

Schuylkill County's Lakewood Park, one-time home to the stars, is getting ready for an encore

By [Daniel Patrick Sheehan](#)

The Morning Call

•

Aug 04, 2019 at 6:03 pm

When coal was king, when big bands made the nation swing and sway — that's when Lakewood Park was in its heyday, though it still erupted in music and hilarity long after the Depression and World War II were consigned to textbooks.

“It was hopping,” said Sharon Pagnotti, running the register at The Brown Bag gas station and convenience store on Route 54 in Barnesville opposite the long-moribund Lakewood grounds that are now being prepared for a second act as an event venue and campground. “They had a lot of big stars up there.”

Indeed, they did. Over the years, [the big ballroom at the Schuylkill County amusement park near Tamaqua](#) welcomed jazz legend Louis Armstrong, bandleaders Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, singer and actress Doris Day, “American Bandstand” host Dick Clark — he introduced the up-and-coming Chubby Checker — the Beach Boys, Guy Lombardo, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington and scores of other entertainers.



Catalpa Grove at Lakewood Park in Rush Township, Schuylkill County, is expected to re-open in September as a wedding and banquet facility. The facility is on the site of the historic Lakewood Park where stars such as jazz legend Louis Armstrong, bandleaders Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, singer and actress Doris Day, the Beach Boys, Guy Lombardo, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington performed. (April Gamiz/THE MORNING CALL)

Lakewood also hosted raucous ethnic festivals: notably Lithuanian Day and the Bavarian Summer Festival, along with days dedicated to Ukrainians, Poles, the Welsh and so on. These celebrations of the immigrant groups that built the Coal Region would sometimes cause long traffic jams on Route 54.

“We want people to know the history,” said Patty Roth, who along with husband Buck and son Andrew is [preparing to open Catalpa Grove Venue and Lakewood Park Campground – a wedding venue and campsite spread across the 54-acre grounds](#). “There are people who live two or three miles away who never knew it was here.”

Many others do know, of course, and as construction has proceeded over the past few months, the curious have driven onto the grounds to take a look. The Roths, who live in Nescopeck, Luzerne County, have also had calls and social media messages from people whose lives revolved around Lakewood when they were younger, including

couples who courted there and a woman who said her family planted the catalpa trees that inspired the new venue's name.

“She felt like we were honoring their memory by naming it Catalpa Grove,” Patty Roth said.

That woman, it turns out, was Peg Guinan Grigalonis, president of the Mahanoy Area Historical Society, whose ancestors include Richard and Daniel Guinan — immigrant Irish brothers who started out as miners, opened department stores and bought the 88 acres of farmland that would open as Lakewood Park in 1916.



Catalpa Grove at Lakewood Park is under construction in Barnesville, Schuylkill County on the historic property of Lakewood Park, a ballroom and event hotspot in Schuylkill County that drew big acts for much of the 20th century. (April Gamiz/THE MORNING CALL)

It began as a quiet spot, for picnicking on the grass and bathing in a man-made lake originally built for ice harvesting. With the addition of a hand-carved, 52-figure carousel and other amusement rides, and the construction of the ballroom in 1925, it became a can't-miss destination for families and couples.

“The big bands really established themselves here,” Grigalonis said. “As far as I can tell, they were kind of on the circuit from Chicago to New York.”

The park also had a theater, the Lakewood Playhouse, which operated from 1949 to 1979 and attracted notable actors and actresses, including Jackie Cooper, Lana Turner, Red Buttons, Dorothy Lamour and Veronica Lake.

Lakewood had competition just a mile up the road in Lakeside Park. Grigalonis said visitors used to buy tickets for one park and wander into the other, until managers instituted a hand-stamping policy.

From 1914 to 1984, the park hosted Lithuanian Day, which was the longest-running ethnic festival in the country. The Bavarian Summer Festival, launched in 1969, drew 96,000 people in its first year. By the late 1970s, the two-week event was drawing a half million, some a bit more boozy than others.

Lithuanian Day Marked By Thousands Attending Lakewood Park Program

Thousands of Lithuanians from various sections of Eastern Pennsylvania gathered at Lakewood park near Tamaqua to celebrate the 25th annual Lithuanian Day. An estimated crowd of 25,000 attended.

A solemn high mass, commemorating the Catholic feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and also the day, was celebrated in the pavilion at 11 a. m. Participating in the service were Rev. John Morkunas, M.I.C., Thompson, Conn., celebrant; Rev. Joseph Neverauskas, Shenandoah,

Typical advertisements and event stories for the former Lakewood Park in Barnesville, Schuylkill County. (The Morning Call)

“There was nothing like it for backing up the roads,” Grigalonis said. “But it did get rowdy and it was a bit of a problem in that regard.”

Declining attendance and rising costs spelled the end of Lakewood in 1984. It was subsequently purchased but never redeveloped. In 1996, the ballroom burned down in a fire that could be seen for miles. The grounds were being reclaimed by nature when the Roths, lifelong campers, began casting around for a property to turn into a campground. Andrew discovered the Lakewood property for sale.

“He came and saw it and fell in love,” Patty Roth said.

On a recent afternoon, under a hot sun, pale blue dragonflies darted in and out of the reeds at the rim of the lake. Birds chuckled in the woods. Drills and saws hummed and growled inside the wedding and event venue under construction not far from the rubble of the ballroom.

Buck Roth, a career contractor, has been overseeing this project with the builder’s usual mix of anxiety and pride — anxiety because the first wedding is scheduled for Sept. 21, pride because the structure has the irresistible warmth and appeal of a lodge in the country, albeit a 6,400-square-foot one that can accommodate 500 guests.

The knotty pine timbers from Colorado underwent an antiquing treatment, so they give the impression of age and history well-suited to the grounds. Andy Kirk and His Twelve Clouds of Joy may never have played their sweet swing in the building, but it looks like they could have.

The venue is fast approaching completion. There is much to do, including landscaping and repairing or replacing some of the outdoor infrastructure.

“It’s amazing what time can do,” Buck Roth said, pointing to a spot where freezes and thaws buckled a portion of the lake’s concrete wall.

The Roths already have 60 events scheduled into 2022, including weddings and proms, and are aiming to book many more. They are also planning about 200 campsites on the grounds.

“We’re very, very happy about the current adventure,” said Grigalonis, who found the Roths to be an amiable family and is confident they are honoring the park’s history in just the right way.

“The workmanship in that place is a tribute to the workmanship of the old dance hall,” she said, speaking wistfully of the new building that is bringing life, at last, back to dear old Lakewood.

Morning Call reporter Daniel Patrick Sheehan can be reached at 610-820-6598 or dsheehan@mcalls.com