

REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

OUR YEAR IN REVIEW

Remembering the many highlights of 2012

by Ruth McCartan, President

Preparing for the Allegheny City Society annual retreat in January, I was once again amazed at how much we accomplished in 2012. We are a small group but we sure do a lot. I am reminded of the quote by anthropologist, Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."

We began in February with a new type of event a film series of movies having some connection to Allegheny City. Held in the historic Unitarian Church on North Avenue, board member Tom Wilson gave us a varied selection of cinema delights from the silent era, *The Bat*, to black-and-white 1940s hit *The Valley of Decision*. The most interesting was the silent films by "Allegheny daughter," Lois Weber with live musical accompaniment by local musician Tom Roberts. Before the start of the feature Tom or John Canning would give a little history and how it related to Allegheny City. What trip to the movies would be complete without popcorn or wine and cheese provided by Society Board members.

A visit to the University of Pittsburgh Archives in March to view items from their collection on the life of Mary Roberts Rinehart helped members understand her life after she left Allegheny City.

Our annual civil war tour conducted with the Greater Pittsburgh Civil War Roundtable was to Washington County. We visited the grave of Rev. John McMillan, the great pioneer Presbyterian minister who established Western Theological Seminary in Alleghentown in 1825. The Civil War Soldiers monument in Washington was built by the same builder and of the same material as ours in the Commons. Allegheny connections are everywhere.

Another first time event this year was the musical series in the new Buhl Park across from the Children's Museum. If you didn't attend any of the four events, you missed a fabulous time. The Allegheny Brass band started off the series with a variety ranging from big band favorites to patriotic standards. The most attend concert featured Aquí Tango. What a night of music and dancing. You could almost close your eyes and imagine that you were in Argentina. The planners for this series are working on another for this summer. Keep your fingers crossed we get some funding. The Buhl foundation

was the sponsor for the 2012 summer musical event. Board member and Treasurer Amelia Gehron had the Society's signature beverage, Remyers Blend for sale to combat the heat.

The Society is more than a few events and tours. We had informational booths at Doo Dah Days in Lawrenceville and both the Mexican War Streets and Allegheny West House Tours. Two Mary Cassatt art scholarships were awarded to students of the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The continue maintenance of the Cassatt Garden got a big boost this year with the help of G-Tech and the volunteers from Alcoa. The site even got rewarded with six new trees from Tree Vitalize. Many cannas were planted in the lower lot next to Heinz Field. The Society has started to work more closely with the Allegheny Commons Initiative to help with our mutual mission of preserving the Commons. The ACS web site has started to grow and we have jumped into the modern world of social media with Facebook. Sales tax forms have to be filled out and monthly board minutes produced. We publish a quarterly newsletter with original and creative pieces written by board members and mailed to over 200 addresses. It's amazing how the members and board members keep the history of Allegheny City alive and growing. Hope to see you at future events planned in 2013.

A few tentative plans for 2013 are: the winter film series, civil war tour following a part of the Jones-Imoben raid a 150th anniversary event, tour of The Stephan Foster Memorial featuring the Foster families time in Allegheny, the summer music event in June, July and August, and to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the fear of Confederate invasion, a bus tour to local redoubt sites is planned.

Watch your newsletter for dates and times.



THE MIRACLE MAN

The story of Allegheny's Thomas Meighan

by Jude Wudarczyk

On a lonely hill in St. Mary's Cemetery in the Lawrenceville neighborhood of Pittsburgh, just behind the Priest's Section, rests "the Miracle Man."

Born in Allegheny City on April 9, 1879, Thomas "Tommy" Meighan grew up on Lacock Street and Taylor Avenue. His father was a prominent businessman and president of Pittsburgh Facing Works on River Avenue near Collins. The elder Meighan sent his son to St. Peter's School, but Tommy was not a good student and was frequently truant in order to see a matinee stage production at the Bijou, the Duquesne, or the Alvin in Downtown Pittsburgh.

While a student at Allegheny High School, his father wanted Tommy to go to college. The young man wouldn't hear of it; consequently, his father put him to work in the family mill. Standing at six feet, and having a strong build, the teenager felt he could handle the work, but after one week of shoveling coal, he quit and agreed to go to Mount St. Mary's College. He wanted to study medicine, but settled for a major in pharmacology.

While in school, he joined the football team, which did not have a coach nor enough manpower to keep the team intact. According to one of his teammates, Meighan didn't care for the game, but played anyway just to help out.

Meighan joined the school orchestra, but his musical talents were so limited that he was thrown out of the orchestra after one rehearsal. He did no better at boxing. During his first fight, he tripped over his own feet and refused to get up.

One night Meighan and his roommate were sitting under a tree gazing at stars, when he turned to his friend and said, "Well, Frank, some day you'll see the name of Tom Meighan twinkle, just like those stars, on Broadway." Frank Smith thought nothing of the conversation, but he was surprised a few years later, when he was walking down Broadway and he saw an electric billboard listing Tom Meighan as the star of the show *Man and Superman*.

Tommy gave up college to pursue his new dream of acting. His father was extremely disappointed with his son's decision, and believed that his son was destined to a life of failure.

Meighan appeared in many performances including roles in *Puddin'head Wilson*, *Peg Woffington*, *A Temperance Town*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Lady Godiva*.

In January 1906, while appearing in the role of Billy Balton, in *The College Widow*, Meighan met Frances Ring, who played the female lead. A 1931 article in the *Pittsburgh Press* claims that the production was staged at the Nixon Theater in Pittsburgh, but other sources say the play took place on Broadway. Ring was from a well-know theater family. She and several of her siblings were the fifth generation of the family to appear on stage. Years later, Charles Phillips Reilly referred to Ring as "one of America's most enchanting romantic comedienne's."

Meighan and Ring fell in love and were married in Jersey City within the year. They kept their marriage a secret, and continued to wow the audiences with their performances. They even traveled to London and performed with audiences

still unaware that they were married.

While Frances Ring faded from the stage, content to live her life as Mrs. Thomas Meighan, Tommy's career was continuing to rise. In 1911 Meighan was offered a role in the new motion picture industry, where he played Kirk Anthony in *The Ne'er Do Well*, which was called a "short" or "short movie." Shorts usually consisted of one reel of film. The show did not do well, and Meighan was not very interested in appearing on the big screen again. He preferred to perform on stage.

He did not appear in another movie until 1914 when he landed the leading role in another short, which was titled *Dandy Donovan, the Gentleman Cracksman*. Being a handsome Irishman, and possessing great acting talent, he was perfect for the role of Dandy Donovan. This movie, like his first, did not do well at the theaters.

While dining at the Carleton in London, Meighan met Samuel Goldfish, a man who was destined to become one of Hollywood's biggest movie moguls. Goldfish later changed his name to Samuel Goldwyn, and became one of the owners of MGM. Goldfish was impressed with Meighan's acting

continued



talent and told his people to get him under contract. Before they could do so, Meighan returned to the United States and starred in a play titled *On Trial*. It was during this time that Goldfish's agents caught up to him and offered him a contract so lucrative that Tommy and Frances relocated to California.

In 1915 Meighan starred as Burton Temple in the movie *Fighting Hope*. He heard that Cecil B. De Mille, who was working for Goldfish, watched a rough cut of the movie, and commented, "Meighan is no good." Immediately, Tommy sought out Goldfish and



TOMMY AND FRANCES on the balcony of their California home

told him that he planned to leave The Goldwyn Company, because Universal had made him an offer. Goldfish encouraged Meighan to postpone his decision until he (Goldfish) could see the movie.

When Goldfish and De Mille saw the final cut, both were completely satisfied and Meighan received another leading role. This time he played opposite Charlotte Walker in the movie *Kindling*.

Thirty three more films followed in quick succession between 1915 and 1919. Meighan played opposite all the top actresses of the day – Edna Goodrich, Marie Doro, Valeska Suratt, Pauline Frederick, and Mary Pickford; however, none of the movies was a hit.

Meighan did not give up. After reading a magazine story titled *The Miracle Man*, he thought it would make a great movie if he played the leading role of the con man Tom Burke. He learned that George M. Cohan had written a script of the story for a stage production. Although *The Miracle Man* wasn't doing well on stage, Meighan believed that with the proper director and the right actors it would be a hit on the screen. When he heard that George Loane Tucker, a director, was also trying to get the story on the big screen, Tommy convinced the others to work with him to achieve his goal. They selected Lon Chaney, Elinor Fair, Joseph J. Dowling, and Gloria Swanson as the main cast members. Swanson was already committed to making another movie. Betty Compson, a newcomer to show business, was used in her place.

The story's plot involved some con men and their molls, who had to leave town because the police were pursuing them. Tom Burke (Tommy Meighan), the gang leader, heard

about a blind faith healer in a small town. The group decided to offer their assistance to the blind man. Of course, their ulterior motive was to defraud the elderly man of his money and bilk the crowds of their donations for a chapel.

One of the gang members, known as "The Frog" (Lon Chaney), a contortionist, twisted himself up pretending to be a cripple until the blind faith healer cured him. Donations poured in and the gang was happy until a real crippled boy was cured. Slowly, the con men and their ladies converted to a better life.

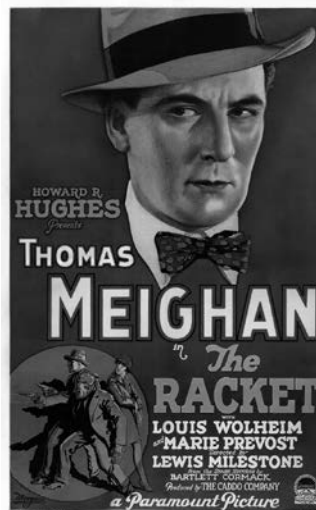
The 1919 film was a sensation. People poured into theaters, and it was one of the biggest money makers of the silent movie era. Chaney, Meighan, and Compson were hurled into stardom. Lon Chaney was so believable that people thought he really was a contortionist; however, Chaney contended that his actions were merely Hollywood stunts. Meighan was known for the rest of his life as "the Miracle Man."

Meighan spent his remaining years in Hollywood, playing leading roles in three- and four-reel (full length) movies (There was one exception where he played himself in a short with Gloria Swanson). His career included 80 full-length movies, plus three shorts. In 1929 he broke into the talkies with a role in *The Argyle Case*.

Even with his busy career, he visited hospitals trying to cheer the sick, answered countless letters, and mailed out 1,200 autographed photos each week. While other actors hired doubles to do dangerous stunts, Meighan always did

his own. He and his wife remained married their entire lives, and they were never away from each other for more than eight weeks. Meighan always picked his own roles, and refused to play in any "dirty" movies. At the height of his career, he made \$10,000 a week.

He continued making movies until 1932 when he became ill. He died on July 8, 1936, leaving a fortune of \$1.5 to \$2 million. Today's equivalent would be \$25 to



\$33 million. This was an unbelievably large sum of money for an actor at the time. He was interred at a holding vault in Long Neck, New York for a year, and then moved to St. Mary's Cemetery in Lawrenceville in June, 1937.

Sadly, all copies of the movie *The Miracle Man* have faded, and none are known to exist.



ALLEGHENY AT THE MOVIES

Second Winter Film Series a success

by John Canning

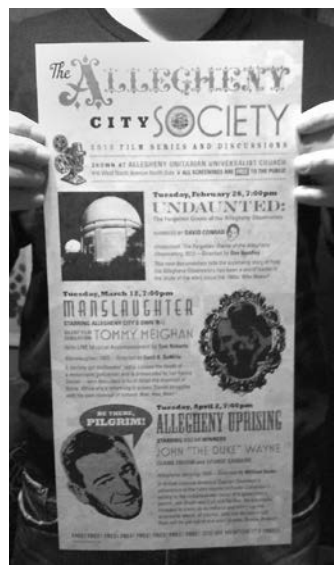
During the “endless” winter of 2012–2013 a significant number of hardy folks attended the three programs that were part of this year’s series. The first program, the recent documentary *Undaunted: the Forgotten Giants of the Allegheny Observatory* drew a record audience. We were indeed fortunate to have Dan Handley “the man behind the film” to speak about his work and the process by which he brought together the roles of Samuel P. Langley and John Brashear as well as several of the scientific breakthroughs that are all part of the history of this wonderful Allegheny institution.

The City Society will honor Handley for this wonderful work with The Rimmel Award at this year’s annual meeting.

Tommy Meighan, Allegheny-born and raised was featured in the second program, the 1922 silent film *Manslaughter*. Unknown to many present-day North Siders, Meighan was quite a successful lead actor during the era when the film making business moved from silent films to talkies. We were once again fortunate to have Tom Roberts our own North Side resident, and composer of *The Allegheny Rag* provide the piano sound track for this event.

The third program in the series was the *Allegheny Uprising* starring John Wayne. The title led some folks to believe the film was a chronicle of those in Allegheny City who fought the annexation of 1906–07. But, in fact, the film dealt with events long before there was an Allegheny City or an Allegheny County.

This year’s poster was by designed and produced by Paul Schifino, who generously contributed his efforts to the Society.



Plans are being made for the 2014 winter series featuring film star William Powell. Powell was born in Allegheny in 1892 and attended Manchester’s Sixth Ward school. As ‘The Thin Man’ Powell was known to movie goers all over the world. Watch for *Previews of Coming Attractions* in future *Reporter Dispatch* issues.

2012 | 2013 FILM SERIES poster by Paul Schifino of Schifino Design

RIMMEL AWARDEE NAMED

Filmmaker Dan Handley to be honored

by Tom Wilson

The Allegheny City Society is pleased to present the 2013 William Rimmel Award to Mr. Dan Handley. With the release last year of his excellent documentary *Undaunted: The Forgotten Giants of the Allegheny Observatory*, Director Dan Handley has decidedly met the criteria “... for outstanding achievement in preserving and interpreting the history of that portion of the City of Pittsburgh that was Allegheny City.”

In the film, Dan traces the beginnings of the observatory, depicting the founding of the Allegheny Telescope Association and the construction of the first observatory on Perry Hilltop. Through skillful weaving of interviews with top scientists and historians, 3D animation, accurate historic reenactments, archival photographs and Kathy Rooney’s digital illustrations, we learn of the growth of the observatory through the contributions to science of the renowned Directors John Brashear, Samuel Langley, and James Keeler.

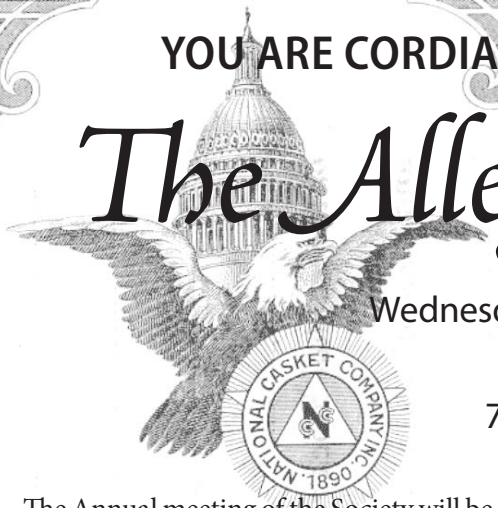
Birthplace of astrophysics, the Allegheny Observatory was the site of the invention of railroad standard time as well as Langley’s early aerodynamic experiments. *Undaunted* also shows that through the work of Brashear, experiments that helped prove Einstein’s Theory of Special Relativity were made possible.

The film will soon be broadcast on American Public Television, and subscribing cities across the nation will be made aware of the important role that the city of Allegheny played in the history of science.

Dan Handley is a scientist, writer, and filmmaker. He has studied playwriting and science journalism at Johns Hopkins University as well as documentary filmmaking at Pittsburgh Filmmakers. His technical education include Johns Hopkins University, Biophysics, B.A., Carnegie Mellon University, Logic and Computation, M.S., and University of Pittsburgh, Human Genetics, Ph.D.

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO THE ANNUAL MEETING OF

The Allegheny City Society



Wednesday, April 24, 2013— Dinner 6:00 pm and Program following.

The Cardello Building

701 North Point Drive (off Beaver Avenue), North Side

The Annual meeting of the Society will be held on Wednesday, April 24, 2013. This year's location is the Cardello Building at 701 North Point Drive off of Beaver Avenue in Chateau.

A buffet dinner will begin at 6:00 pm with a business meeting and program immediately following. The 2013 William Rimmel Award will be presented to Dan Handley for his creation of *Undaunted: The Forgotten Giants of the Allegheny Observatory*. Please, come join in the fun and meet fellow Society members and friends who hold dear the memory of

the former Allegheny City and the North Side. Many wonderful developments are happening. You'll not want to miss it!

The cost of the evening is \$25.00 which includes dinner, program, a grand evening of North Side history, and an opportunity to experience the renovated Cardello Building. There will be free parking in the building's lots.

Reservations for the dinner and program may be made by mailing in the form below, by phone at (412) 364-6132, or by e-mail to < info@alleghenycity.org >



THE CARDELLO BUILDING dates back to the Civil War. The building is the original 1864 site of the Excelsior Coffin and Casket Works, in what was then the City of Allegheny. The firm became the National Casket Company in 1890, and the building served as its headquarters, factory, and warehouse. National Casket was one of the first manufacturers of mass-produced caskets. At the height of its business in the early 20th century, National Casket shipped more than 52,000 caskets worldwide each year, making it the largest coffin manufacturer in the country. National Casket moved its operations to Kentucky in the mid-sixties, and the building was used principally as a warehouse. Cardello Electric first leased space in the building in 1968, and by 1983, they purchased this North Side landmark and architectural treasure.



Name

Phone

E-mail

..... Yes! I will be there for dinner and program

..... I am attending the program only

Please enclose a check for \$25.00 to cover the cost of the dinner, and mail to:
ALLEGHENY CITY SOCIETY, PO BOX 100255, PITTSBURGH, PA 15233

ASTOUNDING!

ALARMINGLY SO!

ROONEY AND PETERSON BOOK New North Side history to be released



Within the next few weeks a new history of Allegheny City and North Side will be on the market. The authors of this new and exciting work are Dan Rooney, Steeler owner and recently the U. S. ambassador to Ireland, and Carol Peterson, local historian and author of hundreds of house histories. A book signing program will held at the Allegheny Branch of the Carnegie Library on Federal Street. Both authors will be available to talk about the book at this event. So save the date and time, Thursday May 9, 2013 at 7 o'clock in the evening. Allegheny City Society members will definitely enjoy this new book and add it to their 'Allegheny Collection.'

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