

Eldora Park was big part of area's history

By Ron Paglia

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Leonard Marraccini is a man on a mission. And he's leaving few of those proverbial stones unturned in his quest for information about Eldora Park, a popular recreation and amusement site for many years in Carroll Township.

"It's rather frustrating at times. We seem to run into so many obstacles," said Marraccini, a resident of Finleyville and a longtime history buff. "But I'm determined to see this through. I'm sure there is more information out there about the park."

Marraccini's pursuit of the history of Eldora Park extends far beyond the realm of its reputation as a gathering place for family reunions, dances, picnics and myriad other events. In reality, it's an expansion of his natural interest in the mining industry.

As an employee of the U.S. Bureau of Mines and the Mine Safety and Health Administration for more than 30 years, Marraccini is following a family tradition of sorts.

"Both of my grandfathers worked in coal mines in the area. My father worked at Lee-Norse Co. in North Charleroi, where they manufactured mining equipment, and my father-in-law worked at the Mathies Mine near Finleyville," Marraccini, 59, said. "I was always fascinated hearing their stories about the (mining) business, especially the early days. So I began doing research several years ago on coal mines and miners in the region."

Marraccini's investigation in that direction led him to newspaper clippings from the turn of the last century.

A headline in the Friday, July 28, 1911, edition of The Charleroi Mail proclaimed, "Eldora Park To Be Mecca For Miners." The subhead noted, "Pay to be Disbursed at Various Mines Today in Order to Give Men Opportunity to Attend Picnic."

"I remember my mother and my aunts talking about when they were young girls riding the streetcar from New Eagle to go to dances and listen to the bands at Eldora Park," Marraccini said. "When I came across the newspaper clippings of activities involving miners there I wondered about the tie, why it was so popular with coal miners."

The July 28, 1911, story in The Mail provided some of the answers. It read: "Eldora Park will be the Mecca on Saturday of miners from this vicinity and the Pigeon Creek Valley, the occasion being the annual picnic and outing of the United Mine Workers. National mine officials will attend and speak. President Francis Feehan, president of District No. 5, will be the chairman of the meeting. The park will be opened at 8 o'clock in the morning to make arrangements for the crowd which will arrive early.

"All the mines will be closed up the Pigeon Creek Valley and in the Monongahela section to permit the miners to attend the affair. One of the biggest days in the history of the miners' organization from this vicinity is anticipated."

There was no word on how many miners did attend that event, but there was no question a year later.

Another Charleroi Mail story, this one on Friday, Aug. 16, 1912, carried a headline that read, "Miners' Outing To Be Important Event."

The story said Eldora Park would be the scene of "one of the greatest gatherings in the history of the miners' organization in the Pittsburg district tomorrow when the second annual picnic and outing of Sub-District 3 of District No. 5 will be held. Between 2,000 and 3,000 miners and their families will be present from all along the Monongahela Valley and from back in the interior part of the county."

"That was an extremely large crowd at that time, a lot of people in one place," Marraccini said. "Can you imagine the traffic heading in that direction? Remember, there were few automobiles then, so most people were traveling by trolley car, perhaps a few in horse-drawn wagons or carriages or just walking to the park."

In addition to the traditional festivities of a picnic, the 1912 gathering of the miners featured "a program of amusements, in addition to those provided by the park." A morning parade was held in Monongahela with Charles Burns as the chief marshal. A "program of sports" also was on tap.

Charles Pritchard was the chairman of the speaking program, which featured such luminaries as William Green, ex-president of the Ohio Mine Workers; President Van Bittner of the Pittsburg District; ex-president Francis Feehan; Assemblyman William Feeney; Louis Goaziou; Ben Bendetti, and Frank Choura.

The newspaper story also emphasized that the Eldora Park management "is making preparations for entertaining one of the biggest crowds that has been at the park this season. The first outing was held in July of last year and proved a big feature among the miners."

Miners also converged on Eldora Park in the summer of 1914 for a Safety First demonstration. That program, according to Marraccini, was prompted in the wake of numerous mining disasters such as the April 23, 1913, disaster at the Cincinnati Mine, which ran between Courtney and Finleyville. An explosion around noon killed 98 men (97 miners and a rescue worker) at the mine owned and operated by Monongahela River Consolidated Coal and Coke Co. of Pittsburgh.

Marraccini, a member of the Peters Creek and South Park historical societies and the Pennsylvania Trolley Museum, said a commemorative plaque in memory and honor of the workers who died in the Cincinnati Mine tragedy was dedicated and placed near the mule entrance to the mine on Route 88 between New Eagle and Finleyville many years ago.

"Mining disasters nationwide led to a call for and implementation of better safety measures," Marraccini said.

The excellent Web site, www.patheoldminer.rootsweb.com, said the use of safety lamps and better control of dust was recommended by the U.S. Bureau of Mines.

A July 14, 1914, story in The Daily Independent, reported that J.A. Holmes, director of the Bureau of Mines, was to be invited to make the keynote address to miners at their annual outing Aug. 22 at Eldora Park. In addition to a speaking program, first aid contests were to be a feature "never before enjoyed" at a Monongahela Valley miners' outing. The competition was open to all first aid crews in the United States and the committee arranging the outing stated there would be "crack teams there."

William Hargest, of Monongahela, was president of the sub-districts committee, and Albert Welch, of Courtney, served as secretary. Others on the panel were I. Phillips, of Hazzard, Alex Gamble, of New Eagle, and Thomas Naylor, of Webster.

On Aug. 18, 1914, The Charleroi Mail reported the first aid contests were to be held under the direction of J.W. Paul, engineer in charge of the mine rescue station at Pittsburg. California, Marianna, Ellsworth and Connellsville coal fields were among those to be represented in the event.

As a prelude to the gathering of the miners, the musicians union of Charleroi presented a benefit dance on Aug. 18 at Eldora Park for a member who had been hurt. An orchestra of 29 musicians performed.

The next night Dunlap's Club of Brownsville held a private dance at the park, and on Thursday the Belle Vernon Civic League held its annual picnic at the Eldora site.

The first aid competition among miners actually began a few years earlier. Marraccini has a photo of such an event taken at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh. Another picture obtained by Marraccini in his research shows the First Aid Team from the Coal Bluff Mine in New Eagle preparing for competition on Sept. 20, 1924.

There is some question as to when Eldora Park actually opened. But reference to the turn of the last century was made by the late R. Mitchell Steen Jr., managing editor of The Valley Independent and noted area historian, in his Backward Glances column on July 31, 1965. The headline read, "Calliope Stirs Memories," and Steen opened the column this way:

"An unusual sound was heard in the Mon Valley the other day, strange to many but familiar to others. It was the sound of a calliope on the river, coming from a showboat that had come from Pittsburgh to carry passengers on a three-hour pleasure trip on the Monongahela. It was a sound that had not been heard for years on the Monongahela. And it brought back memories ... of summers of long ago and the river and trolley rides, both highlights of the summer season."

Steen noted that the calliope sounds also sparked memories of pleasant Sunday afternoons and evenings at the many picnic areas located along the trolley rights of way.

One of those who remembered was the late Charles W. Lundy, of North Charleroi, a retired trolley operator and longtime historian. Lundy, Steen wrote, recalled Eldora Park, "as would most oldtimers in the Mon Valley. It was probably the most popular picnic site in this end of the state."

Located between Charleroi and Monongahela in the Black Diamond area of Carroll Township, Eldora Park was for many years "a beehive of activity," Lundy told Steen.

Eldora Park, he said, had everything: merry-go-round, roller coaster, slides, swings, picnic tables, restaurant, dance pavilion, concerts, tent theaters, vaudeville and all kinds of sports. It even had roller skating and dancing for winter activity.

Lundy said the park was in operation as early as 1904, and he credited three Charleroi men for building the park. Steve Woodward, Guy Moffitt and Tom Sloan were the financial backers, he said. A Charleroi woman, Mrs. J.F. McKenna, was in charge of the rides and also was responsible for maintenance, Lundy told Steen.

Most of the early music for dancing at Eldora Park was supplied by Johnny Jenkins and his orchestra. Mrs. Jenkins also was instrumental in the early success of the park, Lundy recalled.

An honorary member of the Charwood Girl Scouts organization, Mrs. Jenkins was helpful when Charwood bought the pavilion building and chartered the grounds in June 1945.

Steen also pointed out that Eldora Park was where W. Roy McShaffrey, father of Monessen's municipal fire chief, first put on his famed tent shows and vaudeville entertainment. This, according to Steen, was even before the elder McShaffrey came to Monessen and opened the famed Star Theatre.

Among the memorabilia collected by Marraccini is a July 25, 1911, advertisement in The Charleroi Mail calling attention to an appearance by mystery man Jimmy Valentine at Eldora Park on Sunday, July 30. The ad read:

"If you locate him or his pal, you will be handed \$15 by the Eldora Amusement Company, \$10 for Jimmy and \$5 for His Pal. Valentine and his pal will arrive at the park between 2 and 3 o'clock and will circulate among the people. Each visitor will be given a tag which must be worn where Jimmy can see it plainly. Anyone asking him, 'Are you the mysterious Jimmy Valentine?'; if he can see your tag he will pay you the reward. Ask his pal, 'Are you Jimmy Valentine's Pal?' Everybody is eligible, man, woman or child."

"Apparently it was like those mystery man and woman contests they have at community picnics at Kennywood," Marraccini said.

But the park operators also may have been fans of American writer O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) because Jimmy Valentine was the central character in Henry's story, "A Retrieved Reformation." In the story, Valentine was a safecracker who became a hero when he rescued a young girl trapped in a bank vault.

While Marraccini has news clippings and photos, including a 1905 picture of the Frye Family reunion at Eldora Park in August 1905, of early activities at the site, another Daily Independent ad of June 28, 1918, proclaims that: "Eldora Park, Finley Equipped Recreation Spot, Now Open. Public dances every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday nights. Other evenings are available for private parties. The public is invited to take advantage of this place of amusement. A.J. Pancook, Manager, Charleroi, Pa."

Some 21 years later, on June 1, 1939, The Charleroi Mail called attention to Lawrence Welk's bringing his band to Eldora Park.

"Through cooperation of the Frederick Bros. Music Corporation, the champagne music of Lawrence Welk, his accordion and his brilliant orchestra has been secured by the Aneeda Club and will be presented at Eldora Park dancing pavilion Sunday evening, June 4," the story said. It continued:

"The Welk orchestra, a glittering new personality in the musical world, features four vocalists, Miss Mildred Stanley, Walter Bloom, Jules Herman and Parnel Grina; organist Jerry Burke and novelty entertainer Joe Staccio. Featured during intermission on Sunday evening will be Frank Lombardo and his Ambassadors with Miss Lucille DeMille and Jess Wilson as vocalists. Dancing will be from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. eastern standard time."

Lombardo later became Frankie Barr and was one of the top band leaders in the area. He and Wilson, a superb vocalist, were featured as part of the house band at the Twin Coaches night club for many years.

"I remember going to Eldora Park as a very young boy in the '30s to listen to the bands there," said Lou Resovich, chairman of the Carroll Township Board of supervisors. "It was quite a place. They had a carousel, a roller coaster, so many things for family entertainment."

Pat Murphy also has fond memories of Eldora Park after it became Camp Charwood, a haven for Girl Scouts. Murphy, the former Pat Sanders, is the daughter of the late Thomas and Wilda Sanders, of Fallowfield Township. Wilda Sanders was extremely active with the Girl Scouts and also was recognized as an excellent musician. Her father was a coal miner and a florist.

"We had a lot of great times there as Girl Scouts," recalled Murphy, a 1966 graduate of Charleroi Area High School who retired after 36 years as a teacher in the Ringgold School District. "As a literature teacher at Carroll Middle School, I used to begin each school year with a unit I developed about the history of Kennywood and some of the old trolley parks in the area including Eldora Park."

Murphy's collection of photographs from her personal collection and others obtained from students at Carroll Middle School includes those of the roller coaster at Eldora Park. It was, she said, "actually fairly tall and had some decent dips in it." There also are pictures of the ticket booth and the park restaurant from the early 1900s, as well as a family picnic and the trolley tracks over the hill from the park. There also is a photo of Max Wickerham, whose family homestead was located near the park, and another taken inside the Great Hall, originally the dance hall and later a roller skating rink.

Murphy, who now lives at Hidden Valley resort in Somerset County, said the origin of the name Camp Charwood was "rather obvious, Charleroi and Woods put together for Charwood."

"I remember going there to do a musical program when I was about 6 or 7, so that would have been 1955 or so," she said. "This got my mom interested in the Girl Scouts and she became very well known in the Southwestern Pennsylvania area for her work with the program."

Murphy said the last time she was at Charwood was in 1966, her first year of college.

"When we had the Girl Scout camp there, several buildings were still standing -- the dance hall, the restaurant and a smaller building we used as a nurse's station," Murphy said. "Later the buildings were falling down and becoming dangerous, and the older Scouts moved on to a sleepover camp at Laurel Hill State Park. Also, the Scouts were trying to get the girls to go to camps the Southwest Council was running including Camp Redwing for Brownies and Camp Henry Kaufman in Ligonier. I would guess that Charwood closed in the late '60s or early '70s."

"I'm very, very curious about Eldora Park," Marraccini said. "There's so much history in our area, and Eldora Park was a big part of it."

(Anyone with information about and pictures of Eldora Park is asked to contact Marraccini at marraccl@verizon.net or 724-348-6406.)