

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

Vol. XIX - Number 2 December, 2003



### Suburban General Hospital

Our local hospital opened to the public on September 14, 1904. As part of its 100th anniversary celebrations the hospital hopes to exhibit photos and other memorabilia throughout the region it serves. If you have anything to share please contact us or Collette Semonik at the hospital. Send us anecdotes so we can include them in a newsletter in 2004.

The following paragraph from Jim Knox' Dear Emsworth briefly sets the stage. Mr. Porter lived in Emsworth until his death in 1948.

It was L. K. [Louis Kossuth] Porter who called the meeting which led to the founding of Suburban General Hospital. He had gone to the Ohio River Bank near Clifton Station to lend aid to "old Sandy," a Scots man who lived there and had become gravely ill. Sandy was well known to the young men who liked to fish, and he provided poles and bait for them. Sandy had to be placed in a boat and rowed to Emsworth dam, transferred to a wagon, and taken to a hospital in Pittsburgh. Mr. Porter realized the need for a local hospital and set in motion the founding of Suburban General in the old Joseph Brown estate on South Jackson Avenue in Bellevue. He secured the cooperation of 15 men. Meeting

with him in the Bellevue Borough Hall of July 7, 1903 were Captain William Martin, John Shannon, Captain W.B. Rogers, W.W. McCleary, Alex Hamilton, Wm. P. Kuipers, Wm. B. Kirker, and Stephen Newburn.

Many residents of local area serve Suburban General as employees, professional staff or members of its boards. Let's help with the celebration!

*With this issue we are reprinting articles from past issues. We hope these are interesting even to those of you who saw them the first time.*

### Courtney Mill Road (from June, 1986)

Many [older residents, that is] of us miss using the short-cut to Route 19 via Courtney Mill Road. This closing is due to an intersection being constructed at Union Avenue for the new highway, Rt. 279. Besides the beauty of this drive, the road is quite old and historic.

Casper Reel was the earliest settler in this area. His home and farm was in Ross Township on the grounds of Highland Country Club and part of West View. Courtney's mill in Emsworth (on the site of the [closed] Stop 'N Go Market on the boulevard) was a good mill with a steady flow of water which meant it was operating more days of the year. This was where Casper Reel brought his grain

to be ground; the wagon path he took became known as Courtney Mill Road.

The area that is now known as Kilbuck/Ben Avon Heights was partly forest and partly farm. There were no roads through that area. The wagon trail did not take the course of the present Perrysville Road, but went over the hill, probably the Wilson Drive/Newgate Road area. The exact location is unknown.

*That path would naturally continue down through or near Vinegar Hollow and passing west of the Community Presbyterian Church on the way to the flat area of land where the mill was located. The street behind the Stop 'N Go is named Race Street; probably a reference to the mill race delivering water from Lowries Run.*

### **Orphan Homes in Ben Avon**

(from February, 1990)

The Clendenning Homestead, a fourteen room frame Victorian house located on a two and a half acre lot in the East Side of Ben Avon. The Clendennings bought the property from the David Shafer Estate in 1877; further research may reveal whether the house was on the property or built by Clendennings after their purchase. Records reveal that the house and property were for sale again in 1889.

The Odd Fellows of Pennsylvania, a men's benevolent organization, were aware that a home was needed to care for deceased members' widows and children, particularly those who had very limited funds. It seemed to be a dream that could not be fulfilled. However, a Mr. Henry Sutmeyer, a member of the Pittsburgh Odd Fellows, and his wife Elizabeth, bought and presented the deed for the Clendenning house and

property to the Odd Fellows in February, 1891. Ironically, Mr. Sutmeyer died the following month. A charter for a home for Widows and Orphans of the Odd Fellows had been issued in February 1890.

According to the Annual Report published the following year, there were twenty children and one widow living there. Small children were taught by the Matron; older ones attended Ben Avon School.

It soon became evident that more room was needed. For example, in a group home it was necessary to isolate the children who were ill. In a few years, an extensive yellow brick addition was added. The number of widows in this Ben Avon location is unknown, but in 1912 the Rebekah Home I.O.O.F. was opened in a house at 529 California Avenue in Avalon. Today, after many alterations, it is known as the McDonald-Linn Funeral Home. A. W. McDonald and Sons bought the property in 1928-29. The Rebekahs had moved to a beautiful new Colonial brick home at 3515 McClure Avenue on the North Side of Pittsburgh; the house is located on the lower side of St. John's Hospital [now closed]. Now it is called Landmark North; it also houses a Senior Citizens Center for the 27th Ward.

The orphan's home continued in Ben Avon until 1923 when a much larger facility was constructed to the rear of St. John's Hospital. It was a three-story colonial brick with accommodations for 242 orphans. Moving day and dedication took place June 1923. The children attended nearby John Morrow School. As time went on, the need for an orphanage lessened and the home was finally closed. In 1974 it was bought and renovated by St. John's Hospital and operated jointly with Mercy Hospital as

the Brighton Woods Treatment Center at 3530 Fleming Avenue, North Side.

When the 96 orphans left Ben Avon in 1923, the property was sold to the Knights of Pythias for \$12,000 and became known as the Pythian Home Association of Western Pennsylvania. The purchase was described as an orphanage situated in the center of one and three-quarters acre lot bounded by four streets and overlooking the Ohio River. There were 45 rooms in the home and 75 orphans could be cared for comfortably.

The Pythian Home continued until after the opening of the Ohio River Boulevard in 1930, but it was closed soon after. The facility was demolished. Only the foundation stones were saved and used in the building project that followed: Fourteen attractive stone homes were built and offered for sale (\$8,000) about 1938. This area was named Laurel Village.

Today nothing remains to remind us that this land was once the location of the Odd Fellows Home from 1891 to 1923 and the Pythian Home from 1923 until the 1930s.

### **Tragedy in Ben Avon** (from December, 1992)

The evening of October 21, 1991 was mild and quite in Ben Avon. Normally, there is activity at the former Avonworth School [200 block of Dickson, now demolished], at the new house built for the movie production [Lorenzo's Oil], and in the many large trucks parked around the church (now called the Program Center, formerly the Woodland U.P. Church). The community players had practiced in the sanctuary of the Program

Center until 10:00 p.m. when they locked the building and left. Many people later related that they passed the church up until midnight while taking a walk, while jogging or while walking their dog, but nothing unusual was noticed.

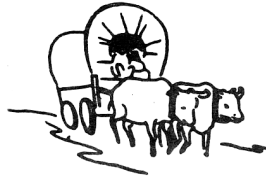
Soon after flames came shooting out of the roof on the chapel side of the building; by the time the fire whistle blew, flames and smoke were reaching high into the dark sky. The speed with which the fire progressed indicated the possibility that it had been set by an arsonist. Later extensive testing by the ATF proved this to be true.

Standing in the chill, watching the church burn brought great sadness to the church family, the entire Avonworth Community, and all who heard of this dastardly act. Later, as former members reviewed the groups who had met here over the years, the list was long: Avon Club, two aerobic groups, A la Carte (formerly Couples Club), Avonworth School Kindergarten for 1 or 2 years, Ben Avon Women's Club, The Golden Retrievers, Smocking Group, Mothers' Morning out, The Book Fair for Elementary School, Community Players, Woodland Nursery School, Wooden Ladder 1 and 2, Christian Endeavor, Union Young Peoples, The Together Group, Over 50's Group, Red Cross, Y-Teens, Playground Association, Ben Avon Area Historical Association, and Wissahickon Nature Club.

Thirteen fire companies worked valiantly to save the structure, but the accelerant was too widespread and the fire could not be controlled. They were able to save adjoining homes.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL!**

Ben Avon Area Historical Association  
 c/o 136 Dickson Avenue  
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**Please Join Us!**

<b>Ben Avon Historical Association</b> c/o 136 Dickson Avenue, Ben Avon PA 15202			
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