



# The Inkwell

45 East Corydon Street, Bradford, PA 16701

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March 2012

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The Armory on Barbour Street was built in 1912, and will celebrate the 100th anniversary of its dedication this November.

It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

Spring has finally appeared. Some people have seen robins, some have seen cardinals, and while the peepers haven't started "peeping" yet, they will soon be. Its been a mild winter, all in all.

This edition of the newsletter covers an interesting variety of subjects. First of all, we must mention the "O'Malley" show; a wonderful songfest of Irish songs and Broadway melodies that the Landmark is sponsoring on March 12, at 7:00 PM at the First Presbyterian Church on East Corydon Street. Tickets are \$12.00 each. O'Malley's is being produced by a local dinner theater company, Enchante' Caba- ret under the direction of Todd Wagner. See our poster on page 2 of this newsletter for more information.

The Bradford Landmark Society often gets phone calls and emails from various researchers, who are investigating a wide variety of subjects. Whether its someone looking for information on the PONY league (phone call last week), the sheet metal decorations on top of Bradford Main Street buildings manufactured by the Mesker Brothers (phone call last fall), or the architecture of Thomas Hendryx, Raymond Viner Hall, or Walter Hall (phone call and emails last week), we jump right in to help. By helping those who are

We try to help these researchers for three reasons. 1) It is our mission statement to learn all we can about Bradford's history, 2) helping other researchers gives us connections to other historians who can help us in return down the road, and 3) by sharing our information, we expand the history database for everyone.

There is an old saying: "You never know who you are until you find out where you're from". And besides, its just so much darn fun to talk to these guys and find out things that we never knew about Bradford history and the surrounding area.

For example, read our article this month on the Singing Tower of McKean Memorial Park cemetery up at Lafayette. Turns out that the man that designed that cemetery not only designed Lynn Hall, the unique home high above Port Allegany on Rte. 6, but ALSO was the chief contractor for Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater home for the Kaufmanns of Pittsburgh. What a great connection. I drove up there on Sunday, March 4 and took photographs of the administration building, the gate- way entrance, and the Singing Tower. I attended M. J. Ryan school, which is di- rectly across the road from the cemetery, and have gone to many funerals at that cemetery as well, but never noticed the beautiful architecture, or realized that we had such remarkable architecture by a famous builder in our area.

So, see you at the O'Malley show. And after reading this newsletter, you just might want to wander down Main Street, looking at up the rooflines as well.

*The Bradford Landmark Society invites you to*

*Celebrate St. Patrick's Day with*



Bradford's Own Professional Performing Arts Company

**Enchante Cabaret**

***O'Malley's***  
**Irish Pub Cabaret Show**

**Monday, March 12, 2012 at 7:00 PM**

**First Presbyterian Church Community Room**

**\$12.00 each**

Sing along as you are transported to an Irish pub in New York's lower east side run by the O'Malley family. With live music and over 20 favorite Irish melodies, Broadway tunes, pop songs and audience participation, this is one St. Patrick's Day you won't forget!



**Tickets Available at:**

- Bradford Landmark Society
- Grandma's Tea House
- Bradford Chamber of Commerce
- Ott & McHenry's Drug Store
- Bradford Area Public Library
- Online at [www.bradfordlandmark.org](http://www.bradfordlandmark.org)
- And, at the door!



# Walking Across Niagara Falls

*One of Niagara's daredevils walked a tightrope tied to an oil derrick right here in Bradford in 1883.*

If you read the news a few weeks ago, you may have learned that Nik Wallenda, one of the famous Flying Wallendas has been granted permission to walk an 1800 foot tightrope across Niagara Falls sometime this summer. (The Flying Wallendas is the name of a circus act and daredevil stunt performers, mostly known for performing highwire acts without a safety net.) Nik Wallenda, age 33, is one of the seventh generations of Wallendas and is known for performing death-defying stunts on a highwire without a safety net.

Niagara Falls is well known to most Bradfordians, although none of us has ever seen anyone walk across the actual Falls on a tightrope. It's never been possible (earlier attempts were across the lower gorge), but Wallenda has been granted special permission to attempt the crossing for the first time in history. The tight-rope walk will not be permitted again until 2032 if anyone is brave enough to dare to try it again twenty years from now.

But at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several men and women walked across the lower Niagara gorge on tightrope - most of them successfully - in varying ways - with baskets on their feet, carrying other people on their backs, standing on their heads, hanging by their toes, and even cooking an omelet in a frying pan on a little stove that had been brought along. There seemed to be no end to the fascination of walking on a high wire above the raging Niagara River.

One of those men was Stephen Peer. Like other daredevils of the day, Peer wanted to walk the gorge on a tightrope.

In 1873, Stephen Peer signed on to become an assistant to tightrope walker Henry Bellini, who successfully crossed the Niagara Gorge that same year. Peer's job was to help Bellini string the rope across the gorge. Peer decided to try a little tightrope walking on his own, using Bellini's equipment but without his consent. Bellini, furious, tried to cut down the cable with Peer on it but failed.

In 1883, Stephen Peer arrived in Bradford, to dazzle the crowds with his daring. And what better way to demonstrate his daring, balance, and expertise, than to walk a tightrope from atop an oil derrick on the corner of West Corydon and Mechanic Streets (now South Avenue and West Cordon), to the top of the old Bradford House, on the opposite corner. *The Bradford Era* reported "Professor Stephen Peer, the great Niagara Rope Walker, will give an exhibition of his daring feats". We are sure that there was a great crowd to watch.

Peer became daring. On June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1887, Peer performed a tight rope walk on a five-eighth inch diameter wire cable stretched between the present Whirlpool Bridge and Penn Central Bridge. Peer started his crossing on the Canadian side, successfully completing a double crossing.

Just three days later, however, on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1887, Stephen Peer was found dead lying on the bank of the Niagara River directly below his wire cable. It is speculated that Peer tried an unscheduled night crossing after an evening of drinking.



# The Singing Tower of McKean Memorial Park

*Built by Walter Hall, the same man who built Fallingwater*

Those who are familiar with Frank Lloyd Wright's "Fallingwater" house southeast of Pittsburgh, and Lynn Hall on Rte. 6, located on the hill above Port Allegany – both built in the 1930s – recognize many similarities. But perhaps it is not surprising when one learns that the architect and builder of Lynn Hall was Walter J. Hall; the same chief contractor that Frank Lloyd Wright hired to build Fallingwater.

The similarity is conspicuous and for years there has been an ongoing debate among architectural historians: Did Fallingwater serve as a model for Lynn Hall, or did Lynn Hall, begun years earlier, provide the inspiration for at least portions of Wright's masterpiece?

The debate still rages today, and the Landmark Society finds itself intrigued by yet another architectural feat of Walter J. Hall, the Singing Tower of McKean Memorial Park Cemetery in Lafayette Township.

A few weeks ago, we were contacted by an architectural researcher in Kentucky, William Scott, whose expertise is not in Frank Lloyd Wright's work, but in Wright's students. Walter Hall's son, Raymond Viner Hall, was one of those students. Raymond Viner Hall became an architect in his own right, and opened an architecture office in Lynn Hall.

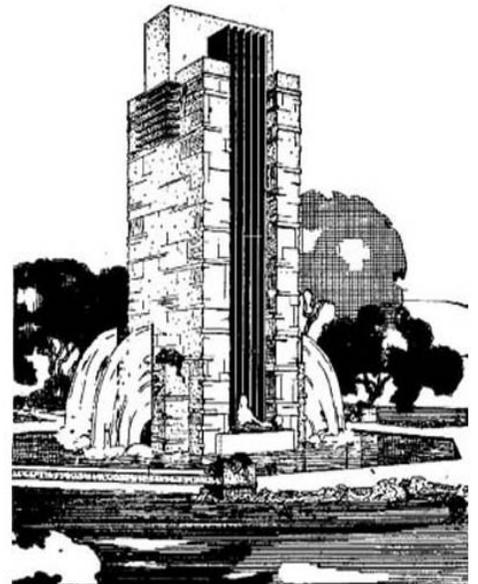
Speaking with Bill Scott last Friday, he told us that he had recently been to Lynn Hall, in hopes of salvaging some of the paperwork, documents, drawings, etc. that still remained in the house. The building is in very poor condition, and he fears that it will not survive much longer.

While talking with Bill, he happened to come upon a folder titled McKean Memorial Park and to his surprise and delight, found that it contained several documents pertaining to the construction of the McKean Memorial Cemetery back in the mid 1930s – not designed by Raymond Viner Hall, but instead, designed by his father, Walter J. Hall. Bill told us that there are blueprints of the administration building, sketches and blueprints of the singing tower, the cemetery layout, and even a workbook with all the names of the men who helped to build the cemetery.

Bill promises to send us copies of the McKean Memorial Park Cemetery file and in turn, the Bradford Landmark Society has promised to help him with his research into Raymond Viner Hall as well as Thomas Hendryx, a Bradford architect who also designed many buildings in the Bradford area in the 1930s.



The Singing Tower, photographed Sunday, March 4, 2012



Newspaper advertisement, August 11, 1938; as the tower originally appeared.

The Singing Tower is unique. Designed to be the center focal point of the cemetery, for years, it “sang”; that is, it would ring out melodic chimes at certain times. Children who attended the M.J. Ryan elementary school which is directly across from the cemetery and within easy hearing distance of the music could hear the music while they were outside in the playground. Visitors on Memorial Day heard it sing, as well as those burying their loved ones.

On August 11, 1938, a sketch of the Singing Tower was printed in the newspaper, along with a good description of the structure. Still under construction, the public was invited to hear it sing every Wednesday from 7 to 8PM, and on Sunday from 2:30PM to 4:00 PM. The newspaper article read: “The tower will be 30 feet high, and built of native stone to conform with architecture of the gateways and the administration building. Copper fins extending to the top of the tower will provide brilliant lighting effects. Spraying from two sides, a fountain will fall gracefully into a pool 40 feet in diameter. The pool, to be built of concrete and colored flagstones, will be encircled by a flagstone walk. The tower itself will house the most modern electric Webster Electric Symphotone musical equipment. Here will originate broadcasts of chimes and organ or musical concerts. The music may be utilized for interments or for concerts.”

The tower is now 74 years old, and badly in need of repair but the Landmark has heard rumors that a restoration is being considered. Let’s hope so; McKean County’s own little bit of Frank Lloyd Wright inspired architecture deserves to survive and inspire, perhaps, future architects.

Walter J. Hall also designed the administration building and the gateway entrance to the cemetery. Both are show below, and reflect the architectural style of the 1930s.

Take a drive up to Lafayette and take a look at these wonderful examples of Walter Hall’s talent.



The Administration Building, still in use.



One of four gateway planters, designed in the 1930s. Each planter measures approximately six feet across.



Gateway Tower to McKean Memorial Park Cemetery in Lafayette Township.

# What is a Mesker Building and Have I Ever Seen One? Yes!

If you had been on Main Street a few Saturdays ago (February 25), you might have seen the decorative metal edging that was attached to the upper cornice of the old Bradford Pharmacy, dangling from the top of the building. Strong winds had ripped it loose, but quick emergency action by the Bradford fire department using Tower One removed the hanging metal before it could fall onto pedestrians on the sidewalk below.

Many of the buildings on Main Street as well as the side streets have, or had, similar galvanized metal trim and decorations on their rooflines. These particular types of decorations were manufactured by either the Mesker Brothers Iron Works, or the George L. Mesker Company of Indiana. Mesker buildings have ornamental sheet metal and cast iron facades that were made near the start of the 20th century.

Coincidentally, a few months ago, the Bradford Landmark Society was contacted by an expert on the very type of metal façade that fell off the Pharmacy building. Darius Bryjka, considered to be the expert in identifying buildings with these galvanized sheet metal decorations, has been on a nationwide mission for the past seven years to identify buildings and towns with Mesker facades. So far, there have been over 2,395 buildings spotted in 48 states. He asked us to send him some photos of Bradford buildings that we thought would qualify (we did), and helped us to identify several buildings on Main Street that can be categorized as authentic “Meskers”.



He wrote, in part:

*All of the buildings are simply spectacular. Even better, several of them have Mesker facades. You already know about the Bradburn Building (Note to readers, the Bradburn building is commonly known as the old Jack and Jill building) which I have to say is one of the best Mesker facades in the country – we just don't see them that big very often. But there are several others that I was able to identify:*

*The really tiny one-bay building next to Tin Ceiling has a Mesker Brothers cornice; it appears as Arthur L. Jones Agency Insurance on the older photo you sent. Also, I believe that the Bradford Pharmacy next to it has a Mesker Brothers cornice, but I would need a better photo so I can verify the ornamentation.*

*The Armstrong Block has a George L. Mesker & Co cornice. (Note to Landmark readers – this is the building where the J & K Pet Store is located).*

*The Durfey Block and the building next to it on the historic photo were both Mesker Brothers facades. I'm assuming that the other building is gone too? It's too bad... (Note to readers – the Durfey block was located roughly where Top's parking lot is).*

*So you have wonderful extant examples from both Mesker companies.*

But what is a Mesker Building? “Meskers are found in historic downtown commercial centers, on Main Streets all across America. The marketing materials indicated that they were intended predominantly for commercial structures; indeed, erecting a new storefront or modernizing an older one were considered musts for any shopkeeper looking to attract and retain a clientele. Opera houses, banks and hotels are but few commonly encountered uses of Mesker facades throughout the nation. A significant number of facades were also purchased by various fraternal organizations — mostly the Freemasons and the Odd Fellows, but also Knights of Pythias and others.” (from [www.meskerbrothers.com](http://www.meskerbrothers.com)). True history buffs of Bradford may know that the Bradburn building – or the old Jack and Jill store- was built as a Knights of Pythias hall.

“Manufactured by the Mesker Brothers Iron Works of St. Louis, Mo., and the George L. Mesker Company of Evansville, Ind., a "Mesker" building features elements ranging from storefront columns and cornices to entire facades made of the galvanized steel and cast iron construction. The Mesker brothers were once the largest distributors of these storefront components; although they didn't invent the idea of constructing buildings from sheet metal, the brothers took the process to the next level by developing patents for innovative installation techniques.



"Meskers" are located all across America, especially in small towns, since the Mesker brothers targeted them. There were once about 45,000 buildings with Mesker components, says Darius Bryjka of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, who launched the Mesker project in 2006.” ([www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org))



The Durfey Block on Main Street is listed on Darius Bryjka's webpage, [www.meskerbrothers.wordpress.com](http://www.meskerbrothers.wordpress.com) as one of the best Mesker facades that no longer exist.

The Landmark is continuing to research our remaining Mesker buildings, and hopes that this architectural knowledge will lead to restoration and preservation.

Interested in learning more?

Check out

[www.gotmesker.com](http://www.gotmesker.com),  
[www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org), or  
[meskerbrothers.wordpress.com](http://meskerbrothers.wordpress.com)

**The Bradford Landmark Society**  
45 East Corydon Street  
Bradford, PA 16701



And you think its cold now?

In northern Pennsylvania, the first week of the new year of 1912 began with sub-zero temperatures that set records from Bradford down to Kane. Although the record of 36 degrees below zero was registered in Bradford, the outlying towns also shivered with the cold. In Derrick City, the temperature reached 30 below; in Kushequa, nearly 34 degrees below, and at Mt. Jewett, the official reading was 20 below.

In Duke Center and Rixford, the arctic weather reached 30 below. Rew was considered a warm spot, with only minus 18 on the town thermometer.

Scores of homeowners found their water pipes frozen, causing the city plumbers to work frantically to warm up the pipes enough to permit water to flow through before the lead pipes burst open. On Main Street in Bradford, the hands of a big clock that stood on the sidewalk in front of the Phelps Jewelry store at 107 Main froze at 4AM in the morning; a local wit suggested a warm pair of mittens might solve the problem.

Forget all this talk about cold.

Think Spring!

***Think Spring! Not Snow!***