



THE ALLEGHENY CITY SOCIETY

Spring 2022 | Number 87

REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

FROM THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR: 2021

While perhaps we have not been able to gather very often over the last calendar year because of the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, your Board of Directors has continued to meet and work on several projects that have helped keep the Allegheny City Society moving forward.

In January 2021, we were pleased to learn that our application for a Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Historical Marker commemorating the life and work of author Mary Roberts Rinehart was approved. Details for the installation and dedication of that marker are still being worked out with the assistance of our friends in the City-County Building, with a target celebration hopefully early in the summer of 2022.

We housed our Annual Meeting in April using Zoom, which featured an excellent program on the redevelopment of Manchester by Dr. Daniel Holland, who was the recipient of the William Rimmel Award. This was the first time we hosted a Zoom program for our membership, and we learned a few things from it – specifically, that our out-of-town members were eager participants. GREAT News there! Unfortunately, technological limitations are always a challenge for our ability to provide more online programming – but we are working on it! Also at that meeting we welcomed new Board members, Dorrie Smith Ritchie of Observatory Hill and Kathleen Washy of Ross Township. We are so glad to have their participation in our group.

We hosted several small gatherings in the Allegheny Commons during the spring and summer months as a way to gather out-of-doors in a safe manner during the pandemic. These gatherings focused on the life and legacy of Alleghenian, Mary Cassatt, and then three walking tours of various sections of the Commons. These opportunities were a welcomed change after

David Grinnell

being hold up in our homes for so many months, and it was wonderful to see so many of our friends in the Society.

A fall tour of West View Cemetery was planned but had to be canceled because of poor weather conditions. The rescheduled West View Cemetery tour will take place on June 11, 2022.

We are grateful to the Buhl Foundation for providing the Society with some funding that has helped us bridge our financial situation considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with not

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being able to host events where admission fees would have been charged, and with neighborhood house tours cancelled (where we would have set up tables to sell books and merchandise), we found ourselves with limited means to support our newsletters and other projects, all of which would have had a negative impact on our small annual budget. A big thanks to Buhl for their ongoing support of our small but effective group.

One of the key projects of the Society is the publishing of this newsletter. Thanks goes out to everyone who has contributed articles and images that make it a great success and our main communication tool with our membership. Our newsletter editor sure does an amazing job with the layout and the create ways that helps us tell the stories of our dear Old Allegheny and Pittsburgh's North Side. Thank you all for your continuing interest in the rich and diverse heritage of our neighborhoods in this great city.

NORTH SIDE FARMERS MARKET REVISITED

Dennis N. Ranalli

Continuing our story recounting experiences at the North Side Farmers Market. | Part Two: Back on the Farm

Working one summer on a Mount Troy farm helping to gather crops for the market and what was gained through those experiences

In early June of 1960, I had just graduated from St. Ann Parochial School in Millvale and was looking ahead to begin high school in September at North Catholic on Troy Hill. My plan for the summer was to focus attention on baseball. I would continue to collect the latest Topps baseball cards; play for a team in the Millvale baseball league; and follow the Pittsburgh Pirates on their quest to reach the 1960 World Series.

It was then Dad threw me a curve ball. He believed it would be beneficial for me to find a little job and earn a few dollars over the summer; nothing, of course, that would interfere with baseball. But who would hire a kid like me? I wasn't even 14 years-old yet! As our conversation progressed, I realized there was a plan already in the works and soon enough that plan unfolded.

Dad was well acquainted with most of the farmers on Mount Troy. We had seen them on our trips to the North Side Farmers Market and there had spoken with them on several occasions. Together we had visited with them shopping at Brenckle's Farm for starter plants for our vegetable and herb garden, the Niederst Farm for flats of geraniums to decorate the family cemetery plots, or our many trips to the Geyer Farm to buy vine-ripened, fresh-picked produce for our dinner table.

I soon came to learn the plan Dad had worked out. Over the summer months I would be working, as needed, as a hired hand on the Geyer Farm. I was familiar enough with the Geyer brothers from our frequent visits to their truck farm and the idea that I would be working on a farm where vegetables were grown for the Farmers Market had a certain appeal. Yet instinctively, I had an uncomfortable feeling there would be one serious drawback in that plan – my nemesis, Jack – a fierce watchdog I always tried to avoid. He never took a liking to me nor did I to him.

The Geyer farmland like so much in that area was situated on hilly terrain. The property was adjacent to Geyer Road, on a curvy stretch that led from Bauerstown below, up the hill to Mount

Troy Road in Reserve Township. The fields sat back off the main stretch on Geyer Road Extension. The Conrad Geyer family, as with many other Mount Troy farm families, was of German heritage. Sons Edward and Melvin (Buss) Geyer had grown up working on the small parcel of land with their father. After Conrad had passed, Ed was able to purchase adjoining property at a sheriff sale, expanding Conrad's original parcel into a 28-acre farm. Although Ed owned the farm, he and Buss were partners. For them it was not only a way of life it was a total commitment.

The Geyer brothers both were hard workers but different in many ways. Ed was a family man married to Mary. They were the parents of two teenage daughters, both girls a few years older than I was. The family lived in a red brick house with a well-tended yard at the top of the property near the entrance to the farm. Brother Buss on the other hand was a cantankerous bachelor. Set in his ways he lived alone in the Old Homestead toward the end of the property. Next to the old farmhouse stood the equally old barn where Duke, a draft horse was stabled. The only other animals on the farm besides Duke and a few cats was my nemesis, Jack.



Newspaper Ad for North Side Farmers Night Market
(Courtesy of Pittsburgh Post Gazette, October 19, 1957)



The Geyer farm On Mt. Troy as it appeared during the 1950s–60s.
(Courtesy of Linda Geyer Christenson)

The Geyer brothers focused mainly on growing vegetables. But Ed did plant fruit trees, and sold baskets of Bartlett pears, Seckel pears, and peaches at the North Side Farmers Market. They also grew flowers such as pansies, sweet Williams, carnations, and phlox that they sold at the Diamond Market downtown.

Every so often I noticed that Ed dug up a spade full of the purple and white phlox, separating them carefully into smaller clumps. I watched as he placed each clump in a wet sheet of old newspaper, added a handful of soil then wrapped them into small packets that he secured with rubber-bands. These small packets Ed loaded into chip baskets ready for sale at the market.

Daughter Linda Geyer Christenson recalls, “My sister and I grew up going to the market three nights a week, from little up to high school, and in fact did our homework in the truck before the buzzer sounded. When there was a lull later in the evening, Dad would allow us to buy an ice ball, but that wasn’t often. Mom and my sister, Maybelle, would sell the retail produce and Dad and I would oversee loading and unloading the truck, and the wholesale items.”

The Geyer brothers were part of an independent, industrious breed of farmers. They lived simply and frugally; they had to since money earned during the growing season had to last through the winter. The brothers also were ingenious in their ability to adapt used items for reuse in many creative ways. For example, they collected seemingly unrelated items such as used concrete blocks, bricks, and lumber; nails, screws, nuts, and bolts; an old motor or water pump, discarded pipes and fittings. From such odds and ends they possessed the ingenuity to fabricate their own irrigation system to water the fields when the weather was dry.

My job on the farm that summer was intermittent. It was Ed, Buss, and hired hand Clem who worked the farm full-time during the season. Ed’s wife Mary pitched in when crops needed to be harvested and she helped with sales at the market along with their daughters. When extra hands were needed, I and one other fellow my age would get a call to help.

For Norm and me it was a learning process – we were green. Clem would take us aside to give us the low-down on what

to do and how to do it. One job I was given was to keep Duke’s stall cleaned out. And on the farm, there were few things wasted, including horse manure! We weeded – then weeded more – in the cultivated fields. After a field had been harvested, it was our job to clean up the debris. For one entire day, I was given the task of plucking out a large field of rotted kohlrabi. I didn’t even know what a kohlrabi was – never heard the name before – but I’ve never forgotten it since.

When we were asked to work for a day, that meant 8 hours. So, even if it happened to rain that day there were always plenty of chores to do around the farm. Another barn also was used as a garage sat near the top end of the property. When it did rain, we would head to the upper barn to restack piles of old newspapers, collect scattered chip and bushel baskets, clean tools, or sharpen knives.

One day after a soaking rain Ed took me aside as sunbeams began to penetrate through the drifting clouds. He instructed that I look closely at the fields, particularly those that had been scuffed recently and try to spot any shining objects the rain may have uncovered. Ed asked, “verstehen?” So, I did as he instructed and over the course of that summer, I gathered shards of antique glass, a tarnished silver coin, and several flint arrowheads.

Once when I sat down to figure out my pay it only amounted to twenty-five cents per hour for hard work! It was then I began to realize the value of a dollar. I really don’t know how many hours I worked that summer nor even how much I earned, but that was not the point. I was beginning to grasp the value in all the other things I was learning on the farm.

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Ed Geyer working in the fields on the farm mid-1960s
(Courtesy of Linda Geyer Christenson)

Although the brothers grumbled about the hilly fields, the rocky soil, or the lack of rain, they were dedicated farmers, justifiably proud of their labors. Their work was not easy and never was! Being a farmer requires patience – a farm is not a good place for instant gratification. Their years of hands-on experience alerted



them intuitively to understand exactly what needed to be done next; when it was the right time to plow a field, what seeds needed to be planted, to water a field or to pray for rain, to pull weeds or to harvest a crop.

I was amazed at how much time and effort Ed, Buss, Mary, and Clem put into working the farm. Most days as I arrived in the morning, they already were working the fields. When it was quitting time for me, they were loading up the truck with produce to sell at the evening Farmers Market on the North Side. Their pride was reflected in a bountiful harvest; their reward garnered in a successful season of sales at the market.

Epilogue

By summer's end the Millvale baseball season was over, and I can't even recall our won-lost record. As usual, I fell short collecting a full set of Topps baseball cards that later were discarded with the trash. Then in October the Pirates did go on to win the 1960 World Series vs. the New York Yankees – indeed a fond memory that endures. Yet from that one summer I have retained treasured recollections of the many lessons I learned on the Geyer farm . . . and those arrowheads.



Dr. Ranalli is Professor Emeritus, University of Pittsburgh, and is a regular contributor to *The Reporter Dispatch*.

You are cordially invited to the
2022 Annual Meeting of The Allegheny City Society

Telling Our Stories

Wednesday, May 4, 2022

Gathering at 6:00 pm – Refreshments at 6:30 pm – Meeting begins at 6:45 pm

The Chapel Shelter in Riverview Park
159 Riverview Avenue, Observatory Hill, North Side 15214

Presentation of the 2022 Rimmel Award

Our speaker is Brian Butko, Author and the Director of Publications at
the Senator John Heinz History Center

Please RSVP by calling (412) 766-5670 by April 22, or by email at acsannualmeeting@gmail.com

DOWN ON JAMES STREET

The changing uses of the multi-storey building at the corner of James and Foreland Streets

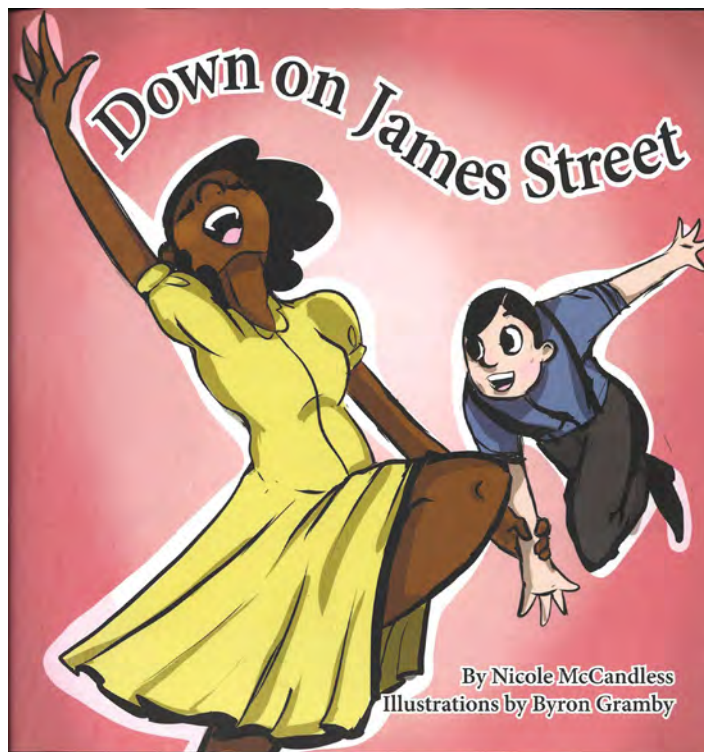
The recent publication of a youth-centered book, *Down on James Street* by Nicole McCandless drew attention to the changing uses of the multi-storey building at the corner of James and Foreland Streets in East Allegheny/Historic Deutschtown. The building, designed in 1898 by the Allegheny City architect Frederick Osterling, was on one of the hundreds of pieces of property in Allegheny, Pittsburgh, and beyond, owned by Mary Schenley, granddaughter of James O'Hara, and heir to one-third of his estate. Following Mrs. Schenley's death in November of 1908, her appointed executors gradually sold off much of the Schenley-owned properties.

In the Fall of 1917 the Schenley estate trustees sold the property and three-story building on James Street to the International Socialist Lyceum for \$7,000. For the next quarter-century this was the site of many Left-leaning labor, political, and social organizations in the Pittsburgh area. An extensive summary of these various groups was listed in David Rosenberg's article, "Pittsburgh Lyceum Home to Labor and Socialist Groups" in the *Pennsylvania Labor History Journal*, December 2005.

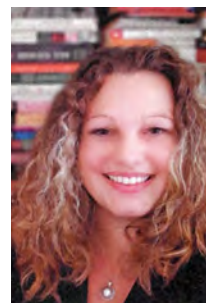
Drawing on Rosenberg's knowledge of labor and social history, McCandless crafted a story of a young, mixed-race couple who fought against the existing forces of de facto segregation evident throughout America. It seems that at times, the Pittsburgh police arrested folks at the Lyceum's social events where inter-racial dating and dancing were the norm. Her work reminds its readers of the courage of some of America's youth in fighting against deeply rooted racist attitudes and practices.

Albert and Katherine Weigand, residents of the "East North Side" neighborhood, purchased the building from the leaders of the Lyceum in late 1941, a few weeks before America's entry into the Second World War. In the four decades that followed, the Weigand family maintained one of the North Side's "go-to" places for good food, good music, and good times. During these years the upper floors of the building were used by community-centered organizations for meetings and programing. The Weigand family closed their business in 1980 and the building became home to the Britton family's "James Street Gastropub and Speakeasy"...a jazz bar. A few years ago the pub's owners closed up shop and put the classic building on the market. Its next "incarnation" is now in the hands of the 422 Foreland Limited Partnership that purchased the place for over 100 times the price Mrs. Schenley's trustees received for the same building in 1917.

John Canning



Down on James Street is based on a real historical incident in 1930's Pittsburgh. Today, young and old can take inspiration from this wonderful story of courage and solidarity, with gorgeous illustrations by Byron Gramby that summon up the style and the cool of that long-gone era.



Nicole McCandless with illustrations by Byron Gramby
Book design by Josephine O'Neil
Published by Hard Ball Press
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Stories of working people struggling for their fair share of society's bounty invite readers to walk in the characters' shoes and to share their hopes and dreams, their joys and their sorrows. Hard Ball Press is dedicated to mentoring working class writers and putting their stories into print, so the world can see their faces, hear their voices, and join them in their struggles. Please visit hardballpress.com



Allegheny City Society
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WEST VIEW CEMETERY TOUR JUNE 11th

Ever wonder what family stories are found behind those artful tombstones in West View Cemetery? This well-maintained "city of the dead" on Cemetery Lane was established by Rodef Shalom Congregation in 1880. Allegheny City's Jewish history is found here in the section we call Allegheny Terrace.

Join us for an afternoon walking tour on June 11 at 1:00 pm. We will explore the tales of a department store founding family, clothes merchants, nationally known religious leaders, club women, suffragists, and even a baseball tycoon. These builders of the City of Allegheny and Pittsburgh await you. Come and learn their interesting stories.

Cost for the tour is \$5. For reservations call (412) 766-5670. This is a working cemetery, and the tour may be delayed for a funeral. We will be walking on uneven ground with a slight elevation, so please plan accordingly!

