

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

Vol. XX - Number 3 June, 2005



In this issue we welcome back contributor H. Ben Avon. His pieces are well written and fact based. Hope you enjoy this one. This story confirms my experience that enjoying trains crosses all generations.

We have had four different authors or correspondents featured in the three issues of this Volume XX. Each had different interests and different styles. But all have been well received, and your story or article would be as well.

The key to all "media" is content. You have some and we need it. You do not need to write it. We will arrange to interview you or, better yet, take an oral history.

Castles, Moats, and Dragons

by H. Ben Avon

In the bygone days of castles, moats and dragons, I lived in a castle. Or so it seemed when I was a child in Ben Avon. Our home was a large Victorian structure that sat high on a bluff overlooking the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad [currently the Norfolk and Western] and the Ohio River. It had been built in 1888 by the Ufers and purchased by my maternal grandfather in 1910. It was later discovered that my paternal grandfather, in his youth as an apprentice architect, had designed the mantles, porch pillars and other woodwork in the house. Neither ever anticipated, of course, as they didn't know each other, that their children would eventually live there - in my mother's case - for sixty years.

In its day the house had been a gracious single residence, but by the time I came

along, it had been converted into two apartments. We lived on the second floor and from its dining room windows, one could watch the boat traffic on the river as it made its way through the Emsworth locks.

Emsworth is still the first dam on the Ohio and it creates the navigation pool for Pittsburgh where the river begins its 980-odd mile journey to the Mississippi at Cairo (Kay-roe) Illinois. This moat to our castle was not one of silent waters, but one of almost constant activity. Here river boats of many descriptions plied their various trades up and down the thriving water way, making Pittsburgh at that time the largest inland port in the country.

Almost all participants in the parade of boats which passed by were smoke-belching dragons pushing barges laden with coal, sand, oil and chemicals. Such freight included produce from the truck gardens on Neville Island. One "packet boat" I remember was the "Senator Cordill." (An excellent photograph of this vessel hangs in Sammy's at the corner of Ninth and Liberty downtown.)

I still picture it nudging its bow onto the sandy beach immediately below the Emsworth Dam and swinging its gangplank ashore. Here a dozen or so men with crates and bushel baskets hurried on board and piled their burdens on the lower deck before going ashore. Then with a plume of steam shooting skyward, followed by a stentorian blast of its whistle, its paddles churned and the vessel slipped backward into the channel and then entered the lock on its way to the wharves in Pittsburgh. In later years I learned that Neville Island was famed for its

vegetables and that asparagus was a main crop.

Other steamers of somewhat similar appearance in that they did not push barges were the pleasure or excursion boats. In the years before and after WWII, excursion crafts such as the "Washington", "St. Paul", "Senator" and, most important to me, the "Greater Pittsburgh" populated the rivers. In September of 1947 still another of this type of boat, the "Island Queen", exploded and burned in a spectacular fire while it was moored on the Monongahela in Pittsburgh.

I had a connection to the "Greater Pittsburgh", however, because it was a source of secondary income for my Uncle Joe during the depression. He spent many evenings and weekends as its "Bingo" caller! I remember his wife, my Aunt Edith, calling to him from our side yard (we dubbed it the "riverbank" in spite of the fact it was some 90 or 100 feet above the railroad whose four tracks were between us and the river). Even as a child I marveled at the strength of her beautiful contralto voice as she cried "Hullo-o-o Joe-oe-oe!" in the summer evening and, sure enough, in minutes, in shirt-sleeves and suspenders, my uncle would appear on deck as the boat slipped into the lock to wave, returning her salute.

Another memory of the "riverbank" was of my brunette sister and her blonde friend, Dorothy Gass (later Clark). As teenagers, they were very conscious of tanning lines from their swimsuits and I now understand the reason I was forbidden from going near them as they sunbathed in the privacy of the side yard, was that they were topless! One afternoon they arrived screaming at the door to our apartment, their towels and clothes clutched in front of them and no sooner in the house than they slammed and locked the door. I know now that "just to be daring" they stood up from their sunbath and waved to the barge tender of a boat entering the lock. What they didn't know was that he, apparently thinking he was being invited to have some fun, charged off the boat, crossed

the tracks and had nearly scaled the cliff before they saw him. Barely staying ahead of him they reached the safety of the house, but needless to say, they weren't inclined to do that any more!

My own reaction, however, was that somehow the impregnability of my castle was breached and there was something more real, and perhaps more dangerous, in the world outside. The cat and mouse of being caught in the dragon's breath as it belched upwards from the boats and trains and into our yard became somehow less romantic and more real.

The steamboats went through their metamorphosis from coal-fired steam paddle wheels, to steam screw propellers fueled by coal and oil, to diesel propellers. Many different combinations were attempted over the years, but none eventually were as simple, powerful and economically sound as the diesels.

Similarly the trains, the land dragons, had their own evolution. From the dozens of daily steam-driven locals came a straggle of diesel locals and then they died. The huge coal-fired steam freight locomotive improved and even went turbine for a short while, but they, too, have become the mighty diesel-electrics we know today.

One of the first "streamliners" in this area was a Baltimore and Ohio passenger train that sped along the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie tracks each morning on its run to Pittsburgh. Many mornings I watched for it as it glided in front of the far hill beyond the river, bemused by its lack of smoke and steam, and its funny sounding horn instead of a whistle. I had a strange feeling as I watched it and I realize now that it was disappointment. Without actually coming to grips with it, I sensed my world of dragons was ending.

Probably the most memorable single event of those earlier years was the 1936 flood. Glued for hours to our dining room windows or standing endlessly on the

"riverbank", I watched it play out its destruction before my eyes.

The present Emsworth Dam was under construction in March of 1936 when the St. Patrick's Day flood struck. The dam was being converted from a simple wall across the river to one with gates which could be raised or lowered to control the depth of water in its pool. I watched as the swirling brown water swallowed the cranes and derricks that had been fabricating the dam. The huge house that was across from us on Neville Island fell into the water room by room. Station platforms and docks and pleasure boats come floating by and were turned into driftwood in the churning water that gushed over the dam. Dozens of telephone poles were undercut and snapped off leaving a chaotic tangle of drooping wires by the Emsworth station. The outside track had its ballast carried into oblivion.

In the rapidly rising water the stationmaster of the Emsworth PRR station, William Schlumpf (Doris Brinkhof of Briar Cliff Road is his daughter) was trapped with cold, muddy water swirling all around the station. My sister came home breathless with the story of a Ben Avon lad shooting a bow and arrow with a string attached to the arrow over to the stationmaster. The attempt failed and finally a toy cannon was effectively used to shoot a line to the station. A breeches buoy was soon rigged and he was hauled (dipping into the water) to safety.

Exciting stuff for a six year old especially when the lights went out and our water was proclaimed unsafe for drinking. Fortunately, the old house still had numerous gaslights, which we supplemented with candles and we obtained water (we boiled it for twenty minutes) from the free-flowing spring that was just below Merton Road on Perryville.

At the height of the flood, I rode my wagon down the center of the closed-off Ohio River Boulevard to where a sea of brown water completely covered the brick surface to a depth of several feet. From my vantage

point, below the old "clock house" on Brighton Road and near the round mill building that stood there then, the water stretched as far as I could see. The old high school football field (lower than the field is now) was nowhere to be seen. I, of course, had been seriously cautioned not to go close to or to touch the muddy, germ-laden sea and I resisted – but it was a temptation!

They were exciting times and there was always something going on. Sometimes boats and barges became stuck on or swept over the dam, with the most spectacular probably being the crash of the "LaBelle", a Crucible Steel Company towboat that lost control of its coal filled barges in the swift, off-shore current above the lock and sent its entire tow sprawling and sinking over the dam.

In dryer fall weather, there were numerous hillside fires set by the hot cinders flying from passing trains. And once a freight train derailed just east of the Emsworth station. But considering the vast quantities of goods and the number of shipments that have passed our boroughs with our hardly knowing, the safety record is pretty impressive.

I still enjoy an hour or two watching trains and boats. I still marvel at the ability of river-men to maneuver tows of twenty-thousand tons, one fifth of a mile in length and 104 feet wide, in and out of a chamber 110 feet wide with hardly a scrape. I still have a visceral reaction to the powerful rumble and roar of freight trains pounding by at fifty-five or sixty miles an hour. But it is nothing compared to those heady, breath-taking days when a boy, who grew up with the knights and dames of "My Bookhouse", lived in Ben Avon in his own world of castles, moats, and dragons!

Ben Avon Area Historical Association
 c/o 136 Dickson Avenue
 Ben Avon
 Pittsburgh, PA 15202



We appreciate your support and that of everyone who sends donations in addition to the mailing list dues.

Mary Ann Montgomery	BA
Carol Christman Spencer	Bethesda MD
Sandra Smith	BA
Jim & Pat Reid	Ohio Twp
Henry & Nell Herchenroether	Cranberry Twp
Elizabeth Gaertner	EMS
Midge & Bob Seelhorst	Indiana Pa
Patricia Cramer	BA
Frank & Rose Meacci	BA
Lawrence & Gene McBride	BA
Martha H. Mitchell	Patchogue NY
Megan S. Mitchell	Lakewood OH
John & Dorothy Anderson	Avalon
Jack & Patty Latshaw	EMS
Fred & Judi Duda	BA
John & Adda Ferguson	BA
Barb & Jim Meehan	BA

Ben Avon Historical Association c/o 136 Dickson Avenue, Ben Avon PA 15202			
Name:			
Address:			
Boro/Township			
Phone:			
Membership:	Family \$10	Indiv. \$5	Other
I would be interested in helping with:			
Articles for Newsletter			
Short Projects or Jobs			
Log House Maintenance			
Publicity			

Please Join Us!