

# REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

## OUR YEAR IN REVIEW

Remembering the many highlights of the past year

by Ruth McCartan

With only a small handful of North Side history lovers, it is once again amazing what we accomplish every year. The year started off with the Winter Film Series produced and directed by our own Tom Wilson. The first in the series was *Undaunted: the Forgotten Giants of the Allegheny Observatory* produced and directed by Dan Handley of the University of Pittsburgh. The film was his mission and he succeeded in giving life to two Allegheny City scientists who worked at the observatory, Samuel P. Langley and John Brashear. By attending the second film, a silent film star named Thomas Meighan was rediscovered. Mr Meighan was born and educated in Allegheny City, he left for the theater; and with his Irish good looks, was able to transfer to the silver screen. Viewing his 1922 silent film *Manslaughter* was enhanced by the accompaniment of live music by Tom Roberts. The final film Director Wilson selected was the 1939 John Wayne film *Allegheny Uprising*, also starring Claire Trevor. Wayne, in a coonskin cap, is fighting the British who are selling guns to the “Indians.”

Once again the Society partnered with the Greater Pittsburgh Civil War Roundtable for a one-day tour to West Virginia. Featured were the various locations attacked by the raiding rebel forces of William (Grumble) Jones and John Imoden. For once it didn't rain and the weather was sunny for this tour of the hills and hollows of the great state born during the conflict of the Civil War.

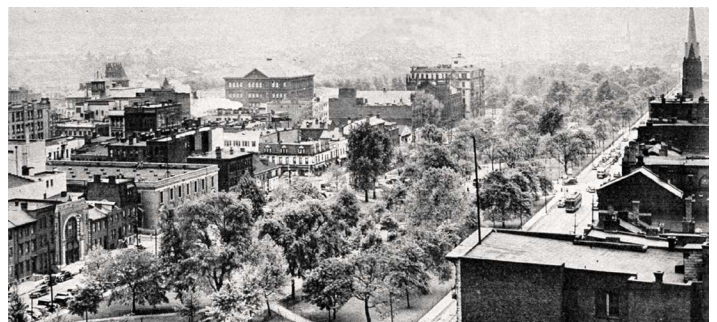
The April Annual dinner meeting was held at the Cardello building with Mike Shealey giving us a history of the building the former National Casket Company. Filmmaker Dan Handley who gave us the film that was highlighted at the Winter Film Series, was given the Rimmel Award. Dan's film *Undaunted* will keep the history of Allegheny Observatory and the scientist who worked there relevant for future generations. The President's award went this year to Councilperson Darlene Harris, for her work in helping keep the spirit of Allegheny City and the North Side alive and growing.

The premier event of the year was the commemoration of the feared invasion of the city by the rebel Confederate

forces of General Robert E. Lee 150 years ago. We gave two bus tours, with a lunch break in between of the five earthen fortifications hastily erected by the citizens of Allegheny City. The 2013 summer featured four musical events held outside on the steps of the old Buhl planetarium. What an eclectic mix of music with something for everyone—brass band to tango. The River City Brass Band and the Allegheny City Ragtime Orchestra played in early July, with Daphne Alderson and Alba Flamenco following later in the month. The series ended with the showing of a silent Charlie Chaplin film with live piano accompaniment. That event was held in the New Hazlett Theater to a packed house.

The Society was in attendance with a sales table at Doo Dah Days, Mexican War Streets House Tour, and the Allegheny West Christmas House Tour. Along with programs and events, the Society still has housekeeping chores such as filling out sales tax forms and federal tax returns. A special Thank You to the finance committee of Amelia Gehron and Lois Yoedt for keeping us legal by filing these reports on time. The Societies newsletter featuring articles of original research would not appear without the dedication of our writers and the fabulous ability of our newsletter editor Donald Zeilman.

Society Board members meet every January to plan the events for the year. The year 2014 has some great programs coming up. Stay tuned for an event in June celebrating the Great Pittsburgh and Allegheny Sanitary Fair and a fall tour of the architecture of R. Maurice Trimble. That is not all we have in store. A tour, *Presbyterians of Allegheny* and trip outside of Allegheny to Northland Public Library for a talk on the orphanages of Allegheny is being planned. Watch your newsletter and the web site for details.



1940 VIEW OF the North Commons along North Avenue

# KANSAS CITY TO HOLLYWOOD

Allegheny's William Powell achieves stardom

by Tom Wilson

In our last *Reporter Dispatch*, we talked about William Powell's early life in Allegheny. He would look back fondly on his childhood here in his later years, and no doubt took many valuable lessons with him when in 1907, William Powell's father Horatio took a better job in Kansas City, and moved the family there.

William became a leading citizen of the Kansas City High School, where he edited the school paper, sang in the glee club and participated in several activities. His success in a public speaking class led the teacher to suggest that Bill get involved in acting in the Shakespeare Club and perform in the school's plays.

Bill loved acting, and decided that would be his career—not a career in law, as his parents had planned. When he lived in Manchester, his after-school job had been delivering dry cleaning from Pfeiffer's Allegheny Steam Laundry. This vital experience helped Bill get a job in the Gent's Furnishing Department of the Emery Bird Thayer Dry Goods Store in Kansas City. There he learned the ways of haberdashery; he would always afterward be known for his excellent taste in clothing.

Upon graduation, William decided he did *not* want to go to Law School at Kansas University; instead, he would attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City!

Horatio would have none of it, and refused to support his son's plan. To raise the money to attend acting school, William took a job at the Kansas City Telephone Company, and quickly found that his salary there would not pay the tuition at the Academy.

In desperation, he composed a 23 page letter to his wealthy great-aunt Elizabeth in Sharon, Pennsylvania, pleading for a loan to help him afford acting school. She sent him \$700, and he vowed to pay her back once he made his fortune as an actor. It ended up taking him 11 years!

At the American Academy, Powell studied his trade with classmate Edward G. Robinson, and graduated in 1912. He started getting small parts off-Broadway and with stock companies, and around this time met and fell in love with

actress Eileen Wilson. They married at age 22. He returned to Pittsburgh and briefly worked with Harry Davis' acting company as part of his stock company experience. (You may recall that fellow Alleghenian, Thomas Meighan, was also part of Davis' troupe.)

Another company he worked with featured the director Leo Dietrichstein. Powell would later claim that Dietrichstein: "... (W) as a German master, who taught me nearly everything I now know about acting." The Dietrichstein method helped Powell develop a style that projected easy believability without the standard bombast of 1910s-period acting.

Finally, he landed a part in a Broadway success called *Spanish Love*, playing the romantic bad guy in 1921.

(*Spanish Love* just happens to have been written by fellow Alleghenian Mary Roberts Rinehart, and Avery Hopwood. It was their follow-up hit to *The Bat*. You may recall our very first film screened in the 2012 Allegheny City Society Winter Film Series was the 1930 film version of Rinehart's *The Bat*.)

Broadway success led to Bill getting noticed by motion picture producers in the New York area. He was offered a part in a John Barrymore movie, *Sherlock Holmes*, in 1922. It was a small part, but he could see that film work might be more lucrative than stage work.

They liked him in the part, and soon more offers started coming in. He must have looked good in tights, because he kept getting parts in costume dramas, often as the bad guy. And as the new movie business started moving to the West Coast, he found himself shooting movies in both Hollywood and New York. His already peripatetic actor's life further strained his marriage to Eileen. They attempted to reconcile, having a baby in 1924, but they separated in 1925. He could see the handwriting on the wall, and decided to move to Hollywood.

There he worked with all the best actors of the day, from Barrymore, the Gish sisters, Clara Bow and Ronald Coleman to fellow Alleghenian Thomas Meighan (*Tin Gods*, 1926.) He also moved to more complex roles such as George Wilson, the killer of Gatsby in the 1926 version of *The Great Gatsby*. As these actors got to know him on set, they recognized his wit and charm and recommended him for more dramatic, romantic and comedic roles.

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With the arrival of sound, all of his years of training on the stage paid off. William Powell smoothly made the transition to talkies at Paramount studios, and started edging into the top billing on the marquee. As detective Philo Vance in a series of mysteries, Powell became a leading man, bringing his natural acting style into cinema. Audiences loved him, and his acting career started to pay more than he might have made as a lawyer.

He moved his parents to Hollywood to live with him at the end of the Roaring Twenties, and made father Horatio his business manager. As a very eligible bachelor, he finally divorced Eileen in 1931, but moved her and William Powell Jr. out west so that he could remain a part of the boy's life.

Romance bloomed in 1931 on the set of the aptly-named *Man of the World* with his young co-star, Carole Lombard. Despite the 16 year difference in their ages, Carole was taken with Bill's charm. Their marriage did not last long, but they remained friends and even continued to date after they divorced in 1933.

His Paramount contract expired in 1931, and he signed an even more lucrative contract with Warner Brothers. But the Depression and fewer quality roles at Warners led Powell to sign with MGM Studios in 1934. Here he was to achieve his greatest success.

Cast as detective Nick Charles in *The Thin Man*, Powell appeared opposite Myrna Loy as his wife, and The Thin Man franchise was born. The playful chemistry of the happily married couple was a hit with audiences, and Powell's performance landed him his first Oscar nomination for Best Actor in 1934. Loy and Powell were paired in a total of 13 films, and six of those were Thin Man films.

Sultry Jean Harlow was Bill's true love, but with her three previous divorces and his two, he did not rush into another marriage. And MGM kept him busy; as "The Great Ziegfeld," he was critically acclaimed, and as "My Man Godfrey," in 1936, he was nominated again for Best Actor. Also that year, he was teamed with Loy for the follow-up *After The Thin Man*, considered by many to be the best of the Thin Man series.

Tragedy struck in 1937, with the death of Jean Harlow by uremic poisoning. Within a year, Powell was diagnosed with rectal cancer, and found himself a pioneer in the use of radiation as treatment of his cancer. The treatment was successful, and he returned to films in 1939 in *Another Thin Man*. But Bill was starting to age out of the better parts, and wasn't quite as believable as a romantic lead. His work scheduled slowed.

With his health returned, he met and fell in love with 21-year old Diana Lewis. Soon they were wed, and they remained married for 44 years.

In 1946, *Life With Father* was the longest-running non-musical play on Broadway, and Powell asked Louis B. Mayer to buy the rights so that Powell could play the lead in the movie version. While \$500,000 gave MGM severe sticker shock, Warner Brothers were as sure as Powell that it would be a hit. When Jack Warner got the rights, he invited Powell to come over on loan. As the eponymous Father in *Life With Father* Powell earned his third Oscar nomination. We can speculate that perhaps his convincing portrayal was informed by the memory of his father Horatio back when they lived in Manchester.

Powell had also inherited his father's financial acumen, and shrewd investments in his highest-earning years allowed him to ease into retirement. He closed out his acting career at the age of 63 on a high note: as Doc, the world-weary but roguish ship's doctor in *Mister Roberts*.

Placid in retirement, William and Diana spent the next 28 years happily in Palm Springs. He passed away on March 5, 1984 at the age of 91 of complications from diabetes. William Powell left behind a legacy of 99 remarkable films and will be remembered as one of Hollywood's greatest actors—but we will remember that he was born on Federal Street and grew up in Manchester!

## WINTER FILM SERIES

Please mark your calendars and join us at the Allegheny Unitarian Universalist Church for the Allegheny City Society's Winter Film Series, this year featuring some of William Powell's greatest films. Tuesdays at 7:00 PM.

» **March 25** – *After the Thin Man* (1936) starring William Powell and Myrna Loy



» **April 15** – *Life With Father* (1947) starring William Powell, Irene Dunne and Elizabeth Taylor

## WINTER TOUR AT THE FAIRMONT

Seeing the artifacts uncovered during construction

by Ruth McCartan

Freezing temperatures and snow could not stop some history minded people from a visit to this special hotel. The hotel's event manager Julie Abramvich, gave us a short history of the Fairmont chain of luxury hotels. This Canadian firm tries to have each of its hotels to be unique. Another hotel hallmark is the featuring of local art talent in the hotel décor. Historic artifacts found during the construction of the hotel fit this concept of uniqueness to perfection. Christine Davis, of Christine Davis Consultants, was the lead archeologist for the Fairmont project located at Three PNC Plaza and conducted the tour. Ms. Davis told of the fascinating work excavating the site of the hotel. Sometimes the team would be working 26 feet down while brushing dirt away from a fragile glass wine bottle. She expressed the euphoria of discovering long-buried items such as dolls heads, a quill holder or a very rare lithophane from ancient wells and privies. C. Yeager and Co., the first department-like store in Pittsburgh, which had been forgotten for over 160 years, came back to life during her presentation. Christain Yeager, the owner lived

above the North Commons of the City of Allegheny and was on the board of directors of the House of Refuge. With the help of all these discoveries—over 26,000 items—the PNC Legacy Collection was created. The Fairmont decided this was the unique expression that they wanted to showcase in Pittsburgh. The main lobby floor and the second floor have wonderful display cases highlighting the discovered pieces. The 185-room hotel has artifacts featured on every guest room floor which we got to see on this private tour. The spectacular view from the 23rd floor of the Fairmont was an add-on benefit. Ms Davis joined us for lunch at the Habitat restaurant at the completion of the tour.



PORCELAIN  
DOLL HEADS  
from the site  
excavation are  
now on display  
at the hotel.

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## VISITING THE FRICKS

Tour of the Frick Art and Historical Center

by Ruth McCartan

Over 23 people gathered on January 19 for a tour of both the grand mansion of coke baron Henry Clay Frick and the art museum featuring the civil war era drawings from the Becker Collection. Our large group composed of both Allegheny City Society and The Greater Civil War Roundtable members was divided into two so we could enjoy a more personal experience with the house Frick and his family enjoyed from 1882 to 1905. We learned of the assassination attempt by anarchist Alexander Berkman on Frick and saw the very room he convalesced in. Frederick Osterling of Allegheny City did a wonderful remodeling of the house after Frick purchased it keeping many of the original features. Both public and private areas of the house were toured and you got a real understanding of difference between such as types of wood used and paint instead of wallpaper.

After the house tour we got to wander through the greenhouse, today they grow some vegetables used in the café on site. In the early 1900s, Mrs. Frick had her gardener grow flowers in the greenhouse for year-round floral displays. Times have changed.

The Carriage Museum visit was informative with volunteers who could explain to you how to manually work the windshield wipers while regulating the gas mixture and shifting the gears. The real gem of the visit was viewing the drawings from the Becker collection. Our knowledgeable docent gave us the history of the collection, how it was discovered and conserved. Today we have 24-hour access to the news and photos from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan but not so in the 1860s. Special artists travelled with the civil war armies sketching the action of the battles and the tedium of camp life. Hastily completing the drawings the artist then sent them back to the engraver who prepare them for publication in one of the national newspapers of the day—*Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. To demonstrate the refinement from draft to newsprint the Frick exhibited the original sketch alongside the published newspaper containing the image. The Becker collection gives the viewer an uncommon glance at the many facets that made up Civil War army life.

Our next combined travel tour will be April 5, we are off to Ohio so mark your calendars—you won't want to miss a minute of it. More on this event will be posted on our Facebook and web pages. If you have not climbed into the electronic age call 412 364-6132 for more information.

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO THE ANNUAL MEETING OF  
*The Allegheny City Society*

Wednesday, April 16, 2014— Dinner 6:00 pm & Program 7:00 pm

The Company Room at Bistro Catering Co.,  
415 East Ohio Street, North Side

Luscious Dinner Buffet prepared by the culinary artists of The Bistro Catering Company  
The William Rimmel Award to be presented to Dan Rooney and Carol Peterson,  
authors of highly acclaimed 2013 book *Allegheny City – A History of Pittsburgh's North Side*  
All members their guests and friends are invited to this annual event.

Hope to see you there!



Name .....

Phone .....

e-mail .....

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

..... No! I cannot attend. Keep me posted on other events

..... I am attending the program only

Please enclose a check for \$25.00 to cover the cost of the buffet dinner, and mail to:

ALLEGHENY CITY SOCIETY, PO BOX 100255, PITTSBURGH, PA 15233

Mail your response to the Society by April 9th

For more information, call 412 364-6132



# PRESBYTERIAN ALLEGHENY TOUR

How Allegheny became a center for Presbyterianism



Allegheny Theological Seminary, Allegheny, Pa.

A century ago there were three Presbyterian theological seminaries in Allegheny City: one for the Presbyterians, one for the United Presbyterians, and one for the Reformed Presbyterians. There were also over 25 Presbyterian congregations within the borders of Allegheny itself. ACS Director Dave McMunn is heading up a team of folks who will be organizing a program and tour on Saturday the May 3.

They will be explaining how Allegheny became a “Little Edinburgh” or “Little Glasgow,” or “Little Belfast.” They will also focus on the roots of these various branches of Presbyterianism, why it was so prominent in Allegheny, and the impact of these congregations of the broader community. More information about the program and tour will be available at the ACS annual meeting on April 16.

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