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Tuesday, January 09, 2007

Brownsville to host wharf dedication Saturday

By Christine Haines, Herald-Standard
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BROWNSVILLE - The old Brownsville wharf was where travelers caught packet boats to Pittsburgh and cities further away, but the new wharf being dedicated Saturday has been designed to be a place where visitors from Pittsburgh and other cities will stop to visit Brownsville.

"I envision the wharf being used for many things, including fishing and boat access to town. I also envision that as a place to just sit and enjoy a good book, watching the boats go by and enjoying the river atmosphere," said Brownsville Mayor Norma Ryan. "I also envision it as a tourist attraction. There's a lot of history in that wharf."

Ryan said the old wharf area was the embarkation point for the steamboat "Enterprise," the first steamboat to go from here to New Orleans under its own power in 1814.

"Travelers west crossed the river on a ferry at that spot. In 1845, for the St. Peter's Church dedication, they got a special packet boat rate from Pittsburgh to Brownsville," Ryan said. "A person could sit there and dream about the past and plan for the future."

Saturday's activities will be a little less contemplative. The festivities will begin Saturday at 10 a.m. with a live broadcast by Pickle radio, and a variety of informational, entertainment and food booths available along the wharf and Water Street.

The activities will include free face painting and a children's "fishing" booth, dream catcher demonstrations, knot tying by the Boy Scouts and photo identification cards and fingerprinting for children under the age of 17.

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Visitors can contribute to a community mural that will be painted by whomever wants to contribute to the design between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m.

A group of California Area High School students will be performing first person interpretations of some of the leading citizens from Brownsville's history, from 1780 through 1850.

The Mon Valley Concert Band will be performing on a stage set up on a floating barge directly in front of the wharf from 11 until noon.

The speakers will take the stage at noon to formally dedicate the wharf. Frank Ricco, president of the Greater Brownsville Area Chamber of Commerce, will open the ceremony. The chamber donated the initial funds needed to get the studies done so the wharf could be constructed.

State Sen. Richard Kasunic, D-Dunbar, state Rep. Bill DeWeese, D-Waynesburg, Fayette County Commissioner Vince Vicites and Fayette County Redevelopment Authority Executive Director Ray Polaski will also speak briefly. The main speaker will be Congressman Frank Mascara. Ryan said each of the speakers has played a crucial role in the development of the wharf.

The entertainment continues at 1 p.m. with the appearance of Gertrude Rapp, as portrayed by Emily Lapisardi. Rapp was a silk manufacturer, musician and granddaughter of the founder of the Harmony Society. The Harmony Society was a communal religious organization.

The society's first town was Harmony, Pa., where Gertrude was born in 1808. Rapp is one of nine historic women Lapisardi currently presents, incorporating history and song.

The Mon Valley Divers will present a diving demonstration from the wharf from 2 p.m. until 3 p.m. and magician Chuck Rygle of Rices Landing will be performing throughout the afternoon with his special brand of close-up, stand-up magic.

Tours of the Flatiron Building exhibiting the river industry of Brownsville will be available throughout the day.

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