

REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore



LOOKING GOOD

by Bette McDevitt

Irene, Norma, Mum, Reg and Wilson

This is my family and their friend Wilson, sometime in the 1920s, on their way to Niagara Falls. You would think, from the photo, that they were part of the Gatsby crowd. In truth, they were just scraping by.

Except for Wilson, who is on the far right. He had big bucks, and he was mad for Aunt Irene, but she didn't love him. That's her on the far left, enjoying her own roaring '20s. My uncle Reg, age 18, is beside Wilson, then my grandmother, Mum, 52, and my mother, Norma, 32. Missing from the picture was the third sister, Jen, who would have been about 30, a devilish 30. My father, Louis, must have taken the picture.

My parents, living in New Castle, were the only members of the pack to leave the North Side of Pittsburgh. They were plain white bread, compared to the rest of the yeasty bunch. My father had worked in Pittsburgh as a chauffeur for Frank S. Love, who owned coal mines. Louis was responsible for the maintenance of the Pierce Arrow Mr. Love owned, and with that experience, he got a foothold in the automotive business, climbed aboard and rode into the middle class. He worked in, and then owned, an auto parts store.

My mother had contacted spinal meningitis three months after their marriage, while still living in Pittsburgh, and it left

her with a creeping paralysis of her left side, which eventually immobilized her. My father was at her side, in every way you can imagine.

After the move to New Castle, letters flew back and forth between the women. Through these letters, and avid use of a Brownie camera, we get a look at life in a Pittsburgh working class family, living in one rental or another, second floor walkups, sometimes big old houses. But always, with their heads above water, making the best of it, dancing to the Victorola in the dining room, having a Sunday evening meal of chipped ham sandwiches around a big table, and clearing away the dishes to make room for a weekly card game. We often came for Sunday visits, along with other relatives who came from other crannies of the North Side. People gathered in those days.

The letters only cover the time from 1920 to 1930 – there were more, but not saved – and they don't touch on the big issues which surely affected their lives, but thanks to historians who dug around in musty records, it's possible to put the family's life in a broader context.

This Pittsburgh family, all women except for Reg, had worked out a support system, pulling their wages to share a living space, and everything else. Mum was the mainstay, and Irene, who, after a brief marriage that produced two sons, and some abuse, was always with Mum. The other two siblings, Reg and Jen, were in and out, before and between marriages. The rest of us were there for week long vacations that we dreamed of all year long. We also took an annual affordable vacation at a working farm, Minnis's Norway Fir Farm, in Sheakleyville, Pennsylvania, that people are still talking about 70 years later.

Mum, whose parents emigrated from Germany, had two hard luck marriages. Evan Vincent Davies, father of Jen and Norma, delivered meat in a horse drawn wagon and died in 1902 when his wagon was hit by a train at a crossing in Braddock. Jen, not one to waste words, described Mum's reaction: "She almost passed out of the picture."

The coroner's report of the accident records the testimony of three railroad employees, who were questioned in a manner that relieved the railroad of any responsibility. The employees

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reported that Davies had not heeded their warnings and that the train was going only 25 miles per hour. The newspaper account had a different version, reporting that Davies had waited for a freight train to be separated, before crossing the tracks, and that a passenger train came hurdling down the track at 40 miles per hour. The newspaper reported that there was no crossing gate and that Davies could not have heard any of the warnings. I never heard of any compensation given to my grandmother. She relied upon the support of her family to get along.

The second husband, father of Irene and Reg, simply walked out on her, never to be seen again. What we do know, from family stories, is that he was abusive.

It was necessary then, as the children reached adulthood that everyone held down a job. At the time, Deutschtown, their neighborhood surrounding East Ohio Street, was growing, as was all of Pittsburgh. According to Nora Faires, in "Immigrants and Industry," an essay in *City at the Point*, the population nearly tripled from 1880 to 1930, going from 235,000 to 670,000. Immigrants accounted for most of this growth, and many Germans had settled on the North Side. The growth was related to the jobs in the iron and steel industry, in the period called the second industrial revolution. These were jobs exclusively for men, unlike the first industrial revolution, when the cotton mills employed women. But the ripple effect opened up employment for women in retail and clerical jobs. Faires gives a description of Deutschtown that echoes what my mother recalled from her childhood. "In the eastern wards of Allegheny the region's first recognizable ethnic enclave grew up...this neighborhood supported a collection of businesses, including bakeries, butcher shops, and beer gardens, which catered to German customers. Deutschtown inaugurated a pattern that would be replicated in subsequent ethnic settlements in the city; the businesses established by middle class immigrants – those outside of industry – became the most visible symbols of immigrant settlements."

In this environment, Mum found a job in a neighborhood drugstore, where she scrubbed floors, ran errands and worked the counter. Jen, with her honey sweet voice, worked the phones at the Fort Pitt Hotel, then at the William Penn. Some of the guests that Jen may have spoken with included celebrities from the Nixon Theater, across the street, Mary Pickford, Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontaine, Elsa Maxwell, Flo Ziegfeld, and Jerome Kern. The hotel was booming in the '20s, under the management of Eugene Eppley. He added 600 rooms, the Grant Street addition, making a total of 1600 rooms, creating the largest hotel between New York and Chicago.

My mother, before she got married, worked as a clerk at Meyer Jonasson and Company, a small downtown department store. Reg, at age 15, went to work learning the electrician's

trade at Braunlich Roessle, in the Strip District. He spoke of selling apples on East Ohio Street as a child.

During a workday, Mum found some money, and wrote to my mother. "This is too good to keep so I have to let you know I found 10 dollars down in the Kenyon Restaurant. Mac (her boss) sent me down to buy him a sandwich. it was laying on the floor right in front of the register where some body had just paid I suppose. Some old man went up to pay but he didn't see it lying there. It wasn't his. I saw it before he got there. At first I thought it was just a dollar until I turned it over." She later wrote that she gave Irene five dollars of the found money for her birthday. (In the letters, I have left their writing style untouched. They had little schooling, but expressed themselves well.)

Irene was losing her hearing, which kept her from working outside the home But she liked to dress well in the flapper style, and attracted Wilson – we don't know if that was his first or last name – whom she strung along, not only for herself, but for the good of the whole family. His car was crucial to getting to New Castle to see my parents. Irene wrote to my mother, "Wilson and I are mad again till the next time. Mum said I better not get mad at him. She wants him to take us down your place on Thanksgiving. so I guess I will have to watch my step. I can't get mad at him, He can't work when I am mad at him."

Jen had the more varied love life. She was married three times, but never to Nick, a brown eyed Italian taxi driver, to whom she returned between marriages – and maybe during. She wrote of her first two marriages, in a casual note to me. "My first marriage was to Henry Zeifert. N.G. [no good] it lasted about a month."

"Then," she wrote, "I married Elmer Bauer, out of pity, and worked like crazy. Six kids. That lasted two years." Poor Elmer was the widower of a relative, and the marriage to Jen was encouraged, if not arranged. Mum wrote to my mother, "Did Jen tell you she was going to marry Elmer next month about St. Patricks day well I don't care he is better than Nick. she will never want and she may learn to love him too. But he may get his bumps from Jen. I dont know." Elmer did get his bumps and Jen moved on to "Red," husband number three, a good natured fellow, who was devoted to her.

Wilson continued to court Irene. In a letter to my mother, Mum wrote, "Wilson got Irene a green alligator purse with amber top it is beautiful she seems to like it that's wonderful. she can hardly treat him civil any more he gets on her nerves so bad. Norma, it is terrible where there is no love nothing seems worth while. I suppose you understand. I am glad you are happy."

Mum was still young and attractive, and went to "the dance" with her daughters. This is how working class people

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ACS SUMMER WALKING TOURS

by Ruth McCarten

The threat of rain had blown off and we gathered for the first of our 2017 summer walking tours on Washington's Landing, formerly Herr's Island. Over 40 people walked the island learning the history found there, which included a stop for young George Washington, Emil Winter's raise from Slaughterhouse owner to bank owner, and the first woman boat race winner Charlotte McAlice.

Former Mayor Tom Murphy brought the island's story to the present day, explaining how North Siders wanted something different for this former industrial wasteland (above left). Jumping through and over many obstacles, the development partners created an oasis of multi-use growth that includes a beautiful green space.

The second summer tour was of Fineview on July 13 (above right), and the third, on July 27, was along upper Woods Run (photos below). The last one is scheduled for August 10 on the North Shore. All tours gather at 6:15, complete paperwork and start walking at 6:30. For more information on the upcoming tour you can load the Meet-Up app onto your cell phone or computer selecting Allegheny City (North Side) history, you will be alerted on all the upcoming events the Society is hosting.

The summer tours are partially funded thanks to a Sprout Fund grant underwritten by the Buhl Foundation. To help fund these events we are involved in a "go-fund-me" project hosted by IOBY. Please think about donating at: www.ioby.org/project/rediscovering-four-north-side-neighborhoods

Your generosity will be matched.



LOOKING GOOD *continued*

socialized in those days. Randy McBee, in his book, *Dance Hall Days: Intimacy, Power, and Leisure among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States*, confirmed that it was common practice: "By all means, commercial leisure, and dance halls in particular, were not only amazingly popular during the first few decades of the twentieth century, but increasingly critical to the formation of day-to-day courting and dating rituals. Many couples fondly recalled the times they spent in dance halls in small and large cities across the country, and many of them were first acquainted with their future spouses on the dance floor."

My mother and Jen both taught dancing at a dance hall above the North Side's Kenyon Theater on Federal Street. Just as McBee described it, Louis courted Norma at the dance hall. She would feel a heavy hand on her shoulder, when she was dancing with someone. "It would be him, and he never lifted his feet off the floor, and he wore black high tops. He was so handsome, though, I couldn't resist," she said many years later.

Sometimes the women went as far as the Penn Shady Ballroom to dance, where Mum met up with Fletcher, who had been one of Jen's boyfriends. She wrote, "Dear Norma, We had a nice time last night. Fletcher was there. You know he is married too he has two children 10 and 11 years old he dont live with her. he said he was only drunk once in his life and it was a sad day he went and got married. He is nice and quiet but awful ugly. His hair is beautiful you know auburn and curly. Jen was real nice did not flirt with him or anything. She may do alright yet."

The women liked to go "over to town and see a show," at the Stanley Theater or the William Penn Theater, or in their own neighborhood at Federal and Isabella. There were plenty of less wholesome forms of recreation on the North Side during the Prohibition Era, described in Dan Rooney and Carol Peterson's book, *Allegheny City*. The *Pittsburgh Post*, in the 1920s, ran many stories by Ray Sprigle, describing "vice resorts," speakeasies and gambling dens on the North Side, all carried on with police protection. The *Post* called it "Sprigle's Roll of Shame."

There is no evidence that the women in this family took part in these activities, but they did play the numbers. I remember the dream books; certain numbers based on your dreams were "sure to win." I willingly participated in this as a runner, in the 1940s, delivering a few coins wrapped in a note to a certain house within the neighborhood.

Most often, the family stayed home and made their own fun, especially on those Sunday evenings, when cousins came by. Mum wrote to my mother "We are all through with our work my kitchen is real clean and warm and peaceful. The rest are all upstairs they are dancing. I think I just heard some one fall."

And the next day, "[cousin] Henry is sleeping here. they had a good time last night first playing cards then dancing. Henry Regis Jen Irene and her fellow dancing and I'm sleeping in the next room. They all had lots of fun. Elmer said he always has a good time when he comes to my house. we had nice sandwiches." Somehow, Mum managed to buy a saxophone for Reg, which he played all his life. Mum wrote this; "Regis gets his first lesson Thursday night he plays two tunes already. aint she nice and cherie. We almost die laughing at him. His instrument is lovely. He laughs at me every time I am telling some body about it is something different once it is a graphophone then machine or something else." And later she wrote, "Regis just went upstairs to play his saxophone that is all we hear every night he is picking up a few tunes now every time he goes to play he says this is a hot one."

It was curtains for Wilson when Jimmy, a smooth talker and svelte dancer who looked like George Raft, came on the scene. Mum began one letter this way; "I always feel so good when my feet aren't tired and burning. Irene and Mr. Wilson had a little quarrel last night because she told him she dont love him or anybody at all. So he called her up twice today then she spoke to him. she dont like a fat man it is to bad I feel sorry for him I just know how he feels but everybody gets that way if they live long enough. I will never tell her to marry him if she dont love him although I know I would have it better. he told her so. I will not be able to work all the time. He is very good natured and kind. so they were talking it over and I suppose they will be just good friends. I guess he would do anything to just be near her because she calls him snot and such nice things ha ha. Jimmy came a while ago and brought her a big box of spaghetti. he is very nice and quiet but he never talks about marriage. Irene said if she was a single girl she would get mad at him Now they are playing dominoes."

In October of 1930, Irene made the final break. She wrote to my mother, "I am sorry but I guess we wont be down Sunday. I had a big fight with Wilson he carried on high over at the dance Monday night he dont want me to dance with anyone else and he just carried on high everyone was looking at us. We rode out the boulevard and he said he dont care if we hit something he was going so fast. I thought this is the end. He came up last night to see if I would overlook the other night so when he went he said he wanted to marry me when I was free and all he could do for Norman (her son) so he said if I ever need a friend I know where to call him. I know I will miss our car. but I wasn't used to it before so I guess I can stand it."

Irene married Jimmy, who had a steady job involving delivery of newspapers throughout the area. Mum lived with them

until she died and Jen, single again, moved in with them. Jimmy did some fencing of small appliances of unknown origin; toasters and boxes of candy bars were accepted by relatives without a question. For the first time, they had a house rather than a walk-up, and he paid the bills. But he had a roving eye. Irene waited up for him most nights, reading recipe books and True Romances. One time, when Jimmy had been gone for a few days, Reg went on a search and found him in a local bar. He suggested it was time for him to come home, and Jimmy slipped off the bar stool and tagged along with Reg.

After Jimmy died, Jen and Irene lived together, stepping around their differences. Irene was interested in cooking and keeping house; Jen was interested in bingo, crossword puzzles, rummage sales, and Nick, who dropped by for afternoon visits. The two of them would go upstairs together, with a wink and nod. Irene would raise her eyebrows and shake her head. Their brother, Reg, remained close, and visited them every few days.

After Irene died, Jen went to a nursing home, with plenty of memories to keep her company until she passed on. The entire saga could have been a dreary soap opera, about poor souls scratching out a barren existence. Instead, they created a robust performance in full dress.

ANNUAL MEETING 2017

Community House Church was the site of the event
by David McMunn

The Annual Meeting of the Allegheny City Society was held at the Community House Church, located on Parkhurst Street at Sandusky. After a delicious buffet dinner that included some of the best slow-roasted barbeque beef brisket that anyone had ever tasted, the meeting was called to order at 6:52 p.m. by David McMunn, meeting chairperson. There was a brief introduction of the caterer, speaker and board members. Dennis Bell was newly elected to the board. A motion was made and approved to re-elect the slate of board officers and directors up for re-election. David then gave a history of the annual meeting, stating that the Allegheny City Society was formed in 1958.

Ruth McCartan, President, spoke on the activities and accomplishments of ACS in 2016. She announced that the newsletter printing had been improved, both in terms of printing stock and color. She also spoke proudly of the Sprout-sponsored *Heartland* tours, conducted in the summer of 2016. The tours were successful and brought more awareness to the neighborhoods. The booklet produced for the tours is being revised and ACS is hoping to have it available soon.

Amelia Gehron, Treasurer, gave an overview of finances. Amelia mentioned the upcoming Kerr Museum tour in Oakmont on May 20, 2017. David McMunn clarified the merging of restricted funds to the general fund. He also mentioned the GTECH walking tour pamphlets and where to get them.

Tom Wilson explained the history of the William Rimmel Award. David McMunn then gave a brief biography of this year's recipient. David presented the award to Christopher George, who was also the guest speaker. The title of Mr. George's talk was taken from his book, *Day-by-Day with the 123rd PA Volunteer Infantry: A Nine-Month Civil War Regiment Mustered in Allegheny City*. A very well-prepared and interesting presentation on the lives of these Civil War men was well-received with plenty of opportunity for audience questions. The book may be purchased through the Allegheny City Society.

Be sure to join us next year for our annual meeting that is tentatively set for Wednesday, April 25, 2018.



MARY CASSATT AWARDS GIVEN

by Amelia Gehron

The Manchester Craftsmen's Guild has been a unique haven, hosting a multi-disciplined arts and learning center for 40 years. This center fosters a sense of belonging and hope in an urban setting. For the past several years, MCG has sponsored an Invitational Arts Exhibition that is open to students in the area. This year, 13 secondary schools participated, and the exhibition culminated in the annual award ceremony on May 3, 2017. At the event, the Allegheny City Society awarded the Mary Cassatt Scholarship Awards to students from Pittsburgh's CAPA High School. The awardees were Kyra Bingham and Allison Pirl, both visual art students at CAPA. The artists stated that their work represents "a coming of age."



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