

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

Vol. XXIV - Number 3, February, 2009



Sunday, March 15, 2009 at 2:00 p.m.  
Community Presbyterian Church  
Len Barcoucky, Speaker  
see page 5

Ohio River Boulevard  
Dick Herchenroether

Ralph Stroyne's article [March, 2008] of his memories growing up in Emsworth sparked my curiosity when he mentioned the heavy construction activity in Emsworth and Kilbuck building the road past Dixmont.

The early 1950s just seemed to be too late for that. But I was sure he was right since a kid does not mistake that sort of earth moving and rock blasting.

In looking into it, I found that in 1929 the official boulevard project started in eastern Emsworth at the intersection with Camp Home Road. The entrance pylons are near the bridge over Lowries Run a couple hundred yards east.

The Ohio River Boulevard was constructed between Emsworth and the Manchester Bridge (one pier remains near Heinz Field) on Pittsburgh's North Side, or in old Allegheny, if you prefer.

The article on the next page originally was part of the commemorative program at the dedication ceremony of the new road, and McKees Rocks bridge held August 19, 1931. Hope you like it. Later (1935) editions of City and Suburban Life contained articles complaining of the ugly

billboards spoiling the landscaping beauty of the original construction.

The road through the North Boroughs was financed with \$4,000,000 of which \$93,000 went toward landscaping. What is more impressive is the taxes to pay the debt were only 2 mills.

At the same time as the boulevard project (1928-1931), Beaver Road in Emsworth and further west to Beaver County received major improvements. It was this section that Ralph watched get the full four lane highway upgrade in the 1950s. Officially there were two separate County projects to complete the "opening" of the northwestern portion of Allegheny County to efficient commuting by 1931.

The major 1931 improvements to Beaver Road were the elimination of several grade level railroad crossings at Dixmont and in Glenfield. Dawson Avenue is the brick road in Glenfield that parallels the railroad tracks on the river (south) side. This is an old section of Beaver Road from when it was part of the Lincoln Highway route. [March, 2005]

Before 1931 Beaver Road came down the hill from Emsworth. A grade crossing took it from north to south of the tracks near Tom's Run Road or about the Kilbuck border with Glenfield. After continuing west less than half a mile (current Dawson Avenue) it crossed back to the north side of the railroad and continued toward Sewickley. The second

crossing was about where Dawson and the viaduct ramp now intersect.

The improvement project kept Beaver road north of the railroad and built the first Glenfield Viaduct to safely cross traffic to the river side of the tracks. The current viaduct replaced in the 1980s, (I think).

### **Description of Ohio River Boulevard**

By Edward L. Schmidt  
Chief Engineer, Bureau of Roads  
County Department of Public Works

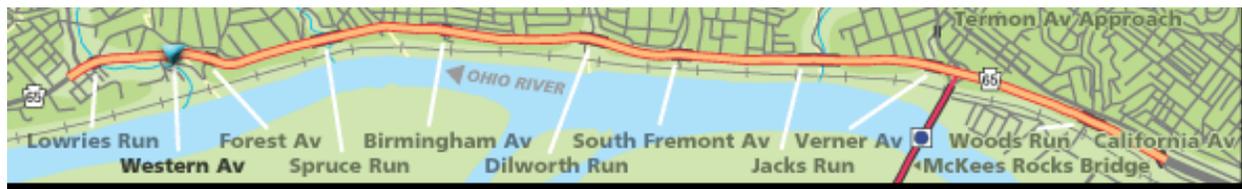
During the early part of 1926, an organization representing the North Boroughs was formed to promote the idea of constructing a high speed boulevard from the west County line to Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle. This organization represented all the Boroughs north of the Ohio River and was known as "North Boroughs Associated Councils."

After several meetings the organization presented the idea of a high-speed boulevard to the Board of County Commissioners in March, 1927. The need of such a highway being apparent, the various representatives pledged their

secondary streets. While these plans avoided congestion on main business streets, they would not, however avoid numerous street crossing which are always potential sources of delay and accidents; street crossing comparing with railroad crossings as hazards on modern high-speed motor highways.

The Ohio River Boulevard, in its present location, abandoned the idea of using secondary streets and the possibility of cross-streets by occupying the land adjacent to the Pennsylvania Railroad on the Ohio River bluffs. This location allows sufficient feeders and also eliminates the hazards of cross-streets.

Following the approval of the project by vote of the people in the 1928 bond issue, contract plans were prepared from exhaustive field surveys, the results of which were the production and projection of the best possible lines and grades from which there has been no necessity for deviation. The heavy cuts encountered required the use of high grade modern construction equipment. In the movement of excavated material, it was necessary to use the heaviest type of tractors and trucks available. Several cuts were made to depths ranging from



**North Boroughs portion of the Ohio River Boulevard**

support to an item in the Peoples Bond Issue of 1928 to finance such a project -- such a project to be a High-Speed Thoroughfare through Pittsburgh and the North Boroughs which would avoid the congested business streets of this populous section. Former plans for this improvement had attempted to use

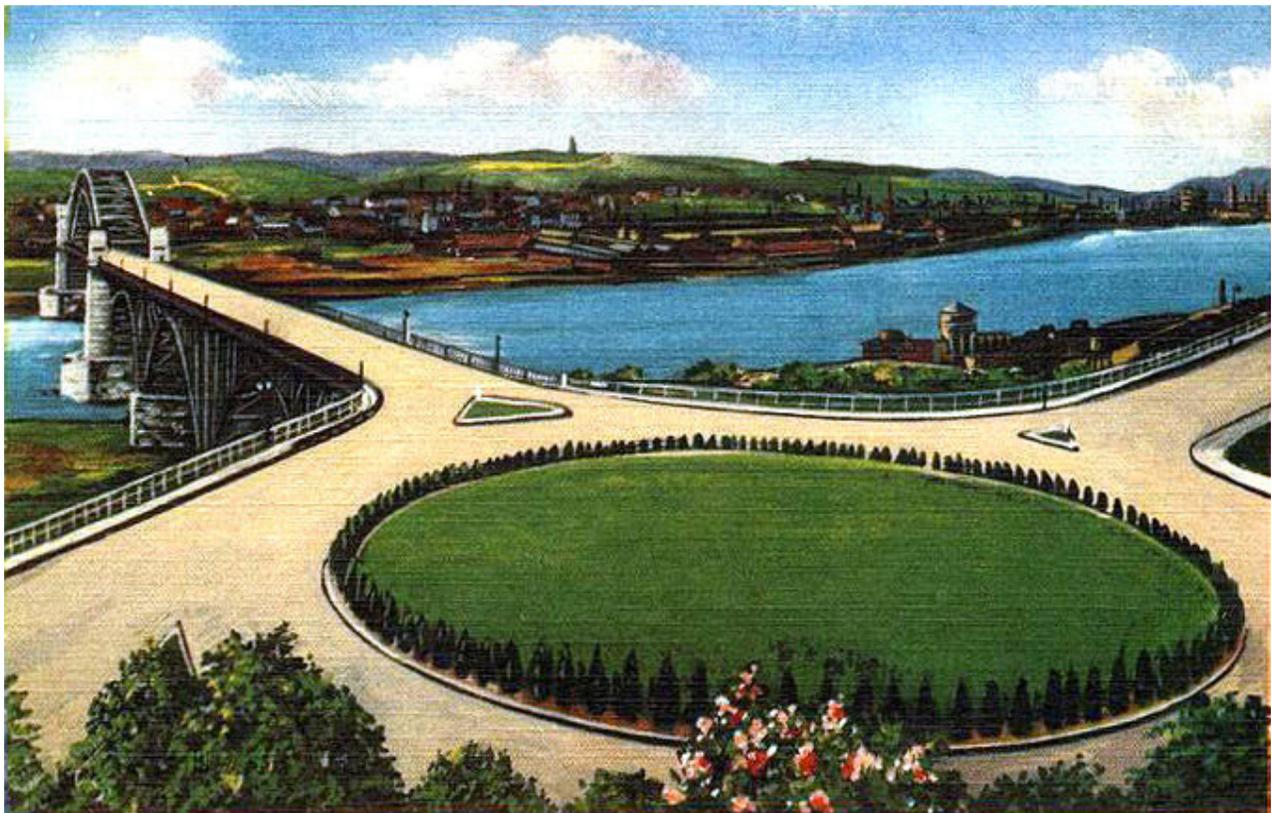
50 feet to 75 feet. Fills aggregating approximately 800,000 cubic yards of filling material were rolled in place in 6 and 8-inch layers, with rollers of the latest approved type to form the proper sub-grade for a 40-foot concrete base course of 9-inch thickness. This base was paved

with three inch depth vitrified paving brick laid on a sand cushion.

By the will of the people and instructions from the Board of County Commissioners, consisting of Joseph G. Armstrong, Chairman; E. V. Babcock and C. C. McGovern, the Department of Public Works, under Norman F. Brown, started contract work in July, 1929 on the Ohio River Boulevard, consisting of grading the 60-foot right of way and a 40-foot paving, five and one-half miles long. The Boulevard, together with the McKees Rocks Bridge and its Termon Avenue approach which joins the Boulevard in a traffic circle was completed in August, 1931. In approximately two years a \$12,000,000 artery of traffic comparable to the best in the eastern United States and surpassing many in Europe was opened for use of the traveling public.

In July, 1929 a contract was awarded and the actual grading work was started for the portion of the highway between Horne Camp Road and the McKees Rocks Bridge, traversing the City of Pittsburgh and the Boroughs of Bellevue, Avalon, Ben Avon and Emsworth. In February, 1930 a contract was awarded for that section of the highway between McKees Rocks Bridge and Superior Avenue and in November, 1930 a contract was awarded which included the widening, reconstruction and relocation of streets between Superior Avenue and Island Avenue; both within the City limits, connecting the whole project with present streets in the City of Pittsburgh.

Shortly after the Boulevard construction was under way, a contract was let in September, 1930 for the landscaping and planting of all cuts,



1931 Ohio River Boulevard Interchange with McKees Rocks Bridge

slopes, fills, traffic islands, banks and berms. Special attention is called to the immediate landscaping of all cuts and fills, the planting of all islands, circles and parking strips with grass, shade trees, shrubs and vines, delighting the thousands of persons who have availed themselves of the uses and beauties of this highway.

The lighting system in use was brought about after numerous conferences, and with the cooperation of the four boroughs and the City of Pittsburgh. The lights consisting of 1,000 candle power are suspended from ornamental fluted poles, no wooden poles being permitted on the boulevard from one end to the other.

The topography of the district through which the Ohio River Boulevard passes is such as to require a large number of bridges. The Boulevard is located in general on a high bluff overlooking the Ohio River. This bluff is cut by numerous ravines requiring 10 bridges of lengths up to 800 feet. It was also necessary to construct two foot bridges to enable pedestrians to cross the boulevard safely at Boston and Rankin Avenues and to relocate and reconstruct a small bridge over Spruce Run in connection with the large Spruce Run Bridge. These bridges have a total length of more than 3,000 feet and cost approximately \$2,000,000.

Among the numerous structures is the Jacks Run Bridge, one of the largest concrete arches in the Country of the spandrel arch type, having a span of 400 feet with a clearance of 370 feet between abutments. Its total length is 802 feet.

Nowhere in Western Pennsylvania, is there a scenic route comparable to the Ohio River Boulevard. For pleasure and ease of driving, the grades are ideal; the elimination of cross streets gives a feeling

of security and the numerous feeders are so located and protected as not to create a hazard. The magnificence of the Ohio River and its valley are in view at practically all times. The scenic effect of the McKees Rocks Bridge and the historic Indian Mound on the river's edge in McKees Rocks, together with the panorama of industry spread over the broad valley, produces an impressive picture.

Original document: "Description of Ohio River Boulevard" from souvenir book published by Allegheny County Public Works Department, 1931

### **Correspondence from the northwest:**

Dear Humorous Historians,

What a nice surprise arrived in my mailbox last week. My Brother Jack (John B. Mallon on Babcock Blvd.) sent me a copy of your [Sept. 2007] newsletter. Oh, the memories that stirred!

Once upon a time, in the Borough of Bellevue, the Mallon Family grew. Martha, the youngest, ended up farther away than any other member—out here in Oregon! But strong feelings survive, even in all of the famous Oregon rains.

Mr. "H. Ben Avon" obviously rode on some of the streetcars I did, only my destination was Duquesne University and not Pitt (which we referred to as the Heights of Ignorance – and then I married an alum from Pitt!). I also worked during High School at St Benedicts', and Duquesne University at Boggs & Buhl. We won't go into the subject of the dramatic changes in the retail area. Boggs & Buhl had such a gentle atmosphere.

Along with the Colonial, I remember "Food City", the first supermarket in our area. There we learned how to push a little cart and take our own groceries from the shelves. After I passed my driver's test, my mother would ask me to drive her down to Food City. But she was careful not to go when our little store next door to our home on Orchard avenue was open. She didn't want to hurt Joe Miller's feelings!

My roots along that stretch of the Ohio River still tingle when I start thinking of all the special places there. I had friends in Avalon, Ben Avon and Emsworth. In fact, I was born at Sewickley Hospital!

As for the sound of those steam engines, no one who is growing up today can appreciate the way those haunting calls affect our generation. Here in Portland we have an active Railroad Club who owns a Steam Locomotive. When they occasionally take it out for a spin, we cherish those tones.

It is easy for us to ramble on, as you can see by the length of this tome! I had intended a brief thank-you for your fine work there. So I will end this with just that: thank you. You have given me some special information and memories.

Good luck in your mission there.

Sincerely,

Martha Mallon Gaidos  
Portland, Oregon  
(from October, 2007)

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Maybe one, or both of you, will want to share a memory with our readers. Send it to 136 Dickson Avenue, PGH PA 15202 or email to: [baaha@benavon.org](mailto:baaha@benavon.org) .

Sunday, March 15, 2009 at 2:00 p.m.  
Community Presbyterian Church  
Len Barcoucky, Speaker

**Eyewitness to Pittsburgh:  
Rediscovering the next-day reports on  
what happened in Western PA**

Pittsburgh's official beginning is linked to the French evacuation and destruction of their Fort Duquesne in late 1758 as the British army approached.

Celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary has been somewhat low key but many people and organizations have found interesting ways to join in looking back. Len's talk is based on reading old newspaper articles.

A journalist since 1970, he continues to enjoy his work -- which is mostly indoors with no heavy lifting. He has been a reporter in the Post-Gazette's Cranberry bureau since 2002.

He has been interested in history since elementary school, where he devoured "Landmark" biographies about famous Americans and another series called "We Were There" which took children to such places as Valley Forge and the Alamo. It was only as an adult, however, that he came to realize that history did not happen just in places like Gettysburg or Pearl Harbor. It could and likely did take place 500 yards from where most of us live.

**Renewing Members – THANK YOU!**

Ed & Mary Ann Graf	Pittsburgh PA
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Lawrence W Snively Jr	Rockville MD
Bill & Barb Millar	Falls Church VA
Marilyn Simon	Kilbuck
Nathan & Megan Troxell	BA
Louise Yeager	Sewickley PA
Leo Stember	Baldwin PA
Tracy & Jack Ferguson	Kilbuck

Ben Avon Area Historical Association  
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 Ben Avon  
 Pittsburgh, PA 15202



**ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED**

**Renewing Members – THANK YOU!**

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Megan Mitchell	Lakewood OH
Richard Batchelor	Nipomo CA
William Shaw	BAH
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Betty Jane Robertson	EMS

A special thank you to those who provided this issues' content. Without something to print we have nothing to send.

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