

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

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Pittsburgh Pirates Have Roots in Ben Avon

By Tracy Ferguson

The headlines in The Pittsburgh Press on February 14, 1891 focused on the passing of Civil War Union veteran General William Tecumseh Sherman. Also in the news, Jack-the-Ripper was terrorizing London, and a dispute in Pittsburgh was settled in favor of an ordinance to locate the Carnegie Museum and Art Gallery at the Forbes Street entrance to Schenley Park. In the sporting news of the day, a Ben Avon resident, J. Palmer O'Neil, President of The Pittsburgh Club baseball team had won a hard-fought battle to acquire Louis Bierbauer, an outstanding second baseman, and Connie Mack, a Buffalo catcher who later became a legendary Hall of Fame manager. Bierbauer had excelled with the American Association (AA) Philadelphia Athletics from 1886 to 1889. He spent one year, 1890, with the Brooklyn team in the upstart Players League, a league formed by mostly National League members of the first baseball players union known as The Brotherhood. The Players League only lasted one year and Bierbauer was looking for a new job.

The Philadelphia Athletics expected him to return to them in 1891, but he signed with the Pittsburgh Alleghenys of the National League (NL) instead. The Athletics were outraged and raised a loud protest that was finally settled by baseball's National Board of Control. James Palmer O'Neil went before the board with a compelling plea for his two new players. Pittsburgh's contracts with Bierbauer and Mack were upheld by the board with Bierbauer's Pittsburgh contract awarded due to a clerical oversight by the Philadelphia Athletics. Philadelphia team officials gave J. Palmer O'Neil the name J. "Pirate" O'Neil after "stealing" Bierbauer from them and the Pittsburgh Alleghenys had a new nickname. The Pirates' name, however, was not officially adopted until over a decade later. By the time of his death on January 8, 1908, O'Neil had become known as the gamest backer of baseball that ever lived. Prior to his Presidency of the team, he had very little knowledge about managing a team. He led with a hands-on style: often spent his own money to keep the team afloat, irritated the team managers by constantly trading players and choosing who would play during games, and predicted with bravado that his losing team would become pennant challengers. He took the team on the road more often than they played at home, because more

people paid to watch their team beat his team at away games than attended at home, resulting in another team nickname, The Wanderers. His obituary stated that in the 1890 season, "he lost \$60,000 on the season, had sixty players under contract, won 23 games in the entire season and lost 114." He resigned from his position with the Pittsburgh team in 1892.

James Palmer O'Neil was born in 1844 in Ulster County, New York. By 1856, his family was living in Chautauqua County, New York. In his thirties, he became the President of a large fire insurance company in his home state, a position he maintained for two years until 1872 when he moved to Pittsburgh. His new position was as General Manager of the United States Life Insurance Company; he stayed with the company until 1877. Over time, his business interests turned towards guns and hunting. He organized the Pittsburgh Firearms Company, the Chamberlain Cartridge Company of Cleveland and the Western Arms and Cartridge Company of Chicago. A patent for a target for testing the penetration of shot was issued to J. Palmer O'Neil in November of 1877.

An interesting history on the organization of the Chamberlin Cartridge Company began with an invitation by Frank Chamberlin to J. Palmer O'Neil to shoot ducks on a marsh near Chamberlin's home in Cleveland, Ohio. During the visit, Chamberlin impressed O'Neil with his invention, an automatic ammunition loading machine. Prior to that invention, shotgun shells were all loaded by hand. With O'Neil's money and Chamberlin's invention the company was born, and shotgun shell production soon increased to between 1,200 and 1,500 shells per hour. The company was successful until 1887, when the

Winchester and the Union Metallic Cartridge Companies began using their own automatic loading machines. Competition was fierce, and by 1900 Chamberlin's focus was in supplying traps and targets to gun clubs.

O'Neil married Elizabeth Breeding Lowry on November 11, 1873, who at the time was living with her widowed mother and sister at her wealthy great-aunt Elizabeth Ewing Breeding's home in Ben Avon. By the 1880 U.S. Federal Census, J. Palmer and Elizabeth O'Neil and three of their children resided with great-aunt Elizabeth, who was the widow of James Ewing Breeding, a prominent Pittsburgh wholesale dry goods and grocery merchant. James Breeding was also a silent partner in a large St. Louis mercantile establishment, and in 1836 he helped Mr. Robert Dalzell establish the first iron works in Sharpsburg, PA. With his brother-in-law George Hogg, and George's uncle William Hogg, James established Dalzell, Taylor & Co., a grocery business. During General (later President) William H. Harrison's campaign in the War of 1812 against Tecumseh and his braves, James Breeding was connected with the Commissary Department. Breeding died in 1863 without issue, leaving his entire estate to his wife. In 1870, his widow Elizabeth built a country house on 12 acres in Kilbuck, now known as Ben Avon. She was praised for being charitable, for housing poor relations and for her instrumental work in establishing the Pittsburgh and Allegheny Home for the Friendless in 1861. It was located originally on Federal Street and served the poor, the friendless and homeless children, and in particular, destitute children of soldiers. It was a predecessor of today's Pressley Ridge youth program. Elizabeth Breeding lived into her nineties



Mid-Victorian mansion built 1870 by Elizabeth E. Breading, widow of entrepreneur James Breading

and sold her home and 12 acres to her niece, Elizabeth Breading O'Neil in 1883 for a sum of \$1.00 "in consideration of the natural love and affection and generosity" she felt for her. The Breading/O'Neil home was described in the October, 1929 issue of *The Ben Avon Forum* as "one of those spacious and homelike old mansions popularly referred to as 'Mid-Victorian'" surrounded by many old-growth, magnificent shade trees and a sweeping lawn. The property also contained a brick stable, an ice house and the shared rights and maintenance responsibilities with a neighbor to a spring with a reservoir. The O'Neils referred to their home and property as Emsworth Station in Ben Avon. The house was located on today's Breading Avenue

across from the former Methodist Church. It changed owners over the years and was eventually torn down and replaced with two attractive ranch-style homes. A reference to the start of the house demolition project in an October, 1940 *City and Suburban Life* article mentioned that "the red brick of which the house was built was made on the property where the Ben Avon Methodist church now stands." Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dyer bought the house in 1906 from the O'Neils, and after the Dyers died their heirs had the house torn down.

The Allegheny County, Pennsylvania Plan Book Vol. 14 recorded a plan of lots called "Brighton Terrace" owned by Mrs. Elizabeth B. O'Neil encompassing most of the lots facing both sides of Breading

Avenue and the west side of Forest Avenue from Brighton Road north to Perrysville Avenue. The plan of lots was approved by the Council of Ben Avon Borough on October 7, 1893. Both J. Palmer O'Neil and Elizabeth B. O'Neil appeared before the Allegheny County Justice of the Peace on that date for his seal acknowledging their plan and recording it. J. Palmer O'Neil retired from the gun merchant business in 1895 and accepted the position of President of the Pittsburgh Athletic Club. He continued in that role for three years. His final years were devoted to the management of the O'Neil estate in Ben Avon and to the real estate development of the Brighton Terrace lots. Newspaper clippings from

Typical newspaper ad from 1906:

BEN AVON RESIDENCES
FOR SALE OR FOR RENT

We offer for sale or rent in borough of Ben Avon, 8-room house, bath, laundry; excellent location, close to train and trolley; price for purchase \$4,750; rent \$32.50 per month. This is a beautiful house surrounded by handsome forest trees, within one minute of trolley; three minutes Ft. Wayne road, Emsworth station. If purchased, payment \$500 down, \$40 per month till paid for.

Also for sale 12-room house, large lot, on best avenue in borough of Ben Avon. Price \$6,750; easy payments.

Also 10-room house on Forest Ave., large lot, handsome forest trees, improved vacant on opposite side of street. Price \$8,500, easy payments; handsomest house in borough; hardwood finish throughout; must be seen to be appreciated.

Call on or address J. Palmer O'Neil, Forest ave., Ben Avon, near Church ave. Take Ben Avon car, get off at Forest ave. Phone 124-R Emsworth

"The Evening Review" of East Liverpool, Ohio in 1900 indicated that J. Palmer seriously contemplated building a 40-room hotel in that city, but it never developed. A "Pittsburgh Dispatch" article in 1892 also reported O'Neil's idea to build a 54-room frame hotel with a 26-room annex in Ben Avon as a summer resort. This idea also never materialized.

A great-grandson of J. Palmer O'Neil, George B. Lyle, meticulously researched the family genealogy and composed a summary of his findings in 1987. However, his research, and that of my own, did not result in a photograph of J. Palmer O'Neil. It begs the question, how could someone who was frequently in the sporting news in the early 1890's, who enjoyed hearing himself talk, who was frequently at odds with those around him and with reporters and who had an easily identifiable appearance, not have at least one photograph or portrait we could find? The Pittsburgh Pirates, the Baseball Hall of Fame, the myriad newspaper accounts, the Carnegie Library, the Heinz History Center, history books about the Pirates and endless internet searches all proved useless. George Lyle used another means to paint a picture of O'Neil by extracting comments in newspaper articles that reflected on the man's nature and appearance. The following quotes from those articles were found in his genealogy report. J. Palmer O'Neil was "tall, broad shouldered;" "manly bosom;" "manly form;" mustachioed with long sideburns, prominent nose, heavy-lidded eyes; "gorgeous side lilacs;" "wind-tempting whiskers;" "luxuriant pair of side whiskers;" "like two blades of flame;" "smile lighted up the whole expanse;" "smile was never so broad;" "Micawber in his disposition;" "18-karat smile." George summed it up when he wrote, "Piece these observations together and we have a well-built man of above average height; clean-shaven chin, but with a mustache and long reddish side whiskers; prominent nose and heavy-lidded eyes; and one who tends to greet even adversity with a wide, ingratiating smile." To this description must be added the following quotes found in my research: "a hustler of the first degree;" "he has such a

drop-a-nickel-in-the-slot-and-the-interest-will-pay-the-rent air about him;” “blowhard;” and “double-jointed tongue.”

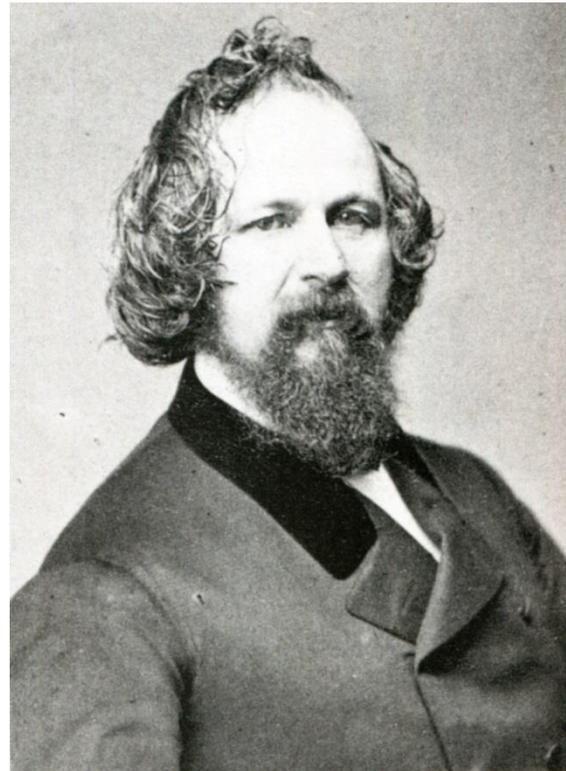
Elizabeth B. O’Neil bore J. Palmer O’Neil six children, but only five lived to adulthood. They knew the heartbreak of losing a child, their youngest and only son, James Palmer O’Neil, Jr., who was just a toddler when he died from the measles. At the time of his death from apoplexy at the age of 64, J. Palmer O’Neil was survived by his wife, Elizabeth, and five daughters, Mary Louise, Elizabeth Breeding, Estell Palmer, Annie Lowry and Virginia Mason. Three of his daughters were married by then and the youngest was in her mid-twenties. His wife, Elizabeth, died a year later from pneumonia while battling breast cancer. Many changes have occurred since then. Generations have come and gone in Pittsburgh and Ben Avon. Houses, businesses, schools and roads have been built. The Carnegie Museum of Natural History and the Art Museum have been enjoyed by legions, and The Pittsburgh Press now lives in our memories and its archives. Baseball has become a more organized business and professional sport, and many great players have graced the ballparks. Louis Bierbauer, Connie Mack and J. “Pirate” O’Neil are gone, but one man’s daring business decisions and gumption have left a legacy that survives more than a century later, the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Lincoln Assassination News Coverage

by Tracy Ferguson

The nation recently commemorated the 150th anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln’s April 15, 1865 death, a tremendous loss still felt today. The assassination and funeral were captured in illustrated papers of the day, such as

Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper. Leslie’s May 6, 1865 issue featured three wood-engraved prints created from drawings by three different artists in his employ. The first was subtitled, “Assassination of President Lincoln- the murderer leaping upon the stage, and catching his spur in the flag which hung- A sketch by our special artist Albert Berghaus.” The second print was subtitled, “Funeral services over the remains of President Lincoln, as they lay in state in the East Room of the White House, April 19- from a sketch by our special artist, C.E.H. Bonwill.” And the third read, “Funeral of President Lincoln, at Washington, D.C., April 19- The Cortege, Attended by a military escort, moving past the President’s Mansion- from drawings taken on the spot by our special artist, Wm. T Crane.”



Frank Leslie [formerly Henry Carter]

In addition to the Lincoln assassination and funeral, all three artists produced drawings of the Civil War for Frank

Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper." Once the sketches were completed, engravers carved the images into wood blocks, then the blocks were inked and pressed on the paper.

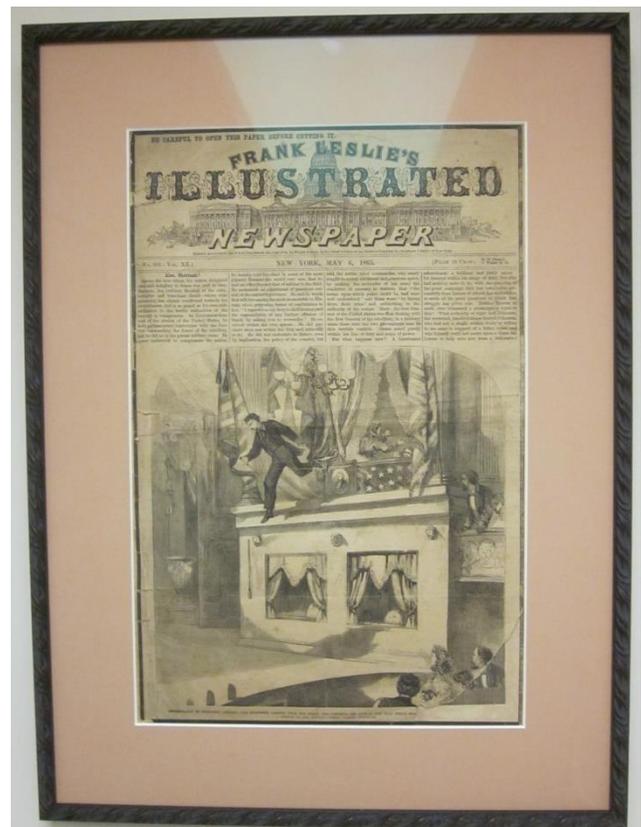
Frank Leslie was born Henry Carter in Ipswich, England on March 29, 1821. His family expected him to join his father's prosperous glove manufacturing firm, but Henry had his own interests. As a youngster, he studied the skills and tools used by a local silversmith, and secretly practiced drawing, sketching and engraving whenever possible. His family did not approve of his artistic inclinations. Henry used the pseudonym, Frank Leslie, to submit sketches to the Illustrated London News, which were well-received; he eventually became their superintendent of engraving.

Two years after founding Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper in America, Henry Carter legally changed his name to Frank Leslie. By that time, Leslie had created a faster method of publishing the news. He divided the artist's original drawing of an event into grids to be worked on by many engravers using smaller wood blocks. Once the smaller blocks were finished, they were screwed together to create the finished piece. By dividing the work load among many engravers, a large-format wood engraving could be accomplished in one day, instead of the month it would take a single engraver to complete the same piece. His illustrated news of often powerful events arrived in his readers' hands in a timely fashion with visual impact during a time when photography was not widely used.

The Ben Avon Area Historical Association was the recipient of a set of these three rare, original Frank Leslie newspaper prints depicting Abraham

Lincoln's assassination and funeral described above from the May 6, 1865 issue. The BAAHA Board of Directors had them professionally preserved and custom framed using conservation methods. The newspaper illustrations were deacidified, tears were repaired and weak areas were stabilized. Neutral tan-tone cotton matting and non-glare glass were used in the archival framing through Borelli-Edwards Galleries.

BAAHA is pleased to offer the set of three framed newspaper prints to our readership and the general public. The framed sizes measure 16"w x 21"h (Assassination of President Lincoln), 27"w x 21"h (Funeral services over the remains), and 49"w x 21"h (Funeral of President Lincoln). We suggest a donation of \$2,500 for the three piece set.



The limitations in printing this newsletter are such that we are unable to show the true quality of these pieces. Interested parties may contact BAAHA for private viewings through our usual email or street addresses.

Editor's Note: The following article was copied from a newsletter published by The Ohio State University because it concerns Avonworth graduate (1941) Donald Dunn.

Making History: NEWS FROM THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY of The Ohio State University. 2013, No. 56

This year we launch a rigorous search for a top scholar in the history of non-U.S. countries and combatants in World War I and/or World War II to fill the Donald G. and Mary A. Dunn chair in Modern Military History. The Dunn chair will have a great impact on both undergraduate and graduate students studying modern military history.

Donald G. Dunn was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on June 25, 1923. He attended Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, before volunteering to join the ski troops in 1941 as America entered World War II. He trained with the 10th Mountain Division in Camp Hale, Colorado, and Texas before deploying to Italy with Company G, 86th Mountain Infantry in December 1944. His unit entered the front lines in January 1945 near the small town of Cutigliano in the rugged area of the Apennine Mountains northwest of Florence.

Company G fought its first major combat action in March near the village of Iola, for which Staff Sergeant Dunn was awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge. During the final offensive in Italy in April, Dunn was wounded while leading the men of his infantry platoon to seize Hill 775, north of Rocca di Roffeno, an action for which he received the Silver Star and Purple Heart.

After a lengthy convalescence, Dunn returned to the United States to resume studies at Wesleyan, graduating in 1948 with a BA. He married Mary Elizabeth Altmaier the same year. They settled in her hometown, Columbus, Ohio, and started a family of five children: Bob, Andrew, Jim, Gardner, and Nancy, now Mrs. George Byers III.

In 1950, Dunn became an investor in a small plastic manufacturing company, and within the first year assumed sole ownership of the business, named Plaskolite, Inc. Plaskolite grew from its modest beginnings to become the largest manufacturer of acrylic sheet in America with six plants: one in Mexico and five in the United States, and a workforce of 600 men and women.

In 1996, Dunn's wife Mary Elizabeth died. She is described by Dunn as having played a significant role in the start-up and development of Plaskolite. Dunn retired in 2005 and his son Jim became president of Plaskolite. Dunn's life remains busy; he is concerned with his children and grandchildren (some of whom work at the company), his church, the Milton S. Friedman Foundation, the Harambee Christian School, and the Pro Musica Chamber Orchestra. He is interested in politics, in his friends around the world, and in remaining active with family and friends in Ohio.

Queries

Members or persons browsing our website commonly contact BAAHA looking for family information (genealogy), or information about land (title, deed, photo) and buildings.

Sometimes we can provide some information or general pointers to help you research more facts. Since others may know what we do not we plan to publish queries here and on a web page.

You can place inquiries or help provide answers to a query. Contact us at baaha@benavaon.org or a special address baaha.queries@yahoo.com.

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We cover all five Avonworth municipalities: Ohio and Kilbuck Townships and the Boroughs of Ben Avon, Emsworth and Ben Avon Heights.

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We ask all who share a passion for history, reverence for the past, and an interest in preserving our common heritage for future generations to join as a contributor to BAAHA.