

# REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

## MEMORIES OF AN OLD HOUSE

Growing up in the Laughlin Mansion

by Judith Walsh Jardine

We moved into the Laughlin Mansion in 1943. I was only two years old and my brother Charles was five. Our parents had decided that moving into such a large home would give them the opportunity to not only house the family, but also the family business. For many years, still photography was the primary business of my father, but he had recently branched into the motion picture industry. Thus, C. Lawrence Walsh & Co. was formed.

The property contained two buildings. The main building, the mansion, had 26 rooms. Behind our home was a very large building containing two large apartments upstairs and a vast area on the ground floor which was used for studios. We assumed that at the time the home was built in 1875, that the second building would have been servants' quarters upstairs and the garage for horse and buggies.

The house itself had been used as an Army school. Fortunately, they had retained its original splendor. During our stay the first floor was the sound studios, laboratories and dark rooms for film processing. Also on the first floor was a screening room and offices, all in beautifully appointed rooms. The wood paneling was exquisite. Most rooms had floor to ceiling fireplaces with either imported marble or hand-painted tiles. On the first floor I remember the Red Room with red Chinese embossed leather walls and a Gold Room with gold Damask walls and a Blue Room. All of the rooms were just elegant and my mother added her decorating touches.

The staircase was of particular interest to us kids growing up. We spent a lot of time riding the banister from the third floor to the first floor. Our parents were always amazed that we made the entire trip in one piece. The beautiful wood railing was wide enough for us to straddle easily and was unobstructed for three floors. All of our friends loved coming to our house to take a ride.

Our family quarters including kitchen, living room, dining room, bathrooms and bedrooms were on the second floor. All of the rooms were very large, with twenty-two-foot ceilings. At Christmas time, we always had a floor-to-ceiling tree in the corner of the living room with a Lionel train running through the villages set up below it.



Photograph of 801 Brighton Road 'The Laughlin Mansion' c1950

My mother and father always loved entertaining and were the most gracious hosts. They gave beautiful parties for family, friends and business acquaintances. We were not to be left out. A lot of the kids in the neighborhood came to our house for dance parties on Friday night. Our parents taught us the latest dance steps. We would make pizza, swill Coke, and jitterbug the night away. Our dance parties were in one of the large rooms on the first floor with the old stereo cranked high, playing all of the latest LPs and 45s. I had many girlfriend sleep overs; and most mornings we would go downstairs and watch our favorite movie: *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Sometimes we would show *The Lone Ranger* for the boys who showed up in the mornings. There were many movies to choose from, but we preferred *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and probably saw it 100 times!

In the back yard in the summer we would play softball with the neighbors. Our parents would play with us or root us on. At one point, we had a large Army tent set up in the backyard with six Army cots in it. The boys loved sleeping in there and mostly made it off-limits to girls.

West Park was just across the street. We spent hours playing hide and seek, catching lightning bugs, roller skating and

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riding bikes. We would picnic in the summer. Mother would make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and lemonade for everyone, and we would take old blankets to sit on or make a teepee. My brother and his friends occasionally camped there as well (although we girls were not allowed to sleep in the park).

In the winter, the pond would freeze over, and we were able to go ice-skating. We were also allowed to sled ride down Monument Hill. What a joy that was! We were forbidden to climb Monument Hill at other times, because our parents felt it was unsafe. However, we spent many hot summer days climbing through the bushes to look down at Pittsburgh from the summit. Our parents were none the wiser.

Next door was the headquarters of the Italian Sons and Daughters of America (ISDA). We had no end of fun playing on the bocce ball courts that sat between our properties. The Italian men would come on Saturday mornings and play bocce. They never spoke a word of English, and we found them fascinating. When they were done, it was our turn, and we enjoyed a lot of laughs. Every summer the ISDA would sponsor "Italian Days," a street festival with great food, games and dancing in the streets at night. It was so much fun. Everyone was Italian for this event.

It was wonderful having the large studio space behind our house, because my father used it to shoot a lot of print layout work. This required beautiful kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms to be set up to be photographed for major magazines. We would spend hours writing scripts, rehearsing and creating costumes for our annual plays. We sold tickets to all of the parents, friends and neighbors in the area. We would set up folding chairs and put on real productions in the "sets." We weren't sure how they could put up with our singing and dancing, but it was fun for all. Believe it or not, but we thought we were pretty good.

I think we may have been one of the first houses in Pittsburgh to have a clothes dryer as well as a television, all thanks to those wonderful rooms of furniture and appliances. When my father started making TV commercials, we were mortified because we played the kids in them. It was so embarrassing to go to school and have everyone tell us that they had seen us on TV the night before. The commercials aired all over the country. Can you imagine? I laugh to this day thinking of arguing with my brother over selecting TV dinners.

Growing up in the 'Laughlin Mansion' was really not much different from growing up in an ordinary house. We were often asked if we had maps to find our way around, but living there posed no challenge. Our basement was scary because it had a large furnace room which was dark and spooky. The steam radiators would creak at night, scaring us to death. We would



At home in the Walsh living room: Judy with brother, Charles, and parents Anna May and Charles Lawrence Walsh.

not venture to the basement or the third floor alone because we thought there were ghosts in the house. Occasionally my father would wake us with a jolt, and the police would be roving through the house because my father thought someone had broken in. The only thing we ever found missing was a bowl of fruit from the kitchen table. The burglar must have been hungry! Ultimately, my father had an alarm installed.

My father made friends with many of the city vagrants. The moment he would see them going through our trash he would invite them in for dinner and a bath. My mother was never charmed by this hospitality, but agreed that they needed a meal and a washing. I guess that's why they never robbed our house. They were on a first name basis with my dad. My father never met a stranger, and loved everyone he met. People in turn loved him.

Family parties would end with my dad and several other men singing all of the old Irish songs such as *Danny Boy*. They certainly knew how to enjoy themselves and have a good time.

It was a sad day for us when we had to move out. I was fifteen and my brother was eighteen. I remember being told that a road

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was through and they needed the land, but learned later that a hospital had bought the entire block to build a new hospital. The day the wrecking ball swung into my bedroom wall; I stood there watching with tears in my eyes. Our beautiful home was torn down to the ground.

We moved out to Brighton Heights but I continued at Allegheny High School as I was entering the eleventh grade. The following spring, my father died. His health had been deteriorating and I'm sure he was heartsick, as we all were when the old house was gone. I will always have many fond memories of the old house.

**NOTE:** The house at 801 Irwin Avenue (Brighton Road) was originally built for B.F. Jones, Sr. Over the years, Jones had

homes built for his son and four daughters within easy walking distance of the family "homestead."

One daughter, Mary Franklin Jones, married Alexander Laughlin Jr. They live nearby on Lincoln Avenue. Following Mr. Laughlin's death in 1881, his widow and their two daughters, Mary and Madelaine, moved into the home of Mrs. Laughlin's parents. Ultimately, upon the death of her parents, Mrs. Laughlin inherited the house. This became her "town house" until her death in 1931. It was then a part of the Laughlin estate inherited by her daughter Madelaine, who was the wife of Maitland Alexander, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh.

## NEW COMMONS PARTNERSHIP

Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy joins effort  
by Ruth McCartan

The further development of the oldest park in Pittsburgh, Allegheny Commons, established in 1867, will now be handled by a partnership arrangement involving the Allegheny Commons Initiative, Northside Leadership Conference and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. The East Commons that parallels Cedar Avenue has been wonderfully renovated with signage, widened gravel walkways and lighting. The capstone of the restoration plan for this side of the commons will be an iteration of the 150-year-old Victorian fountain that was in the northeast corner at the junction with the North Commons. This location is across from the former entrance of Allegheny



The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy rendering of the fountain proposed for the intersection of East and North Commons.



The corner of Cedar and East North Avenue in the summer of 1940 showing the fountain that was later removed.

General Hospital. Many old postcards of Allegheny City show this fountain, which was removed in the 1940s

The fountain and restoration of the landscape immediately around it will cost upwards of 2.5 million dollars, \$730,000 has already been raised. No date was given for the ground breaking but tentative plans have it starting in 2016.

The Pittsburgh Park Conservancy is a professional park planning, development and management organization and will oversee the design and construction of the remaining projects indicated in the master plan for the commons.

If you would like to donate to help bring this treasure back to life, you can make gifts to exclusively support the Northeast Fountain restoration in Allegheny Commons through the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. Just be sure to indicate that your gift is for Allegheny Commons either on your check or in the gift designation box on their web donation page.

## JOHN BRASHEAR BIRTHDAY

1916 Celebration was a great day in Pittsburgh!

by Janet Gunter

November 22, 1916 was indeed a very special day in Pittsburgh. It seemed as though the whole City turned out to help “Uncle John” Brashear celebrate his birthday!

In 1915 Brashear was elected President of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, appointed by the Department of State a U.S. delegate to the Pan-American Scientific Congress held in Washington D.C., and named Pennsylvania’s “most distinguished citizen” by Pennsylvania Governor Martin Brumbaugh. That year Brashear was present in San Francisco for Alexander Graham Bell’s famous transcontinental conversation, and was honored with “Brashear Day” at the Panama Pacific International Exposition, also in San Francisco.

For his birthday celebration in Pittsburgh thousands crowded the largest room available in the City: Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall in Oakland. Congratulatory messages and telegrams poured in from Governor Brumbaugh, President Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison and from scientists, scholars and educators all over the world.

The speaker’s table at the gathering included the President and Chairman of Bethlehem Steel, Charles Schwab, who said, “The gathering was a spontaneous outburst of love and affection for the greatest man I ever knew.” Andrew Carnegie’s partner in Carnegie Steel, Henry Phipps summed up his address with, “John and Phoebe, while showing us other worlds, showed us how to adorn this one.”

After dinner, Brashear was led to the speakers platform and stood as seventy five teachers from the Phoebe Brashear Club filed past him, each one placing a red rose in his arms.

The Phoebe Brashear Club had been formed in 1912, financed with resources from Henry Clay Frick. Frick had wished to remain anonymous and designated Uncle John as the Director of the fund. The Phoebe Brashear Club was commissioned for the continuing education of public elementary school teachers, and enabled teachers to study, travel and perform research work. These were the teachers so appreciative of John Brashear’s support.

As Brashear fell back into his chair, nearly buried beneath roses he asked, “Why should I be proud? I have done a little, and that little you have helped me do.”

A sonnet was offered by George M. P. Baird, playwright, poet and lyricist of the University of Pittsburgh’s Alma Mater and a masque was performed and arranged by the Director of the Carnegie Tech Drama School, Thomas Wood Stevens. Stevens penned this, part of the prologue to his masque:

*Days of high dreams and lowly toil may bring  
To this our part, some image of our love,  
And we the masquers bid you tread with us  
Some measure at the closing of the play,  
And see beyond our circling steps the range  
Of a calm spirit, walking with the stars.*

Charles Schawb later wrote of Brashear: “On the personal side, ‘Uncle John’ is about the last work in simplicity, modesty and charm. To have known him so well and so long has been to me a rare privilege and a great education.”

Happy Birthday, Uncle John Brashear!



## DAVID HOSTETTER'S SUCCESS

Produced Hostetter’s “Celebrated” Bitters

by John Canning

Bitters production and consumption has played an interesting role in the history of Allegheny City and the nation as a whole. The “Bitters King,” nationwide, was in all probability David Hostetter, a long-time resident of Allegheny City. Hostetter arrived in the area in the years before the Civil War and, using his father’s (Dr. Jacob Hostetter’s) “secret recipe” began the production of Hostetter’s Bitters. As a public relations wizard, Hostetter’s Bitters were advertised throughout all of America in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Hostetter, not only a master at marketing, was also a shrewd and wise investor. Profits from the bitters business were wisely invested in a number of rapidly growing enterprises: banking (President of the Fort Pitt National Bank and Director of the Farmers’ Deposit National Bank), railroads (Vice President of the P.&L.E.R.R.), natural gas (President of the Pittsburgh Gas Co.), and a number of investments in petroleum that were eventually sold to the Standard Oil Company.

David and Rosetta Hostetter raised their family of five in a house having a lovely country-like setting along the eastern edge of Manchester at the corner of Western Avenue and Bidwell Street. At the time of his death in 1888, David Hostetter left an estate worth well over \$10 million. Quite a fortune founded on the production and ever popular Hostetter’s Bitters.



## REMEMBERING JANE F. JOHNSON

96-year resident and advocate of the North Side dies.  
by John Canning

While wandering through the North Side during the crazy Spring of 2015 it was interesting to see the sporadic weather shifts affecting how trees and bulbs transform the landscape from winter's last gray days to scenes of green leaves and pastel blossoms. One tree that is a sure sign of springtime is the magnificent pink dogwood in the midst of the 800 block of Western Avenue. I know it as "Jane's Tree" and it speaks to me of community revitalization.

Every year Jane's Tree is more beautiful than ever. It certainly was this year, and it made me think how fortunate it was for that skinny sapling that it came into the hands of Jane Johnson in the summer of 1963. That dogwood and Jane Johnson have been symbols of survivors in an urban setting that, for many years, was not too friendly to trees at all — nor to urbanists who were committed to city living.

Jane Ford Johnson, who most recently resided at "The Allegheny," an apartment complex on the west side of Allegheny Center, had a terrific story to tell about saving trees, helping kids, raising a family, and preserving a congregation and a community.

Jane was an environmentalist long before it was fashionable. She was a community activist when many of her neighbors in the 1960s were heading out of town. She and a few compatriots managed to hold the Calvary Methodist Church together when other North Side congregations were closing up shop.

A year or so ago I enjoyed an enlightening and long overdue visit with Jane. She described her many residences in different sections of the North Side. In her lifetime Jane lived in Brighton Heights, Calbride, Central Northside, and Manchester. As a youngster her family lived in the community we now call Perry Hilltop where she played in and about the windowless remnant of Brashear's original observatory.

In 1936, one of the lowest points of the Great Depression, Jane graduated from Allegheny High School, attended the Pittsburgh Academy, where she met and shortly thereafter married Ross Johnson. By the early 1950s Jane and Ross and their growing family settled in the community that is now called Allegheny West. With urban redevelopment plans to level large sections of the North Side Jane played a pivotal role in organizing her neighbors, property owners and tenants alike, to block such stupid initiatives. Jane was always an activist — a doer. Jane Johnson was the North Side's Jane Jacobs.

Jane was the tree tender, a keeper of the neighborhood story, an advocate for historic preservation and the stalwart of a con-

gregation who kept singing as well as flipping pancakes and mashing potatoes.

This October, Jane passed away. In 2003 the Allegheny City Society happily presented Jane with the William Rimmel Award for her many contributions in perpetuating the very best of life on the North Side. And so, every spring, when that Dogwood at 833 Western is in full bloom, it is, a wonderful reminder of a great North Side champion.

## A LIQUID FUNDRAISER

A summer evening event at Wigle Whiskey

On September 2, Wigle Whiskey Barrel House on Spring Garden Avenue and the Society joined forces for history, music and whiskey drinking get together.

The Hostetter family and their magic elixir, started out this Spring Garden night. John Canning gave a brief history of Hostetter's Bitters and its large alcoholic content mentioning it was better to drink the bitters than the water in those days (see the history of Hostetter in this newsletter).

After the talk a tour was given of the barrel house showing how they currently make bitters to use in their drinks. Wigle offers classes in bitters production. Wigle gets its name from Peter Wigle who was involved in the Whiskey Rebellion.

The night also featured music by the *Spring Hillbillies* which includes Board members Frank Seanez and Tom Wilson.

This beautiful summer night event helped the Society with next year's bills, and provided some fun as well.



Board members Frank Seanez and Tom Wilson playing with *The Spring Hillbillies*.

## SEPTEMBER MUSIC EVENTS

Allegheny City Historical Gallery a perfect venue  
by Ruth McCartan

New board member Frank Seanez, quickly pulled together a music series using remaining grant money from a Buhl grant rewarded in 2014. The the outdoor concert scheduled September 9, featured a Jazz group called “Ken Karsh and Friends.” But in Allegheny City you can never predict the weather. Yes, it started raining. Board member Bill Gandy volunteered to host us at the new Allegheny City Historical Gallery on East Ohio St. The music was saved and all who attended loved the gallery setting. Some said the Jazz featured in this gallery setting reminded them of an imitate Jazz club that used to be located on Brighton Road. Great music and no cover.

Learning from the near rain-out with the first event, the series location was changed, and we were back at the Allegheny City Historical Gallery. So with images of old Allegheny City



surrounding us we heard a great music group called “Jamgrass with Breakneck Creek.” The bluegrass music featured that night packed the gallery. It was an overflow crowd of music lovers and the group kept everyone engaged well into the night.

