

KENNYWOOD, VERONA STYLE

Winter's gone, the first days of the spring brought only two thoughts to us young boys in the late 1940's; baseball and Kennywood Park. As winter said it's last good byes, we jumped on the bright yellow streams of the beaconing sun. Ah baseball, how we loved that game, morning to dark at Cribbs Field. No planning necessary, just show up at the field on Second Street. There was always a game ready to be played. The summer was always magical when you're 9 – 10 - 11 years. But, as June came around, our focus changed to the Verona Oakmont Kennywood Picnic for the two-whole communities. Recently, I saw a placard announcing the picnic, but the towns were reversed on the placard. I don't know when this came about. Even the Marque at Kennywood states "Verona-Oakmont Community Picnic".

As June entered the big picture, our energy and focus turned to making and saving money to buy Kennywood tickets. We would search for discarded old soda pop bottles which had deposits on them; two cents for small bottles and five cents for the big quart bottles. The bottles were all glass. We would take them to the local corner grocery store for a cash reimbursement.

We had to buy tickets in downtown Verona, they were being sold in front of the bank and in front of the A&P grocery store. In the 40's there was no admission to get in. The rides needed tickets to let you on, and so we would buy the tickets at a discount price at home and use them to ride any of the rides. The picnic, the oldest community picnic at Kennywood Park was and is held on the second Wednesday in July. The night before was an exciting time. The family, mostly my mother and my aunts would be cooking all kinds of food. I can remember, rice balls, egg-battered zucchini slices, potato salad, fried chicken, peppers and potatoes in sauce. That was just the beginning, watermelons, canteloupes, peaches and plums. We would bring our own drinks. It seems now that this was an excessive amount of food, but at that time, this was normal behavior.

The two boroughs had set up transportation to Kennywood Park by trains, all free, all gratis. The train would originate in Oakmont and then proceed to Verona for a 10 AM pick-up at the train station. There were enough passenger cars to accommodate all picnic goers. One general thought – please don't rain!

The morning of the picnic was a movement of magnanimous proportions. All the food that was prepared and on the morning of that July, the food was loaded into bushel baskets and smaller baskets. It was the job of my cousins and me to transport the baskets down the hill to the train station; at least three bushels and three baskets, cousins, friends, and aunts on this odyssey. The ride to Kennwood Park was about 50 minutes. The train traversed through parts of Pittsburgh that most of us were not familiar with. It was scary to see some of these slums and

the kids waving at us. I'm sure their salutations were all too friendly. After a long, smoky and sooty ride, we arrived at Kennywood Park station at the bottom of the Park at the rail station. It was located on the Monongahela River. We had to hike up a serpentine foot path for about 100 yards. Half way up there were two or three houses just sitting on the side of the hill. My thought was, how lucky for those kids, who lived so close to Kennywood Park.

As we disembarked the train, the next action was to see who could get to the top first. We had all the bushels to carry up and the race was on. Sometimes we were first, but not all of the time. Other families beat us up, but they carried a smaller amount of food, a lighter task. Our goal was to get a section in the Old Dutch Pavilion. My mother always wanted this particular pavilion because it was well-shaded and besides it also had a small open flame gas burner and water in a back room so we could cook hot dogs.

The Park would open at 11AM. We were there and we were ready. With a hand-full of tickets and the energy of a pack of hungry wolves, we were in position to conquer all the menacing roller coasters. One of the traditions of that time was for the young teenagers to dress in the same shirts, especially the ones who were dating each other. Some would bring dress clothes for the evening. Kennywood Park had a large dance hall with big name bands and in the evening when the multi-colored lights were lit, the dance floor would be jammed with the pretty young girls of Verona and Oakmont. At that time in my life, I would think, why would anyone want to go to Kennywood Park and dance? There was also a large swimming pool, but since Oakmont had the Willows Pool, not many were there to swim.

Other rides consisted of the silver rockets that circled the lagoon. The lagoon had rowboats for rental, a very popular area. In the middle of this body of water, was a stage and at 4:30 and 8:30 PM a circus act was features. Other rides and attractions were the Penny Arcade, Laugh in the Dark, Kiddieland, the three roller coasters, the Racers, Jack Rabbit and the Pippin, the Old Mill which the couples would steal a kiss or two as it entered the dark covered stream, Noah's Ark, a great attraction, the famous merry-go-round, the whip and the ever popular turtle. The train around the park was popular with the older ones. The auto cars were an institution that all ages could ride. And, I remember the games, throwing balls and snagging fish to win some meager little pin. In the Penny Arcade you could win autographed pictures of the movie stars of the day. We would go non-stop, hardly stopping to eat all the delicious food we had carried up that hill. When we did stop to eat at the pavilion, our friends always came with us, knowing darn well they would get some great food. My mother and my aunts would almost encourage them to come to the table. There was also a large cafeteria, where the rich families ate. We had to suffer and eat all the home-cooked food. Guess who ate better and was more satisfied.

Most of the time, I remember that the weather was hot and bright and at night when the rides were all lit up, the place turned into a magical kingdom. The young women would change to dresses and young men changed to different shirts to head to Dance Land; an extra charge to get in. Most of the dance floor sides were covered, but in some parts, it was open and we could see in through the fencing and lattice wood.

At night the screams of the roller coaster patrons seemed louder, the park seemed busier and more crowded. Time was closing in, the park closed at 11PM and at 10PM the last return train was scheduled to leave. The first one left at 8PM. Time was running out and a frantic search to find a short line to ride the last coaster. Now it was time to pack up and head down the hill to the train station. A lighter load for our arms, but in our minds new memories filled thoughts. The train ride was all excitement with stories being told of the daredevil deeds we performed and thought we did. These memories would carry us thru the year until next July.

When the train arrived at the Verona train station, most of the men and fathers were waiting there with their autos to take us up the hill to our homes. I'm sure they had enjoyed their evenings as much as we did. Quiet for them and while waiting by the station most of the men were in Festa's Beer Room to while away the time.

Home again and in bed, but the thrill remained and it was difficult to sleep, the noises of Kennywood Park still present in our mind. There was no let down, the excitement continued until the dreams won over the excitement.

This narration is a collection of the perceptive memories of Frank Santucci, 2014