

Wickerham descendants remember

By Ron Paglia

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Eugenia Kolessar remembers the handsome man dressed in a tuxedo who came to her family's home to use the telephone. His name was Guy Lombardo. "I was just a young girl in my teens and his band was playing at the park," said Mrs. Kolessar, a lifelong resident of Eldora in Carroll Township. "We had one of the few telephones in the area in our house, and I remember my father bringing him (Lombardo) there to make a call. Then he stayed a while longer to listen to the radio."

The "park" was Eldora Park, located in the Black Diamond area of the community, and Kolessar's father was Eugene Maxwell "Max" Wickerham, a member of one of the Mon Valley's pioneer families.

Guy Lombardo and his Royal Candians were just one of the many big names who performed at the bandstand at Eldora Park in the '30s.

John Kifer, another descendant of the Wickerham family whose home is located on part of the land which housed Eldora Park and then Camp Charwood, a Girl Scout facility, recalls hearing similar stories about entertainers.

"Lawrence Welk also came to the home to use the telephone, and I've heard that Jackie Coogan visited there when he performed at the park," Kifer said.

Visits by celebrities notwithstanding, Kolessar, 83, has other memories of Eldora Park, which was one of the most popular recreation and social sites in southwestern Pennsylvania for many years.

"I remember the big picnics, large groups of people in the middle 1930s," she said. "Many of the big bands played there for dances and concerts, and there was a roller coaster, a merry-go-round and the restaurant. People from all over the area came there to have fun. Most of them traveled by trolley car and then walked up the hill to the park."

The roller coaster, called the Figure 8, is believed to have been designed by Frederick Ingersoll, an internationally acclaimed designer of amusement park rides and the creator of Kennywood's Racer.

A visitor to Kolessar's home showed a picture of two young women outside the skating rink that also boosted the popularity of Eldora Park.

"(The skating rink) opened right after the war (World War II) started, probably in 1942," Kolessar recalled. "I believe Jerry Spridik of Charleroi operated the rink. Skating was very popular among the young people in those days. There were rinks in Charleroi, North Belle Vernon, Monessen, New Eagle and Fairhope, and they all did well. We had a good time going to all of those places to skate and meet new friends."

Emphasizing that elation were the smiles on the faces of the women in the picture from the collection of Pat Murphy, a former Carroll Middle School teacher now living at Hidden Valley resort in Somerset County.

"My goodness, that's Janet (Wickerham Gregory) on the left," Gregory said fondly.

Kolessar's father, Eugene Maxwell Wickerham, was born in Eldora on Feb. 6, 1895, a son of the late James and Elizabeth Donnick Wickerham. He worked in the machine shop at the Combustion Engineering plant in East Monongahela and was a veteran of World War I. He was 78 when he died at 10 p.m. Aug. 9, 1973, in the Charleroi Division of Monongahela Valley Hospital and was survived by Kolessar, who was named Eugenia for her father; two sons, Edward Wickerham, of Eldora, and Glenn Wickerham, of North Charleroi; three grandchildren; one great-grandchild; a sister, Maude Wickerham, of Donora, a longtime teacher at Allen School in Donora; and two brothers, Roy Wickerham, of Verona, and Maurice Wickerham, of Houston, Texas. Another brother, James Wickerham, died in January 1973.

He was a member of the former Carroll Township School Board, the Charleroi Old-Timers Club and the Eldora Rod and Gun Club.

"He loved to hunt, especially deer," Kolessar said while admiring a picture of her father as a young man at Eldora Park in the early 1900s.

Max Wickerham, who was married to the former Jennie Hauser, and his brothers were "real gentlemen," Kolessar recalled.

"They were nice to everyone," she said. "I never heard my father or my uncles use a curse word or say anything bad about anyone. And Aunt Maude was wonderful. She traveled a lot and made several trips to Europe. She was an excellent teacher who loved her work. They were a great family, all good people."

Allen School, where Maude Wickerham taught for a number of years, was the first school built in Donora Borough. Constructed on Second Street, it opened Sept. 9, 1901.

Kolessar, a graduate of Donora High School, and her late husband, Edward Kolessar, a Charleroi native, were married on May 1, 1947, and had three children. A son, Gary, died in 2002; daughter Barb Bruce and her husband, Tom, are the parents of two children, Scott and Lee; and daughter Linda Gunda, whose husband George is deceased, is the mother of a son, Jeffrey.

"I'm blessed with a wonderful family," Kolessar said.

Edward Kolessar, who retired from a long and successful career at Corning Glass Works in Charleroi in 1987, died Nov. 9, 1999.

Like Mrs. Kolessar, John Kifer has memories of Eldora Park, although he traces those thoughts through family history and personal experiences later.

"From what I was told, it prevailed as an amusement park until about the late 1920s," Kifer said. "My father (also named John) told me about riding the roller coaster at Eldora Park. And I remember, as a kid, seeing the wooden frame lying on the ground as we walked through the woods."

He also recalls talking with barber Johnny Lorenzo, whose Golden Gate Five was one of the most popular bands in the area, about the big bands and other entertainment at Eldora Park. Lorenzo, a talented musician whose group also performed at such hot spots as Bill Green's on Route 51 in Pittsburgh's South Hills, struck up friendships with the likes of Perry Como and Fred Waring over the years, Kifer said.

"He's a great guy with a lot of wonderful stories," Kifer said of Lorenzo.

Kifer also recalls doing "heavy work" at Camp Charwood after the Girl Scouts assumed control of the property.

"We also used to play in that area as kids," Kifer said. "We would roam the hills a lot, and I remember playing hockey and basketball and skating up there."

Another memory of a reminder of Eldora Park is the public outhouses that were constructed there. The rather large structures, which were built over the streams in that area, were accidentally destroyed by fire in 1972, Kifer said.

Kifer also said a lake was built on the property in 1954 or '55.

"We called it the reservoir," he said.

Kifer's sister Kathe Gregg and her husband, Dale, live "just across the street" from her brother, and they have a lasting reminder of the property in her home.

"The original Camp Charwood sign is in our cellar," she said.

Kathe Gregg worked at the site when the Girl Scouts were there, selling candy and other items.

"We also used to stage plays there when I was a young girl," she said. "And I remember there were basketball hoops constructed in the building after (Girls Scouts) left. We also had one of the old cars from the roller coaster in our yard when I was kid and we loved to sit in it and pretend we were riding on the coaster. It was a lot of fun."

Not much remains in the way of physical reminders at the site of the former park today. The property has been in the family for six generations, John Kifer said.

The Kifers, whose great-uncle was Max Wickerham, own a portion of the land, and Consol Coal Co. is the proprietor of the majority of the site.

"The coal companies began buying mineral rights in the area many, many years ago," Kifer said.

As for those reminders, Kifer said all that is visible are time-worn pieces of lumber from the buildings and some evidence of the walkway that was known as the Yellow Brick Road.

"We have had people ask about the park and requested to walk through the area," Kifer said.

"But it's pretty much overgrown with weeds and trees. All that's really left are a lot of memories."