Portrait of Braeburn
by Sue Wrbican

Braeburn is a small community on the Allegheny River at Lock and Dam #4, near Tarentum, Pa. It sprang up around 1897 when a small steel mill, coal mine and railroad were built. Although the mine and tracks are gone, the mill remains in operation and so does the town around it. My mother was raised there and I went with her frequently on visits to relatives, most of whom had many stories. The reason for doing this project was to preserve these stories (most not from relatives) because things change fast. What follows are excerpts from interviews conducted in 1990; each text block is something said by a different person that, when put together, forms a roughly chronological, general history of the town through about 1945. Later on, there are poems that I constructed from individual interviews. This was all a collaborative effort, as the participants made choices of their own regarding what they shared. I am grateful to them.

BRAEBURN was a prosperous little town. The mill was good. The mill started in 1897.

A barn began to burn and the horses began to bray, so they called it Braeburn.

When I come to Braeburn, I must of been about six years old 'cause my brother was born in 1901 and I remember him being born. The woman was in the bed watchin' her. That was the duty of the mid-wife, taking care of all pregnant women there. You never knew of a doctor. Nobody knew about doctors. If you was sick, you had to use your own treatments like we used to use. Herbs, you know. Cook all kinds of herbs.

In them days everything was hard. To even save money or anything. And it was just the same way with my mother. She kept boarders and worked hard. Washin' their clothes on a washboard and them heavy underwear they used to wear.

Everybody had a cow or pigs or somethin’ in Braeburn. Used to kill pigs. They’d stab the pig in the gut, in the neck, and catch the blood and then they would fry it. Then they’d eat it. Everybody down there had one in the alleys. There used to be a pasture down by the river. I was swimmin’ down there and a cow got out. A train come and hit it. Knocked it down and it died.

The peddlers would come with things in the big suitcases. Straps on the suitcases and have it on their back. They wold come by train or somehow and they would come with material. Like bedclothes or your men’s clothes, your children’s clothes in that there suitcase. That’s how the women got to buy their stuff because they didn’t go shoppin’ like we go shoppin’. Mostly they were just tied down to their homes, to the work. Keepin’ the boarders and cookin’ for them and doin’ their clothes. And you know, when there were boarders, they’d bring their booze. They’d have a gallon of booze by their beds.

Ben Franklin Coal Company was the name of the mine. When they went on strike that was a really wild town.

Sue Wrbican is a photographer at the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Instructional Resources. A Brackenridge Fellowship from Pitt’s Honors College helped make this project possible.
Back in the '20s when they went on strike they had the scabs. Streets was lined with wives of all the coal miners throwin’ apples and oranges at the coal miners, poor guys.

They had a ball team in the steel mill. If you was a good ball player, they’d give you a good job.

During the Depression it became very difficult because people that had come and bought from you, when they had the money, you couldn’t say “no” to them when they came and needed a loaf of bread or a quart of milk for their children. And they had no money for cold meat to pack lunches for their husbands or maybe their son had gotten a little job of some kind to help keep the family. You couldn’t very well refuse them when they had been your previous customers.

Oh I know, yes, I’m member the postmistress of Braeburn. The county would send her extra flour and extra food and she would distribute it. She would know who needed it. So I remember that. And then I remember they started the school lunches. And they really tried to help people. They gave them flour and some of the other things they needed, canned meat.

After the 1936 flood the steel mill was workin’ pretty good and they started hirin’ a lotta people. They were gettin’ ready for the second world war I guess. They worked pretty good. They made the best steel in the country. Tool steel.

Well the mine still worked after the flood, though too. They cleaned up after the flood and then they would have to truck the coal over to the mill. Well then later on they got gas furnaces, gas in their furnaces and they didn’t need the coal. And the coal mine then closed down later on.

I worked on hammers and in the mills before I moved down here. From DuBois. That made me 40 years old when I came to Braeburn in 1941. So I decided it’s better working conditions and more money that I come down and go back at the old trade that I knewed in my younger days. Hammerman. Forge steel. Take hot steel and forge it into different shapes, sizes and anything.

Braeburn was at one time a big summer resort. There was called Stumpy Beach. And the river was lower. Way lower than it is right now. And they had oak poles stickin’ up and they had a little one room cabin on top. People would rent ’em and they’d get a cabin for the summer and they had boats down below that. That big flood that come through there knocked everything out of there.

I decided if Braeburn was good enough to give me a good livin’, me and my family, it was good enough for me to retire in.

At that time you could go into the mill. It was open to anybody. It wasn’t fenced off. I took my dad’s lunch. Right where my dad was workin’, like at the boiler there. Stood there and watched him. My brothers walked in and watched him. And he’d tell me what he’s doin’, you know, when he was firing into the boilers and that.

They never wore hardhats, those guys. They didn’t know what hardhats were. They had these old cotton workcaps on. Heavy clothes because of the sparks and stuff. But no safety clothing because they didn’t know what safety clothing was.

I watched Yazo work on the hammer. John was on the hammer workin’. I’d stand there and watch him. If you wanted to do something in the evening, you could go over there and watch what they were doin’. Try to get into a mill now, huh?

In those days you did. It was like, “Oh, this is for my dad.” They knew who you were. “Okay, he’s over there.” They’d be hollerin’ “cause it made so much noise. And then Dad would stop whenever he was able to stop and show you where to put the buck- et. And then you’d leave. I only had to do that a couple times. Oh, maybe it was because he was workin’ overtime. During the war, that’s it. They had to work an awful lot of overtime. Those mills were day and night during the war. That’s what it was. I would have to take Dad’s supper down to him. Yeah, because they never even left the place. They just stayed there and worked double shifts. It was nothin’ for them to work double shifts.

My father used to come home for lunch ’cause he was close to the mill. He’d be growlin’ the wind’s blowin’ the wrong direction. It was blowin’ down over the hill and across the river. They had these coal fired furnaces with a big smoke stack and there was a damper on the top. The wind was causing a down-draft. The furnace wasn’t gettin’ hot enough. And you had a hard time getting the steel hot enough. He knew what he wanted. If there was a up-draft, the furnace was drawing real good. He said when it’s coming from Chicago, that meant from across the river. Then he knew right away.
Far left: Sunday picnics early this century were popular among friends and family from the mill and mine. The mill (above c. 1920) was once open to just about anyone who wished to stop by, but the CCX Company plant in Braeburn now has tight security.
THE Welsh family run the hotel. In the early years of Braeburn the hotel was the only place in town where you could use a phone. Mr. and Mrs. Welsh and their daughter run the place. Elizabeth was their daughter. They were so nice about letting people come in and use the phone anytime.

They had a bar in there. Then they had rooms upstairs. I think only once I was in there. All I know they had the room upstairs and they said they took the women upstairs. At that time I didn’t know what they were talkin’ about. I didn’t know why they took women upstairs. What for? What do I know?

The hotel? Well I was never upstairs. I was only in a couple rooms like the one where the bar was. I was in there a few times and then over on the other end of the building, like where you’d go in, you call it a vestibule. I know the place was kept clean. The Welshes were a good family and they kept it clean. And they had good food. So it was a good place to stay.

Oh yeah, I went in there. Too many guys in there. They’d start a fight with you. I didn’t like it in there.

That’s where they’d have their activities, like I said. Spend their times in the hotel, this Braeburn Hotel, and in the pool room, but mostly, they were the older folk that would be for the hotel. Drinking, you know. Some o’ them would get so drunk that they couldn’t make it home. Wherever they’d fall over in the ditch or somewhere, well, they’d just lay there. And when the families seen it was gettin’ late they went after them. A lot of times even the kids were sent after [them]. They’d take a wheelbarrow and go down and get their father and bring him home.

I’d say it was just nice. Comfortable. And it was right across the tracks from the Braeburn Steel so handy for the fellows that lived there.

I remember one incident. There was an old fella lived out the road and he liked his drinkin’ pretty good. He come in one night pretty well loaded when he got here and rode his horse right into the bar.

There was quite a number of men that lived there. Ike Pugh was one of the most memorable ones. Well, he liked his “tea” pretty good and I ‘member him one time, there was a “doll” come to town and they got pretty chummy so they decided to get married. So he rented a little house down the road here on the hill and one night things didn’t go too good with ’em. Ike started shootin’ at her. He was gonna eliminate her. She come runnin’ to our house, just panic stricken, you know. She was tryin’ to save her hide and she left town pretty quick.

Before the flood they were goin’ pretty strong then. They were goin’ very good. They had a lot of boarders. People that stayed there then they would eat at the hotel, you know, they had a room upstairs. And some of the millworkers would come over to the hotel and get their meal at noontime.

In the pool room they used to shoot pool. They’d play people for money. You’d get two pills. Say you got a [pill
numbered] 4 and 5. Well, you keep one and you throw one in for a break when you shoot. Say you have a 1 and a 15. You wanna keep the 1 and you wanna shoot a 15. So I be no good. That's what I figure, 'cause you gotta go rotation as you'd shoot. You shake 'em pills out. You'd get two pills and you'd keep one and shoot whatever you had. There's lotsa gamblin' there. Lotta people in there. They had five in there once. And we used to play cards in the hotel in there. Gamble. You're not allowed to gamble. They'd do it anyhow. The guys from the dairy farm used to come down. They thought they was cowboys. They tried to take a horse in there. In the pool room and the hotel. Either one. But they couldn't do it. A fella named Shorty and the other was Joe I think. I used to go up the dairy farm and shoot pool. They had a pool table up there and I used to go up there with Bill Hawk. We's goin' to school then. I'd go home and mother wanted to know where I was. I told her, “Ridin' horse up the dairy farm!” Didn't have no automobile!

You could buy your meal in there. People used to work in the mill, they'd come over there and eat. Big dining room. Elizabeth used to cook. In half of the hotel they had little booths. You know, you could sit in there. You'd want a drink and then they'd bring you one over from the bar.

Oh, that’s my second home. That was second home for everybody that worked in the hammer shop or worked in the mill. You could find the biggest share of the guys stop at the hotel on the road home to have two or three beers and come home. It was just like they show in movies now. A hotel. We didn’t have them there rowdies. We didn’t have them fights and so on. We jis set. Set around and talked about work and talked about what we were gonna do tonight and talk about one thing and another and say about people in the little town here. Pass time away, about a half or three-quarters before we go home for our supper. Never stop on the road goin’ to work. But when it was time, to go home, we always stopped and had a few beers and talked things over. Talk about people.

Say Friday night. Pay day night. We’d stay out 'til pretty late hours at night. Jist listen to them people playin' old-time music and stuff and singin’. Yah, git out there and hop around a while. It was good because it was mostly people you got acquainted with and meet there every time they'd come down over the hill. They go down there and get the old pan out and they had string music.

Well then, the hotel, it stayed after the flood. It withstood all that pressure. But they didn't do anything, though, after the flood. The flood actually ruined the building because they didn't bother with it after that. There was less need for it because the men that worked in the mill, most of 'em came in cars. Most of 'em drove. And they would get rides with other people too. Then there was a bus. The bus would come whenever they'd change shifts. A New Kensington bus. It would take 'em back to New Kensington. The hotel sit there for many years, then I think it was torn down.
The Sokol Slets
And then the Sokol Slets were nice when we had 'em down there.
That was every year we had a Sokol Slet.
And it would be different groups comin' in.
Everywhere. Cleveland, Detroit.
That would always be in June. I think the last Sunday in June.
Whenever they would start the Slet they would have the main march.
They would line up everybody from different towns that came in.
And they would have their own banner. In front
they'd have the little girls carrying them
and the rest would be marching.
And Cleveland would be playin' a march.
It wasn't like watchin' the Olympics when they “march” in.
They just sort of stroll in.
You really had to march. I mean left, right. Left, right. You marched.
We practiced that. We had to learn them in Slovak. I couldn't speak
Slovak. I didn't even know what they were talkin' about.

Each group had their own kind of drill they wanted to do.
To show what you could do.
The hand drills. They were to music and they weren't like what you
see in the Olympics today. Today when they say floor exercises
they're doing tumbling and all these crazy things. Everybody
would be doing it together and you'd have the whole field covered.
Everybody was doing the same thing at the same time.
What we learned in New Kensington, they had to do in McKeesport.
They had to learn in Leechburg, Tarentum, everywhere.
And then we got together about a month before our big Slet
and we would go and we’d get together and we’d have to do it.

And then you never had the Slet without the Deseda.
That was the national Slovak dance.
It was the same thing every time.
It was always the same dance, the same music.
It was considered a mark of honor that you got to do the Deseda.
These guys would come out struttin’. A thousand petticoats.
I still have my outfit.
Well, the Sokols, that was a big part of our life.
That was my social life. I never went anywhere 'til I met Johnny.
Thank God for the Sokol Camp. That’s how I used to get out.
— Olga Pozel and Annabell Jariabka Wrbican
**WWII**

They were both the same size
Makin’ the same pay
They got to arguing between themselves
accusing one another
of not doing his work
and charging the furnace
There I’m standing with a peel
ready to charge and nothing’s happening
So I got mad
Put the peel down
and grabbed ‘em by the back of the neck
and banged their heads together
I says “Now either you get to work
or get outta here.”
They looked at each other
and picked up their bars
and start chargin’.
Now, they say that’s coercion
or whatever it is
But I just couldn’t have patience
after all,
the war was on
I was happy I was here
rather than being shot at.
— Andy Piecka

*Above left: Emil Hrivnak and Olga Pozel,*
and behind them: Jenny Hrivnak, left, and
Annabell Wrbican. That’s Bea and Andy
Piecka, *above right.* The Braeburn Sokol, c.
1938. The “Slet” was an annual competi-
tion between sokols (gymnastic organiza-
tions with roots in southern Europe) from
different cities.
**No Radios**

We had lanterns on the wall and we had to clean them globes so they'd be clean for the night to show us the bright light in the house. And then for pastime there was no radios. There was no television. So we kept ducks. The feathers mothers kept. We used to have a long table in the kitchen along the wall and benches. Every night we would tear feathers to make feather beds and cushions, mostly for feather beds because with the coal stoves that heat wouldn't go all through the house, like upstairs 'n 'at. In one room you’d have heat, in the other you wouldn’t. You would be cold. Many times my dad would sleep in the other room and he would always wake us up and say, “Get and fire the stove. I’m cold.”

**We Got Along**

I made 35 dollars a month at Braeburn Post Office. And I noticed if I told my family I was going to get married they’d talk me out of it. See? So I didn’t take no chances. When we got married things were very cheap. A&P coffee was 13 cents a pound. I don’t think we used coffee then, but maybe we did. Other things were very reasonable. For five dollars you could get a whole rumble seat. We had a rumble seat in our first car. We could get the whole rumble seat full of groceries for five dollars.

**Oh Boy!**

I had an uncle, my mother’s uncle. He rode all over hoppin’ trains. You know, go to Florida or wherever. He’d jump on a train, go to Florida, come back here. His dad lived in Florida. I 'member the cinders in his eyes. He could hardly see, blood and everything else from them old coal trains. Oh boy!
Fire Truck Poem
They needed somebody to pick the truck out.
I seed these pictures
and visualized how good that would look
with a hood and a cap
like it was on trucks in them days.
Trucks with round faces.

They said,
"Gus, you look around
tell the dealers
we're gonna buy a chassis
to make a fire truck."

Well, it happened to be
I was down at Johnson's
and I talked to Johnson.
And Johnson says:
"It must be a Studebaker for Braeburn.
Tell the boys up there."

I come home and told the boys.
Told them how much it was gonna cost.
They got themselves organized
and they decided it would be
a Studebaker.

We took it up to Elmira, New York.
They put the pumps on for us
and whatever we needed on there.
It looked a beautiful thing
with hoses and stuff.

Lots seemed to be comin' along.
I took my pension in '65.
They had to get a bigger better truck.
They had this one up for sale
so I said,
"I'll give youns that lot I got out here
'side the fire hall for the truck."

They gave me the truck
and I gave them the lot.

I'm still plannin' to keep the old truck
over there
with the coal dust and sparrows.
It'll stay there as long as I'm here.
Such a nice little piece of equipment,
and in its day
one of the best in the valley.
I just thought I'd git it
and keep it like it's a relic
you know.
Christmas
Yeah, these Slovaks around Christmas used to go house to house every night and play cards
Play for walnuts
They didn’t play for money
Used to go around and sing
They don’t do that no more
— Emil Hrivnak
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