

Lillian McCahan's 1948 Letter Prompts Ohiopyle Conservation

By Marci Lynn McGuinness

In my last column, we ended with the 1922 downfall of the Uniontown Speedway board-track. Since then, I heard from a Smithfield business owner who remembers gathering boards from the dilapidated track with her father in the 1950s. They built a chicken coop. Are there any such buildings still standing?

Due to the track's demise, prohibition, the depression, and World War II, it was decades before Fayette County saw another significant influx of tourists. Ohiopyle, Connellsville, and Uniontown were lively areas in which to live, but they were small town America, not attractions.

The next tourist boom was set in motion by a letter written to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy by Ohiopyle Western Maryland Station Agent, Lillian McCahan in 1948. The old Western Maryland Station is today's Ohiopyle Visitor's Center, next to the bike/hike trail. McCahan knew of the 100 southern plants on Ferncliff Peninsula, and wanted to save the 100-acre natural area. The conservancy did not have the funds to oblige the request at that time.

Three years later, the peninsula and Ohiopyle Hotel were about to be sold to make way for an amusement park. McCahan approached Dr. William Mayer-Oakes, a Carnegie Mellon anthropologist she had met when he visited Ohiopyle. He understood her plight and spoke with M. Graham Netting, director of the Recreation, Conservation, and Park Council. Netting and Charles Lewis of the conservancy approached Edgar Kaufmann, Sr., who owned Kaufmann's Department Store in Pittsburgh. Kaufmann's summer and weekend home at the time was today's Fallingwater. He had commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design the now famous house in the late 1930s.

Kaufmann purchased the Ferncliff Peninsula and the Ohiopyle House Hotel in 1951 for \$40,000 and donated it to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. In 1959, the Mellon Trust Fund awarded the conservancy \$100,000.00 to plan a park along the Youghiogheny River Gorge. At this time, there were hundreds of year-round residents in Ohiopyle. There were many homes along the falls area. Families raised chickens and had large gardens in this mountain village. There were also many stores and businesses along nearby Route 381.

My grandmother and uncles were running the Ohiopyle House and continued until the early sixties when the Conservancy implemented their decisions. Residents along the river from Ram Cat's Laurel Run to Bruner Run, Sugarloaf Mountain, Tharpe Knob, and Meadow Run were uprooted after a long hard fight. When the riverfront property from Meadow Run to the Yough bridge was donated in 1960, they promptly announced their intention to build a parking lot, hiking path, and picnic area at the Ohiopyle Falls. I remember this time well, swimming in the river, picnicking on Ferncliff Peninsula, and playing at the Ohiopyle Hotel.

Fifty years ago, in 1961, Mrs. Albert Fraser Keister sold the conservancy 589 Ohiopyle acres, including Cucumber Run and Falls, and two miles along the Youghiogheny River. The state of Pennsylvania and the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy then agreed that all the Ohiopyle land acquired would be sold to the state at cost, for a park.

At the 1962 dedication of "Keister Park," Maurice Goddard, Secretary of Department of Forests

and Waters, announced the state's plan to open an 18,500 acre full scale park of unmatched natural beauty here. The state allocated \$70 million to acquire land, which upset more uprooted residents. Many homes were condemned.

Their unhappiness was allegedly played out when the conservancy took over the hotel. It burnt to the ground on Friday, Nov. 13, 1963. It had just been remodeled and was about to be the center of the park. The Whipkey family was living and working there. The fire almost cost them their lives but Jim "Till" King heard Mrs. Whipkey's screams and rescued them. The beloved landmark was ashes in an hour due to a drought. The fire seemed to be set on the back porch, but no arrests were ever made.

Ohiopyle has always been home to hunting, fishing, and swimming enthusiasts. My grandmother had many lifelong friends whom she met while running the hotel. They came to Ohiopyle for sport, friendship, and to be along the Youghiogheny River. In 1958, the year the conservancy announced that they would preserve the Youghiogheny River Gorge from logging and mining, Explorer Scout Lance Martin ran the rapids below the Ohiopyle Falls in an Army surplus raft with his troop.

In 1963, 500 people paid Martin, his wife, Lee, and a friend, Karl Kruger, to paddle them down the Yough's white water rapids. This was the birth of what became the busiest commercial white water river in the world. The Youghiogheny in Ohiopyle was also the first commercially run river in America. In 1968, 5,000 were taken on raft trips. Ten years later that figure rose to 95,000 and grew to 150,000 by 1982.

The face of the borough of Ohiopyle was ever changing then. Front Street was removed along the river, and Route 381, rerouted. The hotel sat in a spot that is now filled with dirt. The sharp curve that brought travelers in from Route 381 north, was removed. Gas pumps used to be situated along Route 381 in front of Holt's Store (Falls Market). Shops, roads, and houses were demolished to make way for the Ohiopyle Falls Area as we know it today.

Ohiopyle's development brought about a tourist boom that has led the Laurel Highlands to become a wonderful region for tourists. Outdoor recreation, architectural wonders, historical inns, forts, and southwestern Pennsylvania's interesting culture now draws millions of travelers each year. I remember Lillian McCahan and wonder if she realizes that her letter set forth an energy that changed the fate of Ohiopyle and surrounding communities.

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