

The Story of Penn Wood Campground



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**CLARION COUNTY
LIMESTONE, PENNSYLVANIA**

**by
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1990

FROM THE BYLAWS

The purposes of the Seward Campground Association are to develop and maintain a campground association; to promote citizenship among its patrons in the community by furnishing meeting places for its members and patrons; to encourage and promote social gatherings and social entertainment; to provide, promote and foster the art of environmental control; to promote, develop and maintain travel trailer campsites for the use of its members and patrons; to promote, foster and encourage beauty of design, beauty of surroundings and cleanliness of travel trailer campsites and surrounding grounds; and to promote, foster and encourage the art and practice of travel trailer camping.

Members of the Association who worked toward these goals, actively volunteered their time and talents to Penn Wood Campground, and maintained permanent sites in 1989 were:

John and Sue Acree	Edward Kraus
James and Betty Allison	Joseph and Helen Lombardo
Vernon and Betty Bachelder	Harry and Jean Mensing
Adeline Baxter	Harvey and Ruth Miller
Edward and Ruth Brown	Hubert, Arlene and Jack Miller
Raymond and Marjorie Campbell	Jane Moore
Frances Cashdollar	William and Sarah Moore
Donald and Jane Christy	Mark and Marnie Paulson
John and Roseanna Cosky	Douglas and Jo Pederson
Layne and Elsie Craig	Victor and Marguerite Peterson
Joseph and Helen Emswiler	Daniel and Dorothy Restauri
Everett and Fern Field	Donald and Virginia Rinkes
Al and Delia Finke	Howard and Barbara Robb
James and Sabina Freeman	Doyle and Marian Shank
Warren and Gertrude Hall	Elliot Steimle
Howard and Dorothy Hays	Peter and Barbara Terwilliger
Clair and Genevieve Hoffman	Harold and Eva Turner
Louis and Lynn Jarratt	Charlotte Vial
Charles and Nathel Johnson	Warren and Grace Wakefield
Frances Johnston	Clair and Mildred Walter
Kenneth and Selma Kern	Charles and Roberta Weber

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Penn Wood Campground is nestled in the forested Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. It lies in the center of Clarion County, in the Township of Limestone. It encompasses more than 67 acres where Indians - the Seneca to the North and the Delaware to the south - once hunted deer, elk and small game. Their land claims were settled by 1785 and the county was laid out that same year, although the first permanent homestead was not established until seven years later. In 1842 an area described as hilly and undulating was organized as Limestone Township. Two streams cut through the township, Big Piney Creek which winds through Penn Wood, and Little Piney Creek.

The early settlers were described by historian A. J. Davis in his 1887 county history as "well fitted to conquer the wilderness and build up prosperous communities on a permanent basis." They established successful farms on the rich soil and built mills along the banks of the creeks. These included a grist mill, five flouring mills, a carding machine and fulling mill, a woolen mill, three iron foundrys, 21 saw mills and an ax factory.

In the boom days following the Civil War oil wells dotted the countryside around Knox to the northwest as well as other county communities. As the supply of oil diminished and the 19th century

came to an end, the most extensive businesses that remained were farming and lumbering.

The acreage now known as Penn Wood Campground passed through many hands during the early part of this century and in 1921 was purchased by Peter Repoff. Repoff was a Russian immigrant who had first settled in West Virginia where he worked in the coal mines. He returned to the Ukraine to marry and bring back his wife. In 1921 they resettled in Limestone Township. Their house, which is more than 100 years old, is at the far end of the lower meadow near the remains of the ax factory. Repoff farmed the tillable flat lands of his 77 acres and operated a still in the hilly, wooded area. His family grew and on his death there were twelve heirs.

In the late 1930s, Repoff's son Paul continued farming and also planted more trees with the intent of establishing a lumber business. His plans were interrupted by World War II. He served in the navy, assigned for a time to the aircraft carrier *Wasp*, and was on board in September 1942 when it was sunk in the Pacific. After the war he resumed his interest in the property.

It was not until Paul's mother died in the 1960s that he began to make serious improvements. While one brother continued to farm some of the acreage, Paul extended the pond, planted grass and developed the idea of a trailer park on the flat lands, naming it Penn Woods. He established about 50 sites, laying out brick patios for some. He installed water and electricity for

the sites around the meadow and buried 30 gallon drums for sewerage. He built a cottage, log cabin, tool shed and an open air pavilion with a large brick fireplace. The original post and beam framework of the pavilion is easily identified by its "boxcar red" paint. He laid out rudimentary roads and in time several mobile homes were moved in. A relative took up residence in the cottage at the crest of the hill overlooking the meadow, and another relative lived in the cabin which is now the office.

Paul left the area after some of the other heirs disputed ownership and use of the property. His youngest brother Nick placed it for sale and at that point the remaining family members took the matter to Orphan's Court.

Earlier and elsewhere in the state, the Pennsylvania Unit of the Wally Byam Caravan Club had organized in 1958. Their first rallies were in open fields or at fairgrounds. State restrictions were few; for example, holding tanks could be emptied into dug-as-needed shallow pits. Dubbed "gopher holes," the pits were covered with garbage can lids which offered a unique category (Best Decorated Covers) for contests at unit and international rallies.

Skits were a popular form of entertainment at rallies during those early years, as were pie contests. With no money for hospitality, the refreshment committee sliced and served the leftover pies for dessert, once the winners had been announced. Other activities were Kangaroo Courts, which required audience participation, and

trap shooting. One year a monk's dinner (eaten without utensils) was both dinner and entertainment; the entree was spaghetti. Breakfasts were never included in the rallies.

The Unit's bylaws stated that rally fees were to be \$5.00 and the first and last rally of the year must be held in heated buildings. It became harder to find buildings available for rent for the amount the rally fee generated, even though the average attendance was more than 75 trailers.

Then, as camping became more popular, rally attendance increased to an average of 85 trailers, which was more than most fields could accommodate. By 1971, while members sought more amenities, camping regulations were becoming more restrictive. The Unit members planned a rally outside Greensburg that year, but were ordered to move because they had no permit. Only slightly deterred, the Airstreamers caravanned to property owned by one of the members and the rally proceeded. The situation was a foreboding of the future, however, and at another rally the trailers followed a stock show onto a fairgrounds where the only clean-up was a bulldozer that pushed away some of the top layer.

"That was the last straw," said Hubert Miller, a past president of the Unit. Other members agreed, it was time to have their own special place.

Sam Gallaher was president of the Pennsylvania Unit in 1971 and Jonnie McGowan was secretary. Several members including George Morgan, George Shiflet, Frank Shirey, John Vial and Warren (Buck) Wakefield formed a committee to

look for a permanent location. Buck lived in Seward, near Johnstown, and knew about a 42-acre campground called Seward, which was owned by the Sportsmen's Club. The group incorporated as the Seward Campground Association (SCA) in 1972 and elected board members and officers with John Vial as president. The Association prepared to buy the campground, but discovered it was prone to flooding, then learned it was only available to rent. Their search for a suitable location continued. During that same year, in 1972 while George Morgan was president of the Unit, John Vial heard about Penn Wood.

The committee traveled to Limestone to see Penn Wood in the spring of 1973. It was a rainy day and they met in the tool shed to discuss the situation and the price the Repoff family was asking, which was about \$1000 per acre. By the end of June an agreement was struck and the business of fundraising began.

Members of the Campground Association, still chartered as Seward, sold \$100 non-transferable certificates (callable bonds) at 6% yearly interest to raise the money. Certificates rather than stock were sold so that SCA would remain the legal owners. They were sold only to Unit members and were to be paid off on a schedule each year, with all redeemed by 1985. Three members of the original group, George Morgan, Ed McCabe and Sy Bevans, were named to an open-ended trusteeship. They were to protect the investments and arrange for interest payments and certification redemption.

A weekend rally at Penn Wood soon was scheduled "to test the waters," said Charlotte Vial. Nearly 100 trailers attended and realized first-hand the potential of the campground. The weather was so warm that one of the women waded in Big Piney to cool off and test its waters, too.

The certificates sold quickly and on September 24, 1973, the deed was signed. "For a whole year I had a dining room full of papers," said Charlotte Vial about that period in her life.

Six days later the SCA board had its first official meeting at Penn Wood. John Vial was president, Sam Gallaher was vice president and Bob Mager was secretary-treasurer. They established committees for grounds and maintenance, water, sewerage, roads and hospitality. They added an article to their bylaws, specifying requirements for membership. It stated that to be a member of Seward Campground Association a person must be 18 or more years of age, someone in his/her immediate family must own an Airstream, and he/she must also be a member of the Pennsylvania Unit. (Unit members, do not need to be members of SCA, however.)

The changeover in ownership was not smooth. Some members of the Repoff family were dissatisfied with the arrangement and several mobile homes remained on the grounds beyond a reasonable time for them to vacate. It was feared there would be difficulty over the issue, but trouble never developed.

The following spring many SCA and Unit members came to Penn Wood, ready to begin the work of upgrading the park. "That's when they had their first surprise," said Don Rinkes, the Association's fifth president. Although they knew the sewerage system would need upgrading, the members had not realized the extent of the work. After a Board of Health inspection it was determined the park must have a whole new system at an estimated cost of well over \$20,000.

The Association was not prepared for such a large expense, so members began the work themselves while the officers sought a contractor to complete the project. David Wakefield, Buck and Grace's son, donated fiberglass pipe, and the Airstreamers began digging trenches with picks and shovels.

One inexhaustible worker was Bob Free who brought in his heavy earthmoving equipment to grade sites and move excess dirt from the trenches. He deposited much of the dirt between the road and creek, just at the entry into the meadow area. Later the Wakefields chose that location as their permanent site, although it took them a year to prepare it for their Airstream. Bob Free was given a lifetime Association membership in appreciation for all his effort and time.

Other projects they tackled were painting, extensive repairs on the cottage and cleaning out the pond. "We didn't have any money," said Sam Gallaher, "so we supplied the labor. We cut trees down and took the logs to a mill to exchange for finished lumber."

One of their building projects was a spring house described as "walk-in size," built against the hill. It was large enough to hold the water tank and pump, plus space for a repairman to work.

"You never took your overalls off," said Buck Wakefield. "Even the women worked, burning brush and so on." While the men and women worked they used the old connections and the old dump station, which appeared to be bottomless.

In September a contractor was hired to complete the project which was finished a year later with a cost overrun of \$9,000. The weather may have been a delaying factor; it rained so hard the summer of 1975 that someone tacked up yellow plastic sheets to the sides of the pavilion to provide a dry, warm nook in which to congregate.

Because of all that rain Big Piney flooded and took with it both a footbridge and a larger bridge for vehicles to cross over to the lower meadow. Some of the milled lumber from the campground was used to build a new footbridge that was named for its designer, Weldon Smith. Twila Smith and Grace Wakefield set up a toll box at one end, planning to donate the free-will contributions to the campground improvement fund. Before the season ended they had turned over \$3.14, a candy wrapper, a wood chip and a small stone.

For two summers there was discussion about the need to enlarge the pavilion by extending the two sides. John Cosky was named as the architect and Nate (Hap) Palmer, who was carpenter for many of the projects, chaired the building

committee. But the pavilion project was postponed in favor of erecting a propane station along the road into the park.

During all this flurry of building and upgrading, three mobile homes remained on the property. According to the charter at the time, only Airstream trailers could park on the grounds. By the fourth summer the trailers had been removed.

During those first few years there were almost as many setbacks as there were improvements. One factor over which there was no control was the energy crisis of 1973. Sales of recreational vehicles were affected for several seasons which in turn affected the number of permanent sites SCA was able to lease. For a few years it was questionable whether or not the campground would survive.

But, the SCA board and members were determined to make it a success and worked doggedly year after year to improve the park. To create more sites, electricity was extended along the hill above the meadow as far as the pond. Marking and harvesting mature trees to keep the woods thinned became an ongoing process, plus a source of income from the sale of the timber.

Work at the campground finally reached a point where with each step backward, there were two forward. The renovated cottage was rented and by the summer of 1976 the pavilion was extended on both sides and enclosed at the urging of John Vial who was in his fourth year as president. It was then that the enlarged pavilion

was named in his honor. "John was shocked," said Charlotte, "but he was sentimental, too."

One of the largest rallies ever held at the park was in the summer of 1976 and the July 13 *Clarion News* carried a feature on the event. There were 102 Airstreams from such points of origin as Michigan and California, on their way to Washington, D.C. Water and electric lines were run down the middle of the meadow (Section A) where the trailers were parked in a herringbone pattern. A few trailers even parked beside the creek.

To prove to the merchants that Airstreamers spent money locally when they camped, the rally-goers were asked to spend two dollar bills, or to keep their sales receipts. The effort effectively showed how much Airstreamers contribute to a local economy.

That same summer a drainage problem was discovered in the lower meadow (Section C), and the state notified the officers that the campground would need a water filtration system. Board members began talking seriously of devising a master plan.

Until 1978 the campground was opened each spring by John and Charlotte Vial, George and Priscilla Morgan, Ed and Martha McCabe, Sam and Dorothy Gallaher, Buck and Grace Wakefield, Cy and Mary Bevans and Ronald and Rita McDonald. (By then the McDonalds were serving as secretary and treasurer, originally one board position that had grown into two.) It became a tradition for these couples to arrive in early April and attend Easter Sunrise services at Cook's Forest.

"Sometimes it snowed so hard there would be snow on the hymn books," said Dorothy Gallaher of those Easter services. On especially cold nights they let the water drip from the faucets to keep the pipes from freezing. The Vials stayed each year until November 1 to close the park, and frequently saw the first snowfall of the season. Once again, freezing water pipes were a problem.

Some of the members experimented with white deer hunting rallies for a few autumns, patterning them after the antelope rallies in Wyoming. Fred Schultheiss was in charge, but Pennsylvania's season begins late in the year, the Monday after Thanksgiving, and it was too cold to attract enough Airstreaming hunters to support the event.

Each year the number of leased permanent sites increased and these new members contributed their talents to Penn Wood's progress, too. Don and Ida Rinkes had discovered the campground soon after it opened. Don trimmed lower tree limbs, then installed a television antenna system which was connected to many of the trailers. In 1978-79 he built a kitchen for the pavilion in his Cleveland home and delivered it in his station wagon.

Under continuing discussion was the idea of developing more permanent sites by improving and extending the upper level (Section B). It was a big project and the volunteers and money were near exhaustion. Then, nature took a hand.

"It was God's gift to Penn Wood," said Don Rinkes, for a spring tornado in 1978 took out

enough trees that 10 spaces could be cleared and prepared for permanent sites. Some of the fallen trees were wind shaken and unusuable, but many were salvaged for construction use.

Bob Free brought back his earthmoving equipment and did all the grading. Lines were laid from the cottage to supply water to the first two sites and water was piped up the hill for the others. The next year sewers were put into all the hillside locations. Members bought pipes at the lumber yard and carted them back, strapped to the tops of their towing vehicles.

The new sites were farther from the pavilion, but they were larger. It was one of these that the Rinkes' chose, as did another former Unit president, Fred Van Amburg, and his wife, Bea. Fred and Bea, along with the Lee Warthmans and Doyle and Marian Shank, developed a "friendly corner" just across the road from the Van Amburg site.

Ken and Selma Kern found the campground about the time Section B was being cleared. "The first time we drove into the park we didn't know what we were getting into!" Selma said. She saw a large rock formation along the upper level and wanted her permanent campsite there. The dirt from their space was used to fill in two other sites near the creek. As the site next to them was being cleared the rains came and the workers were up to their knees in water.

"You wonder sometimes why people commit themselves to so much work," said Selma. "I guess you have to love it!"

Further along beyond Section B a circle and border of 10 large sites were laid out as Section D. Work progressed on this area through 1980 and when completed was called Kern's Circle, named for Ken.

Until the end of the 1980 season much of Penn Wood's income was used to redeem certificates. This was proving to be an unworkable system and a difference of opinion developed regarding the redemption schedule. Eventually the campground board took charge of the income and designated a greater percentage for improvements and expansion. The trustees continued to arrange for the interest payments and all requests for redemption. Trustee Ed McCabe retired and was replaced by Fred Van Amburg who resigned in 1988 leaving an unfilled position. Sy Bevans also resigned and Doyle Shank replaced him. In 1980-81 a second issue of certificates were offered to Unit members.

As the Association approached the end of its first decade, its members began refining earlier projects. In 1980 Bill Schaeffer took on the project of revising the bylaws. Two years later all the roads were upgraded and that same year the "x-brand" ruling went into effect allowing two-week stays by trailers other than Airstreams, if sponsored by a member. In 1983 the campground bought a new tractor-mower.

The next year the water storage system was upgraded, as well as the sewage system, with an "unlimited capacity." All the water and electric lines were improved in 1983-84. In 1986-87 the

Vial Pavilion was expanded to include additional meeting space, restrooms, a laundry, storage room and a hot air furnace. Cable TV capability was installed and made available to all trailers in 1987.

"We couldn't have done it without a lot of cooperation," said Hubert Miller. Others also noted that through the years Hubert had donated a considerable amount of money toward the pavilion and campground improvement.

Since SCA purchased Penn Wood, members have come forward willingly to be leaders as well as workers. John Vial served as president for five years, from 1973-77, and Fred Schultheiss was elected the second president. Due to illness, he was unable to serve out his second year and it was completed by his vice president, Ken Kern. In 1980 Ben Durst was elected and served two years. Don Rinkes was elected in 1982 and served through the 1988 season. Howard Hayes was elected the sixth president.

Over the years others took on specific jobs. Layne (Bud) Craig became known as "Mr. Plumbing." Joe Emswiler was "Mr. Propane," collecting and refilling bottles for the residents and over-nighters. Don Christy and Fred Schultheiss served as electricians. Clair Hoffman was the auditor, accountant and official camp photographer. Ben Durst was the plant expert. Jim and Betty Allison became part of the new opening and closing committee each season, which was shortened to May through October. Jim, Lou Jarratt and many others helped construct a new footbridge of superior design across Big Piney early in the 1986 season.

The women members have contributed their talents to the campground by serving on board positions, or by creating and adding to an improvement account they call "The Kitchen Fund." They conduct what has become the longest continuing flea market in Clarion County. They make and sell crafts, and are in charge of beautifying the grounds. The glorious array of color that greets visitors and residents during each changing season is a product of that committee. Marian Shank worked as its chairman for several seasons and from 1985 to 1989 Virginia Carter Rinkes was in charge.

Jane Moore first drew attention to the flora and fauna in 1975 when she reported to the board on the many varieties on the property. After she developed a nature trail, artist Charlie Kuhn painted signs to mark the way.

Jane Christy conducted a ceramics class one summer and campers made cups, some of which still hang on a board in the kitchen. Genevieve Hoffman took on the task of librarian. Good fun was still an all important part of camping and Bea Schaeffer O'Pry provided the piano music for all the skits and sing-alongs.

The pond has been the focus of a special kind of interest. Three ducks return each spring to nest and when Penn Wood closes in the fall they move across the creek to Piney Meadows Campground where they are fed. There have been canoes on the pond from time to time and one (described more accurately as a raft), made by Don

and Jane Christy's son Bill, took its maiden voyage on the pond one summer, then quickly sank.

The campground residents began their long association with the Nevin Memorial Church in June 1981. It started with a picnic and the congregation soon nicknamed Penn Wood the "Shiny Trailer Park." The Airstreamers in turn dubbed the church "The Little White Church on the Hill." Since then many Airstreamers have become regular worshippers there as well as at other churches in the area.

In the fall of 1987 the Pennsylvania Unit hosted its first Autumn Leaf Festival Rally at Penn Wood and invited Airstreamers from all the Units in the Wally Byam International Caravan Club to attend.

"Up until 1987 the campground couldn't have handled it," said Don Rinkes. "Doug Pederson saw that the capability was going to be there and he instigated it."

Doug was elected president of the PA Unit in the fall of 1986 and began working immediately on conducting a rally that would coincide with Clarion's annual Autumn Leaf Festival. That year, while Clarion celebrated its 25th fall tradition, Penn Wood started a tradition of its own with 65 units from around the country represented. In the fall of 1988 another annual event was introduced when the campground played host to an Elder Hostel.

The Seward Campground Association boasted a season of 42 leased sites in 1989. The campground offers water, electric and sewer

hook-ups at 100 sites, including 23 located in the lower meadow. Pads may be poured at the expense of each site leasor. The sewerage system is inspected by the EPA who dictates that grass over it must be kept at two inches. The spring water is tested four times each camping season. Penn Wood has an estimated capacity for 300 trailers, yet still maintains its natural beauty and forest-like atmosphere.

On June 23, 1989, that natural beauty was tampered with again in what may be remembered as the "Great Flood."

Sometime near midnight a trailer parked near the creek bank in Piney Meadows Campground broke loose from its connections and sailed downstream, lights still shining. It slammed against the footbridge knocking one end off its foundation. Debris built up behind the trailer and dammed the creek. Nearby, two empty Airstreams were picked up and moved by the rising water and one followed the x-brand down Big Piney. By morning, pieces of the x-brand could be found all along the creek for a mile. The Airstream was intact, beached near the edge of the property.

When Big Piney crested it flooded the pavilion with about two feet of muddy water. But, before camping season was fully underway, the residents had restored order once again to the park.

The summer residents of Penn Wood are like members of a family or a small community. Many see each other during the winter at Airstream parks in Florida. Their common bond is their love

of travel trailer camping, and when death occurs amongst them it is noted and mourned. On the wall near the fireplace in the Vial Pavilion is a memorial plaque which lists the names of those members who are deceased and in whose name memorial funds have been donated for campground improvements. It was begun after the death of John Vial in 1980. In 1990 it also listed Robert Cashdollar, George (Dutch) Moore, Ida B. Rinkes and Warren (Buck) Wakefield.

The people who have populated Penn Wood are like those pioneers of Clarion County who conquered all obstacles to build permanent, prosperous communities. Like most dreams come true, many, many people worked to bring it to reality.

They believed, as John Vial, that "it's no use building something if you don't build it to last."

And so, Penn Wood's story continues. ##