



SHARON

BY ERICA LEVI ZELINGER

My best friend told me about Sharon. She'd visited her college boyfriend's hometown a few years ago and, while the relationship didn't last, she still recalls fondly "that great off-price fashion store, where they held a special promotion and dropped dollar bills from an upper floor window."



HOME SWEET HOME:

Above, the Buhl Mansion is now an inn and spa. Right, Mr. Buhl's Den is among the rooms guests can choose from.

SHARON CLAIMS THE WINNER as one of its myriad "World Largest" attractions; among the others are Reyers Shoe Store and Daffin's Candies – come for fashion, shoes or candy – and leave well-clothed, heeled and fed.

Sharon, just an hour's drive north of Pittsburgh International Airport, is near the crossroads of Interstates 79 and 80;



BIG ATTRACTION: Clockwise from above, The Tara Inn embodies the Old South; the selection at Daffin's Candies; aboard the S.S. Winner at the world's largest off-price fashion store.

it's a charming spot within Mercer County for bargain-hunters, antiques collectors and golfers. In 2005, *Golf Digest* ranked Mercer County as one of America's top golf destinations.

According to local lore, Sharon received its name from a Bible-reading settler who compared the land to the Plain of Sharon in Israel. Its large coal deposits put Sharon on the map in the late 19th century as an industrial center along the Shenango River. Frank Buhl, a Yale graduate, founded the Sharon Steel Corporation in the 1880s, and created a source of financial stability in the community. Its steel mills once employed thousands; I spot what remains of these businesses as I drive into Sharon.

State Street has all the staples needed for a small town: modern, brick hospital, '50s-style diner, lawyer's office, early 20th-century stone recreational facility with pool and gym, contemporary library. There are two family names that continue to pop up as I tour the Sharon area: Buhl and Winner. His success in the steel industry allowed Buhl, the "Father of the Shenango Valley" who had

no children of his own, to donate liberally to the community – his name still appears on the F.H. Buhl Club, Buhl Farm Park, and of course, his own home, the Buhl Mansion. The stone building with its elegant archways, coveted turret rooms and expansive gardens is where I will rest for the night.

The afternoon light shines in through the half-moon stained glass window as I start up to my room – Mr. Buhl's Den – at the Buhl Mansion. I turn my head and catch a ray as it illuminates the letter "W" over the staircase. Winner. Jim and Donna Winner are Sharon's modern-day Buhls. Jim, the inventor of The Club (yes, the steering wheel lock I see on parked cars everywhere), is a huge benefactor to the Mercer County community.

I drive up West Hill, or what locals call Millionaire Row – to Stateline Road where residents on one side of the street live in Pennsylvania and their neighbors across the way live in Ohio.

Then onto Buhl Farm Park, to walk the grounds that Buhl assured in his will would always be perpetually maintained for the community. It's hard to know if the couple

strolling next to me through the park, or later, the family devouring wings next to me at Quaker Steak & Lube (a.k.a. "The Lube") is from Sharon or visiting, but the town and its surroundings has a hard-working, proud air about it.

Every June, the Small Ships Revue floats into town on the Shenango River. Hosted by The Lube, the event signifies the start of summer with a parade through downtown, a food festival and a raft contest. Thousands flock to Sharon on Labor Day as well for Buhl Day, a family day that honors the working men and women of the Shenango Valley with a parade, fishing derby, tennis tournament, food and free entertainment.

When the Buhls were too old to attend the parade and festivities, they'd wave to the residents of Sharon from the windows of their home on State Street. Their philanthropic efforts continue to benefit the town; the Buhl legacy is eternally a part of the Sharon community, and after a night's stay in their home, so am I.

IF YOU GO:

Mercer County Visitors Bureau, 800.637.2370; www.mercercountypa.org