that instead of being enlivened by towns and farms along its banks, it was a woody wilderness shut in to the water's edge...the banks presented an unbroken wilderness, the solitude was not disturbed by a single human voice..."*



The forests, however, were not devoid of life. Like much of Western Pennsylvania, the Ohio River Valley supported a large variety of wildlife. There were elk, bears, panthers and deer, as well as wolves. Waterways were filled with beavers and a variety of fish. Buzzards, eagles and ravens were commonplace, as were ducks, geese and wild turkeys. Arriving in the mid-1700s, the earliest explorers and traders often followed Buffalo roads, laid by great herds that once roamed the region.

In clearings, where sunlight was able to reach the ground, there grew a variety of wild fruits: strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, gooseberries, plums, grapes, cherries, crab apples and paw paws. There were nuts of every kind: hickory, walnut, chestnut and hazel. Apple, peach and pear trees arrived later with the first farmers.

(Photo: If left unchecked, wild grape vines entangle trees and other vegetation. Before felling trees for log house construction, boys would climb high into the branches to cut the vines, thus freeing the trees.)

17.- Thursday The woods were clear from underbrush, & the oaks & black walnut & other timber do not grow very compact, & there is scarcely anything to incommode a traveler in riding, almost in any direction, in the woods of the Ohio.

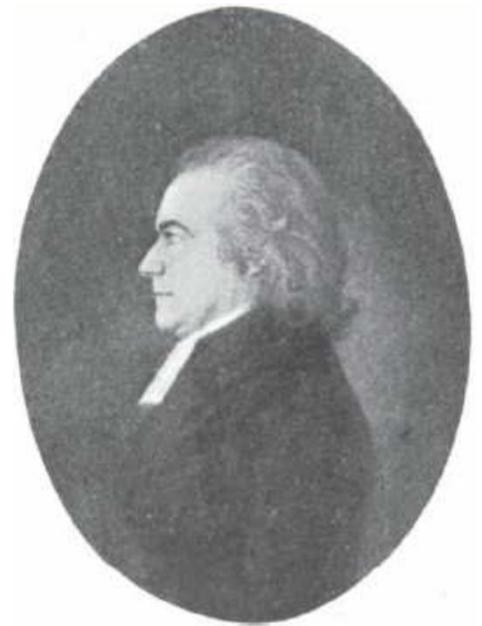
The Indians have been in the practice of burning over the ground, that they may have the advantage of seeing game at a distance among the trees. We saw this day several deer & flocks of Turkeys. About an hour before sun setting we arrived at Little Beaver Creek.

On the bank of this stream, which was fordable, we had a wonderful prospect of game. In the middle of the Creek, a small flock of wild geese were swimming, on the bank sat a large flock of Turkeys, & the wild pigeons covered one or two trees; & all being within musket shot, we had our choice for a supper. My Interpreter chose the Turkeys, & killed three at one shot.

Friday morning we were ready to leave our encampment about 8 O'Clock, & travelled through an excellent country of land, about 18 miles & coming to a small & pleasant river, we pitched our tent about an hour before sun setting.

Saturday 19 – Our path had led us along the North bank of the pleasant river Ohio, almost the whole way from Pittsburgh, & frequently within sight of the river. The soil is luxuriant, the growth principally white and black oak, Chestnut, Black Walnut, Hickory &c. The sweetest red plums grow in great abundance in this country, & were then in great perfection. Grapes grow spontaneously here, and wind around the trees. We have been favored with delightful weather.

At the request of his presbytery, Reverend David McClure undertook a spiritual tour of settlements west of the Allegheny mountains, arriving in Pittsburgh in September 1772. The above are excerpts from his travel diary in which he describes his journey along the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and Newcomers Town on the Muskingum, having crossed both Little and Big Sewickley creeks on the way.

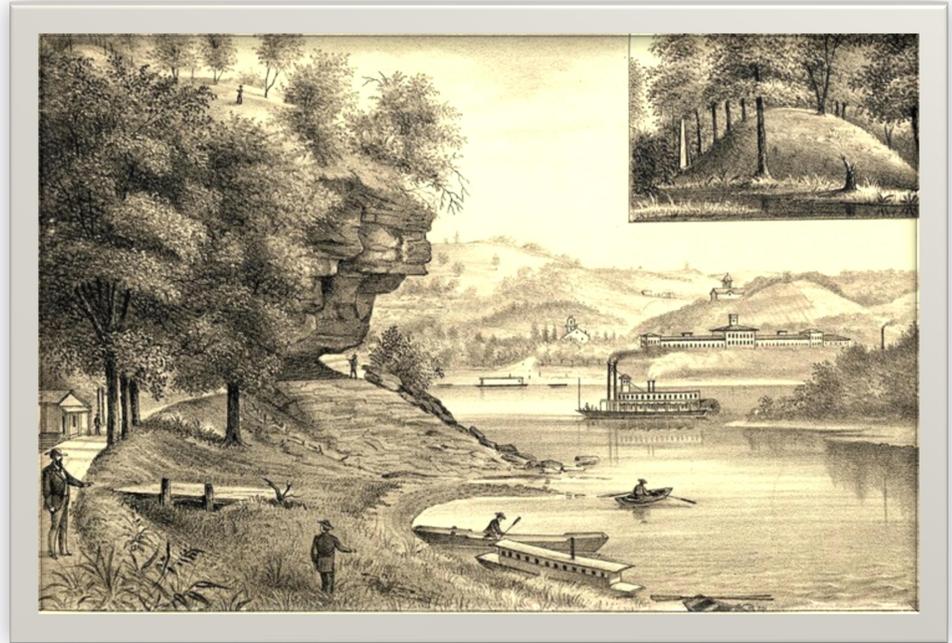


(Reverend David McClure 1748-1820)



The People

As early as 1,000 BC, the Adena peoples followed by the Hopewell, inhabited the Ohio River Valley, leaving behind ceremonial and burial mounds of differing shapes and sizes. The largest in Western Pennsylvania was the McKees Rocks mound near Pittsburgh. Constructed on a rock outcropping above the Ohio River, the sixteen-foot high mound was the site of thirty-three burials. Five smaller mounds once stood in the Leetsdale – Edgeworth area.



Little is known of these earliest Sewickley Valley inhabitants who vanished long before the later arrival of Native peoples from the East. Pushed westward by an unrelenting wave of European colonists, Delawares from Eastern Pennsylvania and Shawnees from the Southeast arrived in Western Pennsylvania in the early 1700s where they would remain until century's end when again forced to leave.

Other than Logstown, which overlooked the Ohio at a point below Ambridge, there were no permanent Native settlements on the river. It was at Logstown that French and English traders as well as representatives of the colonial governments met with Native peoples to conduct business. It was where George Washington visited in 1753 while on his ill-fated mission that resulted in the first shots of the French and Indian War.

During much of their history, the "hills back of Sewickley" were Native American hunting grounds with no settlements, only campsites. Covered in layers of soil, stone artifacts left behind by their makers would, in later years, be unearthed by the farmer's plow and collected by children as curiosities.

With the removal of Native peoples from Western Pennsylvania during the 1790s, settlers began venturing into the wilderness north of the Ohio, although a small group of Native Americans remained on Big Sewickley Creek, living in what was described as fourteen mud huts.



An early engraving (above) shows the McKees Rocks outcropping on which a burial mound was constructed (shown left). Western Penitentiary at Woods Run is also seen in the engraving.