

Sayre Historical Society

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Museum opening April 4 with new exhibit on Susquehanna River

CAPTION: The Susquehanna River, pictured above in a postcard view, is the subject of a new exhibit at the Sayre Historical Society which opens for the 2015 season on Saturday, April 4.

SAYRE – After a long, cold winter, the Sayre Historical Society will re-open on Saturday, April 4 with a new exhibit on “The Mighty Susquehanna.” Volume II of the Walt Brittain Band CD recorded live in 1974 will also be available in the Burkhardt Gift Shop.

Hours for the opening are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The museum will be open Saturdays (10 to 4) and Wednesdays (from 5 to 7 p.m.) through December. Admission is free.

The new exhibit, which runs from April 4 to September 1 in the museum’s rotating exhibit room, covers the history of the majestic waterway some have called “America’s River.” The early geologic history of the waterway is recounted from the point of view of a geologist while numerous local archeological discoveries are also covered.

One object was a Native American “stone tube” found near Riverfront Park in Sayre in 1944 by local archeologist Leroy Vanderpoel. The discovery of the unique object received extensive coverage in the January 1945 *Pennsylvania Archaeologist*.

Other subjects covered in the exhibit include a shad fishery operated by Milltown’s founder John Shepard along the river near Cayuta Creek in the early 1800’s. In her book *Early Times on the Susquehanna*, Mrs. George A. (Julia) Perkins expounds on the river industry that sought to capture the once-abundant migratory fish.

“This luxury had been the blessing of the red man from time immemorial, and of the white man for many years,” said Perkins, “until the dams in lower Pennsylvania were built, for the accommodation of the canals.”

A timeline of floods that have entered the annals of local history are included in the exhibit including the Pumpkin Flood of 1786 and the disastrous St. Patrick’s Day flood of 1865. Numerous photographs document the damaging flood in 1936 including a newspaper photograph showing two local men rowing their boats down North East Street on Sayre’s East Side.

Later events include the Susquehanna Sojourn, an annual canoeing excursion to raise awareness of the river as a resource, and long-distance swimmer Russell Chaffee of Sayre.

Mr. Chaffee, who passed away on August 9, 2014, was a pioneer in the sport of long-distance swimming, having navigated the entire length of the Susquehanna River in 1966. The former math teacher at Sayre High School is also credited with swimming all the Finger Lakes, the Connecticut River, the Delaware River, the Allegheny River, the Monongahela River, the Juniata River and 600 miles of the Ohio River from Pittsburgh to Louisville.

Along with the newest rotating exhibit, permanent exhibits at the museum focus on the founding of Sayre, the Robert Packer Hospital, the Lehigh Valley Railroad and more. Two HO-scale model train layouts pay homage to Sayre's rich railroad history. The museum is located in the historic Lehigh Valley Railroad passenger station in downtown Sayre.

The newest souvenir item is Volume II of the popular Walt Brittain Band that played their smooth jazz music for 30 years at the Keystone Inn. Recorded in 1974 by Roberta Sickler whose husband Nelson Sickler joined brothers Roy and Walt Brittain in the trio, was recorded at the Iron Kettle Inn located in Waverly. Limited copies of Volume I are also available. An exhibit on "Music in Sayre" last year highlighted the many musical endeavors in Sayre including Nelson Sickler, the Walt Brittain Band, and the Lehigh Shops Band, among many others.

The historical society is a recipient of funding from the Bradford County United Way.