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# *The Allegheny City Society* **REPORTER DISPATCH**

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The Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

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## **New Life for the Garden Theater?**

*by David McMunn*

The neon sign and marquee of the Garden Theater has been a silent sentinel to our past, present and future. In April 2007, the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh took control of the building after 33 years as an adult theater. Now, we wait to see what developers come forth for the next best use for the storied Garden Theater. Many of us long to see a first- or second-run movie theater once again occupy this corner of Federal Street and North Avenue.

The Garden Theater is a gem as the last surviving silent film era movie house in Pittsburgh that has never seen any use other than as a neighborhood motion picture theater. The theater was built in 1915 at the request of David E. Park, Allegheny City resident and successful steel and banking magnate through Allegheny City's and Pittsburgh's industrial boom at the turn of the 20th century.

The theater was designed by Pittsburgh native Thomas H. Scott, who also designed the Benedum-Trees Building on Fourth Avenue downtown, the Wilksburg High School, the Mission Street Pumping Station, the Aspinwall Pumping Station, the Standard Steel Car Company office building in Lyndora, PA, the Charles Sorg Paper Company office building in Middletown, Ohio, as well as a number of private homes in Pittsburgh, Allegheny and Sewickley. Through extensive research, this appears to be the only public (non-municipal) building ever to be built by Scott.



From 1917 until 1970, the theater was under the watchful and loving eye of Bennett Amdur, who managed the theater for the Park family and then was given ownership of the movie house by Lewis Park in 1924. Bennett lived and breathed the Garden Theater. Very little has changed in the architecture and decoration of the theater because of his vision to see the theater remain intact. He worked at the theater every day of his life for over 50 years and became a true friend to employees and customers alike. It was a sad day on the North Side when Bennie passed away in June 1970. In respect to his passing, this was the only time the lights on the theater were ever dimmed.

In 1974, the theater was faced with either closing or becoming an adult theater. The latter was chosen so that it would not suffer being torn down as so much of the North Side had seen throughout the 1960s. The owner of the adult film business, thankfully, did very little to the building in his 33 years of operation. It is still intact--albeit run down and in need of restoration--on the facade and on the inside.

The Mexican War Streets Society has nominated the Garden Theater to be a city-designated historic structure in order to insure that the facade and the neon signs remain a permanent part of the W. North Avenue streetscape. The MWSS will pursue National Register Historic Landmark status next. Please share your memories of the past and concerns for the future of the Garden Theater. Send letters or emails to David McMunn, 306 Jacksonia Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15212, [LTEMcMunn@msn.com](mailto:LTEMcMunn@msn.com).

At this writing, the entire block of buildings surrounding the Garden Theater are part of a wide

scale development project of the U.R.A. The vision of the Central Northside Neighborhood Council and the Mexican War Streets Society is to see the North Avenue-Federal Street corridor join the E. Ohio Street and Western Avenue business districts in drawing growth, renewal and an exciting future for Pittsburgh's North Side.

## De-Famed

by Mike Coleman

Mother Nature is apparently zeroing in on the remnants of the City of Allegheny. In April 2006, she let loose her lightning on the Carnegie Library. On August 10<sup>th</sup> of this year, she zapped the statue of "Fame" that stands on top of the Soldiers' Monument in the Commons and, a week later, did the same to the top of Jones Hall on the CCAC campus on Ridge Avenue.

As you are probably know, the Allegheny City Society, with the cooperation of the City of Pittsburgh's Parks Department, had recently completed restoration of the Soldiers' Monument. All that was left to do was the landscaping which had to await the repair of the footbridge across the railroad tracks.

While we are not back to square one, we now need to figure out the appropriate action, create a plan, get the required financial support, pick a contractor, and monitor the results. We're a long way from the party to celebrate the new restoration.

*(photo by Frank Konacki)*

## "What Took Place Here: The Annexation of Allegheny City"

Join the Allegheny City Society board of directors on Thursday, September 27<sup>th</sup> for a lecture and round table on the history and consequences of the annexation of Allegheny City to the City of Pittsburgh. Great opportunity to hear the real story, see "before" and "after" photographs, meet and greet Allegheny and North Side residents—past and present. Northland Public Library, Lower Level Meeting Room.

**From 7:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. No Charge.**

## Upcoming Tour of Allegheny City

**Saturday, October 20, 2007, "What's  
Happening in Allegheny Today"**

Join the Allegheny City Society for a guided motor coach tour of the old neighborhoods surrounding the Allegheny Commons. Visit the national historic districts and community development areas of East Allegheny (Deushtown), Central North Side, Mexican War Streets, Manchester, Allegheny West, Allegheny Center and the Allegheny Commons. Catch up on all the wonderful things that are happening in our neighborhoods! Wear comfortable walking shoes. Some places that we visit are not handicapped accessible.

From 8:45 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. \$40.00 per person with luncheon served. Reservations are required. Mail to the ACS at P.O. Box 100255, Pgh, PA 15233.

## Commemoration Banquet and Re-enactment

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1907, the City of Allegheny ceased to exist, being annexed by its sister city, Pittsburgh. To commemorate this event, the Allegheny City Society will sponsor a dinner on the evening of December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007 from 6PM to 10PM and a reenactment of Miss Allegheny being escorted across the Allegheny River by Pa Pitt at 12 o'clock noon on December 7<sup>th</sup>.

The dinner will be held at the Grand Hall at the Priory in Deushtown (aka East Allegheny) and will include an entertaining program recognizing the importance of the annexation. The cost for this event will be \$30 per person. Cash Bar all evening. Advanced reservations are required.

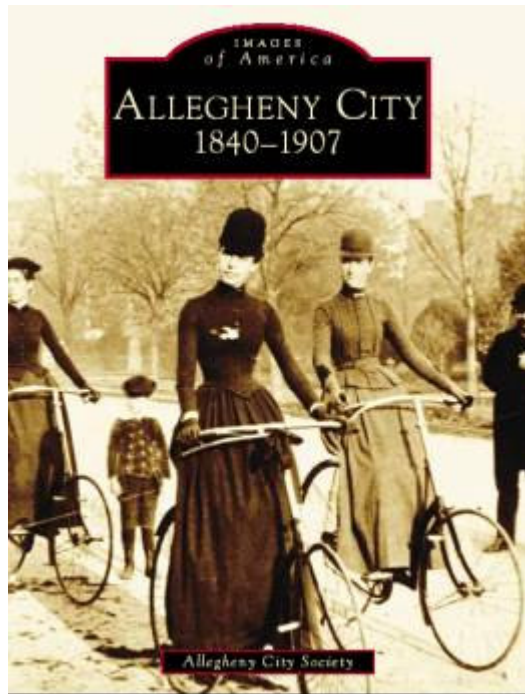
Volunteers are needed to assist the Board. Please email Mike Coleman at [mcoleman@alleghenyrd.com](mailto:mcoleman@alleghenyrd.com).



# *Allegheny City 1840-1907*

## **Accepted for Publication**

*Allegheny City 1840-1907* was completed on schedule, mailed to Arcadia Publishing Co., and accepted by them for publication. We expect delivery in mid-November, just in time for the December Annexation Centennial events. The ACS is accepting orders now. The pre-publication price is \$22.50 including tax and shipping.



## **Glimpse of the Greatest Generation**

Four hundred World War II letters were found in the attic of the new restaurant called “Sassie Marie’s” (formerly “James Street”) while cleaning the building during the renovation work this spring. The letters were from World War II servicemen to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Ward Service Club. The Service Club had sent small money orders to local soldiers and sailors who were serving overseas. The money was raised and the recipient selected during weekly bingo nights that the club conducted. The letters were sent to the club thanking them for the gift.

John Canning and David Grinnell, both board members of the Allegheny City Society, were told of the find and collected all the letters they could gather up. These letters were in relatively good shape for being in an attic for over 50 years.

The ACS is planning to write for a grant for the cataloging and preservation of the letters. If anyone has information or pictures of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Ward Service club, please contact the Society.

## **Jubilee Celebration in the Park**

Hosted by the North Side/North Shore Chamber of Commerce, the fifth annual event celebrated our neighborhoods and our business districts. Held in the East Park of the Allegheny Commons, this year, we paid tribute to the famous women of Allegheny—past and present—with large puppets designed by Cheryl Capezzuit.

A history tent to honor the centennial of the annexation of Allegheny City (North Side) to the City of Pittsburgh in 1907 had pictures of Allegheny City from the Carnegie Library on display. This also afforded an opportunity to record on paper and digital audio memories of Allegheny City and the North Side.



Joe Nick, owner of the Mayfield restaurant on Perrysville Avenue, was one of the people interviewed by Larry Berger, whose radio program, “The Saturday Light Brigade”, is broadcast on WRCT from the Children’s Museum.





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