

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

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### A Visit with LST - 325

by Dick Herchenroether

Early morning on Wednesday, September 1, 2010 the ship entered the main lock chamber at the Emsworth Dam on the Ohio River. It was travelling to tie up along the north shore of the Allegheny River to give tours through the Labor Day holiday. After that it started back down the Ohio River to Evansville Indiana where it will be part of a museum for these World War II era ships.

This ship is the last one in original configuration that remains operational. It is manned by a crew of Navy veterans, including one who served in an LST commanded by Jim Knox, who served on our board several years ago.



Jim's daughter, Jennie-Lynn, had long been in contact with this crew as they brought the LST-325 home from Greece where it had been mothballed. In light of her father's service connection and also his work with the LST veterans group, she wanted to greet this ship as a way of recognizing the local connections.

The idea for a "Landing Ship, Tank" germinated with Winston Churchill. The design for a beach-able ship capable of unloading heavy equipment (including

tanks) and soldiers quickly, then backing off the beach was worked out by British and American Naval officers. Construction techniques were worked out by Dravo Corporation on Neville Island and shared with shipyards

in Ambridge Pennsylvania, Jeffersonville & Evansville, Indiana and Seneca, Illinois.

A fleet of 1,058 LSTs were built by these inland river facilities. In the lead up to the Normandy D-Day Dravo launched two LSTs each week. In all, Dravo built 724 of the total. A tremendous accomplishment with women, teenagers and men too old for military service in the workforce.

The gathering at the Emsworth Dam was small in number and had a small town feel. Prior planning made contact with the Army Corps of Engineers who operate the Dam. Their public affairs officer helped the lockmaster in coordinating everything which included a tour of the ship for some and brief chance to meet the Captain and crew. Special guests, in addition to Jennie-Lynn were Jim's widow, Valerie, sister Jennie and granddaughter Kelsey. Others in the group were officials of Ben Avon and Emsworth Boroughs and a few board members of BAAHA.

The local commanding officer of the Corps of Engineers remarked on the importance of the LSTs in WW II and honored those who manned and built them.

Jennie-Lynn continued that theme in her brief remarks. "Many people in the boroughs and townships surrounding Pittsburgh served on LSTs. Many more built them in local shipyards. Our gathering today is to honor all those local men and women, and to those across our great nation. That is why our small communities recognize and applaud your efforts to preserve the LST in the history of World War II."

Earlier it had been noted Jim Knox wrote The Birth of the LST, published by the Pennsylvania LST Association. Jennie-Lynn concluded, "What you in the ranks of LST service may not know is Dad wrote another book. This one, Dear

Emsworth, is a collection of his favorite memories of life in his beloved Emsworth Borough. In a way, it is his record of the development of his character. What he learned in Emsworth prepared him to join with others when the call to duty came."

A copy of Dear Emsworth was given for the benefit of the LST museum.

By about 10:00 am the lock chamber was filled, gates opened and LST-325 moved on, up river to downtown Pittsburgh. The crowds there were larger, of course, but the local greeting was special in its own way.

### **BAAHA Links: Robert Schmertz**

by John Warren

*This article is the second in a series spotlighting websites which focus on local history, and thus might be interesting to readers of this newsletter.*

Try to imagine this scene from many years ago. It's a cool and quiet Sunday evening in Ben Avon. At 6941 Perrysville Avenue, two school-age children – a girl and a boy – have completed their after-dinner chores. Somewhat reluctantly, they head upstairs to get ready for bed. It's a school night, after all.

As they reach the top of the stairs, however, the doorbell rings. The children turn around and peer down to the front door, as their parents open it and greet the visitors. Two men step into the hall, each carrying an instrument case. Recognizing the visitors, the children race to their rooms, jump into their pajamas, and hustle down to sit on the first floor landing. Maybe it is a school night, but this is a special occasion!

By that time, their mom has brought out refreshments and their dad has fetched his violin. One visitor lifts an accordion out of its case, and the other

begins to tune a banjo. Soon the house is filled with music.

About 80 years have passed, but for Marjorie Todd Simonds, a lifelong resident of this community, the memories of evenings like that remain vivid. Her eyes sparkle as she describes how the two men made a point of visiting with her and her brother Jack, telling them stories and singing songs just for them.

The man with the accordion was Charles M. Stotz (1898 - 1985), an architect and historian whose impact on historical sites in Western Pennsylvania will be described in a future article. This time around, however, he appears in association with the man with the banjo, who was Robert W. Schmertz (1898 - 1975).

John and Marguerite Todd got to know Bob Schmertz through their good friend, Charlie Stotz. Todd and Stotz were active members of the local Cornell University alumni organization.

Schmertz taught for 35 years in the School of Architecture at Carnegie Tech (now CMU) and also maintained a substantial private practice. Folks who are familiar with the Ligonier area have probably seen a church that he designed – St. Michael's of the Valley, Rector, PA.

Within architectural circles, and well beyond, he was known for composing and playing songs, many of them associated with Pittsburgh. But many years passed before he could be persuaded to record any of his music, and that only happened when three dozen of his friends passed the hat to cover the cost of a recording session and the pressing of 300 copies of a 78 rpm album.

The year was 1949, and a nationwide revival of folk music was underway, led

by Pete Seeger and his fellow Weavers. When nationally known folk singers came through Pittsburgh, they would visit with local friends and get to know Bob Schmertz, either in person or through the album. Soon they were including his songs in their concert performances.

Burl Ives recorded *Noah Found Grace in the Eyes of the Lord*. So did Tennessee Ernie Ford and (many years later) the Statler Brothers. Ives, who recorded several albums of children's songs, included *Angus MacFergus MacTavish Dundee* on one of them.

Most significantly, Pete Seeger recorded *Monongahela Sal* and sang it and other Schmertz songs all across the country, identifying the songwriter when he introduced each song.

One memorable concert took place in the early Sixties, when Seeger appeared with the American Wind Symphony, performing from their floating stage, tied up along the Allegheny River side of Point State Park. The highlight of the evening came when Seeger asked Schmertz to join him on the stage to sing *Monongahela Sal* and several other songs.

The widespread interest in his music led Schmertz to assemble several friends and two of his children to record albums in 1955, 1959, and 1960. The 1959 album is a collection of the songs that Schmertz wrote to celebrate Pittsburgh's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. They feature such people as George Washington, Christopher Gist, General Forbes, and Queen Alliquippa. This album has now been reissued as a CD by Smithsonian Folkways <http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=949> .

To learn more about the albums, and the man who wrote the songs, you can visit the following website that is a

<http://www.robertschmertz.com/default.asp> tribute to Robert Schmertz. The creator was Ann Shear, whose father was the head of the School of Architecture at Carnegie Tech in the early Fifties. If you read her introduction to the site, you will be struck by the similarity of her memories to those of Marjorie Simonds.



Photo courtesy of [www.robertschmertz.com](http://www.robertschmertz.com)

The music of Bob Schmertz can still be heard in the Pittsburgh area. Larry Berger includes Schmertz songs on his 'Saturday Light Brigade' program, [www.slbradio.org](http://www.slbradio.org), which is broadcast from a studio in the Children's Museum.

A group of local musicians, The Newlanders, hopes to soon issue a CD of the Schmertz songs that they perform in concerts. You will find details on that project on the 'News' page at their website [www.newlanders.com](http://www.newlanders.com).

Ann Shear's tribute website includes the lyrics of 21 of the songs, some with notes by Charlie Stotz on how they came to be written. On the site's 'Miscellany' page is a collection of articles about Bob Schmertz and some of his friends and collaborators. One highlight from that

page is 'The Biggest Living Room in Town' by Gretchen Haller <http://www.robertschmertz.com/m-biggestlivingroom.asp>, which describes Schmertz's final concert in April 1975, a few weeks before his death. From the concluding paragraph of Gretchen's article:

*Since I grew up with Bob Schmertz's music, I hope you'll pardon my prejudice. He and his banjo have been frequent visitors to my father's house and I feel I should thank him for many things. It is through him that I discovered folk music, a bit of architecture and local history, and the artistry of grand old men.*

It is clear that Gretchen Haller, like Ann Shear and Marjorie Simonds, had special memories to treasure. And, one suspects there are many, many more.

*As you may know, each issue of the newsletter is posted and available to you at <http://www.benavon.com/BAAHA/> our BAAHA website. Thanks to Jeff Cieslak (our webmaster), you can read the newsletter online as an HTML page or display it as a PDF file. The PDF version of the newsletter can also be printed or downloaded. Share it with family and friends, and convince them to join in supporting BAAHA!*

*For these 'BAAHA Links' articles, the plan is to collect them on a separate page of the website. Within each article, the links (like the one in the preceding paragraph) will be clickable, so that you can read the text and then visit the website it describes.*

## **1811 Bicentennial of First Steamboat** by Don Clare

Rivers Institute at Hanover College

Plans are under way all up and down the Ohio and Mississippi River System to celebrate and commemorate the 200th anniversary of the most significant and historic transportation breakthrough

accomplishment in the history of the United States. It was 1811. And it was a side-wheeler steamboat named the New Orleans. A joint venture of Robert Fulton (the father of successful steamboat navigation on the Hudson River with the Clermont, in 1807), Robert R. Livingston (the wealthy New York politician of Louisiana Purchase fame while Minister to France from 1800-1804, under Thomas Jefferson), and Nicholas Roosevelt (a highly regarded manufacturer of steam engines at Soho Works, one of the best metal foundries in the country located on the Passaic River in New Jersey) culminated in the first steamboat to navigate up and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers under its own power. It wasn't until Roosevelt convinced both Fulton and Livingston that his own patented side wheel design was far superior to their stern wheel method of propulsion, that the Clermont was a success. And they did the same on the New Orleans.

Roosevelt himself served as captain of the New Orleans on her maiden voyage, leaving Pittsburgh on the Monongahela River site of its construction on October 20th headed for New Orleans, Louisiana, a distance of 981 miles. Years of preparation, planning, building and rebuilding preceded this inaugural voyage. He even made the same trip the year before in a flat boat he built himself in order to record river conditions, depths, currents, channel location, and even sources of coal for fuel to be used in the trip the year following. It was a comprehensive fact finding mission and his very young wife accompanied him for the entire trip. They left Pittsburgh on June 28, 1809 and arrived in New Orleans on December 1, 1809. On January 15, they arrived home in New York by sea from New Orleans.

The successful scouting trip served as impetus in the commencement of the construction of the New Orleans. Highly skilled workers from Roosevelt's New Jersey manufactory were summoned to the banks of the Monongahela and the 370-plus ton, 148.5 long steamboat, drawing 12 feet of water, was under construction.

When the time came for the actual trip, the New Orleans arose to the challenge and overcame additional obstacles other than those of river current, speed, and efficiency. The crew consisted of Nicholas Roosevelt, the Captain, and his young and very pregnant wife Lydia Latrobe Roosevelt (the daughter of Benjamin H. Latrobe, Roosevelt's business partner and architect of the U.S. Capitol), their young daughter, an engineer (Nicholas Baker), the pilot (Andrew Jack), six deck hands, two female servants for Lydia, a waiter, a cook, and a Newfoundland dog named Tiger. Much to the disbelief of river men everywhere, she successfully shot the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville without sustaining any damage, after having had to lay over for some time until the water level was right (at which time Lydia delivered their second child). Next the New Orleans found herself caught in the middle of the effects of the New Madrid Earth Quake as it literally changed the course of the Mississippi River and "made it run backwards." And finally, just before reaching Natchez, Mississippi, she managed to hold off a canoe attack by the Chickasaw Indians. Finally, on January 10, 1812 they reached their final destination of New Orleans.

*The use of the Ohio River as a transportation corridor has been important to our local history for three centuries. The arrival of steam powered boats marked an era in river history until diesel powered tugboats and flood control allowing year round navigation arrived.*

*Hanover College Rivers Institute in Indiana is organizing bicentennial celebration events. Go to <http://rivers.hanover.edu> for more information.*

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