Record in Stone: Cemetery's 150-year history mirrors that of the Sewickley Valley

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Editor's note: This is the third in Sewickley Herald's Record in Stone series of articles to acquaint the community with the treasure in its midst -- Sewickley Cemetery -- and prepare for the 150th anniversary gala celebration to be held Memorial Day weekend.

The venerable 1860 Sewickley Cemetery dates to the same period as the 1861 Presbyterian Church on Grant Street and the 1862 Christy House on Frederick Avenue.

Only a very few other constructs in the valley are older. For all the many intervening years since 1860, the blessed spot has been useful to the community.

Besides, as always, affording comfort to all who suffer loss day in and day out, the cemetery straightaway received the Civil War dead, as outlined in last month's essay. And the valley graveyards on Graveyard Lane and beside the 1840 Presbyterian Church were emptied and the tenants assimilated into family plots or buried under a common stones in Section C in the new hilltop cemetery.

These several hundred individuals literally represent "the dust of the ancestors"-- that first generation of settlers. It was they who, in the first half of the 19th century, cleared the forest, farmed the land and stayed to serve the masses moving westward on the Beaver Road and the Ohio River as drovers and rivermen and inn and shop keepers.

They built the churches, schools and the town of Sewickleyville, which was incorporated in 1853.

It was a river town, with a landing at Chestnut Street and lodging at the top of the wharf grade. After 1863, that hotel was the Park Place Hotel, and from the 1890s on, the Elmhurst Inn.

Many involved in the river trades chose this valley for their homes, and, in due course, they ended up in Sewickley Cemetery, where their presence is recorded in stone.

The most prominent among them, the steamer captains, vied with one another to have the tallest monuments in Section B that could be seen from the river.

Sewickley, the "ville" was dropped in 1871, remained a river town until the 1920s at least. River

news was prominently featured in local newspapers until then. Then that era in its history ceased.

Sewickley also was a town intimately associated with the railroad, which in 1851 came right through the valley, along the north shore of the Ohio River, where Ohio River Boulevard is today. At first just a single track, that line roared to life as the great Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad and later, the Pennsylvania Railroad Lines West.

Eventually there would be four tracks--the two outside used for passengers and the two inside used for freight. A train stopped in Sewickley, or at any of the other six stations in the valley, about every 15 minutes.

The heyday of passenger travel was in the 1920s. It ended in the late 1960s.

Those railroad days are remembered in Sewickley Cemetery, because like the river men, the railroad men found the valley a congenial place to live and chose to leave their marks and to rest in Sewickley Cemetery.

The railroad also made it easy for the Pittsburgh businessman to find quiet and no smoke at a residence in the sylvan Sewickley Valley, and a commuting population took up residence here.

In the 1890s, some of the city's wealthiest families, for that matter some of the country's wealthiest families, who had money made in manufacturing, followed Henry Oliver to the hills known as Sewickley Heights and constructed expansive estates, for use in the summer season.

The society which developed there, with the 1902 Allegheny Country Club as a nucleus, introduced yet another component of the valley's fascinating history. Income tax and the depression strangled the life out of this golden age, and most of the great estates were razed, but the Heights community survives to this day.

And the second and third generations of this particular group showed where their hearts lay by abandoning their practice of using Pittsburgh's Cemeteries to choose Sewickley Cemetery, joining the first generation of commuters there.

The 200 years of the local history has occurred against a backdrop of wars, and Sewickley Cemetery has been providing a means of assuaging the pain and remembering the sacrifice occasioned thereby for three quarters of that time. The Sewickley Cemetery, created on the very cusp of the Civil War, admirably provided then and was beloved by veterans of that conflict because their memorial called Fame stands there.

The Spanish American War followed and the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and the several modern wars. The same risks and losses recur again and again, and the veterans repair themselves. In each instance, the cemetery seems to be the place to go to try to fix it all, to put it in perspective.

Memorial Day at the end of May is the day chosen to remember what is lost, and gained. When the Civil War veterans were able, well into the 20th century, they marched up the hill with the whole town to the statue of Fame. Then it became harder and harder for them, and then they didn't come any more. The veterans of World War I came to the cemetery and laid wreaths where their Civil

War forebears had. They too are gone now.

The veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam and their younger warrior brothers come today for the same purpose. This year the laying of the wreaths will be held Monday, May 31, after the parade through town.

All are invited to visit the cemetery this Memorial Day weekend and witness all the veterans' graves, most proudly inscribed with their service, each complimented with a fluttering flag.

It is on this most essential holiday that Sewickley Cemetery will celebrate its sesquicentennial. It is a celebration which pointedly shows that friends and neighbors have not forgotten names and deeds, and further, it exults that the cemetery has been able to keep history for all these many years.

Festivities will begin at noon Saturday and Sunday under a big tent with Celtic song and dance provided by the Maidens IV, at 3 and 7 p.m. on Saturday and 1 p.m. Sunday.

The Mockingbird Theatre Company will present a Civil War Hamlet and a variety show on a horse-drawn stage at 12:30 and 4:30 p.m. Saturday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday.

Company C of the 63rd Pa. Volunteers, Civil War re-enactors, will be encamped at the site to remember the Civil War beginning of the cemetery.

The event is sponsored by John Dioguardi and Rome Monument. It's all free, and food and refreshments will be sold. There is ample parking. There will be available self-guided tours of the cemetery that will show you where many evocative graves are located. All are invited to celebrate, and usher in another 150 years of service to the community.

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