

**Athenaeum Paper**

**06 April 2023**

**THE SOUTH FORK FISHING AND HUNTING CLUB**

*James B. Coursey*

*Athenaeum Copy.*

Athenaeum Paper  
06 April 2023

## **THE SOUTH FORK FISHING AND HUNTING CLUB**

Since the beginning of recorded time, those at the top of the heap have strived to set themselves apart from the rest. What better way to accomplish this than to build grand palaces or retreats, or just plain homes away from home for themselves.

It is not uncommon for the super-rich to have more than one of these get away paradises - and in a number of recognizable cases FAR too many. In 2008 Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain ... (owing to having a very rich wife) ... couldn't remember when asked just how many homes he DID have - was it 9 or 11?

Notable examples of these private pleasure palaces are 2nd Century Roman emperor Hadrian's Villa near present day Tivoli. More modern examples include William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon Castle in California, the Vanderbilt's Biltmore House near Asheville, NC and Marjorie Merriweather Post's Mar A Lago in Palm Beach Florida - all too famous NOW, for all the wrong reasons.

The next progression is to the enclaves of the fortunate few, such as

**Asheville North Carolina's Biltmore Forest (where the Vanderbilt's Biltmore House is located), Newport Rhode Island, Cape May, New Jersey and Tuxedo Park, New York. There are countless others. One stands out among all the rest, not because it was in any way grand (it was anything but), ostentatious or even luxurious, but because of the cataclysmic event that occurred there on the 31st of May 1889.**

**So, for a short while - as the song says - let's turn back the clock and bring back yesterday - in the state of Pennsylvania. In 1681, King Charles II of England granted to William Penn the Province of Pennsylvania - to settle a debt owed to his father - for the sum of 16,000 (pounds). Fast forward 100 years to 1780 and Pennsylvania passed a law providing for the gradual abolition of slavery - being the second state in the USA to do so, after Vermont. Democrat James Buchanan - the last pre Civil War president (from Lancaster PA) - in common with many other residents of the state - thought that the government should not interfere with the institution of slavery. Buchanan's position on slavery helped propel one of America's most lack-luster Presidents into the White House.**

By mid 19th century, the Pennsylvania Railroad had become one of the largest in the entire world. Today we follow its progress, looking at the development between Philadelphia and Pittsburg, PA, but more specifically between Altoona and Pittsburg - and finally between Altoona and Johnstown. Crossing this treacherous - and previously impenetrable - mountain divide had been accomplished mostly on foot - prior to the 1830's - as this landscape of the Allegheny Mountains is the most rugged in all of Pennsylvania. Finding a viable way to cross this deep chasm that separated the state became a matter of economic and political survival.

In the 1840's British novelist Charles Dickens crossed the state of PA in what was at the time the standard combination of canal, railroad and stagecoach. In his sarcastic - if often illuminating - travelogue on this experience, he somehow failed to be impressed by the extraordinary engineering accomplishment which reshaped the economic destiny of Pennsylvania - the Portage Railroad. One terminus of the Portage Railroad, and the original hotel on the site is still extant - and a tourist attraction - operated by the National Park Service.

**The Portage Railroad operated from 1834 until 1854 - a twenty year span - and for the first time provided a direct route between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The Portage operated between Holidaysburg and Johnstown (going west) and was both a freight and passenger service, even hauling boats and barges over the divide. It featured the first railroad tunnel in the United states, and rose to a maximum height of 1,172 feet - raising and lowering its passengers and cargo with steam engines and ropes as thick as a man's leg.**

**The Portage Railroad only became obsolete after the railroads - by mid century - had developed and constructed bridges that would span the divides that had been such an impediment to the country's westward expansion. The first of these suspension bridge<sup>s</sup> - in Pittsburgh - was designed by German born John Augustus Roebling, who would later provide the design for the Brooklyn Bridge.**

**During its heyday, the canal from Johnstown west was troubled by water shortages nearly every summer. Operations were interrupted. The obvious solution was to put a dam high up in the mountains to supply enough water to keep the basin working and the canals open.**

Work began on the Western Reservoir above the town of South Fork in 1838, necessitating the clearing of some 400 acres of timber by the state.

According to studies made by civil engineering experts years later, they did a competent job. In 1842 work on the dam was halted because the states finances were in such bad shape.

This earth dam construction followed methods accepted for thousands of years, which have proven to be a perfectly fine way to hold back water. And, they were the most economical. But, since earth is the basic raw material, it is also highly susceptible to erosion. It is absolutely essential, therefore, that any earthen dam - no matter how thick - be engineered so that water never goes over the top and that no internal seepage develops.

If properly built and maintained, earthen dams can safely and **INDEFINITELY** contain tremendous bodies of water. There has never been **ANY** question that the original dam was properly built.

The spillway was not cut through the dam itself, but more thoughtfully through the rock of the hillside to which the eastern end of

the dam was "anchored". It was 931 feet wide. In cross section the depth of the dam at the top was about 22 feet and at the bottom 270 feet. It was 72 feet high.

As the dam grew higher it was coated, or riprapped, on the outer face with rocks (on both sides) - some so huge that it took three teams of horses to move them into place.

At the center of the base were five cast iron pipes, each two feet in diameter, set in a stone culvert. They were designed to release water down to South Fork, where it would flow on to the Johnstown basin by way of the Little Conemaugh River. The pipes were controlled from a wooden tower at the dam.

In 1852, the dam was at last completed, the sluice pipes closed and the lake began to fill. By the end of August, the water level inside the dam was at 40 feet, or 2/3 full.

In 1852, at the very same time that the dam was finished, J. Edgar Thomson, chief engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad, was making rapid progress with his daring INCLINED rail route over the mountains, which included what was to become the famous Horseshoe

Curve. This engineering feat would replace the Portage Railroad. On December the 10th in 1872, six months after the South Fork Dam had been completed, a steam engine made the first run from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. The canal was swiftly put out of business <sup>AS</sup> and the Pennsylvania Railroad was fast becoming the biggest and most powerful single force in the state.

And so, the effect of the PA Railroad's progress on the state's beloved canal system was immediate and disastrous. The PA Legislature in 1854 voted to put the Main Line Canal System up for sale for \$10,000,000.00. This included the Main Line, the Portage Railroad and the South Fork Dam. Predictably, there were no takers, and three years later the PA RR dipped into their heavy pockets and ended up buying it for \$7,500,000.00 - mainly to gain control of the right of ways. Having no use for the dam, it simply sat there - unmaintained in the woods for 22 years - from 1857 until 1879 - when the men who would establish the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club began to take interest.

During this time, the first portent of things to come surfaced in 1862, during the Civil War - when Union General McClellan was making



his first unsuccessful attempt to take Richmond. There was a heavy rainstorm in Pennsylvania, and some of the smaller creeks and rivers were overflowing their banks.

On the 2nd of June in 1862, the Johnstown Tribune ran the first ever article speculating on what might happen if the South Fork Dam ever let go. Just eight days later on the 10th of June, the dam broke for the first time. The break was caused by a defect in the foundation near the stone culvert. This defect - it should be noted - was Man MADE, not a defect in design. Residents had been stealing lead from the pipe joints during the years that the dam had been abandoned, resulting in the serious leaks.

There was much alarm in the valley, but in fact the break caused little damage for a couple of reasons, the first of which was that the lake was less than half full. The watchman at the dam - just before the break - had opened the sluice gates and released much of the built up pressure. Shortly after this event, the wooden tower controlling the discharge pipes caught fire and burned to the ground. It was never replaced.

In 1875, Congressman John Reilly bought the South Fork Dam for

\$2,500, removed the cast iron drainage pipes **and** and sold them for scrap. From this day forward, the South Fork Dam was like a bathtub whose drain had been plugged, leaving the only way for water to escape being to go over the top.

Four years later, in 1879, Reilly sold the dam to Benjamin Ruff, who bought it in the name of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. It is important to note here that when acquired by the Club, the dam was already (to use a phrase frequently applied to women of questionable morals) **DAMAGED GOODS**.

Ruff made repairs to the breach during the 1862 flood on the cheap - with whatever materials were at hand, such as brush, hay and manure. These materials were much looser than the original clay and subject to settling. These slipshod repairs washed away several times, and each time the repairs were again undertaken with substandard materials. - until such time as a repair finally held. In later years, these inappropriate repairs would cause the center of the dam to sag - although the dip was not apparent to the naked eye.

On the 14th of October in 1879 The Johnstown Tribune featured an

item that suggested that a resort was to be built by a Western Game and Fish Association. No names were mentioned, nor was the actual name of the Club.

The unmentioned names included Andrew Carnegie and his partner Henry Phipps, Jr., Andrew Mellon, Philander Knox, John George Alexander Leishman and Henry Clay Frick. The South Fork Dam might as well have been called the Pittsburg Boys' Club - since it most definitely was. Daniel Johnson Morrell (from the Cambria Iron Works of Johnston) was allowed through the doors as a member - ostensibly to monitor the condition of the dam. It is an understatement to mention and maintain that he DID NOT earn his keep, although he tried.

The purpose of this private and (as it turned out) EXCLUSIVE club was to afford its privileged members the opportunity to get away from the noise, heat and dirt of Pittsburg - the subtle emphasis here probably being dirt, for at the time and until the late 20th century (when it was finally cleaned up) Pittsburg was a very dirty city indeed. The above mentioned members took great pains to keep the name of their

club from receiving any kind of public notice. After the flood, this would be interpreted as evidence that they had no desire for anyone to come looking into their business. Nor in fact did they! The Club was exclusively for use of its members, and locals were not allowed on the grounds, nor anywhere near them. This rule was strictly enforced.

Much to the Club's management's irritation , however, the lake DID provide some excellent sport for local anglers. Slipping onto the property in the early morning or at sundown was mere childsplay for the area residents. The well stocked lake and streams continued to provide lots of meals in the neighborhood from the time the dam was first restored.

The lake created by the dam was called Lake Conemaugh. ON IT, the club provided two steam yachts, sailboats and canoes - and a boathouse to store them. There was a 47 room Clubhouse with a dining room that would seat 150. There were initially 16 "cottages", which were actually comfortable two and three story houses. As previously mentioned, there was nothing ostentatious about the South fork Fishing and Hunting Club - it was just a relaxing getaway location for wealthy

**Pittsburgh captains of industry and their families.**

**Just before the first full season at the South Fork got underway in 1881, the dam threw a terrific scare into the people of the valley. On the morning of June 10th, during a flash flood in Johnstown, a rumor spread that the dam was about to break. This was the first spring in years that there was a headwater of any size behind this mammoth earthen embankment. The Cambria Iron Works sent two of its men to the dam to make an inspection. The report that the dam was safe made the evening paper. The fact that they'd found water only two feet from the breast of the dam did not seem to disturb the inspectors in the least - nor the editors of the Tribune.**

**Relations with abutting property owners had never been pleasant and lawsuits were occasionally threatened. Any love lost between club managers and the local populace didn't bother Club members at all, but it did lead to widespread resentment in the area around the lake - that would come back to haunt clubmen in the not too distant future.**

**For eight seasons - between 1881 and 1889 - the South Fork Fishing**

and Hunting Club operated with an "entente cordiale" that was none too "cordiale" - more of a Mexican standoff. But, as with many marriages, business partnerships and friendships, life went on apace.

On Memorial Day, the 30th of May 1889, the season at the Club wasn't scheduled to begin for several weeks ~~for several weeks~~, and there were only some half dozen members in residence. The nicely painted buildings, neat lawns and well tended flower beds, however, announced that all was ready for the season to begin.

But, a gathering storm that had started out in Kansas and Nebraska on the 28th of May headed east TO and THROUGH Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. Trains were delayed, roads washed out and a number of people killed. The U. S. Signal Service issued notices that the Middle Atlantic states were in for severe local storms. When the storm struck Pennsylvania, it was the worst downpour that had EVER been recorded for that section of the country. It was - in fact - the most extensive rainfall of the century, recording between six and ten inches of rain in a twenty four hour period. At the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club 7 inches of rain

were collected.

On Thursday the 30th of May - Memorial Day - in the valley city of Johnstown, it had been a typical yearly celebration. Stores were closed until 6:00 pm, school had been let out and men were off from the mills. The whole town turned out, and visitors were on every corner. They had arrived by train from Somerset, Altoona and other neighboring areas.

The main attraction, as usual was the Memorial Day Parade, which started late - as usual - around 2:30 pm. And then in the afternoon the rains began. After a respite in late afternoon, about 9:00 pm the rains began again, gently at first, but then it started pouring - and didn't stop.

Quite used to Spring time flooding, the residents in this industrial valley city of Johnstown at first were not overly concerned as the basements in the lower part of town started flooding. When the rivers rose and some of the streets were knee deep in water, there was still no panic. They had seen it all before.

Unknown to the inhabitants of the area was just how serious this particular rainfall was. During the evening and into the wee hours of Thursday night the 30th of May and into the early hours of Friday

morning, major erosion had occurred - even in the woods, and bridges had been washed out. The riverbanks were already overflowing. Rivers were rising an an astounding one foot per hour. Already a threatening yellow - brown color, the waters were full of logs and big pieces of lumber and traveling downstream at an alarming pace. On the morning of the 31st, when the 7:00 am shift arrived at the Cambria mills, the men were told to go home and look after their families. All of this took p<sup>s</sup>place hour before the dam broke.

Meanwhile up at the dam, John Parke awoke in his room at the clubhouse to witness a white mist that had settled over the trees and the water. Inspecting the water level at the dam, he noticed that it appeared to have risen to what he calculated to be two feet or more overnight. Normally the water level was between four to six feet below the crest of the dam. Now it was no more than to two to three feet below the crest. The water in fact was rising about an inch every ten minutes.

At the dam, about 50 people were gathered, and were being supervised by Elias J. Unger, who had recently been named the Club's President and Manager. Workers were trying - without success - to



throw up a small ridge of earth to heighten the dam at its center. At the west end of the dam men were trying to cut a new spillway through the tough shale of the hillside - again without any marked success.

Although I've never seen anything about it in print, at the flood museum in Johnstown, there is an early design drawing of the dam which shows TWO spillways, one at either end. Obviously the second one was never built, and the first was now covered in wire mesh (to keep fish in the lake). After much procrastination and delay, a last ditch efforts to remove the wire mesh at this stage of the game proved unsuccessful, as too much brush and debris was already solidly piled up against it. The die was cast.

The telephone line from the clubhouse to South Fork was used only during the season, and had not yet been put in working order. By the time a messenger had been sent to the nearest communication point and the first word relayed to Johnstown, it was 2:45 pm. At 3:15 the Central Telephone Office called the Tribune up to say that it had been informed by Agent Deckert, of the PA RR Freight Station that the dam was in danger of breaking. But, by the time this message was received, more

than 20 million tons (or 3 billion 600 million gallons) of water were on their 15 mile journey from South Fork down to Johnstown, obliterating everything in its path, including entire towns. The dam had burst at 3:10 pm.

When the dam let go, the lake seemed to leap into the valley like a living thing, one eyewitness reported. The worst dam break in American history was responsible at that time for the largest number of recorded deaths in <sup>THE US</sup> America (2,209 in number), until the Galveston hurricane of 1900 - which claimed between 6,000 and 8,000 lives. Johnstown was virtually obliterated. 1,600 homes were gone and there were \$17,000,000.00 in property damages. Today that figure would translate to \$514,266,170.00.

The stone railroad bridge in Johnstown survived the flood, but was itself the catalyst for many flood related deaths. Debris piled against the bridge brought with it many living souls who were clinging onto wood, roofs, mattresses or anything that would float. Lit stoves floating down among the debris set the wood on fire, and it burned for days - taking <sup>A FUNERAL PYRE</sup> with it many people who could not be extricated from the conflagration.

Many rescuers had to stand by and watch those they could not get close enough to save, perish before their eyes.

Clara Barton, in 1881, the very year that the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club opened for business, succeeded in establishing the American Branch of the International Red Cross and HAD from that moment on been present at floods and famines far and wide. None of these previous challenges had, however, come anywhere near to the ones faced when she came to Johnstown - a real female Jim Dandy To The Rescue. Her swiftly erected tents were soon serving as the best organized and cleanest hospitals in town. <sup>S</sup> Soon six Red Cross Hotels two stories high were subsequently erected from salvaged materials, with hot and cold running water, kitchens and a laundry.

Other help came in great numbers from various sources, both commercial and private, along with sightseers, pilferers and outright crooks. Members of the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club also contributed to the relief effort. Contributions poured in from abroad as well. And Clara Barton stayed for five months, never once leaving the scene, even for a day.

There were huge cries of outrage in papers all over the country, blaming the callous rich for endangering the lives of thousands in the Johnstown area and killing over two thousand. It was useless to sue the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club, because they had virtually no assets. At that time in history the very wealthy were much better insulated from any kind of attack, let alone viable lawsuits. None of the members were personally sued.

So where SHOULD the needle of blame point? Ultimately, of course, it points to the owners of the dam, The South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club. But, realistically, how many members really knew how precariously perched the dam was - even if THEY and their representatives certainly SHOULD have known? Had it not been inspected periodically over the years and given a clean bill of health? Yes it had, but - for the most part - not by licensed professionals:

One glaring exception was the inspection commissioned by Manager Daniel J. Morrell - In 1880 - the year after the Club acquired the property and the year before it opened. In November of 1880 Morrell asked John Fulton, who was an engineer at the Cambria Iron

**Works, to inspect the dam. Fulton told Morrell that the two serious elements of danger at the dam were (1) the lack of drainage pipes to control the water level and (2) the insubstantial repairs (by Ruff) leaving a large leak which seems to be cutting into the embankment.**

**Other than this one occasion, the dam had been inspected by various owners' representatives, - men who were NOT engineers and not competent to make the evaluations. But even the most casual of observers and the sloppiest of investigators should have noticed this laundry list of the obvious.**

- In 1862, during the Civil War, when the dam gave way, it was only half full and delivered the water to the valley gradually. At the time, the river and creek beds below were dry or quite low, and they absorbed much of the water. It only flooded Johnstown to a level of about three feet. Since the damage was minimal, so was the concern about safety.**
- Shortly after the 1862 break, the wooden tower with the controls for the sluice pipes burned to the ground, and was never replaced.**

From that time forward there was no way to release water from the dam, which inexplicably didn't sound alarm bells anywhere along the line.

- Lead joints in the sluice pipes had been stolen over the years when the dam was unused, which caused leaks that contributed to the 1862 failure
- Repairs to the 1862 damage were slipshod, faulty and inadequate materials were used. These repairs washed away several times before they were done well enough to hold.
- After acquiring the property in 1879, the Club installed metal mesh over the spillway to keep the expensive stocked fish from going over the dam
- The Club also lowered the crest of the dam by about 3 feet in order to widen the road that went over the dam to the hotel and Club members' cottages.

When one examines this list of contributing factors in the aggregate (no pun intended) , the obvious question becomes ... not IF the dam was going to fail, but WHEN? It was literally the classic example of

an accident waiting to happen. And, it needn't have, which is the salient point. Had the dam been properly maintained, it would still be there today and the Club (or perhaps its successor - open to the public *maybe* perhaps?) - might still be functioning.

The definitive work on this American disaster is David McCullough's THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD, which I recommend to anyone who has further interest in the subject.

