

Our Golden Anniversary



50TH ANNIVERSARY

HISTORY OF SLIPPERY ROCK PARK

by
Ralph A. Nicholas
July 17, 1975

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SLIPPERY ROCK PARK

OUR 50TH ANNIVERSARY

It all began fifty years ago.

At least, as far as Ralph and Mary Jane Nicholas are involved.

Actually, Slippery Rock Park began in the 1880's. My father and mother were married in 1895. I was born in 1897. One of the first stories I ever heard as a child was that in their courting days they attended a picnic in Slippery Rock Park. They had gone to Slippery Rock Park by railroad from Butler; while attending and enjoying the picnic, a huge storm developed, which washed out a railroad bridge between the Park and Butler, which caused all the picnic participants to stay in the Park overnight, sleep on the picnic tables, and wait for transportation south to Butler and Pittsburgh the next day. That story I heard many times in my childhood.

It is confirmed by an article from THE HISTORY OF BUTLER COUNTY, published in 1909 by James A. McKee:

"The Oil Men's Outing Association had its inception in 1886, when the employes of the National Transit Company and their friends held a picnic at Slippery Rock Park on the Bessemer Railroad. The affair was such a pronounced success that it was decided to hold an outing every year and include all the oil men and their friends in the entire oil field. The place of holding the annual outing was changed to Conneaut Lake, and a permanent organization was effected."

Also; by an ad by the trainmen of Western Pennsylvania, which was given me by Pete Crawford in the last two years:



ANCHOR LINE DIVISION 217.

O. R. C.

SLIPPERY ROCK PARK.

Saturday, August 20th, 1892.

Anchor Line Division No. 217.

ORDER OF RAILWAY CONDUCTORS.

Desires you to attend its First Annual

EXCURSION AND PICNIC,

AT

SLIPPERY ROCK PARK.

Saturday, August 20th, 1892.

Original Royal Italians, McMichaels.

Refreshments may be obtained at the Park.

Times of Trains.

SPECIAL TRAIN, CENTRAL TIME.

Leave Allegheny.	7:10 A. M.
Leave New Castle.	6:30 A. M.
Leave Foxburg.	7:23 A. M.

RETURNING, SPECIAL TRAIN LEAVES PARK, 6:30 P. M.

RATES.

Fare for the round trip, including dancing, for
Gentlemen, \$1; for Ladies, 60 cents.

BENNETT STAR PRINT, BENNETT, PA.

COMMITTEES.

ARRANGEMENTS.

W. H. BAIRD.	S. B. CLANEY.
J. C. HUBNER.	
FLOOR.	
E. R. EMERY.	R. E. WHITE.
O. W. CROOKS.	
W. H. MANN.	JAMES TONES.
A. T. SCOTT.	
W. J. BURKE.	D. C. HENSHAW.
M. DEMPSEY.	
L. B. FORTNEY.	

Also an excerpt from BENCH AND BAR OF BUTLER COUNTY, published in 1968 by J. Campbell Brandon, Esquire:

"The many interesting experiences and anecdotes in the oil country were probably responsible for the formation of the Oil Men's Outing Association in 1886. That year, employees of the National Transit Company held a picnic at Slippery Rock Park on the Bessemer Railroad. This was the start of the famous "Pipe Line Picnic," later held annually at the popular Conneaut Lake Exposition Park. It included all the oil men and their families and soon developed as one of the big events of the Conneaut Lake season. Special trains picked up the passengers at wayside stations, along the Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad. Three of the most active sponsors were Charles H. Oliver, C. R. Watson and James W. McKee. The Pipe Line Picnic always meant a long day for the excursionists, leaving Butler about 6:00 a.m. and returning around midnight, tired and happy. From this organization, the Oil and Gas Magazine was said to have developed, supplying all kinds of information about the oil industry."

My personal recollection of our Park began in 1912. I was a freshman in Butler High School. Four of my closest friends in Butler, Ted Beatty, Ed Anderson, "Cooker" Hooks, and John Greer and I decided to go camping.

One of our parents, I cannot remember which, probably my dad, who owned a 1909 Packard, took us out over the sandy road to Slippery Rock and dropped us off at the Sanderson farm. The Sanderson farm, now owned by Arthur Sanderson, lay just east of where Mike Namadan's beautiful home now is along the creek.

We slid down over the hill and set up camp on the level place between Mike's home and the fallen bridge. There was a beautiful spring and we had provisions for a week. Our tent was very small and, as I remember it, if one of us had to turn during the night, we all had to turn.

We had a kayak canoe, made of slats, covered by canvas, and so unstable that you had to have your hair parted in the middle to ride it. The section of the creek from Mike Namadan's home, maybe Margaret Kohn's, and up stream to Buzz Miller's was very familiar. We learned not to go farther up stream and land on the other side of the creek. That farm was off limits. It was the old Wadsworth farm owned by a man named Goellet, who was married to Etta Wadsworth. He had a ferocious temper and would permit no trespassers.

We soon ran out of food and began to be hungry. Mrs. Sander-son sold us bread for 10¢ a loaf (she did not know we tried to steal her chickens, but never succeeded). We had a ham bone left, which we hung on a tree, and Lewis Hooks boiled it every day, (hence his nickname "Cooker"). That is my end of the 1912-1913 era.

In 1914, we camped below the dam on the creek which is now Rock Falls Park. There was a well which gushed to the surface and which smelled terrible from the gas which came up with it. We were camping on the Daugherty Mill property. It was powered by the old wooden dam, which was later replaced by the present dam. They ground grain into flour and feed for farm animals. They lived in the big red house near the dam. One night we were pressed into service by Mrs. Daugherty to help serve dinner to the Automobile Club of Butler, which had just been organized. We got a good chicken dinner for our help.

My outstanding recollection of that year, 1914, is that, being boys with an interest in girls, we walked up to Slippery Rock and learned to know three girls, Leila Watson, Lola McQuistion and Jean Grubbs. They would come down to the creek and swim with us.

I was lying on the lawn of the Watson home, waiting for Leila, when an extra from the Butler Eagle was being peddled by the news boys:

"EXTRA: WAR DECLARED!"

The beginning of World War I in 1914.

One day we boys and girls went swimming in the creek. There had been high water and Leila, Jean and I were wading in shallow water. Suddenly, both girls were being swept away by the current, and I, never a good swimmer, reached a hand to each of them. We were swept away and, fortunately, my foot hit a stone in the creek and I stood there holding them by both hands, and, with my nose just above water, waited until the other boys, good swimmers, came from across the creek and took them one by one to shore and then took me in.

I have long since lost track of Jean Grubbs and Lola McQuistion, but Leila married Arthur Vincent, who became a professor of the College, and Leila was for years a Trustee of the College. She still lives in Slippery Rock, and, I am certain, would verify these remarks.

So much for the era of 1912-1914.

Let's move on a decade. I sold Packards from 1920 to 1927. When Packard quit making trucks, we became agents for the White trucks. I sold one about 1923 and took a mechanic to Pittsburgh to drive it back.

He told me he had a chance to buy some property and would like me to look at it. Which I did, but I told him, "Charley, if you are going to buy property you should consider the Slippery Rock Creek area." So, soon we drove out, slid down over the hill to the level spot near Mike Namadan's home and I told him that this area had great possibilities.

In searching further in 1924, he learned that the Wadsworth farm (now the main portion of the Park) was for sale, and he wanted to form a partnership and buy it. I was not interested. Finally, that fall he learned that the two remaining Wadsworth women in their 90's, Etta, with all her marbles and Margaret who was born without any, had to eat and that the big trees were going to be cut down to feed them.

The big trees to me meant as much as the creek, so I approached two uncles, who had money, to buy the farm. They laughed at me.

Fortunately, the trees were not cut down that winter, and early in 1925, Charley approached me again. He could borrow \$250.00 on his interest in an oil well. What could I raise? Well, I became interested and found I could borrow \$250.00 on my life insurance. We had \$500.00. Where do you get the balance?

I approached Frank Anderson of Anderson Gas Company, who was loaning mortgage money. I drove him out and we dodged all the underbrush on what are now Fairway numbers 6 and 7. I said, "Mr. Anderson, this is going to be the Golf Course." I shall always remember the twinkle in his eyes when he said, "Ralph, do you really think so?"

He loaned us the money and on May 17, 1925, we owned the Wadsworth Sr. and Jr. farms. Charley settled down, to live in the Kiester house, which is now Hap's cottage. We had immediately bought the Kiester farm. He started to clear what is now the Beach. Only then did I learn that he was an alcoholic and I had to support his family.

In a few months, it was you buy me or I buy you. Neither of us had a cent and we were headed for bankruptcy. My father reluctantly bought out Charley, so the partnership with my father began, until I was able to buy his share, by taking over his share of the debts.

In 1926, Ordell Crawford leased land and built a cottage where the Helmrichs now live. In 1927, we were able to have the Original Park Plan laid out by Aiken and Greenough, Engineers. Bill Greenough, a son of Lew Greenough, is still our Engineer. Naturally lots no. 1, 2, 1A, 1B, 1C were laid out around Crawford's cottage and he bought them.

In 1928 and 1929, I sold 60-odd lots each year and was able to build a bridge for a better entrance, the roads, the beautiful dance hall and helped build the Golf Course. I thought it would never end, but it did.

The Depression caught all of U.S. in October, 1929, but it caught me in July. The dance hall was to open July 4th and the Saturday before there were forty men lying out in my yard to be paid and I had no money. But we lived through the Depression, through World War II when gas was rationed. My wife would sit for days and there were no golfers. The fine was very high for using gas ration stamps for anything but business. We saw weeds grow ten feet high on the greens and all we wanted was to sell the Golf Course. Finally, Wynn Tredway came along and bought it. Then the war was over and he, being industrious and honest, fixed up the nine holes, prospered, bought land from me for the other nine and later sold to Armco.

The seven years the dam was out and we had no boating were very tough years. How we got the dam, and the tremendous value of Slippery Rock Park Civic Association is another story. I must tell some time.

So we lived through the ups and downs of those years, and here we are fifty years later. Mary Jane and I are two very fortunate people and we are thankful everyday.

Just one more memory. You know why we called the new Real Estate Development Slippery Rock Park. Little did I know until about 1940, that I had bought the old Park. We had a chance to buy part of the English farm from the railroad to the creek. Then Route 8 was built and we laid out Addition I and Addition II. When we started to clear brush, we found all kinds of foundations and rotting buildings, which had to be removed. Only then did we know that we had bought the original Slippery Rock Park. So all of you who live along Route 8 from Ralph Vignone to the Badalis live in old Slippery Rock Park.

Jim Clements has been asking me for old pictures of the early days of the Park. Unfortunately, they and all of my World War I pictures, hundreds of them; were stolen from the locker room of an apartment we once lived in, about thirty years ago.

Fortunately, we have a few of our home, so I shall share them with you.

In 1925, there were two homes on the Wadsworth farms, the Dawson Wadsworth Sr. and Jr. The Senior's home was a beautiful thing, but terribly run down. It had three rooms downstairs and three upstairs, each room twenty by twenty feet, with random floors pegged down. We all lived in it, my father and mother with their children and Mary Jane and I with our nine month old baby, Hap. It lay right across Mohawk Trail from Nichols, in fact the spring feeds into Nichols yard.

I remember coming home at night and my wife complaining about the dirt coming down through the wooden ceiling. I got around to fixing it. I tore off some of the ceiling boards and pulled bushels of chaff and corn cobs piled up by the squirrels and rats over the years. Suddenly my hand hit something and I jerked back. Then slowly feeling my way, I pulled out a book. It was a "DIRECTORY OF THE CITY OF PITTSBURGH, 1815." It gave all the streets in the Golden Triangle known today by all of us. It listed the residents and their occupations: gentleman, wash lady, wheel wright, hot nailer, as examples. It boasted about the tremendous increase in population, due to the late war, from twenty-five hundred to over 9000 souls.

We prize it very highly among our possessions.

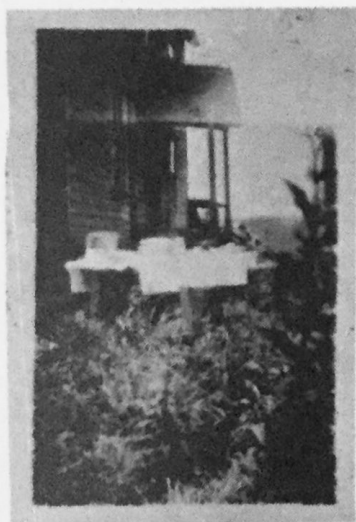
On the frontispiece was written "John Brown, his book." I learned later that John Brown was an uncle of the Wadsworth girls. It was probably slipped under the upstairs floor by one of the Wadsworth women. Oscar Kiester, from whom we purchased his farm and house (now Hap's house), the next door neighbor to the Senior Wadsworths, once told me that there were six feeble-minded women in the Wadsworth family; the windows were barred and their bawling and screaming made the nights almost unbearable for the Kiesters.

By summer Mary Jane and I decided to fix up the Wadsworth Jr. home. That winter the Wadsworth Sr. home burned down.

The Dawson Wadsworth Jr. home was not beautiful. No one had lived in it for twenty-two years. It was not habitable—the roof and windows were gone and the plaster barely clung to the laths.

So we lived in a tent about where our mall now is. Hap was a year old on August 27, 1925, and I was so proud to take my son to the Nicholas Family Reunion. I was secretary and while I was busy, he wandered off into the orchard and ate some green apples (so we were told later). At any rate the next morning I went off to work and Mary Jane got awake to find her baby in convulsions, stiff as a board and blue. Being a young, frightened mother, not knowing what to do, she gathered him up and ran across the field to Mrs. Crawford's. Having four of her own children, she knew what to do. She put Hap into hot water and mustard and saved his life long before Dr. Hockenberry got there by horse and buggy.

This is what our house looked like in 1925:



We got a new roof and windows installed. In 1926 we saved the plaster by papering all the walls and ceilings with newspapers and then wall paper. In my office I have a chunk of the plaster we cut out in the 1968 remodeling. On it is a full page spread of the Pittsburgh Press, Wednesday Evening, May 19, 1926.

In 1928 it looked like this:



In 1947, it looked like this:



In 1968, it looked like this:



These memories I intended to put in a book someday for my grandchildren, but Jim Clements is looking for material for the News Letter announcing the Golden Anniversary of the Park at the annual picnic on August 3rd. So I have written it now, not years from now, and instead of bothering him and Matt Rastetter with it, I have decided to publish it myself as a GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY MEMENTO for those attending.

This is a history of the Park as it progressed over 50 years, but one thing I left out which is so important. As the developer, I would have gotten no place without the help of Slippery Rock Park Civic Association.

It began within a year or two of the Park. At first it was just a loosely knit organization of property owners to solve common problems. The first problem was the road through the Park. I had built it in 1928, twelve inches thick of slag. By the Depression Days, when no one had any money, it had blown away as dust, with only five or six inches left and lots of pot holes. The Township Supervisors even refused to apply calcium chloride to keep the dust out of the cottages.

Then the Civic Association, with Ordell Crawford, as president, and some very prominent bankers and business men of Butler as directors, and I took them to Court. It sure helped to be backed by such prominent men.

The judge offered a solution: Change the Township boundary line to include all the Park. Then Slippery Rock Township will adopt the road, get all the taxes, Brady Township will have no road problem and no taxes. All of us were satisfied, the Court decreed, and we got a good road.

The next great crisis was the loss of the dam. We watched board after board wash off the dam. Daugherty Mills was gone, the present owner had no commercial use for the dam as the Daughertys and their predecessors had for over 100 years, but he refused us permission to repair it. Yes, he would take \$25,000 for the site.

There was no boating for seven years. All kinds of ideas popped up. The Dam Committee was quite effective. When the owner was obdurate, somebody had a brilliant idea (I can't remember who). Why not get Sol Stoughton and Norman Straub, who owned the land above the dam, to deed the Civic Association a 50 foot wide strip across the creek, 50 feet above the dam site? They willingly did so.

At that point, the resistance of the owner collapsed. We could build the dam on the present site with water rights up to the shallows at our present entrance, to the high water mark on both sides of the creek, and own the dam and the water rights.

But where do you raise \$17,500.00? That is where the then President, Bill Dillner, showed his business acumen and initiative. He had his attorney form a Non-Profit Corporation to issue stock at \$100.00 per share. At the organizing meeting, Bill stood up and said, "I'll buy \$2000.00 worth of stock and so will Ralph." I nearly died for I was not making much in those days. Where would I get \$2000.00? Well, I did, and most of the cottage owners came in for \$100.00 to \$600.00. Some did not.

We raised the money and built the dam and now the Association owns it.

The Civic Association helped get us our garbage collection, helped fight the battle in Court to get our bridge replaced (we failed and I believe all of us will say "Thank God, we have our peace and quiet and not the through traffic.").

There have been many presidents of the Civic Association and many loyal directors, who have worked long and hard for the betterment of the Park.

With fifty years of hindsight, as secretary, I have to rate Jim Clements and his very fine Board of Directors right in there with Ordell Crawford and Bill Dillner.

You are all aware of what has been done lately; street signs, trash clean-up day, beach restoration, initiation of the Association News Letter, clearing the fallen trees from the creek, the annual picnics, the mosquito abatement program, and the beginning of the school busing this fall, all attacked with enthusiasm by the members of the Association.

It was a great inspiration to me to see the enthusiasm on the two most recent creek clean-up days. It was almost unbelievable to see the efforts of the thirty-seven men and boys who worked so long last Saturday and with even more men on Sunday. Marilyn Thompson, delivering on her boat her sandwiches and drinks, did the work of three women. Fine men, who had no business doing that kind of work, in the creek or out of it, till 7 o'clock Sunday evening. Their hard work, conviviality and loyalty were a delight to see. And, incidentally, their efforts saved the Civic Association \$2500.00 which was the bid for the removal of the leaning trees and submerged snags.

That's what the Civic Association is all about. Those few who do not belong should join—a share of stock for \$5.00 and annual dues of \$10.00. As Bob Howells, comptroller of PPG Industries, said to me last year, "It's the best buy on the market."

I doff my hat to the Slippery Rock Park Civic Association—with my warmest thanks.