

2022 FALL NEWSLETTER

Did You Know?

The Many Faces of Guffey Hollow

by Bob Cupp



The Brine Well House was a famous hotel along the Youghiogheny River during the nineteenth century. It was built by Alexander Guffey and named after the salt wells he operated nearby. (Courtesy of Joe Brugnoli)



Guffey Hollow is a remote area between two steep hillsides along North Huntingdon's border with Sewickley Township and the Youghiogheny River. Although many local residents now find Guffey a mysterious, isolated place, that wasn't always the case. With only a few houses remaining in the narrow valley, it's hard to imagine that it was once a thriving community, occupied by several hundred people.

The hollow is named after the descendants of William Guffey who came from Ireland in 1738. A member of British General Forbes' 1758 French & Indian War campaign to capture Fort Duquesne, he eventually settled in Sewickley Township. In 1780, William's son, James Guffey, purchased several hundred acres of nearby land from the Penn family.

James Guffey's grandson, Alexander, was born on a farm near Madison in 1804. As a young man, Alexander Guffey moved to Old Possum Hollow, along the Youghiogheny, where Possum Hollow Run flows into the river. He operated salt wells there and shipped the salt down-river by flatboat as far as New Orleans.



This monument was erected in West Newton Cemetery in honor of Alexander Guffey. He and some of his family members are buried around it.

(continued on page 2)

(continued from page 1)

Guffey's Landing



The Yough near Guffey's Landing. The Youghiogheny River wasn't consistently deep enough to safely accommodate steamboats until two locks and dams were built in the mid-1800's to control water levels.

Mother Nature has reclaimed the land once occupied by the Brine Well House Hotel and the B & O Railroad Station. The old inn, station house and steamboat landing are long gone.



Because the location was used for river transportation, carrying salt and coal downstream, as well as passengers across the river to the Allegheny County communities of Dravo and Stingtown, the area became known as Guffey's Landing.

Due to inconsistent water levels, river transportation was unreliable. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Slackwater Navigation Company was formed to solve that problem by building dams on the river at Greenock, below Guffey's Landing, and upstream at Buena Vista. This "slackwater navigation" system opened the river to steamboat transportation.

During the steamboat era, the arrival time of the steamboats was uncertain, and the Guffeys would frequently be asked to keep travelers overnight in their home. This became a nuisance, so Alexander Guffey built a hotel and named it the Brine Well House. It faced the river, had three stories and an attic, and was 40 by 60 feet.

Mr. Guffey built several smaller homes near the Brine Well for his sons. They were cottage-type houses with porches along the front. There was also a storehouse, coach house, and large stone spring house with a smoke house above it.

The Brine Well House became a famous hotel for steamboat and, later, railroad travelers along the Yough River Valley. The inn was well-known for its unusual furnishings, excellent food and gracious hospitality. Until it burned down in 1900, many former guests, including prominent political figures, made return visits for "old time's sake."

Arrival of the Railroad

When the Pennsylvania Railroad first crossed the state, it initially brought westbound passengers no farther than Beatty Station, east of Greensburg. People traveling to Pittsburgh would disembark at Beatty Station, go overland in Alexander Guffey's stagecoaches to Guffey's Landing, and then travel by steamboat to Pittsburgh.

The Moore family built a mill near Guffey's Landing in 1851. Possum Hollow Rye Whiskey was produced at Guffey by Thomas Moore's Distillery until 1889. Other businesses operating in Guffey Hollow in 1867 included Todd's shoe shop, a general store, a blacksmith shop and D. S. Christy's mill. Profes-

(continued on page 3)

(continued from page 2)

sionals in the hollow included D. T. Harvey, Attorney-at-Law, and William Gallagher, a practical distiller and undertaker.

A school was built in 1900 on the Watt property, located on the bank at the first bend in the road coming up the hill into Sewickley Township. In the early 1900's, there was a large slaughterhouse at the bottom of Guffey Hill and the Cervi family operated a meat market in Guffey.

In 1856, when the Pittsburgh & Connellsville Railroad was completed along the Yough as far as Guffey's Landing, Alexander Guffey granted a right-of-way through his property for what later became the B & O Railroad. However, instead of a cash payment, the agreement stipulated that all trains, including passenger expresses, make a water stop where the old family house stood. As a

result, the area was guaranteed dependable passenger train service.

One year later, the completion of the railroad to Pittsburgh greatly reduced the need for steamboats. The Yough River dams were abandoned in 1866 after they were damaged repeatedly by heavy winter ice flows, eliminating the steamboat traffic. The railroad stop, as well as the surrounding area, then became known as Guffey's Station. For years after the station house was gone, the B & O still honored the contract and trains continued to stop to pick up passengers who flagged them down at Guffey's Station.

Coal Mining

Although not readily apparent, the hills around Guffey are dotted with evidence of past coal mining operations. The Guffeys' first coal mine opened in 1806. In 1817, they were credited with mining the first local coal shipped down the Ohio River. By 1826, shipping coal to Cincinnati by flatboat was done on an extensive basis. In 1847, coal mined in the Guffey area sold in Cincinnati for ten cents a bushel.

Over the years, a number of different mining companies operated here. One of the early mines was known as the White Bell Mine. In the early 1880's, a slope mine was opened by William Kliment. The Paulton Coal and Iron Company operated a second mine and the Guffey Mine also remained active. Guffey had about thirty houses then.

(continued on page 4)



Joe Brugnoli, who became a member of the Guffey Club in 1941, pointed-out the remnants of coal mining operations in the hollow. This "gear-wheel" was used to pull the coal cars up the slope to the mine tippie.

(continued from page 3)

With workers needed for the mines, the Guffey population peaked in the late 1890's; there were over 300 miners in the hollow. The majority of the miners came from the Po River Valley in Northern Italy. Every house had eight to ten boarders. In 1898, the Pittsburgh Coal Co. bought all three mines.

The closing of the Guffey mines in 1921 was the beginning of the end for the once flourishing mining community. Where the busy sounds of coal mining once filled the hollow, the peaceful quiet today is interrupted only

This "Honor Roll" pays tribute to 96 citizens of Guffey and nearby Shaner, who served their country during World Wars I and II, and the Korean Conflict. Now, with only a few houses remaining, it's hard to imagine that so many people ever lived there.

Emma Goldman was suspected of being involved in the attempted assassination of Henry Clay Frick, as well as the assassination of President William McKinley.



by the sounds of passing automobiles on the state road through an area that remains virtually untouched by either the advantages or problems of modern day life.

Anarchists in the Hollow

Guffey Hollow also had a dark side; it was inhabited by a group of anarchists in 1900. Their leader was Ciancavilla; he published an anarchist propaganda paper here, known locally as "The Firebrand".

A group of local citizens put an end to the anarchists' activities. A Pittsburgh newspaper reported their actions on September 17, 1901. *"Thirty armed men, imitating the movements of the Ku Klux Klan, raided the anarchists at Guffey's Hollow, Westmoreland County, on Sunday night and forced twenty-five families to take their departure from the town before daylight. The raiders surrounded the houses and terrorized the anarchists by firing Winchesters and revolvers and yelling like Indians."*

Famous Lithuanian anarchist, Emma Goldman, was living in the hollow at that time. Goldman was linked with both the attempted assassination of

(continued on page 5)

(continued from page 4)

The Italian Brotherhood of Guffey has been in existence since 1853. Known as the "Guffey Club," this building has become a landmark in the hollow.

Henry Clay Frick in 1892, and the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, but, due to insufficient evidence, was never prosecuted.

The large Italian immigrant population also had problems with the "Black Hands." These Mafia bullies attempted to extort large sums of money from the workers.



The Guffey Club

Through all the changes in the hollow over the past 150 years, one constant has been the presence of the Italian Brotherhood of Guffey, known locally as the "Guffey Club." The club's social hall was constructed in 1853, and the organization was fully chartered by 1876, making it the second oldest Italian miner's society in the state. The original wooden structure burned down about 1950 but was rebuilt in 1953.

The cement block building has become a landmark in the hollow. According to Gene Minerva, President of the Guffey Club in 2006, the family-oriented

social organization maintained between 250 and 300 members at that time.

North Huntingdon resident, Joe Brugnoli, was raised in Guffey Hollow. His father, Ovidio, arrived from Italy in 1900 and worked

This sign is proudly displayed on the exterior wall of the Guffey Club. Although the club was established in 1853, it wasn't incorporated as the "Italian Brotherhood of Guffey" until 1910.



(continued on page 6)

(continued from page 5)

in the Guffey Mine until it closed. Brugnoli (now deceased) pointed-out where many of the old buildings were located, including the hotel, train station, school, company store, Guffey Mine tipple and shaft opening. Part of the mine's brick powder house is still standing on the wooded hillside above the road.

He explained how the Guffey miners were housed in those days: *"The 'bach' shanties were built on the bank over there near the mine. You could only live there if you were a bachelor or if you were married but had no children. The row houses were for miners with families."*

Brugnoli was once the senior member of the Guffey Club. He vividly recalled that, *"The minutes were written in Italian when I joined in 1941 at 16 years of age. Miners received no benefits in those days, but the club paid \$1.00 a day in sick and accident benefits."*

The Future

"A lot of history has been made here at this old place," Minerva proudly explained. The Guffey Club has been an integral part of the hollow's past. With many of North Huntingdon's new housing developments steadily encroaching on Guffey's peaceful solitude, it won't be long until the hollow has another new face. Perhaps it will someday be known as "Guffey Estates."

The Cosmopolitan Band of Guffey – This photo was taken around 1910 in front of the old Guffey Club. Guffey was well-known for its good music. At one time, the community had two brass bands, two string bands and two social halls.



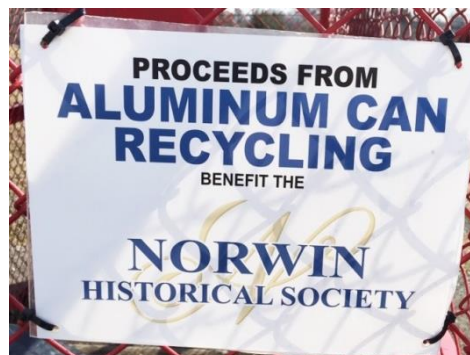


You can Recycle Aluminum cans and help us at the same time!

Please help the environment and support us at the same time by recycling your aluminum cans at one of our 4 recycling bins:



- **St. Agnes Church Parking Lot**
- **Rear of Straw Pump Fire Dept.**
- **Irwin Playground Parking Lot**
- **L&L Fleatique in Adamsburg**



THANK YOU!



2022 FALL NEWSLETTER

PO Box 623
219 Main Street
Irwin, PA 15642
724-309-1161

TO:

BOARD OF
DIRECTORS

Carl Huszar, President
Tom Witman, Vice President
Geraldyn DeFelice, Secretary
Diane Holderbaum, Treasurer
Tom Agnew
Sandy Carlson
Robert Cupp
Bill Hawley
Regis Holecko
Brian Jovan
Sharon Lunn
David Sinclair
Richard Siniawski
Noreen Turkowski

*Newsletter
design and production
by Sandy Carlson.*



*Your gift to the
Norwin Historical Society
helps to preserve our history!*