



An Brief Overview of the Borough of Smethport

by Ross Porter

The Route 6 hamlet of Smethport is in the midst of a community-wide renaissance based on a renewed awareness of its history, translating that history to define and build its future.

Since the earliest days Smethport has been considered a topographic crown jewel of the Pennsylvania Wilds region. The moment the traveler enters Smethport they feel the hills wrap around them and from any direction they know that they have discovered a special place. A short drive from the Allegheny National Forest and Kinzua Bridge State Park, Smethport is about two hours from Erie and Buffalo, and five hours from Philadelphia and New York City. Smethport is teeming with natural game, wildlife, and outdoor recreational opportunities. With its many festivals and events residents enjoy an active community and cultural life. The 1,700 residents have been bustling with renewed focus and interest as the Borough embraces opportunities and grass roots initiatives for economic and tourism development.

It was in 1807 that Dutch land investors, while surveying a giant track of land they purchased from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, discovered this most perfect valley and named it in honor of the Dutch banking family, the deSmeths, who financed their land investments.

Smethport became the McKean County seat in 1826, and grew and thrived as the principal village of Keating Township. But it wasn't until 1853, that Smethport officially was incorporated as a Borough. Prior to this, Smethport was simply a settlement surrounding the county courthouse.

But although it was Smethport's remarkable environment that drew its first settlers and continues to attract modern day explorers, it's been a renewed interest in its entrepreneurial heritage that is driving its future development.

Part of the modern Smethport Renaissance is being driven by former residents returning or newcomers simply discovering that it is an excellent place to settle and start a business. Well educated and well traveled, they

appreciate Smethport for its quality of life, charming small town demeanor, and low cost of living. The unique character and charm of this Pennsylvania Wilds community, coupled with high-speed Internet infrastructure makes Smethport a desirable place to launch a business.

Smethport has a long and colorful entrepreneurial history. From its earliest days, creative innovation has been tied to the local environment. In 1822, John Applebee built a dam across Marvin Creek to create a millpond in the center of town and installed a water-powered sawmill. Thus began an entrepreneurial lumber industry with the naturally supplied power.

Eventually the millpond at the center of Smethport became the stunningly beautiful Hamlin Park and Hamlin Lake. Once filled with thousands of logs waiting processing at the local sawmill, the lake is now teeming with trout and offers excellent opportunities for anglers. Today, just as in its past, Smethport is at the epicenter of major east coast hardwood industry and is home to the offices of forest industry giants.

During the 1870s through early 1900s Smethport was in an economic explosion that created some of the wealthiest entrepreneurs in the country. Financier and Smethport benefactor Henry Hamlin was reported to be the wealthiest private banker in the United States during the 1890s. As a result of vast wealth generated by various aspects of the lumber industry and financiers Smethport was blessed with numerous exquisite mansions. The Smethport Mansion District is one of the community's paramount attractions, and is one of the best-maintained historic architectural areas in the region. Examples of Victorian style architecture include Greek Revival, Queen Anne, Stick and Italianate. Visitors can view these masterpieces through walking tours that are offered periodically during special events, or by taking a casual stroll with the aid of the Smethport Mansion District walking tour guide.

Smethport is also celebrating its tie to American Civil War. It was in 1861 that General Thomas Leiper Kane first mustered the McKean County Rifles and the famous and valiant Bucktail Regiment was born. Named for the whitetail deer tail placed in their hats, the Bucktails marched out of Smethport and into history. Smethport is home to an active group of Bucktail re-enactors who each April recreate this special piece of United States history.

The first magnetic toys in the country were invented in Smethport in 1908. From out of those early roots would eventually come the famous 1955 hit toy "Wooly Willy." This famous 20th century toy was created by Jim Herzog in Smethport in 1955, when he worked for the family-owned business Smethport Specialty Co. (www.smethporttoy.com/woolywilly). Wooly Willy is celebrated by the town in June during Summer Fest when any Willy-want-to-be can enter the Wooly Willy look-alike contest to stake their claim with Smethport's most famous son. With more than 50 million being sold, the child's toy is one of the largest promoters of Smethport, which features the town's name on every toy.

Smethport was a center of bicycle hysteria during the 1890s. During September, Victorian Days Smethport relives part of its 1890s history by featuring its famous, "Wheel Around the Hub" 53-Mile Bicycle Race. Just as during the 1890s, the winners receive gold pocket watches as well as handsome cash prizes. Period costumed folk mingle with visitors as they wander through street art vendors and enjoy tea and live music on the courthouse green.

Today bicycling is enjoyed on forested county roads and back woods trails that hub out from Smethport as well as on old railroad grades that are being converted in the "rails-to-trails" program. Trails for snowmobiles, cross-country skiers, mountain bikers and ATV riders snake through the area to be enjoyed both winter and summer. The local snowmobile association is working on a connection needed at Smethport to allow access to the PA Grand Canyon to Allegheny National Forest trail.

Smethport became electrified in 1921 through the vision and persistence of Smethport industrialist and inventor J. C. Backus. The Borough has owned its own electric company since that time. Since the earliest days Smethport operated and serviced its transmission lines and purchased electricity from outside providers. Uniquely Smethport is the only municipality in the entire 12 county Pennsylvania Wilds Region to own its electric company.

In 2004 Smethport was selected as Pennsylvania's very first Route 6 Heritage Community. The borough is currently in the midst of a community-wide planning project supported by a DCNR grant to develop a Heritage Tourism Work Plan by identifying heritage tourist sites, resources and themes; by developing a way to enhance and refine these resources; and by creating a plan to sustain local heritage tourism while enhancing the local economy. Highlighted in the plan are an extensive community reforestation program, opportunities for business development including lodging, specialty stores and extended hours; cultural venues such as dances, concerts and plays; hospitality training; year-round event planning; streetscape enhancements; park improvements; signage and parking. The completed program is expected to take 10 years to plan and implement the various stages.

We study history to learn what worked and what didn't work; what was successful and what wasn't. What did we do right that we should do again and what mistakes did we make so as not to repeat them. Lumbering and the logging industry has played a vital role in Smethport's economy for Smethport's entire history. Ever since John Applebee created the Hamlin Millpond and installed the up and down, water-powered, sawmill Smethport has focused on its regional lumber heritage. During the 1880s and 1890s giant, steam powered saw mills were located in the borough sawing millions of board feet of lumber and driving our economy.

During the turn of the century 1900s wood chemical plants dotted McKean County and pumped money into the local economy. But these industries had a high price for the environment. The forests were denuded and toxic byproducts from the chemical industry polluted the soils. But it was this lumber industry that ignited our local economy and drove the economic engine that would create the Smethport Mansion District.

With the Smethport Woody Biomass Demonstration Project we are reinventing Smethport based on our rich lumber-based economic history but coupling that reinvention with modern, state of the art, technology and environmental science. Working closely with the Department of Natural Resources and the Pennsylvania State University, Smethport will become an environmental resource leader and green energy borough that will model proper stewardship of our natural resources while creating locally produced energy and a revitalized economy.

To learn more about Smethport's colorful past visit Planet Smethport <www.smethporthistory.org>, a virtual (Internet) walking tour of historic Smethport and nearby communities being created by students of Smethport Area High School. It features historic photos, newspaper clippings, and other information. With already over 2,200 pages the giant award winning project is still a work in progress.

For still more information about Smethport, you can also visit the news magazine format Borough of Smethport website <www.smethportpa.org>.