

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

Vol. XXI - Number 3 June, 2006



NOTE THIS DATE

Wednesday

July 19, 2006

see page 3

We have copies of pieces from the Ben Avon Forum, a magazine from the 1920s, but would love to have a complete set. Help us if you can, and Thank You!

One of the pictures that gets the most interest shows a four story frame house, with full Victorian detailing, situated on a hill top and surrounded by tall oak trees. A photo (below) with a somewhat different view is from page 19 of the Ben Avon centennial history book. So the story is picked as the subject for this issue's reprint. From May, 1992, by Gladys Phillips, we present the story behind the Dean House.



The Dean Family

The homes in Belle Riviere Court built around a cu-de-sac occupy the

largest part of the original six acres that comprised "Oak Hill" developed by Mr. John Dean I starting in 1868.

Mr. Dean had come from Northern Ireland as did his wife, Elizabeth. They settled in Allegheny and were parents of seven children but only John Peebles Dean and Emma Dean reached adulthood. By the time of the land purchase in [then] Ohio Township in 1868, that is now Ben Avon, John Dean I had a profitable seed and grain business. He owned a lovely home on Stockton Avenue in Allegheny City [now Pittsburgh's northside] and his son, John P. Dean, had joined his father in the business.

Most of the early [pre-1900] homes in the area from Bellevue through Sewickley were built by families who had fared well financially allowing them to own a second home in the country for use during the warm summer months. Allegheny City and Pittsburgh were smoky, dirty towns that did not see much of the sun at anytime, for iron, steel, and glass factories and foundries were belching black smoke, soot, and foul odors into the air. [Reliance on coal for residential heating was also a major contributor to pollution.] That description lasted until after the Second World War.

By the 1880's, these summer home owners realized that their homes could be winterized and convenient train

transportation would permit year round living in the country.

When John Peebles Dean married Amanda Fifer of Xenia, Ohio, they too settled in Allegheny and had their first child, Jean Peebles Dean, in 1866. Davis was born in 1867 and Bessie in 1868. Three years later, Bessie died of burns from a scalding accident. Amanda mourned the death of this child so much that she did not want to go back into their home. It was at this point they decided to come to the summer home to live the year round.

The original home was built from logs brought down from northern Pennsylvania by Indians. They stopped at "the island" to have the wood cut. Since Mr. Dean I owned property on Herr's Island [in the Allegheny River below Troy Hill and now called Washington's Landing] this may be where the logs were finished before continuing to the building site. The house had two floors and a basement. John P. Dean added two additional floors to provide for an expanding family and live-in quarters for the servants. Ultimately, the property consisted of an eighteen room frame house, a combination stable and barn, a tennis court, a billiard building, a large greenhouse and an ice house near Brighton Road. Ice was cut from the river in winter and stored here for use in the summer.

A lovely drive to the house from Brighton Road had chestnut trees lining each side of the lane. The road went around the house so that guests could stop at the front door. Their property also fronted on a road that had been cut through for the O'Neils, Deans, and Veeches (later Flaccus'). This road is Forest Avenue [connecting Perrysville Avenue to Brighton Road and the railroad]. It was little more than a dusty,

ruttled dirt road that had wooden boardwalks to keep pedestrians from walking in mud.

To those of you who have admired the beautiful oak trees that grace the lawn of the Trent home at the corner of Brighton Road and Forest Avenue these were common to the area. [In recent years storms have thinned the number left.] The Deans called their small estate Oak Hill.

Later John Dean II raised chickens and sold some produce and then it became known as Oak Hill Farm. Mr. and Mrs. Trent were able to save the sign when the house and buildings were razed.

John Dean II, the one many of us knew, was born in 1874. He was the fourth child but the first to be born in what we now call Ben Avon; it was Kilbuck Township at the time. Three sisters followed: Claire Louise who later married Mr. Louis Hood and lived in Seneca Falls, NY, Emma Elizabeth and Mary Katherine. Of this large family, only Dr. Davis Dean and Claire Louise married. Davis Dean, M.D. was an ophthalmologist.

Over the years Jean Peebles Dean became quite adept at photography and in the collection are many pictures of lovely gowns for women and fashions for men of the 1890s era. Rooms in the house were photographed showing a typical Victorian home and surrounding property. A few other homes, river boats, the railroad station, Crawford farm workers and Miss Lizzie's classes were included.

You might find living in that period quite boring without the radio, telephone, television, and automobile but it was a good life. Tennis and baseball, walking and boating, bicycling, ice skating and sledding and gathering in parlors for

evenings spent in singing, talking and dancing. These were some of the leisure activities of the 1890s.

Tennis was very popular and each year a tournament wound up with a "hop" in the John P. Dean's barn. It would be decorated with bunting, banners, and flags, and the hardwood floors waxed and prepared for dancing. The boys wore white linen trousers and dark coats; the girls were in dainty organdies with matching ribbons. The evening closed with a special supper in the Dean home.

On moonlit summer nights, taking a skiff up river near the Davis Island Dam and then floating down in the rippling waves was romantic and fun. Quite different from the Ohio River of today!

Mr. John Peebles Dean died in 1907. At this time John Dean II quit his job to manage the family's real estate. During the years that followed, John II became an avid gardener of both flowers and vegetable. He developed the egg business and won several ribbons for his prize roosters.

Amanda and her older son [Davis] died in the 1930s. The three maiden girls and John remained in the large house, but each succeeding year found maintenance of the house and property more difficult. Industry lured many from domestic jobs during the war years. No longer were families able to afford a staff of servants and a gardener and a driver.

These large homes were built before indoor plumbing, central heating and electricity were common, or in some cases were available. Fireplaces in each room of the house required daily attention as well as the gas lights. One of the daily jobs of the handy man was to pump water from a cistern to a thirty gallon barrel tank on the fourth floor to provide water for the home. When the family members were at home, two women cooked and served the meals.

With less help available, the house began to show the lack of maintenance. The lovely driveway became little more than a narrow path, the clay tennis courts were covered in weeds, and the large greenhouses were missing many glass panes. Later on, this was a popular spot for young boys to throw stones to break the greenhouse glass panes. It is no wonder that Halloween proved to be a trying time for John Dean II, for boys and girls carried out their "tricking" in the dark and eerie setting of overgrown trees and bushes. [In the 1960s, it was known as a

"haunted" house.] These youngsters did not realize the charm of this home in an earlier day when summer breezes and tall oak trees provided natural air-conditioning for gracious entertaining or a quiet afternoon on the veranda with a book or working on a piece of handiwork.

Changing times outdated this unique home and out-buildings requiring them to be razed for the new development [1966-74]; Belle Riviere Court. Now only memories and history of this period of time can retain the story of an early Ben Avon family.

Dixmont Documentary Debut

Wednesday, July 19, 2006, 7:00pm
Heinz History Center
1212 Smallman ST, Pittsburgh.

Kate Guerriero presents the first showing of "The Dixmont State Hospital" A Historical Documentary" which tells the story via written and oral accounts from former employees, photos, and hospital documents since opening in 1862.

BAAHA helped locate materials, make contacts with people who have connections to the former hospital as well as facilitating the filming of the contents found in the Reed building's cornerstone time capsule. Mostly, though, we provided moral support.

As one of our special interests, we anxiously wait to see the final production.

Reservations are suggested. Contact Nancy Cain McCombe of the Heinz History Center at 412-454-6411.

Donated Items Received

Louisa Knox obituary

Virginia Niemela

On the Web

Browse to (no "WWW") <http://pghbridges.com/index.htm> and click on Tours on the left side list. On the tours page are many choices, but under "Around Town" is a choice of "Ohio River Boulevard : Ghost of Grandeur"

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



Renewing Members – THANK YOU!

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Membership:	Family \$10	Indiv. \$5	Other
I would be interested in helping with:			
Articles for Newsletter			
Short Projects or Jobs			
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