

CULTURAL SURVEY OF SWISSVALE, PA
Fall, 1992
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I. Background

Geography, Climate and Geology

The amorphous shape of the Borough of Swissvale is due to the very geographical and geological aspects of the area that have made it moderately prosperous until the last decade. Located eight miles southeast of downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the borough shares borders with Edgewood to the north, Rankin to the south and west, Braddock Hills to the east, North Braddock to the east and south, the City of Pittsburgh to the west and the Monongahela River to the south.

200 years ago, when the country was young and what is now known as Swissvale was just being discovered by people other than Native Americans, the area was virgin, bucolic woodland. At its population peak in the mid-1950s, the borough had become an industrial community of 16,500. Land usage and growth shifted over the years due to Swissvale's location (latitude 40 degrees 25 minutes north, longitude 79 degrees 52 minutes west) on the Allegheny Peneplain. It could be argued the varied topography, and positioning of the land at the crossroads of weather and natural boundaries, made Swissvale ripe for both agricultural and industrial endeavors. Such pursuits took advantage of the river proximity and natural coal and gas deposits. It was the manufacturing and mining industries, providing a promise of work, that attracted the families of many of the citizens interviewed. With population increasing and jobs prevalent, Swissvale became a thriving community at the turn of the century.

The rugged topography of Swissvale is marked by deep valleys, steep hills, narrow winding interfluvies, and the terraced remains created before the Ice Age. The upland surface of the plateau represents eroded remains of the Allegheny Peneplain, which had an elevation of 1,200-1,300 feet in its pre-glacial days. In contrast, broad, flat plains, such as the land of the present day commercial district, were created by channels occupied by the Monongahela River millions of years ago. These flat areas, where most of Swissvale has been built, embody wide clay, gravel and sand valleys at about 900 feet elevation. As the powerful and enduring river carved a new channel for itself the steep sides of the plateau eroded, creating the three physiographic division of present day Swissvale.

The first division is the flood plain, which was identified by savvy businessmen early on as a good place to take advantage of natural resources. The area became home to the Carrie Blast Furnace and the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Next are the abandoned river channels, rising 150 feet above the flood plain. The steep escarpment exposes beds of sandstone, shale and limestone. Above the ridge created by the escarpment, an old valley slopes west to east, with the highest portion reaching 900 feet. The east section funnels into one-third of a mile in width, which expands to over two miles wide in the western part of town. The most distinctive geological characteristic of the borough is the high ridge on which the northern most third of Swissvale is located at 1,200 feet--some 300 feet above the rest of the town.

Remnants of the old Peneplain exist on top of this ridge, which was leveled in the early 20th century as a recreational area for children. A new athletic field was built there in 1991 and, to the chagrin of the

townspeople whose taxes paid for it, the field is already sliding down the slope of the manmade plateau.

The relatively flat plain below the hill is marred by only three small, young streams, with only Nine Mile Run still in existence.

Climate

Swissvale lies in the path of both cold and warm air masses moving northeastward towards the Atlantic Ocean. The proximity to Lake Erie only has a marginal effect on the area as it is out of reach of the moist air and Canadian winds of the Lake Effect region.

During winter the Polar Continental air masses sweep over the Allegheny Plateau, historically bringing deep freezes and thick snows. Residents say these weather conditions have decreased significantly over their lifetime. Some attribute the change to mill closing, generating better air quality and less cloud mass.

In summer the area is dominated by warm air masses from the Gulf of Mexico, traveling via the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys. Swissvale's official weather classification is Dfa, meaning humid continental climate with long summers. The growing season is 180 days, with the first killing frost expected October 20 and the last expected April 21.

There is a 50 percent chance of sunshine from April to October, as well as the same chance of precipitation for those months. The average annual temperature is 52.5 degrees, with the town's record low recorded as -16 degrees in January 1936. A high of 102 degrees occurred in July of the same year. Drainage of 36.29 inches of annual precipitation down the Borough's steep slopes creates fog, especially in cooler months.

The southern portion of the Allegheny Plateau, where Swissvale is situated, is a transition zone. Elements of northern and southern weather vie for dominance. The region is also the meeting place of the northeast hardwood deciduous forest (birch, beech, red maple, elm and sycamore) and the southern hardwood forest (chestnut, chestnut-oak, black oak, red oak, black ash, white ash, red ash, yellow poplar, sweet gum, buckeye and honey locust). Large expanses of sycamore are speculated to exist because of the tree's smoke resistant qualities, allowing it to thrive in a polluted atmosphere not conducive to many other species.

(More on Swissvale weather can be found in Rampon, p. 8-11)

B. History

Swissvale's history reflects that of the region. Exploited for its natural resources, the borough initially thrived, providing plenty of jobs for those who sought to work in the manufacturing industry. Reliance on this kind of economy set the town into decline as the country's manufacturing base shifted to Pacific Rim and Third World nations and, in the case of coal and gas, the resources were depleted.

Initially populated by the Shawnee, Iroquois and Delaware tribes from the south and east, the first

record of a European settler crossing the path of present day Swissvale was in the writings of Frederick Post, an Ohio Valley trader in the early-1700s. The borough contains within its limits part of the old Braddock Field Road, the direct route east from Fort Pitt during frontier times.

Throughout the time of the American Revolution, William Pollack built and operated a gristmill where the Braddock Field Road crossed Nine Mile Run stream. Other farms didn't emerge until 1800, when John Swisshelm bought Pollack's mill and built a cabin. Eastern Pennsylvanians of Scotch-Irish decent started moving to the western portion of the state in search of good farming land about the same time. By 1808 44 grain farms were operating in the borough. The Braddock Road remained the main route of transportation for people and products because the path down the cliff to the river was too treacherous.

1845 saw the first school, not much more than a log hut, emerge along with a church. These were the first signs that the community was beginning to draw together. By 1852 a railroad station was built to service the four trains a day that barreled through town at less than 20 miles an hour. The station was called Swissvale, after the Swisshelm's farm of the same name. Trains enabled Swissvale to be a commuting town, with greatly increased commerce and interaction with the city of Pittsburgh eight miles to the southwest.

Between the time the first train pulled into the Swissvale station and 1870, the farming district owned by Scotch-Irish pioneers metamorphosed into a suburban region populated by people and houses of wealthier classes. Only 14 years after the train station was built 34 homes stood on Swissvale streets, housing a population of 250-300. 1865 was the year the first non-agricultural industry moved into town. In retrospect the Milligan Coal Mine was an omen to greater successes and failures to come, but the 100 men who worked in the mine and lived in the tenements built for them couldn't know that.

The Dickson Stuart Coal Company opened a mine in 1866, which operated for 13 years before depleting the natural resource. Another 100 men, mostly Irish immigrants, were hired and housed.

The opening of the Allegheny Car and Transportation Shops in Swissvale, and the Edgar Thompson Steel Works in Homestead (which encouraged some entrepreneur to start running a ferry from Swissvale to the mills), made the town even more attractive to blue-collar workers and management that needed to live close to the mills, but wanted to be far enough away that the din and stench didn't infringe on their few off hours.

The Carrie Blast Furnace in Rankin, constructed in 1888, brought the industry a little closer to Swissvale's borders, but still didn't have the impact on the town that a railroad signal manufacturer would. The Union Switch and Signal Company bought the Allegheny Car Shop space, where the present day Edgewood Town Center stands, and attracted immigrant workers in record numbers. Though the Mon Valley towns were driven by the steel industry, Swissvale's first and foremost relationship with business would always be with "The Switch", as it is still referred to today.

As the steel mills expanded more people who wanted, and were able, to move away from the mills migrated to towns like Swissvale, creating a social caste system between blue-collar immigrant workers from Italy, Ireland and Slavic nations and management who were predominately white Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

1898 saw the introduction of the streetcar, providing direct contact with surrounding towns for the first time. It was also in this year that the Villages of Swissvale and Hawkins, in the Township of Braddock, were formally incorporated into the Borough of Swissvale. This illicit a change from initially being considered a hamlet, to the slightly more authoritative village, to become a politically and economically autonomous town, which may have helped cause the borough's greatest population boom between 1900-10. 1,750 people grew to 7,351 in the same decade Kopp Glass moved into town, the only industry from that era of prosperity to remain in present day Swissvale.

The rapidly expanding population initiated the building of Trinity Lutheran Church for the German population (which is slated to be registered as a historical landmark within the next year), St. Anselm's for Irish Catholics and Madonna Del Castello, for Italian Catholics, among other houses of worship. 17 years after the latter church was built it boasted a congregation exceeding 1,700.

How much of the town's segregation was ordained and how much was self-imposed is in dispute, but the immigrant population lived near Braddock and Rankin while the native white population bought their homes near the city of Pittsburgh and Edgewood. (A large Swedish community existed on the hill overlooking the city at this time, with LaBlanc Avenue being referred to as Swedetown.) Swissvale is where the two disparate populations met and was most noticeable in the varied ethnicity's in the schools. Swissvale's boundaries were connected with other boroughs in the 1920s, with some lines of demarcation running down the middle of streets or through houses. Edgewood jumped on claiming the land the Switch was on as their own, even though Swissvale to this day insists it was part of the original seven farms that made up the town. Now Swissvale residents refer to Edgewood Town Center with irony as they feel it should read Swissvale Town Center, though the irony is the borough suffers from the development of a prosperous business on what was once part of their town.

By 1930 the greatest single immigrant ethnic group in town was the Italians, though collectively the largest number of foreigners came from Northern Europe and the Scandinavian Peninsula. Swissvale was losing its identity as the population grew and diversified in this decade. Settlements became more compact as the rest of the area east of Pittsburgh merged it's borders with neighboring towns, leaving no area unsettled.

Swissvale residents were active in the war efforts, holding the distinction of having the greatest number of residents per capita killed in WWII in the country. Though there were hard times with men off to war, interviewees all refer to the late 30s and 40s as a happy time, marked by holidays, marriages and for many, working at the Switch. The 1950s saw the first big layoff from the Switch, shaking a community that had not faced unemployment in great numbers since the Depression.

The expectations for young people through the early 80s was to work in one of the town's industries. If not the Switch, then Kopp Glass, Pittsburgh Die & Cast, or Vesuvius Crucible. One interviewee, Charles Martoni, classified people who wanted a different life as renegades.

As the mills started closing, Swissvalers in the steel industry started scurrying around for employment. Some found it at the Switch, some moved away, and a few went to school or for retraining. As younger people started trickling away because of lack of employment opportunities, and because higher education was beginning to be stressed allowing young people more options for careers, Swissvale's population started aging. While the closing of the mills didn't decimate Swissvale like it did Braddock,

subtle effects of an economy in trouble began appearing. Small businesses closed. People moved away. Then the other shoe fell. Repeated union disputes at the Switch, the worst being in 1982 which lasted seven months, caused the management to pull out of Swissvale, leaving thousands unemployed. Though Edgewood Town Center has replaced the Switch physically, it does not offer the kind of career or well-paying positions the manufacturing industry once provided for the borough. The only industry left in town is Kopp Glass and Pittsburgh Die and Cast, which past their peak long ago.

The town has not been able to bounce back economically, though it was never a wealthy town and some businesses do maintain prosperity. There is still incentive and desire to organize community events, discuss acting on town problems and some young families and individuals find Swissvale's lower rents and neighborly spirit a welcome change from the growing costs and alienation in other parts of Pittsburgh. Still, the population continues to age with few resources to attract industrial growth or a large population change. Accordingly residents are concerned about jobs for the future and the baggage of social ills that chronic unemployment drags with it. Presently the town seems to be holding its own, even if it's through sheer force of will.

C. Population and Ethnicity

Population

Originally settled by Scotch-Irish pioneers in the late 18th century, Swissvale did not grow quickly until the "new" migration of southern and eastern European peoples came to Pittsburgh, beginning in the 1880s. The Scotch-Irish were followed by groups from England, Wales and Germany in the early 19th century. There was a large Swedish population which lived on the hill above town for many years, but it began dispersing in the early 20th century. (Today there is only a handful left.)

The Irish arrived early in the 19th century, many being recruited to work in the town's mines. A flood of Italians, Poles, Slavs, Croates and other northern European peoples arrived between 1880 and 1930. Too few residents were interviewed to get an exact idea of what part of these countries many of the immigrants came from, though for Italians, the towns of Naples and Caserta, and the region of Abruzzi seem to have been the origin of a number of people's ancestry.

Swissvale never had a large Jewish population. The brief spurt of Jewish growth in the early twentieth century is attributed to the off-shoots of one family that lived on Woodstock Street. Presently, there are only two older Jewish families in town.

Geographic isolation and the more attractive draw of the city of Pittsburgh kept the town's growth to a steady trickle in the 19th century. With the advent of trains, street cars and jobs in the east end Swissvale suddenly became the ideal place for immigrant workers as well as for industry management looking to live close to the mills, but not too close.

The borough was viewed as an immigrant, working-class town of people with a strong work ethic. Now more African-Americans are moving in, and the last census identified a smattering of Asian and Hispanic families, but no more than two of each. The ethnic make up of the town is shifting, but much more slowly than in surrounding neighborhoods.

Swissvale has seen the following changes in population of the last 90 years:

year population

1900 - 1,716
 1910 - 7,381
 1920 - 10,908
 1930 - 16,029
 1940 - 15,919
 1950 - 16,488
 1960 - 15,089
 1970 - 13,819
 1980 - 11,345
 1990 - 10,637

Ethnicity

Ethnic make-up of Swissvale has been location-driven since the area was first farmed by the Swisshelm family. Scotch-Irish frontierspeople liked the area for its rich soil. Industry attracted immigrants from Eastern Europe, Italy and Scandinavia for many years before and after the turn of the 20th century. More Italian and Eastern European immigrants arrived in the early to mid 20th century. Some came to work on the railroads or the mines, others worked in the mills or Westinghouse in East Pittsburgh and just wanted to live away from their workplace. Some came straight from the Old County, others moved from more rural areas to be nearer industry jobs.

Families staying in Swissvale in great numbers have prevented a large ethnic shift in the latter part of the century, though the African-American population is the fastest growing for the first time. In 1950 96.7 percent of the Swissvale population was white, 3.3 was African-American. In 1990 89.5 percent is white, 9.7 percent is African-American.

The chart below shows the country of birth for foreign-born citizens of Swissvale in 1950:

Italy	448	Austria	140
Ireland	177	Yugoslavia	97
Czechoslovakia	160	Germany	94
Scotland	151	Others	312
England/Wales	143	Total	1,722

Out of a population of 16,488 only 1,722 were foreign born. This shows a sharp decrease from the influx of immigrants two generations before during Swissvale's boom years. Two generations later, in 1990, there are very few foreign-born citizens of Swissvale, according to the interviewees of this survey. Fewer of the total population reported single ancestry than multiple ancestries, according to the 1990 census.

Religion

I do not have any statistical data on religious background at this time. Speculation from interviewees

suggests Swissvale was predominately Protestant until the turn of the 20th century. At that time, large influxes of Irish, Italian and Croatian immigrants developed a large Catholic following. This hypothesis is supported by the building of Catholic churches in the borough in the early 1900s. Though the Catholic congregations were large, 1,700 in the Italian Catholic church alone in 1930, interviewees suggest the Protestants, especially the Presbyterians, maintained most of the political and business power in the borough until the 1950s. There has been a Baptist following as long as African-Americans have lived in Swissvale. There is also a small Apostolic church built by the present Pastor's father on Collingswood Avenue. Jewish worship was not mentioned by any interviewee and there never has been a synagogue in Swissvale.

D. Economy, Industry and Occupations

Agriculture

As stated more explicitly in the history section of this paper, Swissvale was initially settled by pioneers looking for good soil for farming. The first productive structure on the land was William Pollack's gristmill. The original boundaries of Swissvale supported grain farms by the early 1800s. The owners of this land were: John Boreman, Joseph Simon, David Gilleland, Abdell McClure, Jacob Burkhart, Anthony Thompson, James McKelvey, George Thompson, Robert Millegan, Eners Callester, Reinhart Antis and Peter MacKacheny. (See diagram in Swissvale Diamond Jubilee, p. 1 in appendix for more information.) A number of these names now appear on Swissvale street signs.

Settlers from the east found the graybrown Westmoreland soil of the area to be very conducive to farming. The difficulty was in transporting the grain over the rugged landscape as the river was difficult to access. The town was named after the Swisshelm Farm, best known not for its grains, but one of its inhabitants: Jane Grey Swisshelm, the noted reformer, suffragist, editor and abolitionist. Documentation of her work in the Swissvale Library suggests she caused quite a stir in her time and is considered one of Swissvale's most famous individuals.

Manufacturing Industries

Though Swissvale has never been a town to rely solely on the industry within its borders to employ its people, the borough's manufacturing industry has certainly had the strongest impact on its citizens.

The Union Switch and Signal Company, in later years called the American Standard Switch and Signal after it was purchased by the company best known for its bathroom fixtures, was by far the largest employer of Swissvale citizens in the 20th century. In 1886 the Allegheny Car and Transportation Company sold its land to "The Switch", which manufactured safe and efficient railway signals and traffic control devices worldwide. Through the years the company provided jobs at almost every level--from floor sweeper to top engineers and researchers, who constantly sought improvements to their own pioneering safety systems. Recognized efficiency in electronics and electrical engineering won the company government contracts during World War II, and later for the production of flight simulators, guided missile launchers and air navigation aids such as the Saturn rocket relays for which one of the study's interviewees received an award.

The plant occupied over 50 acres and had 1,125,000 square feet of floor space. In the early 1970s it

employed over 4,200 workers, many of whom lived in Swissvale. Their monthly payroll in the early 70s topped one million a month, with a large portion of this money being spent in local establishments. In it understandable then why the closing of the Switch in the mid-1980s had such a decimating effect on the town's economy.

Kopp Glass Company moved from Coraopolis too Swissvale in 1900 because of the availability of a suitable building, proximity to the railroad tracks and nearness to sources of sand and natural gas needed for glass production. The company first produced oil and gas lamps, then moved into electric lamps and produced selenium red glass for the Switch to use on their warning signals. The company was at its peak in 1926. Plagued by mismanagement and a continually changing demand, Kopp Glass has had a roller coaster history of success and insecurity. Ironically they have greater longevity than any other industry in Swissvale. Interviewee Melvin Wach recounts a good story about the owner, Nicholas Kopp, purchasing an attractive, well-crafted lampshade on a trip in Germany only to find out from one of his workers it was made in Swissvale (ES92-MF12-C #027). Some of the town's best artists were employed at Kopp to paint the lampshades and craft their designs. Today the company manufactures the coverings for runway lights.

Through the years Swissvale has had other marginal manufacturing businesses, like Pittsburgh Die and Cast Co., a wire factory, and the natural gas industry, which collectively offered a boost to the town's economy.

Iron, Steel and Related Industry

Swissvale's third largest industry (behind the Switch and Kopp Glass respectively), Vesuvius Crucible Company, began operations in 1916, just east of Kopp Glass on Palmer Street. They made graphite refractory products, including crucibles for melting metal and stopper heads for use in steel mills. Before relocating to Virginia in the mid-80s Vesuvius Crucible was an international company handling accounts in Mexico, India, Turkey and the Netherlands, among others. Upon moving the company employed approximately 100 people.

The Carrie Blast Furnace in Rankin and the Edgar Thompson Steel Works in Homestead drew employees from Swissvale, though the steel industry was never the town's primary employer. There was enough of a demand at the turn of the century to support a boat shuttle from Swissvale to Homestead, and most interviewees knew of someone who had worked in the mills, but few had direct contact with the steel industry.

Coal and Natural Gas

Both the coal and natural gas industries exhibited a brief but profitable existence in Swissvale. The Milligan and Stuart Coal mines began production in 1865 and 1866 respectively. Though this industry attracted immigrants, mainly Irish who were housed in town, the amount of the natural resource was not of great proportions. The same occurred with the natural gas industry, flourishing in the early 1920s. Enormous profits from early natural gas wells in McKeesport spurred Swissvale citizens to join the natural gas boom. Kopp Glass purchased natural gas from local wells at about \$300 per month in the 20s. The

large number of wells tapping a finite amount of gas eventually put an end to speculations of get-rich-quick schemes.

Women's Work and Other Jobs

Until the 1920s women, for the most part, had the traditional roles of raising the family. With family sizes often rising into the double digits, this was no small task. Many interviewees recall the food of their childhood's more than any other single ethnic element. Pies, seven kinds of fish at one meal, laborious pasta dishes pepper people's recollections of mealtime. Women also recall the excessive amounts of laundry done by hand because of the soot and ore dust released into the air from the mills. One interviewee remembers women getting together a few times a week at the library during World War I and knitting sweaters for the boys on the front lines. When the Depression hit some women were forced to enter the work place in search of an additional means of family income. More often than not it was the children who got jobs at this time.

World War II saw the greatest shift in Swissvale women entering the workplace, mirroring the rest of the country. With men off at war, women were the majority of the staff at the Switch. Women were running family businesses in town, like the grocery shop, the pharmacy and working at the bank. According to Virginia Martoni, prior to the war the only jobs generally acknowledged available for women were nurse, stewardess or teacher. She had aspiration to be one of the first two, but pressure from her family to quit school and get a job extinguished those dreams, as it did for many young people of both genders at this time. Women either stayed home or worked in "acceptable" jobs but they didn't often finish high school much less attend college.

The 1950s and 60s saw large numbers of women entering the work force, with this change increasing over the years. Swissvale reflects changes in the country concerning the attitude of women working. Many young families leave Swissvale so both adults can find better jobs. Among Swissvale families it is common to find women running businesses or holding positions on the school board. Considering the high elderly population in town, there is surprisingly little strife between older and younger women as to their roles. Older female interviewees seemed to find women's broader acceptance in the workplace a positive change, as well as feeling a little sorry that both parents had to work in the present economy, keeping adults away from their children.

Other past occupations were those that supported the town: Grocers, movie houses, car mechanics, funeral homes. These were all family businesses, like Nied's Funeral Home which still exists today, run by the third generation of Nied men in the mortuary business. The advent in recent years of chain stores, especially with the construction of Edgewood Town Center, has hurt or closed many of Swissvale's mom and pop-type stores. For a few though, business has been better, such as at Melvin Wach's hardware store where the personalized service he provides for customers cannot be matched at a warehouse-style retail establishment.

(The Business Directory on p.135 of the 50th Anniversary of Swissvale (1948) source in the appendix provides extensive detail to area establishments, including a Hotel on Woodstock Street.)

E. Organizations

Churches

A brief look at Swissvale's church history:

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1867

38 charter members built their church on the corner of Schley and Monongahela Streets. An effort was made in 1867 to start this church but the congregation wasn't strong enough to keep it going until 1902, when the first building was dedicated. The present day church was completed in 1917.

Swissvale Presbyterian Church, 1870

The land for the structure on the corner of Church Street and Monongahela Avenue was donated by James Swisshelm, one of the town's first residents. The stone edifice of the present structure was completed in 1911 and the building was dedicated in this year.

Swissvale United Methodist Church, 1892

This church held its first service at Dickson Hall on Edgewood Avenue in 1892. The first Methodist church was built on the corner of Noble and Dickson Streets in 1893 but proved too small. The present church was dedicated in 1930, and the church school was built in 1960. The building suffered fire damage totaling \$50,000 in 1972 but was promptly repaired.

Madonna Del Castello Catholic Church, 1920

Italian Catholics first held services in the basement of the McKinley Italian Club in Rankin until Reverend Vincent Giovanitti from Italy established a church on Duquesne Avenue. The name means Our Lady of the Castle, after an ancient sanctuary to the Virgin Mary located in Caserta, Italy, where a number of the town's Italians can trace their heritage. Within 40 years the church became incapable of handling the growing congregation and the much larger present day church rose above Monongahela Avenue in 1966.

Trinity Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod, 1914

The first Lutheran ceremony was held in town in 1914 at the request of two townspeople, one of whom is the mother of interviewee Melvin Wach. The German congregation grew and entered its present house of worship in 1930 on the corner of McClure and Monongahela Avenues. It is built in French Provincial style of the Normandy type and is about to be registered as a historical landmark. Melvin Wach is the sole parishioner surviving from the charter congregation.

St. Anselm's Catholic Church, 1903

The first Catholic mass in Swissvale took place in a citizen's home by Reverend Daniel O'Connell. A church was erected by the Irish community one year later but a rapid increase in population made the wooden structure inadequate. A new church built in the Romanesque style was dedicated on the same spot in 1925.

First Baptist Church of Swissvale, 1904

The first Baptist meeting in Swissvale took place in the public hall of the Swissvale Bank in 1904. A new church was finished in 1905, but the African-American congregation moved to a building the Presbyterians were leaving four years later at the corner of Schoyer and Miriam streets.

St. Barnabas Catholic Church, 1950

One of the last ethnic communities to get their own church was the Slovaks. St. Barnabas, located at 2540 Woodstock Street, was built in 1950 using local Indiana limestone as its primary material. The accompanying school was constructed seven years later. The church's interior, the current worshipping place of an ethnically mixed congregation of 500, was remodeled in 1987.

Apostolic Church

The tiny, yellow brick church on Collingswood Avenue has served the African-American population for two generations. It was built by the present Pastor Ramsey's father.

Ethnic Organizations

The year after the organization name denotes its charter date, when known.

Dante Club (Italian-Americans, though located at 115 W.

Braddock Avenue in Rankin many Swissvale residents, past and present, frequent the club)

Lincoln Civic Club, Italian-Americans, 1931 (inactive)

Primavera Lodge No. 149 (initiated into the Order of Italian
Sons and Daughters of America, 1946)

Swissvale Mt. Castello Lodge No. 756 (Italian-American,
1930, inactive)

Ancient Order of Hibernians, Division V and VII (Irish-Americans)

NOTE: Contacts Bill Davies and Stu Getz, listed in the appendix, would know how to get in touch with the active organizations.

Social, Civic and Religious Organizations

Acorn Club (all men until 1990)

American Legion D. W. Brooks Post No. 63 (1919)

American Legion Auxiliary (1921, inactive)

Boy Scouts (1912)

B'nai B'rith Lodge No. 1757 (inactive)

Catholic Daughters of America (1926)

Dames of Malta, Swissvale Sisterhood No. 110 (1916,
inactive)

Democratic Women's Club (1964, inactive)

Fraternal Order of Eagles, Swissvale Aerie No. 1609 (1907, inactive)

Girl Scouts (1924)

Independent Order of Odd Fellows No. 227 (1902, inactive)

Jaycees (1972)

Junior Women's Club Of Swissvale (1935, merged with Women's Club)

Knights of Malta, Swissvale Commandery No. 356 (1905, Protestant fraternal organization, inactive)

Ladies Auxiliary to the Bentz-Isles VFW Post 6679 (1947, inactive)

Lions Club (1941)

Meals on Wheels (1973)

Milligan P.T.A. (1957, inactive)

Moose Lodge

Order of the Amaranth (1922, fraternal society founded on the history and activities of Queen Christina of Sweden 1653, inactive)

The Philanthropic Society of Swissvale (1910, inactive)

Rotary Club (1928)

Swissvale Business Association (1947)

Swissvale Jewish Women's Club (1927, inactive)

Veterans of Foreign Wars, Bentz-Isles Post No. 6679 (1946)

Women's Club of Swissvale (1923)

Youth Temperance Council (1947, inactive)

Social meeting place: The Sarah Jackson Black Community Center (1935, no longer in use. Now churches or library serve as community meeting places.)

NOTE: Much of this information was found in Swissvale's Diamond Jubilee Committee Book (see bibliography). The clubs' activity level was checked with contact Bill Davies, one of two unofficial town historians. Another source of current organization information is the town hall.

Emergency/Fire/Police

The Police Civil Service Commission (1941)

Swissvale Police Department

Swissvale Lady Police (school guards, 1950)

Swissvale Volunteer Fire Department

Sports

Sports organizations were mainly organized through the school before Swissvale became part of the Woodland Hills Regional School system, except for right after World War II. At this time there was a national movement to start community football and baseball leagues, and the very sports-minded residents of Swissvale jumped at the chance. According to Bill Davies, the advent of televised sports put an end to organized community leagues.

Interviewee Stu Getz's father was instrumental in a number of athletic teams in town and a Swissvale ball field now bears his name. According to interviewee Kenneth Burkley, who coaches football at the Rankin Intermediary School, Swissvale's athletic facilities and parks attract young people from Braddock and Rankin as well as Swissvale. A number of the community figureheads identified by interviewees were famous sports figures from Swissvale, like Dick Grote and Turrell Green. This is both true in the past and now.

F. Events Calendar

Annual service and ceremony in front of war memorial on Veterans' Day and Memorial Day.

San Simeone Festival, October, around Columbus Day. It is the biggest Italian festival in area which many interviewees, both Italian and other, spoke of with fondness.

The last community wide event was the final football game at Dickson School before switching over to the Woodland Hills School District in 1986. All the old sports players were invited to this social event.

The American Legion sponsors an annual reunion for Switch employees, many of whom come from out of state as far away as Florida and Nevada.

The next big community event is scheduled for the town's centennial celebration in 1998.

G. Folklore/Folklife

At Home

The folklore/life aspect of this study proved the most disappointing, at least in tangible ways. Many interviewees spoke of their parents striving to become "Americanized" and not passing on language, customs and at times not speaking about the "Old Country" at all. The discrimination felt by many immigrants prompted them to assimilate and at times lose some of their unique heritage. Food seems to be the one ethnic element that survived in most families, especially those of Italian decent. Everything tended to be home-made ("Nothing from a can!" recalls Melvin Wach about his mother's cooking--as if she thought the act was sacrilege).

Interviewee Marty Gladora, of Czech decent, says his family ate very American, though when prompted he did remember a few cabbage dishes. Recollections of ethnic desserts (like spaghetti pie and fruit pies) and holiday delicacies were more prevalent. It was the Italians who seem to hold onto more traditions than other ethnicities interviewed.

Charles Martoni remembers Good Friday being a time when "the whole world stopped." There was food and church and nobody dared work. Easter was another big holiday for the family to get together. In Italian families Sundays were special and often feast days.

Very little was uncovered about crafts and though some people remembered their parents or grandparents singing ethnic songs, the dancing was mainly Americanized, except for the occasional polka or tarentella.

The best example of ethnic folklife or beliefs came from Dan Yazvac, a pre-press production manager in his 30s. He recounts a wonderful, detailed story of how his Croatian grandmother "knew" one of her neighbors was a witch who could turn herself into a frog (ES92-MF3-C side B #067). He described the mixture of Catholicism and folklore (bordering on witchcraft) his grandmother believed in and marveled at how she never saw the contradictions in her beliefs.

Dan Yazvac also gives a rare look into the lives of immigrants who had a hard time assimilating to their new country. Though he is unsure how much was natural personality traits and how much was due to the confusion of a new environment, he describes the isolation of where he grew up, the misconceptions of his Croatian family and the overbearing strictness of a father he both respected and feared. Expectations and social mores were different in the Mon Valley than in Yugoslavia, causing the generation gap in his family to be very acute.

In the Community

Throwing money and candy at weddings is an Italian custom that Jane Nespoli found surprising but endearing when she married an Italian. Another wedding custom she described was when the Italian men placed her in a chair and serenaded her at the reception.

Peter Nied was able to give some insight into ethnic social customs surrounding death. He said the Italians were the most emotional, the Croatians were the most concerned with detail, as they are very meticulous about their customs, and the Irish treat a wake like a family reunion, unless the death was untimely. Jane Nespoli called Irish wakes raucous.

Jane also recalls her Irish grandmother serving high tea every day at 4pm. The Irish ladies would come over and everyone had to be well dressed--it was a very proper affair (ES92-MF1-C side B #300-410). She also remembers her Irish grandfather spiking his tea and singing Irish songs to his grandchildren.

The Italian San Simeone festival is the most overt display of folklife or customs in the community. Virginia Martoni's father and uncle were the Masters of Ceremonies for the event for many years, which included stunning fireworks that many of the interviewees recalled readily, a greasy pole contest for the boys, candy and dancing. It seems to be the social event of the year.

II. ISSUES

In this section I will be capsulizing Swissvale's resonant issues--school, drugs and employment--and examining reactions to ethnicity and politics over the years.

A. Schools

Change to a Regional School System

Not one of the interviewees felt positive about the regionalization of the public school system. Swissvale and Braddock schools merged first in the early 70s, and soon the need for a large (Stu Getz refers to it as a warehouse) school was built in Woodland Hills, serving students from nine school districts in 1986. It looks like Wilkinsburg will become the tenth in the near future. The degree of dislike, sounding more like resignation among some interviewees, varies, but all seems to agree it has served as one more decision that continues to fray the edges of an already unraveling sense of community in Swissvale.

Interviewee Jane Nespoli was one of the most vehement against the system (ES92-MF1-C #000-217), probably because she has three daughters presently attending school. The old system offered town schools, where parents and the community had greater say, interaction with and knowledge of what their children were doing. The students knew the townspeople and vice versa. Now students are bused to Woodland Hills. It takes longer to get to and from the school, creating a sense of disconnection with the community. Jane Nespoli dislikes the fact that when her daughters want to visit their friends she has to drive them half an hour away. She feels the young people of Swissvale do not interact in town, but are scattered across the district, providing no impetus for the hometown pride Swissvale's past sports teams or honors students used to incite.

Stu Getz also made strong statements against the system, which he described as turning the kids into numbers (ES92-MF8-C #174-219). He sees fewer young people being given the opportunity to participate in clubs and sports because teams can only be so big and now there are nine times the amount of people trying out for these positions. He talked, as did many, about not liking busing as it further separates young people from their community. He recalls all the townspeople he would meet walking to school every day as a kid. In the end, he said, the real problem is it's the kids who are losing out.

Other interviewees worried about urban influence of some of the other town's children, as it was a Swissvale youth who brought the gun to school that made such a big media splash in Pittsburgh only a month ago. Ken Burkley, who works in a local school, did mention other town's social ills creeping into Swissvale and children from dysfunctional families being exposed to unhealthy lifestyles at a susceptible age. But he also said that might have happened in Swissvale without the regional school system because towns can no longer live in isolation of one another.

Interviewees, especially the older men, spoke fondly of Swissvale High School and all the lessons they learned there, the good times they had, and the people in their lives who made a difference. They are concerned today's youth aren't being given the kind of attention and nurturing children and teenagers need. Catholic school graduates, like Marty Gladora and Peter Nied, spoke of the incredible discipline they received (Marty got hung on a coat hook for a day for whispering and Peter was suspended from school for four days for giving a girl a peck on the cheek). Though they feel these reactions were harsh, they say they are the better for it in the long run and feel discipline, at even the most moderate level, is absent in such a huge school system.

Future Outlook

Future concerns for school revolve around continued disassociation of young people from their community, increased drug and crime influence experienced through the overburdened school system (especially if Wilkinsburg students become part of the Woodland Hills system), and little knowledge about what their children are learning. Swissvale PTA organizations used to be very active, but now there is no room for such an organization.

People are also concerned about the price of higher education being out of reach for many of the community's youngsters. While school was not encouraged in many immigrant families in the past, the absence of assured work at good wage has caused more people to seek the benefits of college. The aspirations for children may be there, but the money is not.

B. Employment

Relationship Between Industry and Community

Employment is an issue most people recognize has a cyclical life. The creation and loss of jobs is not new to Swissvale, but the extent to which unemployment has settled in without hope of industry arriving has people speculating on a difficult future for the borough. As stated earlier, the Union Switch and

Signal was the town's main employer. According to interviewee Dom Dello Stritto everyone who worked there knew each other, and were often related (ES92-MF8-C # 279-305). As this was the largest employer of Swissvale people, it's fair to believe this practice was also true in the smaller establishments and companies in town. The relationship between the community and their work was strong because they were one and the same. Other ex-Switch employees recall the Christmas Party the company would hold for its workers and their families and the occasional kindness shown for a job well done or a family tragedy. (There is an annual reunion of Switch workers at the American Legion.)

Conversely interviewees also recalled management taking advantage of workers over the years, creating unhappy relationships between employers and employees. Dom Rossi recalls hardships his father suffered before there were any unions to support the workers (ES92-MF8-C #333-376). His father had to work every other Sunday for free and during the Depression and other times was expected to bring the boss some gift (read: bribe), even if it meant taking the last bit of food off his family's table as his offering. The reason for this practice was even though you were employed at a company, they may not have needed all their employees on a given day. So the boss would have all the workers wait outside and go pick the people he would "allow" to work and be paid that day. Bribes produced better chances of work, which may have been two twelve-hour shifts in a row.

Described as a very pro-union town, Swissvalers joined unions over the years, generating more equitable businesses practices. Still, layoffs and strikes plagued the Switch and other area manufacturing businesses as the country's edge in the global market started to disintegrate. Stu Getz described the owners of the Switch as "hard people". Enough others must have agreed with him because the Switch was riddled with strikes in its final decade in Swissvale. The strike in 1982 lasted seven months, with community people and churches working in high gear to offer food and clothing to needy families. In the end "the Switch beat is down," say Dom Dello Stritto, his voice still betraying regret a decade later (ES92-MF8-C #333-352).

Stu Getz remarked that when the mills and the Switch were around, a father could always talk to his boss about finding some work for his son in the company. Now that kind of relationship no longer exists. It is the college degree that will make an employer look at a candidate, not his family's history with the company. While the absence of nepotism in the workplace may be seen as more fair, there was more of an implicit understanding between the worker and the employer that if he did a good job, this would pave the way for his children to get an opportunity to show they could do a good job too. Stu feels the young person who is not college material is getting lost in the shuffle, with fewer and fewer jobs being available to him or her (ES92-MF8-C #390-414).

When the mills first closed Jane Nespoli remembers many of the working age men leaving for California and Texas (to work in the oil wells). Now the young people are leaving too because there are no jobs for them in Swissvale. Interviewees see this as one more reason the town's sense of community is suffering. Families have to be torn apart if young people are to make any money. The older community is very tight-knit and does not want to leave Swissvale (Virginia Martoni won't move nearer to her daughter in Swisshelm Park--one mile away--because she "doesn't know those people"), but the younger generation has to go elsewhere for work. In an economy where both parents have to work, interviewees lament the time when one member of the household could stay home. Two working parents often leave a young child unsupervised, which Ken Burkley sees as one of the main reasons young children are getting into trouble now. With wages being so poor at area businesses, like

Edgewood Town Center, families, especially the growing number of single-parent households, cannot afford after school child care. This is an area interviewees feel the community and government should address, because they don't expect the problem to go away.

More than dwelling on the past, when interviewees saw good and bad in their employers, people are concerned about future job opportunities. The shift to a more service oriented, minimum wage paying economy is not answering their children's and grandchildren's needs. But there is little money being spent on research and development in the U.S., and it seems the Pacific Rim and European Community will be stiff competition in the job creation arena.

Pollution

There was a noticeable shift in opinion among the older generation and people in their 30s and 40s concerning pollution issues in Swissvale. Melvin Wach and Virginia Martoni were the most outspoken about the importance of jobs, regardless of the pollution they created. Charles Martoni and Dan Yazvac feel environmental issues are important for the longevity and prosperity of the community. Their feeling is if the place is a cesspool, no one will be attracted to open a business there and people will move away from, not to, Swissvale.

Mel Wach and Mrs. Martoni feel people are already leaving because there is no work. The latter complained about the omniscient red ore dust released from the Carrie Blast Furnace in one breath and then said "It was bad, but they worked didn't they? Now the air is clean, but what good is it?" (ES92-MF7-C #247-276). Melvin Wach echoed this sentiment exactly, expressing the opinion that pollution was just part of the deal of steady work.

Though Swissvale has direct access to the river, the idea of using the water for swimming was only entertained by the very young (who wouldn't tell their parents for fear of their wrath). Swissvale residents swam in Frick Park and Kennywood because the river was so polluted. Dom Rossi and friends remember calling the section of town along the river "Bare-ass Beach" because they would sneak down, take their clothes off, push the oil on top of the water away from their bodies with their hands, and swim. When asked if they ever fished in the river they looked horrified and said as boys they wouldn't dream of it, thinking they would catch some bizarre mutant fish or worse. Yet in their youth they didn't see, or acknowledge, the contradiction of swimming in the same water (ES92-MF9-C #394-430).

C. Drugs

Community Involvement

No one interviewed is kidding themselves about the prevalence of drugs in Swissvale. It's one of the primary concerns of the community, but it is not a new issue. Melvin Wach talks about bringing in DEA agents to clean up local beer gardens when he was mayor in the early 70s. The difference is what the drug is: crack, and the fact that it is being supplied from so close by: Wilkinsburg and Braddock. Swissvale has one of the highest incidents of crime in the greater Pittsburgh area, something many residents attribute to the needs of addicts and disenfranchised youth.

Ken Burkley has neighbors with addictions to drugs and alcohol and says some of them seek help, but others just continue on until they get in trouble or killed. He is especially concerned about Swissvale's African-American population, which seems to be falling prey to social ills and urban decay faster than the white population, which he attributes to racism and the economy. Darnell Loper, the youngest individual interviewed and an African-American, fears "things will get worse before they get better" and sees few prospects in the future (ES92-DK-5-C #224-254).

One of the biggest concerns for the borough's immediate future is real estate. With the elderly population beginning to move away to warmer climates or die, more older homes are becoming available than the market can turn around. Empty homes, especially older ones in poor condition, attract drug dealers. More of these homes are being rented too, and interviewees felt renters do not have the same incentive as owners to take care of their property, bringing down the value of the neighborhood.

Future Outlook

The worst-case scenario is Swissvale going the route of Wilkinsburg: drugs, gangs, drive by shootings. Ken Burkley feels the community must remain vigilant to insure this does not happen. Peter Nied, Charles Martoni and others have tried to start Boys' Clubs and other youth oriented organizations to give local kids something to do but they report a meager response. One of the strongest aspects of the community is that people know each other, and pay attention to new people in the neighborhood. Citizens are more likely to pay attention to something unusual and call the authorities when they see a drug dealer than turn the other cheek, as happens in some other communities. Peter Nied, among others, describes the residents of Swissvale as spunky, determined individuals who will not give up their peaceful town easily.

84-year-old Mel Wach feels there is not much left to attract people to Swissvale. The fact the town has become a place for the retired and elderly supports this view in his mind. All the land is taken up, but the industry is gone, so if anything is to change it will be people working with what is already in Swissvale. For many young people, he says, it's just easier to move to the outer suburbs.

On the optimistic side, the town's sense of community and spunk keeps it from declining further, and some people feel it is just that spirit that will keep Swissvale on an even keel. Most people's view of a positive future for the borough is having it stay just the way it is. No one espoused lofty ideas for the community but some mentioned it was doing better than many surrounding towns and expect it to stay at that level. New people are moving in, especially young adults and new families looking for reasonable priced home.

D. Politics and Economy

Politics

Until the mid-1950s Swissvale was a Republican stronghold. Out of 15 districts only one was Democratic, the Italian district. Charles Martoni remembers 50s Republican Party Boss Johnny Hoffman as one of the "bad guys" in town because he treated the Italian poorly. What he came to realize is it wasn't their ethnicity that was so objectionable, it was their politics. At the time, the district got the

worst garbage pick-up and road plowing of the borough.

The pendulum has swung in the other direction and now Swissvale is predominately Democratic, but still conservative. At one time Swissvale, Edgewood and Wilkinsburg were the three most conservative towns in the Pittsburgh area. The borough still acts cautiously with its money and long-term decisions, but Democratic candidates certainly have the edge come election time. Since the 50s more Catholics, Irish, Poles and Italians have seen elected offices than in the earlier part of the century.

Charles Martoni says there's always been a high level of disagreement among districts and residents see community meetings as an adversarial gathering rather than a neighborly get-together. School regionalization, and the extension of the PAT busway through Swissvale are two issues he says really brought people out for arguing (ES92-MF5-C #480-506).

Economy

As alluded to earlier, the economy was based on blue-collar jobs and has been forced into the service sector due to plant and mill closings. There was and still is a strong immigrant work ethic, with work being the foremost concern in people's lives, as shown by some interviewees willingness to bring the pollution back if it would mean jobs.

A few people made significant amounts of money, the owners of the Milligan Mine, Switch management, successful family establishments, but for the most part Swissvale citizens earned at the national average, supported local businesses with their salaries. Swissvale is experiencing hard times, felt by many small towns in the nation now, but is not succumbing to the urban blight noticeable in nearby Braddock and Homestead.

One of the issue felt most strongly in Swissvale is the loss of livelihood for the mom and pop businesses residents used to socialize in, such as the Village Diary. They blame Edgewood Town Center, which Mel Wach says he will never spend a penny in, reflecting the feelings of many residents. As the chain stores like KMart, Giant Eagle and the Office Depot moved in to "do it cheaper and faster", small local businesses couldn't compete. Many citizens are particularly angered at the owner of the Giant Eagle in Edgewood Town Center, who used to run the Shop n' Save in Swissvale on Monongahela Avenue. Though the owner closed the Shop n' Save when he bought the Giant Eagle, he still keeps the lease with the store staring vacant at its equally empty parking lot, to insure there is no competition for his newer store. This practice ruffles the sensibilities of Swissvalers, who find it more difficult, especially for the elderly, to get their groceries. It also annoys them they have to shop in a shopping center built on what used to be Swissvale's land with neighboring Edgewood, which was always a wealthier community, getting all the tax benefits when Swissvale only gets all the traffic congestion.

E. Ethnicity and Heritage

Discrimination/Racism

It is unrealistic to think any town that has as long and varied a history as Swissvale wouldn't have tales

of discrimination. What's interesting is how that prejudice shifts and twists back on itself over time.

Initially a conservative white Anglo-Saxon Protestant outpost, Swissvale developed a number of hierarchies, both religious and ethnic. The largest discrimination was the Protestants against the Catholics. Among the Protestant sects Presbyterians dominated. When Mel Wach was recently asked to give a talk about changes over the years in Swissvale, he said the most noticeable difference was the harmony between Catholics and Protestants. When he was young if you said you liked a girl the first question was, "is she Protestant?"

He also said, supported by comments from many other older interviewees that the racial problems have gotten much worse over the years. Though Virginia Martoni mentions watching the Klan burn crosses up on the hill in the 30s, she says it wasn't a big issue when she was growing up. Martoni remembers walking hand in hand with her African-American friends and Mel Wach says people didn't even recognize the difference (in the races). People were taken at the value of their actions not by the color of their skin. He feels a lot of the present strife between the races is due to African-Americans making trouble among themselves, while Ken Burkley sees it as the pot boiling over. "The chickens have come home to roost," says Burkley ruefully about America's history of oppressing Blacks (ES92-MF10-C #450-464).

A number of interviewees spoke of people in the community they knew who were uncomfortable with the increase in the African-American population in Swissvale, but no interviewee said directly that he or she was against the change in ethnic make-up. Many residents have seen bigotry and prejudice come and go, but they do agree the racial issues are the only ones that have gotten worse, not better, over the years.

Though the Italians dominated in population, the Irish had a more powerful hold on Swissvale in its earlier years. Dom Dello Stritto remembers being turned down for a job at the Switch because he was Italian and the Germans and Irish were in power. ("But," he says "you were set if you were a mason.") When asked if they could recall any ethnic slurs against their ancestry, it was always Italians with the prompt answers.

The Slavic peoples of Swissvale, the Croatians and Serbians, stayed to themselves more. The Italians and Irish may have had their own closed communities and bigotries of each other, but they also liked to argue with one another so there was a level of interaction in which other ethnicities didn't partake.

When speaking of heroes or figureheads in the community, interviewees often recalled the generous and bigotry-blind members of Swissvale. Priests and doctors were often revered for their acceptance of all people. Doc Daniels, an African-American doctor, would assist anyone and Mrs. Bumgarten would bring hot soup to all who were ill.

Charles Martoni made the often-overlooked point that the discrimination didn't always come from the outside. He recalls growing up in a community where Italians and Eastern Europeans sold themselves short and didn't push the expectations on their children that other ethnic and religious groups wished for their offspring. There was a sense of "this is our lot in life; it can't be better". Martoni says he knew there was something wrong about that, even as a young boy (ES92-MF5-C #177-206).

Ethnic Preservation

The Italian-American residents seem to be the best at, or most concerned with, preserving their ethnic heritage. The Italian ethnic clubs are still going very strong, with a Miss America chosen from the ranks of the Primavera Club every year. The Swissvale Italian Sons and Daughters of America has the third largest chapter in the country, behind New York City and Chicago. The San Simeone festival is still celebrated and Italian Day at nearby Kennywood remains the amusement park's biggest event. Italian is still spoken at mass at Madonna Del Castello.

The Irish may follow, with the Ancient Order of Hibernians going strong and the Irish Catholic Church, St. Anselm's, boasting the first and largest Catholic congregation in the borough. The Slovak church, St. Barnabas, also maintains some special ethnic days.

In the home, it's up to each individual family what customs get passed down. Interviewees felt many of the old customs, such as preparing ethnic dishes, didn't fit into modern life for the younger generation. Even the customs that people young and old would have liked to continue are too time-consuming for people's busy schedules. Virginia Martoni made the observation, "Why is it with all the modern conveniences designed to make life easier, people have no time any more?"

III. PLACE

Push-Pull Factors

Jobs and the promise of a better life brought immigrants to Swissvale. Ironically it was for the exact same reasons people left Swissvale. In the 1970s, a better life meant the sunny promises of California or working in Texas oil fields. Many residents left during this decade, and Swissvalers love to talk about how many of them came back because they missed the neighborhood, the familiarity, the old friend on the corner. Though most of the returnees were in their retirement years, younger people like Jane Nespoli came back because they just missed the area. After studying nursing in a number of other cities Jane found she was spending all her vacations in the Pittsburgh area and decided it would be better to move back to Swissvale and vacation elsewhere. Now she wants to move to a more rural community, like Ligonier, where her children can have more freedom to play and explore. She doesn't like the fear residents now have and doesn't think it's a healthy way to bring up her daughters. It saddens her she has to leave once again.

The children of older residents who have stayed in the Pittsburgh area seem to favor suburbs like Penn Hills and Monroeville, which aren't very far from their hometown, but have a more suburban, prosperous setting.

Heroes/Villians

Except for Jane Nespoli, who identified Abigail Adams and Stonewall Jackson as her role models in addition to her grandmother ("anyone with spunk"), the heroes and figureheads in Swissvale's past have been accessible community people. Father Joe, Joe Nied (who fed the needy), Dr. Morrow and Dr. Daniels, interviewees' parents and grandparents, a school teacher who tutored men after the war so they

could pass the test for the GI bill, a football coach, a sports star. Repeatedly interviewees recall individuals who went out of their way for others. They speak of respect, sagacity, strength and tolerance as qualities in the town's figureheads.

Now, heroes are outside the community, music, media and film personalities. "This is the age of the anti-hero" says Charles Martoni, who works with young people everyday. "Kids look up to people they shouldn't." (ES92-MF5-C #332-364) They seem to want to emulate what they can't have or ever be (in part because media heroes are not realistic) and miss the accessible goals they could strive for in a community like Swissvale.

Martoni feels this shift is partly due to media being so pervasive in our culture now, and because what people worry about has changed. He recalls just looking from paycheck to paycheck to live, while now people are concerned with larger issues--the future, the environment--outside the community.

In the African-American community, Ken Burkley says the young people who have role models look up to local sports figures, like Turrell Green (who still lives in Swissvale), Darin Pointdexter, Brian Chismont.

The villains in the community's past seem to be the outsiders: the Mafia, the Klan, the bootleggers, a couple individuals "who just went bad." There was talk of car and house bombing in Swissvale in the 30s, a bank robbery in the 20s that is still considered the biggest individual crime to rock the town; and of not being able to be out after dark when the Mafia was in town. Now the villains are the drug dealers and thieves that make people afraid to walk around at night.

Socializing

Dances were the way to meet members of the opposite sex. Virginia Martoni remembers when they were 10 cents. There were dances every Friday at the Croatian Home in Rankin, at the McKinley Club, in church basements, at Kennywood, anywhere there was a dance floor there would be young people dancing on a weekend. A large number of the interviewees met their spouses at a dance. Dance was a socializing event and Jane Nespoli remembers learning how to jitterbug by using her refrigerator door handle as a partner.

In the past, chaperones were necessary for dating, or at least boys and girls had to be in a group, like at a dance. Most people recalled stories of strict parents with very specific rules about dating. Dom Rossi remembers coming home from the front lines of WWII, where he felt he had really dealt with the most difficult situations he would ever face, and found he wasn't allowed to take his 22-year-old girlfriend out past 11 o'clock. Interviewees speak of respect (or fear) about these rules. You just didn't break them. If you had to be home at a certain time, you were home. If you were asked to do a certain chore, you did it. Now, interviewees say young people don't show respect or listen to their parents; they're loafers, are undisciplined and don't appreciate how much easier it is for them. Jane Nespoli, who presents herself as a no nonsense mother, says even she has a very hard time getting her daughters to do any chores around the house.

There were certain taboos about socializing with a person of another religion or ethnicity, but most of the interviewees had married people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds, obviously not heeding

the wishes of their parents or ethnic community. Jane Nespoli said she tried to do it her family's way the first time, and married an Irishman she says was a "bad husband". She's now happily married to an Italian.

Summary

Swissvale can be viewed as a local reflection of national concerns. Abandonment of the increasing aging population, small businesses unable to compete with large chains, increased traffic, crime, drug and alcohol use, unemployment, urban blight, unwieldy school systems, these are the topics in Time magazine and on the evening news in many cities. They are concerns shared around many dinner tables across the country.

One of the changes over time that is most noticeable in Swissvale, is the town cannot remain an isolated community in this age of media bombardment, regionalization of schools and the increasingly transient nature of the borough's population. Interviewees speak fondly of the time they could walk up the street and know everyone, and everyone was friendly. Now there are strangers on every street, and whether it be fear, preoccupation, or self-centeredness, people do not reach out to their neighbors like they used to. The town cannot be everyone's extended family. Business has stopped playing that role too. It's much more of everyone out for themselves.

Swissvale has been described as a community that comes together when there is a crisis--the most recent manifestation being the long, difficult 1982 strike at the Switch. But even then, when many families couldn't put food on their tables, one interviewee remarked he felt there were some people who were just coming for the handouts of food at the church without even trying to help themselves. There is an underlying sense of resentment towards people who "don't pull their own weight" because they choose not to. It goes back to the work ethic espoused by Virginia Martoni, of her reprimanding of her grandfather who didn't work as hard as he could have, and of the importance of having jobs, even if it means destroying people's health with the pollution the employment brings.

Swissvale still radiates a strong work ethic, especially among the older generations. But they don't agree with what business is offering for work. Dom Dello Stritto stated he didn't like the practice of hiring people part-time so the company didn't have to provide benefits. People feel the area offers nothing for the college educated, and little for the working class. There was a sense of wistful betrayal by big business and government, as if they wanted to blame someone for present day difficulties but realize it's a problem much bigger than Swissvale. Everyone wants a better life for their children, greater opportunities and understanding among all peoples, but they fear it will be very difficult for them. They see their families becoming more and more scattered, and for immigrant families, this is exceptionally painful.

On the positive side, interviewees recognized great strides in overcoming bigotry and having more choices in life, especially for women. Everyone worries how the younger generation is going to handle their lot, but then Stu Getz remembered his mother saying the same thing to him, and he says he

wouldn't change his life for anything.

IV. SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

While an enormous amount of information has been obtained from a mere dozen interviews, the surface is only scratched. The rich history and traditions of Swissvale are too varied and complicated to be efficiently examined in the number of residents currently interviewed. In addition to people, the following is a list of areas that could use further coverage:

Churches: they've barely been touched as far as service tradition and roles played. The Apostolic church on Collingswood may be an especially rich place for information on the African-American community.

Industry: It would be interesting to go into Kopp Glass, Pittsburgh Die and Cast and other small local businesses and observe and photograph the work being performed. Kopp Glass offers an especially rich heritage in Swissvale, and as the remaining business of the town's charter industries, it is not unlikely that it won't be around much longer. Workers in these jobs would be able to give a good present day view of the union issue too.

Slavic peoples: Interviewees mentioned the Croatians and Serbians as meticulous people who interact mainly with their own community. This seems apparent as I had a difficult time finding interviewees of Slavic origins to talk to. Given more time and funds, the study could benefit from going to St. Barnabas and talking to the Reverend for contacts in the Slovak community.

Minority Populations: Unfortunately I feel I was just starting to get somewhere with the African-American community when I reached the end of the study. It would be interesting to talk to one of the 54 Asians living in town, or one of the few Arabs to gauge whether or not they feel like outsiders, and to discover what made them move to a town where they wouldn't be part of a like community.

Attend events/services: Attending church services and community events aid a researcher in understanding how the community interacts. Spending a Friday evening at the American Legion, and attending a Lion's Club meeting, were helpful to me in this process.

Group interviews: Though they can run on for a long time, group interviews with people who know each other are an excellent way to get people to talk and remember stories from many years ago. It also helps eliminate awkward pauses when the interviewee has nothing to say. The group format also creates a more informal atmosphere to talk in. People seemed more excited about the interview when it was more of a festive gathering of friends.

Women/Younger People: It seemed to be easier to identify male interviewees and I think the study could benefit from getting more women's views on issues and how the family unit interacted. Though older residents have better perspective on changes in the town, I noticed younger interviewees were more on top of current issues and concerns, and were able to formulate clear visions of the town's future. It would be useful to interview younger people, even teenagers, to get their views on Swissvale.

More specifics: More specifics as to the expectations of the study would have helped in field research.

Not knowing a written report was expected until halfway through the survey was discouraging, as I would have handled my project timeline very differently had I known the extent to which I would be writing a report.

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D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

The most common complaint by area residents was the regionalization of the public school system. This issue affected not only those with children attending school, but the entire community. Older residents see it as causing a breakdown in the community between young and older people. Parents don't know what their children are doing (no local PTA), there are no longer Swissvale sports team games for the community to attend, etc.

I think the schools should utilize the human resources in the community more, to bridge the gap between old and young and bring some local flavor into the regional school. Organizations like the Swissvale Lion's Club, American Legion and the Dante Club are full of older people who lived through, and participated in, the history children are learning about from history books. Why not invite an interested member of the American Legion to an 8th grade history class when they are studying World War II, the Korean War or Vietnam? What better way to learn the reality of wars, the industrial revolution, or how the Depression effected people in Western Pennsylvania, than from the memories of person who lived through it? In addition to being educational and bridging the generation gap, it would also enhance students' recognition of their home town as a place where things happened. Their elderly neighbor may look a little more interesting next time they walk by.

I think the older people of all communities are an untapped wealth of knowledge and the people I met in Swissvale in particular support this. Talking to people like contacts Bill Davies, Stu Getz or Chuck Martoni would be a good starting place for organizing something like this.

2. Sports seems to have played a community role in Swissvale for many years. The last football game at Swissvale High School (before students were sent to the regional school) attracted most of the town, according to some of the interviewees. While Boys' Clubs have attracted little interest, maybe a community baseball team would draw more people. Maybe it should be aimed at adults, or a mixture of adults and teens.

3. Residents are unhappy about the loss of the "community," (though the turn out at church festivals and bazaars shows the interest is still very much there if the venue is right). I believe community projects would receive much more support in Swissvale than outside endeavors, though residents would be thrilled to have a business move in a provide decent jobs at a decent wage. Since that doesn't look likely at the moment, maybe contacting groups like the Lions and Moose Clubs to initiate community projects, like doing something with the burnt out building on Woodstock Street, or community improvements like flowers and trees, would prompt people to action, as well as give residents a forum to get to know one another. The fact that older residents see so many new, unfamiliar faces bothers them because they miss the friendliness of the old days when they knew everyone. Knowing people would also deter crime, as Swissvale residents are the kind of people to watch out for each other. The town is lacking some spirit that I don't think is gone, it just need some waking up.