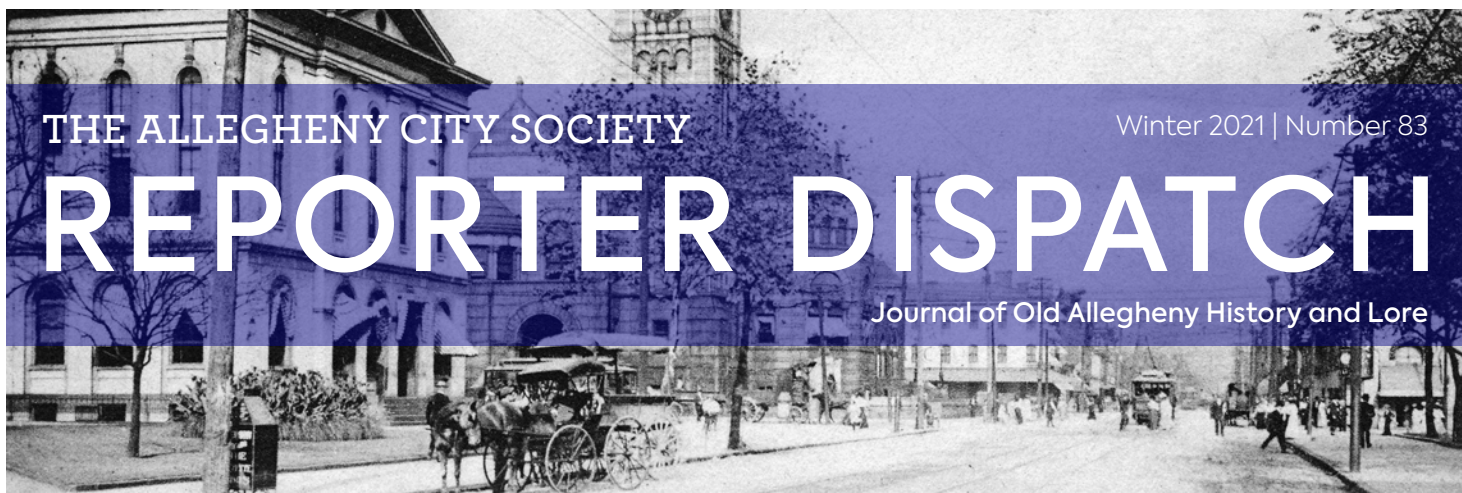


THE ALLEGHENY CITY SOCIETY

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REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore



A Troy Hill Miracle

Dennis N. Ranalli

During the early days of 1960, I was among a group of young men selected to attend North Catholic High School (NCHS) on Troy Hill Road. The school had earned the reputation for high academic standards, outstanding athletics – notably football – and legendary discipline. I was thrilled to have such an opportunity.

NCHS was established in 1939 from its forerunner, the Saint Joseph's Orphan Asylum. The orphanage was originally founded in 1849 by the School Sisters of Notre Dame to care for young survivors of a ship disaster that had claimed the lives of their adult German immigrant parents. For ninety years over 30,000 children were cared for until they reached the age of 14.

As the institution was in transition to this new Catholic high school for boys, the Diocese of Pittsburgh placed it under the administration of the Society of Mary (S.M. Marianists). When the Marianist priests and religious brothers took charge of the school, they already had established a long-standing and successful record of educational service in the diocese.

NCHS rested atop a hill overlooking the H.J. Heinz plant and on brewing days the aroma of vinegar, various pickling products, and Heinz Ketchup often mingled with the not-so-pleasant odors emanating from the stockyards and rendering plants on nearby Herr's Island. On hot days in particular, this pungent mixture of fumes drifted up along the cliff and diffused throughout

the neighborhood – and into our open classroom windows – an indelible olfactory sensation never to be forgotten!

My NCHS class – the Class of 1964 – was designated as the Silver Anniversary Class. We were among the first wave of Baby Boomers that contributed to a trend in population growth that resulted in expanding class sizes during the 1950s and 1960s. Entering NCHS in 1960 my freshmen class was composed of 423 male students, likely the largest class to enter the school up until that time. For various reasons several young men did not complete the four-year curriculum. Still, our graduating class numbered 317 new alumni.

Along with the influx of us Baby Boomers, the geographic catchment area for NCHS also was expanding to encompass not only Catholic parochial school students from the North Side, but also young men from parishes in the growing towns and suburbs to the north along the Allegheny River. This shift in demographics contributed to an enrollment heyday for the school, but with a confounding factor.

Unlike today, students enrolled in Catholic schools during that era were not permitted to be transported on public school busses. Since NCHS had no such vehicles, we were on

our own making the trek each day to and from the crest of Troy Hill Road. While some students were dropped off by parents or neighbors on their way into work; and upper classmen sometimes drove or carpooled with friends; the vast majority of us relied on public transportation, most notably the Pittsburgh Railways Company, which at that time included both streetcars and busses.

There were also several other transportation lines operat-

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Saint Joseph's Orphan Asylum

ing in the region during that era. One example was the Horrell Transportation Company, an independent operation, small by comparison with Pittsburgh Railways. Horrell busses were maintained in a garage located at the corner of Geyer Road and Mount Troy Road. While their route schedules seemed less frequent there was one advantage. Horrell bus routes traversed Mount Troy Road through Reserve Township to Troy Hill Road in the City of Pittsburgh. The Horrell bus that I sometimes rode stopped conveniently near the back entrance to NCHS on Lowrie Street.

But by March of 1964 Pittsburgh Railways along with the other 32 privately owned and independently operated transportation lines throughout the region (including Horrell) were subsumed by the Port Authority Transit of Allegheny County.

Nonetheless, during the early 1960s Pittsburgh Railways was the major source of transportation providing several direct routes up Troy Hill Road for the many students who lived in North Side neighborhoods. For those of us who lived up-river in Millvale, Shaler, Etna, Sharpsburg and extending up to Blawnox we faced an additional challenge. Busses along those routes traveled down Route 28, through the North Side, on their way to Downtown Pittsburgh. The nearest Pittsburgh Railways bus stop to NCHS was at St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church on East Ohio Street at the bottom of the cliff. Those of us who exited there were faced with the daunting task each school day of climbing the 188 steps up to Troy Hill Road!

While this may seem an admirable early morning aerobic workout for young men, it was accomplished toting a heavy load of books and gym bags, and wearing clothing prescribed in a strict code that included dress shoes, dress trousers, dress shirt with collar, a necktie, and a sport coat or blazer. The concrete steps were difficult enough to climb on hot mornings but on winter days when covered with snow and ice, they could be treacherous and nearly impassable.

At the end of the school day the descent down the steps was much less of a challenge, again with the exception of snowy and icy days. Once we had reached the bottom of the steps, the

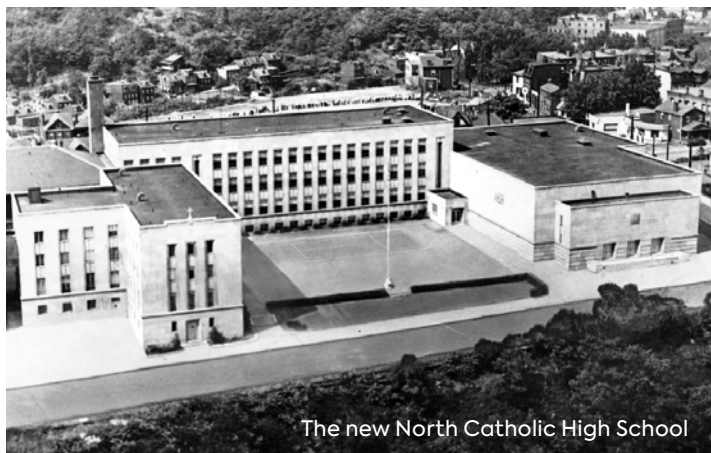


bus stop heading North on East Ohio Street was on the opposite side of the highway directly in the right lane of traffic moving toward Route 28. The large number of students waiting there to catch a bus completely blocked that right lane, but there was just no other place for us to stand. We pressed close to the concrete roadside retaining barrier that separated the roadway from the railroad tracks, but there was no protection: no safety island; no barricade; no flashing caution lights; nothing!

Some guys sat atop the retaining barrier as the rest of us stood, waiting, as cars swerved into the passing lane to avoid ramming into our group. On occasion a stray gym bag on the fringe ended up smashed beneath the wheels of a passing bus. On days when it rained or snowed, we'd be soaked from the mist and spray off passing trucks. But we waited until our buses arrived and as we filled each bus the group outside gradually diminished.

I am reminded of one particular incident that occurred on a snowy winter afternoon during our sophomore year. As we waited for the Millvale bus, two of my classmates, Art Heiles and Fran Meyers, began throwing snowballs at each other. One of Art's snowballs caught the edge of Fran's glasses knocking

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The new North Catholic High School



them to the pavement. The glasses slid along the roadway and at that precise moment a passing vehicle crushed them under its wheels.

As I look back on it now, aside from an occasional smashed gym bag or a pair of crushed eyeglasses, I'm convinced a miracle repeated itself every day for those four years as none of us were seriously injured or accidentally killed while we waited at that bus stop on East Ohio Street to return home safely from our day at NCHS on Troy Hill!

Dr. Ranalli is Professor Emeritus, University of Pittsburgh and a 1964 NCHS alumnus. Most recently his publications have appeared in the Western Pennsylvania History Magazine.



The Year in Review

Ruth McCartan

First of all I hope this winter newsletter finds you and your loved ones healthy and safe.

This will be my last year for writing this review for the Society but more on that a little later. I normally write the review of our activities for our first newsletter of the next year. But this has not been a year we can call anything but normal. The Society is in the pause position right now and hopes to begin 2021 Covid-free with a vaccine and start talking about, and doing, Allegheny City History.

The virus has affected everyone and everything and the Allegheny City Society is no exception. Leaving the ACS Board retreat in February, we did not expect to be unable to even complete one of our planned tours, meetings or programs for 2020. Oh, the fabulous plans we had, which we hope to complete in the coming new year. Evolve and embrace change has been our motto this pandemic year.

Because we could not attempt any programs, the Board decided to do an extra newsletter this year, so four instead of the typical three. I hope you have enjoyed the original research contained there and a special *thank you* to DZ for his wonderful newsletter layout. He makes the Society look great every issue. Most of our ongoing plans have been sidelined for a while, such as the Avery Bell memorial construction and the Veterans monument documentation. The Annual meeting is hopefully back on the calendar for Spring 2021.

We had hoped to present a tour of locations relating to the life of Henry Phipps (a great philanthropist and Andrew Carnegie's boyhood friend and bookkeeper) in September. It was just out of the question. The Society needed a new way to put forward the historical narrative that is Allegheny City. We prepared a request for a Buhl grant asking for money to help us

May we have your e-mail address?

We are asking members to provide the ACS with an e-mail address so that we can improve our communications. The goal is to update ACS activities on a more frequent basis through e-mail. This update will be in addition to our newsletter, the ACS website, and our Facebook page.

The ACS member mailing list also includes a large number of lifetime members who were not previously asked to provide their e-mail address. Know that we will never share your e-mail address with anyone! We are asking all members to submit or confirm their address by sending it to Charles Schneider at chucschi@aol.com. If you do not have an e-mail address, please call Charles at (412) 366-4927. Thank you!

create, produce and present virtual history of Allegheny City. We are in the process of creating our own YouTube channel. This way we can produce digital historical content and disseminate it via the internet. Anyone who has a computer or smart phone can access it. This will be a new way to engage our members and expand our reach. We hope that we can spread the history of Allegheny City and the North Side to the world in this way. You can see some of our tentative attempts on telling Allegheny City history virtually by going to our Facebook page and typing in facebook.com/alleghecycitysociety there you will find two- to three-minute short clips on Philotius Dean, Louis Thiel, Lt. Col. James Hull, and Bishop Calvin Kingsley to name a few. It's only a beginning, which we hope to build on with funding from the Buhl.

The November Board meeting (via Zoom) was declared our annual meeting for 2020. New Board members were added and some current Board members' tenures renewed. Election of officers followed, with David Grinnell as the new incoming President, Jon Klosinski becoming Secretary, and Carole Ashbridge, Treasurer of the Society. Stepping down after decades on the Board and in leadership, both Amelia Gehron and I felt that it was time to let others become more involved. Thank you for all your support during our time in office. I know the new leaders of the Society will make us all proud and continue the mission of the Society in the coming years.

As we look forward to the new year, the Society is grateful for your continued membership and support of our mission. We hope to be gathering together again in Spring 2021. Until then, have a Happy New Year and please stay safe.

Looking for some good reading for the long winter days and nights ahead, check out the offerings in the Allegheny City Society store. For your convenience we now offer checkout with PayPal or a credit card. Watch for additional publications to be added. alleghecycity.org/product-category/books



Local Negro League Connections

Craig Britcher

The year 2020 marked the centennial anniversary celebration of the founding of the Negro National League, providing a timely opportunity to examine the story of Allegheny City's and the North Side's Negro Leagues connections. Of most significance, a young North Side teenager proved to be one of the greatest ballplayers ever.

The first documented local baseball game was played on Allegheny's West Commons in 1857, but in the ensuing years few games with African American players were noted in newspapers. In 1882, the Pittsburgh Alleghenys baseball team (later to become known as the Pirates) was formed and joined the American Association, a major league. The Alleghenys first faced the Toledo Blue Stockings and their African American catcher Moses Fleetwood Walker in May of 1884 at Allegheny City's Union Park. Along with his brother, Weldy, the pair were sadly the last African Americans to play in the majors until Jackie Robinson debuted with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. By 1887, the same year the Alleghenys joined the National League, the second known separate professional league for African American players was established – the National Colored Base Ball League. Manager Walter Brown led the league's Pittsburgh Keystones, the first prominent local African American team. Unfortunately, they only briefly called Recreation Park (the renamed and renovated Union Park field) their home in the spring of 1887. This site can now be visited in the area bordered by modern day Pennsylvania, Galveston, and Allegheny Avenues, and Behan Street.

Sandlot and industrial baseball teams filled the Pittsburgh sports pages in the following decades. The Murdoch Grays, which were mostly composed of skilled African American steelworkers at the Homestead Steel Works, changed their name to the Homestead Grays in 1912 and grew in strength. In 1920, Rube Foster founded the Negro National League. The following season a new and separate Keystones team played as a league affiliate, then in 1922 as a full member in the Hill District's Central Amusement Park. In the following years, a Pleasant Valley teenager named Joshua Gibson grew stronger on the North Side and later became the greatest slugger in the history of the Negro Leagues.

In the early 1920s Josh Gibson's (b. 1911) family left Buena Vista, Georgia, moving north to follow their father Mark, who earlier found work in a Pittsburgh steel mill. The teen-aged Gibson began developing his baseball skills while living on North Charles Street and playing for Gimbel's Department

Store, the (then more amateur) Pittsburgh Crawfords, and Westinghouse Air Brake, among other teams. His father, Mark Gibson was listed in city directories as a laborer who lived at 2118 North Charles Street in 1926–1927, and at 2106 North Charles/Charles Street from 1928–1930, the year son Josh moved away at the age of 18. These homes, once near the present-day BreadWorks, no longer stand. Gibson had enrolled in vocational school to become an electrician, but his athleticism eventually paved the way to further opportunities that culminated in a busy and unfortunately tumultuous 1930 season. That summer Gibson signed with the Homestead Grays and played his first game on July 31 at Forbes Field. Recently married in March, that year's successes were tragically marred when his wife Helen died while delivering twins in August. Josh struggled during the Depression, and despite his wife's death, soon became one of the most prolific and feared sluggers, if not the most, in baseball history. A case can be made for either Gibson's 1931 Homestead Grays team or his 1935 Pittsburgh Crawfords team as the best Negro Leagues club ever assembled.

Josh Gibson tragically passed away in 1947 in his mother Nancy's home on the North Side's Strauss Street just months before Jackie Robinson's debut. In 1972, the great catcher became just the second Negro Leagues player to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, following pitcher Satchel Paige. More local honors followed years later. A street off North Charles was named Josh Gibson Drive and in 2017, murals of Negro Leagues greats – each with an attributed quote, were rededicated and erected at the corner of Wilson Avenue and West Burgess Street on the North Side's Perry South. Josh Gibson is flanked by eight players and owners including the aforementioned Rube Foster. Those with prominent local ties include Satchel Paige, Cum Posey, and Gus Greenlee. Please consider visiting the park if you have not yet – it offers a COVID-safe outdoor destination to learn about and contemplate the Negro Leagues' heritage.

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DEPT.	CHECK NO.	NAME	571
Gage	40	Joshua Gibson	
PLACE OF BIRTH	Georgia	DATE OF BIRTH	12-21-11
IF FOREIGN BORN ARE YOU NATURALIZED?		IF NOT, HOW FAR HAVE YOU PROGRESSED?	
HAVE YOU EVER WORKED FOR THIS CO.?	No	WHERE WERE YOU LAST EMPLOYED?	
5-2-30	19	THE ABOVE STATEMENTS ARE TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF.	
L S Weight		Joshua Gibson	
WITNESS		APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE	
EMP. DEPT.	ACCEPTED	DATE	INITIALS
	REJECTED	WILL START TO WORK	5-5-30
	ACCEPTED	OCCUPATION	Janitor
	REJECTED	ADDRESS IN PENCIL	2106 Charles St., N.S., Pittsburgh, Pa.
RELIEF DEPT.	ACCEPTED	No.	49379
	REJECTED		
REMARKS			

Signed 1930 Westinghouse Air Brake employee card, listing Josh's [North] Charles Street address (Courtesy of the Detre Library & Archives, Heinz History Center)



Josh Gibson mural in Perry South

The Josh Gibson Foundation, run by Josh's great-grandson Sean Gibson, meaningfully continues the great slugger's legacy. As of the time of this writing, Sean is advocating for the renaming of baseball's National and American League Most Valuable Player (MVP) awards, recently stripped of former baseball commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis's name by the Baseball Writers' Association of America. Post-WWII Pirates MVP award winners include Dick Groat (1960), Roberto Clemente (1966), Dave Parker (1978), Willie Stargell (1979), Barry Bonds (1990 and 1992), and Andrew McCutchen (2013). Hopefully future Pirates will win an award named after the former North Sider who, unfortunately like many other Negro Leaguers, never had the opportunity to be honored as the best player in the National and American Leagues – the Josh Gibson Memorial MVP Award.

[Sources]

Craig Britcher, "Josh Gibson – Baseball Star, Westinghouse Employee," *Western Pennsylvania History*, Summer 2011, 8–9.

Josh Gibson Foundation.org, Sean Gibson, and various biographies

Ruck, Rob. *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh*. University of Illinois Press, 1987.

27th Ward World War I Memorial

Ruth McCartan

The fourth anniversary of Armistice Day, celebrating the cease fire ending the fighting in France, November 11, 1922 would be a long day of remembrance for all who participated. Beginning with the dedication of the Boulevard of the Allies downtown, "to the memory of all men and woman of Allegheny County who served in the World War" and ending with a solemn ceremony in the 27th Ward of Pittsburgh's North Side.

Once the service was completed in town, a parade of thousands of men who had served their county in war stepped off. Veterans from the Civil War to returning men from the Great War, marched. The first division of the parade of veterans consisted of service men of the former Allegheny City now the north side of Pittsburgh. They proceeded over the bridge to the corner of Ohio and Federal Streets to the grandstand for a pass and review. Newspapers on that day reported over 20,000 people enjoyed the pageantry. But another dedication was to follow later that November day. The north side veterans proceeded up the valley to a new park for a smaller observance that was far more meaningful and personal.

Groups with the names such as "War Aid Society for the Boys of the Twenty-seven Ward" and the "Citizens Committee of the 27th Ward" wanted a memorial commemorating their veteran sons' service to their country a little closer to home. The American Legion of Allegheny County petitioned the City in October 1919 to have the triangular field between Brighton Road and Davis and Shadeland Avenues named American Legion Park later shortened to Legion Park for a memorial. Money



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was raised and collected. Allen G. Newman, a noted sculptor of monumental scale figures from New York was selected to create the 27th memorial. His "Doughboy" memorial at the intersection of Butler Street and Penn Avenue was dedicated May 1921 featuring a casually posed standing soldier in bronze. The artist was to create a very different commission for Legion Park.

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Allegheny City Society
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The 25-foot-high heroic warrior in granite entitled “Sacrifice” is arguably Newman’s most solemn work among all of his memorials. The warrior has on his decorative breastplate the spreading wings of an eagle representing the United States and on his head the wreath of victory according to Marilyn Evert, the author of *Discovering Pittsburgh’s Sculpture*. Gazing to heaven with a sword across his upturned palms suggests the offering of the lives of the men of the Ward to the service of their worthy nation. Surrounding the base of monument hang his robes with three bronze plaques containing the 1,500 names of the 27th Ward veterans.

The *Pittsburgh Daily Post* reported on November 12, 1922 that a “Miss Virginia Anne Miller, niece of five of the service men whose names appear on the tablets pulled the cord unveiling the monument.” The emotional part of the dedication was the reading of the 30 names of the men who gave the supreme sacrifice. As the soldier’s name was called out, a family member of the dead warrior was given a white rose to place at the base of the memorial.

Over 5,000 people attended the dedication the largest event in the history of the neighborhood. The program closed

as the mournful notes of Taps floated out over the assembled. “Sacrifice” in Legion Park would be the gathering site every year for services honoring and remembering the war heroes of the Ward. The Great War, now referred to as World War I is not the only conflict that the neighborhood commemorated in Legion Park. The park now holds monuments for World War II, and the Korean, and Vietnam wars, and every year a Memorial Day service is held to honor veterans.

The Pittsburgh, Department of Public Works cleaned the bronze plaques on the World War I and II monuments this summer, and also repaired the walkways around Legion Park.

The Society is planning to document and make available on its website the veteran names recorded on the bronze tablets from both the World War I and II memorials found in Legion Park. This is the Society’s way of commemorating the veterans’ service to our country, and keeping their memory alive.

To view two local Memorial Day commemorations from the 1950s, the Allegheny City Society’s Tom Wilson has transferred home movie footage from the VFW archives to YouTube. You may find the links on the Society’s website.