

FROM COWANWANIK TO CHARTIER

The history of Tarentum, Pennsylvania begins in a place known to the Shawnee Indians as Cowanwanik, or “the place of the bull buffalo”. In the 17th and early 18th centuries the Bull Creek Valley was still grazing territory for thousands of elk and bison; as well as bear, wolves and other wildlife that have long since disappeared.



In about 1728 hundreds of Shawnee refugees had arrived in the Bull Creek Valley situated on the west side of the Allegheny River, in a large area known as Alleghenia. The Shawnee had been driven from their ancient homelands in eastern Pennsylvania by advancing English colonists. Headed by Chief Nukakana, the Shawnee settled at mouth of Bull Creek. Eventually, it became the largest and most important of several Indian villages scattered throughout the region of the Allegheny and Kiskiminetas Rivers. It was here, in 1734 that Pierre Chartier, a part French, part Shawnee fur trader started a trading post. Chartier’s trading post became the center of the village, which

was known for decades as “Chartier’s Old Town”. Because of its location on the Allegheny River at the mouth of Bull Creek, Chartier’s Old Town continued as a major crossroads village long after Chartier moved westward in 1745.

Eventually, the conflict which had been raging in the eastern part of the American colonies between the English settlers and Native American tribes came to the Alle-Kiski Valley. Increasing waves of white settlement and the continual taking of Native American grounds provoked natives and incidents of violent conflict became inevitable. In the Bull Creek Massacre of 1791, several whole families were slaughtered in the cabin of Abraham Ross near the junction of Bull Creek Road and Van Teal Hollow. In the late 18th century, the west bank of the Allegheny River was largely the wilderness, and still Indian Territory. And so, in order to fortify control and provide protection for settlers in the area, Captain Robert Orr a noted frontiersman and Revolutionary War veteran, built a blockhouse in 1783 at the mouth of Bull Creek. In this location for several years after, Captain Orr and his brigade of volunteer militia led attacks on the natives.



URGED FORWARD

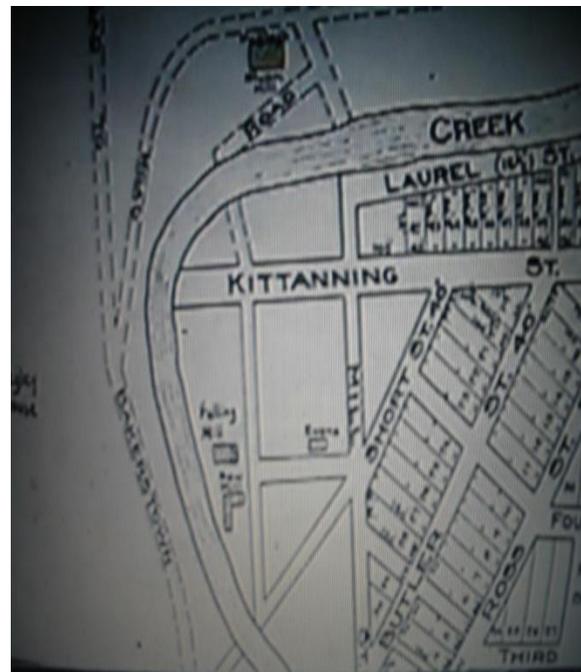
By 1796 new families had begun to arrive in Chartier's Old Town. Some of them were Revolutionary War veterans who had been granted parcels of land as payment for their wartime service. The most notable of these was Felix Negley, who had served with Captain Orr in the Westmoreland militia. Negley held title to a strip of land extending west from present day Ross Street (Bull Creek), and encompassing all of what eventually became West Tarentum. Between 1797 and 1800, Negley and a crew of men built a dam on Bull Creek along with a saw mill, grist mill, and what was also said to be the first flour mill west of the Allegheny River; and later, a carting and folding mill.

Mill Street thus became the first street in a village that was then part of Deer Township. Beyond Negley's laborers and friends who built log cabins at the mouth of Bull Creek, the only other residence in the village for the next quarter of a century was the home of James Lizley, who built a log house on 6th Avenue across from what is now the railroad station. The population of Chartier's Old Town in 1825 was thus likely not more than 100 persons.



In 1827, Judge Henry Brackenridge, son of Supreme Court Justice and Whiskey Rebellion figure Hugh Henry Brackenridge, acquired by marriage an estate of several thousand acres of land along the Allegheny River, extending east

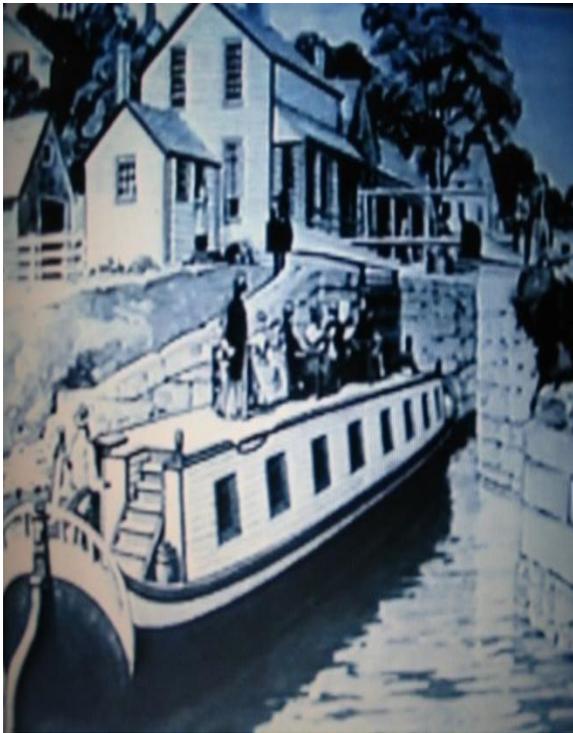
of Ross Street into present day Harrison Township. Caroline and Henry Brackenridge built a home called Oak Grove, just west of what became Sycamore Street in Natrona. In the fall of 1829, Caroline gave her husband permission to have a significant portion of the property surveyed and divided into town lots. Shortly thereafter, Judge Brackenridge laid out the streets and named the growing village Tarentum - the Latin name for the colony of the ancient Greeks on the Gulf of Tarentum in southern Italy. This is true, despite the tale that Brackenridge, or Negley, or the Indians, depending on who tells the story; built a row of homes along the Allegheny River, and simply named it Tarentum.



Tarentum seceded from East Deer Township and was formally incorporated as the third borough in Allegheny County in the year 1842. At that time, it included sections to the east of what would later become Harrison Township in 1863. The establishment of Tarentum Borough was one of many achievements in the life of Judge Brackenridge. He was an eloquent and progressive champion of human rights.

THE CANAL AND THE DIRTY BLACK OOZE

The major impetus for Tarentum's development, however, had actually arrived a year before Brackenridge laid out the town, and likely helped prompt his decision to develop the community. In 1828, just months after the first steamboat traveled the Allegheny from Pittsburgh to Kittanning; the canal, the central form of long distance transportation in America early to mid 19th century, arrived to link Tarentum with Pittsburgh and points east, all the way to Philadelphia.



The western division of the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal, extending from Pennsylvania to Johnstown, included 64 locks; one of which was located at Lock Street and another one mile to the east at Mile Lock Lane. There was a row bridge at Bridge Street, and an overnight docking area between Lock and Wood Streets. The tow path ran on the south side of the canal channel, which was wide enough to let two boats pass, and was about six feet deep; good for both fishing and swimming. The canal in Tarentum was fed mainly from Bull Creek. The

home of Tarentum's main canal conductor, John Kennedy Sr., is now a Tarentum landmark.



A stable was built at what was South Canal Street and Ross Street. The horses had to be changed every 7 or 8 miles throughout canal route. After 1834, Bull Creek farmers could ship their produce to Philadelphia in four days. More commonly, farmers could pack up their goods for the overnight trip into Pittsburgh for 25 cents, and arrive at the wharf in the morning for breakfast and a day in the big city, selling and buying goods. The canal gave such life to the community that in just a few short years, the population had grown to 300 people, and included the following businesses: six salt works producing about 70 barrels a day, 2 coal mines, which supplied Pittsburgh and Philadelphia with large quantities of coal; one steam grist and saw mill, one folding and carting machine mill, two blacksmith shops, one wagon and coach maker shop, one brick and stone mason, a tailor, three house carpenters, three coopers, two shoemaker shops, two dry goods stores, and two taverns. There were two churches, Presbyterian and Union. There was a brick school house which was not yet finished, and a post office.



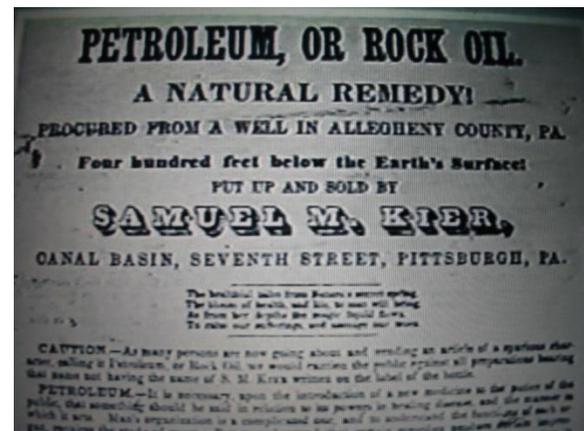
One of the notable passengers who traveled the canal was English novelist Charles Dickens, whose descriptive but caustic commentary of our region became immortalized in his 1842 book, "American Notes". He says, "It became a science to walk to and fro without tumbling overboard into the canal. It was somewhat embarrassing at first too, to have to duck nimbly every 5 minutes, whenever the men called for us to lie down flat. All night long, and every night on this canal, a storm and tempest of spitting ensued; and once, my coat, being in the very center of a hurricane sustained by five gentlemen I was feigned to lap it on the deck and rub it down with fair water before it was in a condition to be worn again".



Despite Dickens' feelings to the contrary, the entire region was progressing, and in Tarentum

especially, it was the natural environment and its resources which provided the basis for future growth. Important in the mid 19th century for food preservation and a host of other uses, salt became the first marketable commodity extracted from the Tarentum area. Sometime before 1810 several salt brine wells were drilled, making Tarentum the first place in western Pennsylvania to produce salt from brine.

Salt wells were drilled near Cairns and across the river in Wild Cat Hollow. In 1850, a group of Quaker businessmen from Philadelphia founded the Pennsylvania Salt Manufacturing Company in the section of East Tarentum that in a few years became Natrona. Natrona was christened as such after "natron", the Greek word for salt. Penn Salt manufactured a wide variety of salt and soda alkaline byproducts, from lye for home soap making; to chemicals used in the manufacture of paper and wool; to chemical explosives used from the Civil War through World War II. Downriver in what was then East Deer Township, Thomas Kier established a refinery in on the site of what is now Greco's scrap yard.



In 1845, Kier and his son James M. Kier accidentally discovered the first oil in the United States while cleaning their salt wells. Not pumping their wells on Sunday, the oil which had gathered on top of the salt well over the weekend had to be pumped out. The oil was contaminating the brine wells of the Kiers and

their neighbors. But knowing the local Indians had used the oil for soothing aching muscles and joints, Samuel Kier, another son of Kier and a Pittsburgh druggist bottled and sold the liniment as Kier's Rock Oil, or magic oil. Kier established a refinery in Pittsburgh at the present day corner of Grant Street and 7th Avenue. Kier also began using the petroleum as crude aluminen around the saltworks.

As a result, Kier joined Louis Peterson, who in 1844 had begun selling Tarentum Petroleum, drawn from his farm, on the site which became PPG Industries. The product was then sold to a cotton factory in Pittsburgh, which used it for lubricating their cotton spindles. Before he realized its potential, Peterson had been dumping the dirty black grease into the canal, which infuriated the boaters. The Tarentum oil story continued into the 1850's. Tarentum wells produced nearly all the oil used in the United States. Penn Salt oil was the first ever shipped overseas to Great Britain. None of this little known oil history could have been possible without William Smith, a blacksmith who hailed from southern Butler County near Cabot. After working in Freeport for a while Uncle Billy, as he was called; established a blacksmith shop at the intersection of Ferry Street and the Pennsylvania Canal in East Deer Township, not far from the Kier salt wells.



Smith had developed the tools for drilling local salt brine and oil wells, which prevented sand and gravel infiltration into the liquid as it would

be pumped. In 1859 when Edwin Drake was ready to drill for oil in northwest Pennsylvania, he came calling on Uncle Billy. In April of that year, Smith and his son went with Drake to Titusville, and on August 25th, helped the Colonel make history by drilling the first commercially successful oil well on Oil Creek, Pennsylvania. The oil boom was on, thanks in part to an obscure blacksmith, who quietly returned to Tarentum to live out his remaining years. After making possible the enormous wealth of the Rockefeller Empire, Billy Smith died in modest circumstances at the age of 88, and is buried in a cemetery in southern Butler County.

A CROSSROADS VILLAGE GROWS UP

On the eve of the Civil War, the census of 1860 reported half of Tarentum Borough's population of 708 to be younger than 20 years of age. Most of the Borough's residents listed their ancestry as German, Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Scotch-Irish. Among the occupations there were three physicians, four ministers, thirteen blacksmiths, nine teamsters, five coal diggers, six shoemakers, ten seamstresses and two lawyers.



The Tarentum area sent two hundred of these residents, more than a quarter of its population, to defend the union during the years 1861-1865. Companies F and I of the 123rd Pennsylvania Volunteers were recruited here and placed under the command of Colonel J.B.

Clark. Both companies drilled at McCall's Grove, now Riverview Memorial Park; and took a ferryboat across the river midway where they walked the boardwalk the rest of the way along the shallow part of the river. Across the river, they boarded the Allegheny Valley Railroad train at Craigdell station, which took them in to Pittsburgh, and on to Harrisburg. There, they were mustered in to service on August 8, 1862. The soldiers' equipment was manufactured at James McCall's blacksmith shop located in the park area near Wood Street. There are today more than one hundred Civil War veterans buried in Prospect Cemetery in Brackenridge; including John McCullen, who was killed the second day in battle in Gettysburg, and Eli Hemphill, one of the many American soldiers who died of disease during the war. Years later, Robert McCall held a 25 cent bean bake to raise funds for the Civil War soldiers' graves. Many of Tarentum's Union troops served in the Battle of Fredericksburg in December of 1862. In 1917, the last local Civil War veterans gathered for a photograph outside the Tarentum Municipal Building.



During the years of the Civil War, the Great Flood struck the Tarentum area on March 17, 1863, preceding an even greater Saint Patrick's Day disaster by nearly 70 years. The 1863 flood inflicted irreparable damage to the channel of Pennsylvania canal; and the canal, already being rendered obsolete in the burgeoning age of the railroad, was abandoned. The Western Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad purchased the

right of way, filled in the channel, laid the tracks, and the first train arrived in Tarentum in October of 1866.

In 1870, the first Tarentum Railroad station was constructed, and in 1892, was replaced by a building closer to Lock Street than the present structure. In 1915, after another disastrous flood in 1913, that station was elevated three feet, along with the tracks, and moved by teams of horses to the present location and remodeled; complete with landscaped gardens an enlarged passenger station.

Around the time of the Civil War, coal mining became the predominant source of fuel for residents and growing industries. "The surrounding hills abound in coal," declared an early prospectus for the town's development. Coal ultimately became the central fuel for nearly every major industry which developed in the region.



While salt and coal were crucial early resources, it was glassmaking which ultimately identified Tarentum as a manufacturing center within what was known around the world as the Pittsburgh district, or, "The Workshop of the World." In 1874, the Lippincott Bottling company purchased the lot at the corner of First Avenue and Bridge Street. Their plant was taken over by C.L. Flaccus in 1879, which continued its operation until the 1930's. In 1884, two Pittsburgh area glass producers moved their works to the Tarentum area;

Challinor, Taylor and Co., and Richards and Hartley. A decade later, the Tarentum Glass Company was organized.



For the next 25 years, all three of these produced some of the finest tableware and pressed glassware in the world. Glassmaking was the reason for Tarentum's rapid growth at the end of the 19th century. The entire area of Brackenridge along 6th Avenue between Mile Walk Lane and Morgan Street was lined with glassmaking facilities. A lot of the glassworkers came from Europe and some from the other glassmaking communities in the Pittsburgh area. At Flaccus' glass plant, glassworkers would use a glassblower's pipe to imprint the name of a local druggist or dairy. As it was work requiring a great deal of attention to detail, Tarentum glass employed high numbers of women. In the days before child labor laws, there were a lot of young teenage boys working in the glass plants. Families needed every penny they could get. Often at the end of the day, workers would take some of their extra glass and fashion canes, and they would carry the canes proudly in Labor Day parades, which were big events of the time. These were symbols of the excellent craftsmanship of Tarentum glassmakers. There is Tarentum Glass on exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C., and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. There were even more glass companies which sprang from the glass boom of the late 19th century. In 1895, Fidelity Glass, which later

became Atlantic Bottling Company, began making bottles. In 1892 the Tarentum Art and Mirror Glassworks was established on West 7th Avenue near Center Street, later moving to Springdale.

With the growth of industry and population in the 1870's, the need for financial institutions in the community became obvious. The First National Bank of Tarentum opened in 1875 and was located at the present site of the community library. Part of the national banking system developed after the Civil War. A few months later, the Kennedy Bank, located at the corner of Lock Street and Fifth Avenue, opened for business. By 1890, the Kennedy Bank had closed, and the National Bank of Tarentum had moved into the building. In 1900, the Peoples' National Bank opened for business at the corner of Wood Street and Fifth Avenue, only to move in 1917 to larger quarters at the corner of Corbet Street and Sixth Avenue.



YOUR EQUAL

Before arriving in Tarentum during the spring of 1880, Captain John Baptiste Ford had been many things, including a riverboat captain on the Mississippi River during the Civil War. When he came to Tarentum, Ford possessed an interest in establishing a facility to manufacture plate glass. Several attempts had been made by other men, but Ford was determined to use the combination of an abundant supply of natural

gas, coal, sand and gravel from the nearby Allegheny River as the keys to making it work.



After going bankrupt in New Albany, Indiana, in his first efforts to produce plate glass in this country; he borrowed \$100 dollars from one of his workmen and he parlayed that into a fortune. He took the \$100 dollars that he borrowed, and got on a train with a glass sewer pipe under his arm. He owned the patent to this glass sewer pipe, and he was headed to New York City to sell this product to the New York City officials, who he heard were going to put in a sewer system. He sold that patent for about \$40,000, so from that \$100 he now had \$40,000. While he was on the train, he met General Fremont, a hero of the Mexican War. He was also convinced that he could sell land America won in the Mexican War along the Mexican border. So he picked up another \$20,000 selling real estate. At that point, he went to the New York bankers. He paid visits to the Pittsburgh bankers first, but they turned him down. He wanted to build a glass plant in Creighton. He believed that this would be the best place, because it contained a new fuel he wanted to work with (natural gas), and he was probably the first person in the world to use natural gas in the production of plate glass.



In 1881, Ford, having teamed up with Pennsylvania Railroad official John Pitcairn, started construction of the New York City Plate Glass Company, later changed to the Pittsburgh Plate Glass company, Works 1, in nearby East Deer Township. It was complete in 1883, and Works 2 in Tarentum was also soon online. The PPG works became the first successful plate glass manufacturing facility in the United States, and the first major industry of any kind to use natural gas in production. Although he respected the work ethic of the local people, Ford knew he had to bring in skilled craftsmen from Europe who knew the art of glassmaking, and so he did, recruiting heavily from Belgium, and thus began the settlement of West Tarentum, and selling of lots on that side of town. Thus the establishment of PPG not only made industrial history, it literally gave life to the west side of town, and to the growing villages of Hite and Creighton, both of which had essentially been farm country since the days of Felix Negley. Further, the immigration of Belgians greatly enriched the ethnic heritage of the Borough.



Unlike many of his industrialist contemporaries, Captain Ford was not only a great philanthropist; he was by all accounts a true friend of working people. He donated the \$50,000 necessary to build the Allegheny Valley Young Men's Christian Association. On November 14, 1891, more than 1,000 PPG workers from Tarentum and Creighton traveled to Ford City, many on PPG sternwheelers. They went there for the purpose of unveiling a statue to Captain Ford which they themselves had paid for. The statue served as a lasting tribute of the feelings they had for the captain. As Captain Ford near the end of his life he recalled, "My relations with labor are among the great consolations of my old age. There never was a man who worked for me who was unwilling to return to my employ. I have always believed in making the man in the factory your equal".

THE CATHOLIC SIDE OF TOWN

By the turn of the century, there were a number of major industries in the Tarentum area. They included not only the glass factories; but the paper mills, Shoop Bronze Company, Penn Iron and Steel, a planing mill and a cigar factory, among others.

Work was plentiful, but dangerous. The hours were long by today's standards. Steelworkers, PPG Glassworkers and miners worked 12 hour days, 6 days a week and a 20 hour shift every 2 weeks. There was no union organization in the

place known to union organizers at the time as Black Valley, because of the harsh anti-union stance of most industrial employers.

Nevertheless, these factories drew thousands of immigrants to the Tarentum area, primarily from southern and eastern Europe, and later, from the American south. They settled on the west side of town, a section which was soon thereafter known as "Little Europe", or "The Catholic side of town". Germans, Italians and Slovaks settled heavily in West Tarentum; establishing their own churches, fraternal clubs, and grocery stores. Conroy Way was known pejoratively as "Hunky Alley", because of the predominance of Slovaks who lived there.



The people brought with them from their native lands not only a strong work ethic, but also deeply held spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions. Often times, these were woven together, as in the case of St. Clements well-known Slovak choir, or Sacred Heart's Corpus Christi sawdust carpets; a tradition which was transplanted from the Black Forest of Germany to the German congregation at Sacred Heart by Holy Ghost Fathers during World War II. Initially, it was a way of vividly praying for an end to the war. But, the tradition took hold, and continues to this day.



In the later part of the 1910's, African Americans began fleeing the oppression of the American south and heading north in search of greater freedom and opportunity. In the Pittsburgh area, many of those who took part in the Great Migration arrived by way of recruiting agents sent on behalf of mining and steel companies. Unbeknownst to them, African Americans were brought into the region as strike breaking scabs to take the jobs of white immigrants in the mines and mills. This was evident during the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Blacks used as pawns in the conflict were settled across the tracks in an area known as Wayman Way, and in Brackenridge on Clay Street; both of which were clearly segregated from the rest of their communities. Upon their arrival, blacks established the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wayman Way.

PUBLIC FACILITIES

Calamities and disasters have often brought out the best in Tarentum people - their ingenuity, bravery, generosity and spirit of volunteerism. Such was the case during the flood of 1891, which saw the Allegheny River rise higher than anybody could remember, and caused severe illness throughout the community. Likewise, in the first years of the 20th century, the rising number of waterborne diseases and industrial accidents prompted several physicians of the Tarentum area to establish what was first called the Allegheny Valley General Hospital.



Formally launched in 1906 by a group which included benefactor Henry Morgan Brackenridge, the hospital began service on January 28, 1909 in the Barr residence on Second Avenue. Quickly outgrowing that building in October of 1909, the hospital group purchased the large residence on West 7th Avenue originally built by John B Ford. Remodeled by the firm of Seftin and Myers, the new Allegheny Valley Hospital opened in August, 1910. It was at this location that the first class of the Allegheny Valley School of Nursing graduated in October of 1914. However, this structure would also prove too small, and plans were underway by 1915 for the construction of a new hospital. Led by William "Daddy" Lester Walker, the community responded with an outpouring of financial support, large and small, prompting one citizen to remark, "... it was the first time in the history of the valley that this community got together on one thing for longer than 10 minutes." Awarded a Loving Cup for his leadership, Walker commented, "One individual does not make a community. It is perseverance and all going in one direction that counts."



The location selected for the new hospital was in Harrison Township near the old Tarentum fairgrounds. The building design chosen was that of a Pittsburgh architect who later designed Grandview school, the Peoples Bank, and American Legion Post 885. On June 12 1919, forty patients were transferred to the new hospital. A similar spirit of community service arose following the Great Fire of December 21, 1885, in which most of the Sixth Avenue business district was destroyed. Bucket brigades fought with great futility to douse the fire. Only barrels of salt prevented further destruction of the town. Soon after the fire, the first volunteer fire company was formed. Known first as the Independent Pump and Hose Company, it was later renamed Eureka Hose. In 1898, the Highland Hose company was organized and in 1906, West Tarentum residents organized Summit Hose.



In 1886 Captain John Baptiste Ford donated a hose reel to the residents of the Third Ward of

Tarentum. He suggested it be stationed on West 9th Avenue, as there was a church and a bell to ring to alert residents and business owners. The Humes family on the corner of West 9th and West Valley donated part of their barn to be used as a place to station the hose reel. On December 23, 1896, Saint Peter's church caught fire. The hose companies from Tarentum all responded. The water reel was used to protect all of the homes around the church. The church itself burnt completely down to the foundation. On January 29, 1906, the Frischern meat market caught fire. It was large fire and all three Tarentum hose companies and the Brackenridge fire company responded. After the Frischern fire, Mr. William Nicklaus called a meeting and the Third Ward Hose Company changed to Summit Hose Company. In 1908, they moved to West 7th Avenue.

No organization better exemplified the spirit of community involvement than the Tarentum Brackenridge chapter of the American Red Cross. During World War I, their activities both home and abroad were many, and included the preparation of comfort kits for the servicemen, surgical dressings and garments, and other knitted articles. They also supported liberty loan drives and war fund campaigns and provided emergency hospital and sanitary services during the great influenza epidemic of 1918.



Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was steady progress in the

improvement of public transportation and infrastructure in Tarentum. Strangely enough, two polls taken in 1874 showed the community somewhat divided on whether to install streetlights. Nevertheless, fifteen oil street lamps were installed that year at a cost of \$132.00. Until Corbet Street was paved in 1897, all of the streets were dirt and mud, depending on the weather. There were several livery stables on either side of town, and some chose to take part in the newest fad – bicycling from one end of town to the other.

In 1898, getting around was made easier with the formation of the Tarentum Traction Passenger Railway Company, forerunner of the Allegheny Valley Street Railway. In 1904, they built a car barn on Adams Street and 2nd Avenue – today, the site of Highland Tire, where the trolley tracks can still be found. Eventually, trolley service ran on the west side of town through the east over the viaduct, linking Tarentum with surrounding communities via the TB and B trolley, affectionately named the Toonerville trolley, after a favorite comic strip of the time.



In 1913, a bitter labor struggle engulfed the trolley industry in the region, with strike breakers being brought in, and crowds choosing sides. Jitney service was revived during the strike, as a temporary means of transportation. There were other improvements to infrastructure. After a bitterly contested court

battle the Borough in 1918 led by Valley Daily News publisher Charles Preston Howe and Burgess E. Clay White won the right to form its own water company. Indeed, the Borough of Tarentum was a state leader in the movement toward municipal ownership of water and electric power companies. In 1914, the Borough replaced its first municipal building at Corbet and Third Avenue with a grand new structure on Lock Street. With the inaugural paving of Corbet Street in 1897, others eventually followed, along with the installation of concrete sidewalks.

Getting news out to the people began with the publication of the Allegheny Valley Times in 1881. This was followed by the Tarentum Telegram, the Tarentum Times, and the Tarentum Evening Telegram. Outliving them all was the Valley Daily News, established in 1904 by Charles Preston Howe on Boyd Street. A few years later, they moved into more modern quarters. In 1970 the Valley Daily News merged with the New Kensington Daily Dispatch to form the Valley News Dispatch, still headquartered in Tarentum.



Since the mid 1830's, but accelerating in the late 19th century, the growing population of Tarentum was in a constant need to expand facilities for the educational growth of children and for the spiritual enrichment of its citizens.

The first Tarentum library, known as the “The Reading Room”, opened in 1901. Located in the basement of the YMCA, this was part of Captain Ford’s philanthropic legacy in Tarentum. Several years after Ford’s departure, however, financial resources to sustain the library were lacking, and it was forced to close. After a fundraising appeal in 1923, the library reopened and in 1942 it expanded to larger quarters in the First Ward School. When the school itself expanded in 1949, the library moved again to the Council Room, located in the Tarentum Borough building. Within a few years, the library outgrew this facility, and moved to its present location on East 6th Avenue, in the former Windsor Music Store.

The first schoolhouse built in 1828 at the corner of Lock and 4th Avenue was replaced by a building at the corner of Ross Street and 9th Avenue. A four room schoolhouse was built on the west side of town, and enlarged in 1898 as the Third Ward School. Parochial schools at Sacred Heart and St. Clement provided for the education of Tarentum’s Catholic children. In 1892, the Second Ward School building was constructed.

Like the library, the tale of the First Ward School is also one of movement. The First Ward School, built in 1895 at the corner of 9th Avenue and Corbet Street served as Tarentum High School until the Grandview School was built in the 1920’s. At that time, the original school from 1855 was torn down, and the new Grandview became the grade school and junior high school. Later, Grandview became Tarentum High School, and the grade school for the First Ward was housed in the building at 9th and Corbet. Changes continued in the 1960’s with the merger of Fawn and Harrison Township, along with Brackenridge and Tarentum into the Highlands School District. Grandview today has reverted to its original use as an elementary school.



Spiritual faith has been at the center of Tarentum’s sense of community since the very beginning. Felix Negley, a German Lutheran, invited other groups to hold religious services in his barn in the summer and his home in winter. The Bull Creek Presbyterian church, the Tarentum area’s oldest church, dates to 1794. The First Methodist church of Tarentum dates back to 1810. The First Presbyterian and United churches date back to the 1830’s. The Highview structure is one of the grandest and oldest buildings in Tarentum, dating to 1868. Sts. Peter and Paul Byzantine Catholic Church, formed in 1918, is the only Catholic church on the east side of town. The Ovam Shalom Synagogue dates to 1923. The Pittsburgh Tarentum Campground Meeting was established in 1850 as an outdoor seasonal meeting place for the Methodist congregation. Today, it is an interdenominational place of quiet worship strongly rooted in the sense of faith and community.



Music also fed the soul of Tarentum people. Organized in the late 19th century, Tarentum's Keystone Band was nationally recognized and played at the funeral procession of President William McKinley in 1901, who incidentally was assassinated by Leon Czolgosz of Natrona. Similarly, the drum and bugle corps of the American Legion Post 885 won numerous national competitions for its performances. With its advancements in business, industry, culture, spiritual faith, and musical tradition; Tarentum was entering its golden age.

THE END OF A PERFECT DAY

Like many communities, Tarentum experienced a business boom at the end of World War I. Part of this construction legacy is the Tarentum Post Office. This era also saw the establishment of Tarentum's Riverview Memorial Park. The move to purchase the riverfront property was a progressive step for the Borough. Over the years, thousands have strolled there, had wedding pictures taken there, listened to band concerts, and played on cannons overlooking the river. It remains the only riverfront park anywhere near its size in all of Allegheny County.



A LITTLE MEANT ALOT

In October of 1929, the business boom which had sent America roaring through the decade came to a screeching halt, with the collapse of the stock market. The impact in Tarentum, as elsewhere in America, was profound. Local

industries laid off men by the hundreds, and businesses put out signs saying, "No Help Wanted." The First National Bank and Trust Company, like thousands of banks around the country, closed its doors. The Great Depression held the Alle-Kiski Valley in its grip for the next decade. The founder of Allegheny Steel frequently assisted members of the community by providing money for coal and clothes for children. The U.S. Government's Works Progress Administration (WPA) built Tarentum's water building, completed a vast amount of work on the Tarentum Park, and the honor roll in Brackenridge.



OOZE AND DESOLATION

On Tuesday morning, March 17, 1936, the Allegheny River was in the living room of hundreds of Tarentum residents. By the end of the day, thousands would be forced from their homes in the greatest flood in western Pennsylvania history. Although no one from Tarentum perished, the flooding did leave more than 200 dead in 14 states from Maine to Kentucky. Hundreds of thousands were left homeless. Several thousand homeless families were housed in the YMCA, Hi-Brac High School, the Church of God, Prospect School, Calvary Baptist Church, the Oddfellows Hall, the American Legion Post, and Sacred Heart Church. The flooding was caused by two straight days of rain and spring thaw. The Saint Patrick's Day flood brought in waters rising at a rate of over three inches per hour during the night of March

16. The waters crested on March 18 at 42 feet above flood level, covering the railroad tracks and East 6th Avenue in Tarentum. Forty-five people had to be evacuated by boat from the Unger building at Fifth and Ross Street. On West 6th Avenue, one man was rescued from his attic when a hole was cut through his roof to free him. All local mills, electric, water, and gas services east of the tracks were shut down. The Valley Daily News had to be printed from the offices of the Butler Eagle and the New Kensington Daily Dispatch. The National Guard moved in to help prevent looting and 300 men employed by the WPA moved in to assist with the cleanup. The Red Cross was mobilized once again and was invaluable in assisting local citizens with an infinite array of needs. The Great Flood of '36 forever gave new meaning to the celebration of Saint Patrick's Day in the Alle-Kiski Valley. Exactly 67 years and 6 months later, Tarentum would again be devastated by massive flooding resulting from Hurricane Ivan on September 17, 2004. Five years later, some businesses and residences are still suffering the residual effects of the flooding.



WE WERE VERY PROUD

When the United States entered World War II in December of 1941, the Tarentum -Brackenridge

area sent nearly 2,000 men and women overseas in an effort to defeat Hitler and Axis forces. At home, food was rationed, as coffee, meat and butter were purchased with food stamps. Gasoline was hard to come by, and victory gardens were planted. Local industries and offices, whose employment rolls were stocked heavily with women, were essential in producing the necessary steel, coal, glass, paper, chemicals and aluminum to help win the war. Allegheny Ludlum received an "E flag", for excellence in production to the government. Service flags were flown in windows of families who had lost a loved one in the war. Sister and mother pins were worn by those who had family members in the service. A large honor roll erected at the corner of Corbet Street and Third Avenue was dedicated on May 2, 1943. The names of all Tarentum boys who served in the war appeared on the roll. It was later replaced by a monument in Tarentum Park.



When the war ended, the Centennial celebration planned for Tarentum in 1942 was held in 1947, and the American Legion Post 885 designed the interior of their ballroom as memorial to their veterans and those killed in battle. A team of designers from Pittsburgh Plate Glass led by architect Albert Van Dine, father of KDKA newsman Wayne Van Dine,

sandblasted the maps and emblems with neon as a striking memorial to those whose efforts will never be forgotten.

ELBOW TO ELBOW

In 1936, the Tarentum directory listed the following business establishments in the Borough – 28 grocery stores, 9 meat markets, 4 fruit stands, 10 confectionaries, 5 dairy stores, 3 bakeries, 7 pharmacies, 9 lunch rooms and restaurants, 10 clothing shops, 7 shoes stores, 8 repair shops, 2 tailors, 8 cleaners, 7 furniture stores, 3 flower shops, 4 jewelry stores, 7 variety stores, 13 barber and 11 beauty shops, 8 real estate and insurance agents, 5 car dealers, 16 service stations, 4 hardware stores, 2 blacksmiths, 58 other miscellaneous establishments. Tarentum’s population was at its peak of more than 10,000 citizens and business was booming.



For entertainment, one might go to one of Tarentum’s many large theaters. In 1886 the community’s largest commercial building known as the Oppenheimer Building, was erected at the corner of Fifth Avenue and what is now Corbet Street. The structure was originally graced with two prominent towers which were removed in 1919. The Opera House, located on the second floor, was used for vaudeville and Indian medicine shows. A skating rink and dance hall were built in the building’s rear, while stores like J.C. Voageley’s occupied the first floor. A year or so later the El

Hambre Theater opened on East 6th Avenue and Ross Street. Tarentum’s second opera house was an even grander structure. Located on Corbet Street between 6th and 7th Avenues, the Tareco Opera House opened in January 1906, and had a seating capacity of 1,200 and a stage larger than any theater between New York and Chicago. The name of the opera house was changed to the Nixon in 1907, and then the Harris Theater in 1926. Although the first motion picture was held at the Nixon in July of 1913, the first movie theater in town was actually located on the first floor of the Masonic Temple building. The Boyd Family Orchestra played here frequently. There was a theater in the Praha Hotel, destroyed by fire in 1908. Oppenheimer then opened the People’s Theater on East 5th Avenue in 1910. Another theater with a short life was the Dreamland, located on the site of the old G.C. Murphy store on Corbet Street, and immediately destroyed by Fire in 1908. The Star Theatre replaced the Dreamland, only to burn in 1926. On the west side of town, there was the Gem Theatre on 7th Avenue, and the DeTola, which later became the Penn.



Beginning with countless afternoon ballgames at Peterson’s Ballfield, sports have always been a part of Tarentum’s recreation and life. The Allegheny Steel baseball team was one of the

best semi-pro clubs in western Pennsylvania. There were high school championship teams and stand-out players as well.



TRoubles LOOM AMIDST PROSPERITY

Several events of the 1950's and 1960's which appeared at the time to be leaps forward for Tarentum's progress helped to turn Tarentum's business district on a downward slide from which it has not yet fully recovered. For decades, Alle-Kiski Valley residents longed for a bridge across the Allegheny River north of the one in New Kensington. At the time, the Natrona lock and damn had been built in the mid-1920's and there was much discussion of a bridge between Natrona and Rayburn. Ultimately, through the efforts of local businessmen, the Allegheny County Chamber of Commerce and state representatives Kenneth Lydic and George Stuart, a bridge connecting Tarentum with New Kensington and Arnold was the preferred route. After decades of engineering and several years of construction, on February 26, 1952, the Tarentum Bridge was open for traffic. The opening of the bridge occurred with men from the surrounding areas again fighting halfway around the world; this time, in Korea.

In the years that followed, the Natrona Heights Plaza Shopping Center, Riverview Shopping Plaza in New Kensington, and Hillcrest Shopping Center in Lower Burrell all opened for business; drawing shoppers now fully equipped with automobiles away from Tarentum's business district. What happened in the cities and small towns in America in the post war years occurred in Tarentum as well. A combination of suburbanization, our fixation on the automobile, and the rumblings of de-industrialization which entailed the loss of high paying manufacturing jobs; all contributed to the decline of Tarentum's business sector and depopulation beginning as early as the 1950's. A telltale sign of the decline in population was the closing of the Harris Theater in December, 1959. Other businesses would follow.



PRIDE IN TARENTUM

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Tarentum Borough along with an organization calling itself the Pride In Tarentum Redevelopment Organization, or PIT, launched an effort to revitalize the Borough. The centerpiece of PIT's work initially was the Tarentum Railroad station, which had been closed for years and was purchased by the Borough's parking authority in 1981. The Tarentum History and Landmarks Foundation worked to place the building on the National Register of Historic Places, and then PIT got together with the Borough to facilitate the restoration of the structure. It is now an historical showplace and

fine restaurant. In the same way, businessman George Gatto purchased the former YMCA building and relocated his new Cycle Shop and Diner. In 1986, led by Attorney Alexander H. Lindsay, the Allegheny Valley Expressway was completed. The missing link of this highway had extended from Natrona Heights to Creighton, and required extraordinary engineering to complete. Bulldozers cut into the hills of West Tarentum; Bull Creek was covered with what some called the largest culvert in the world, and Bull Creek Valley was filled in with enough dirt to fill Three Rivers Stadium four times. Though progress was achieved with the completion of the expressway, it did cause division of the communities of Job's Hole and Mill Street Extension.



Although time and development have taken landmarks away, many remain vital to parts of the community. These are the physical reminders of not only what once was, but of what can be again. Beyond the physical bricks and mortar are the people.