

REPORTER DISPATCH

JOURNAL OF OLD ALLEGHENY HISTORY AND LORE

A TROY HILL TRAGEDY

BY DENNIS N. RANALLI

OVER 50 YEARS AGO, on November 17, 1971, a tragic industrial accident unfolded on Troy Hill at the intersection of Gardner and Lowrey Streets, behind what was then North Catholic High School. On that fateful day, crews of the Equitable Gas Company were dispatched from their Division B North Side Shop on Hyperion Street to Troy Hill to complete the routine task of replacing old valves in an underground gas regulator vault.

As work progressed that afternoon the tragedy developed. Methane gas began to leak from a valve on the low-pressure side of a regulator that the men were replacing. There was no explosion, but as the gas accumulated inside the small space the three men working in the vault, with no gas masks, were being overtaken by the escaping methane. The situation quickly became dire.

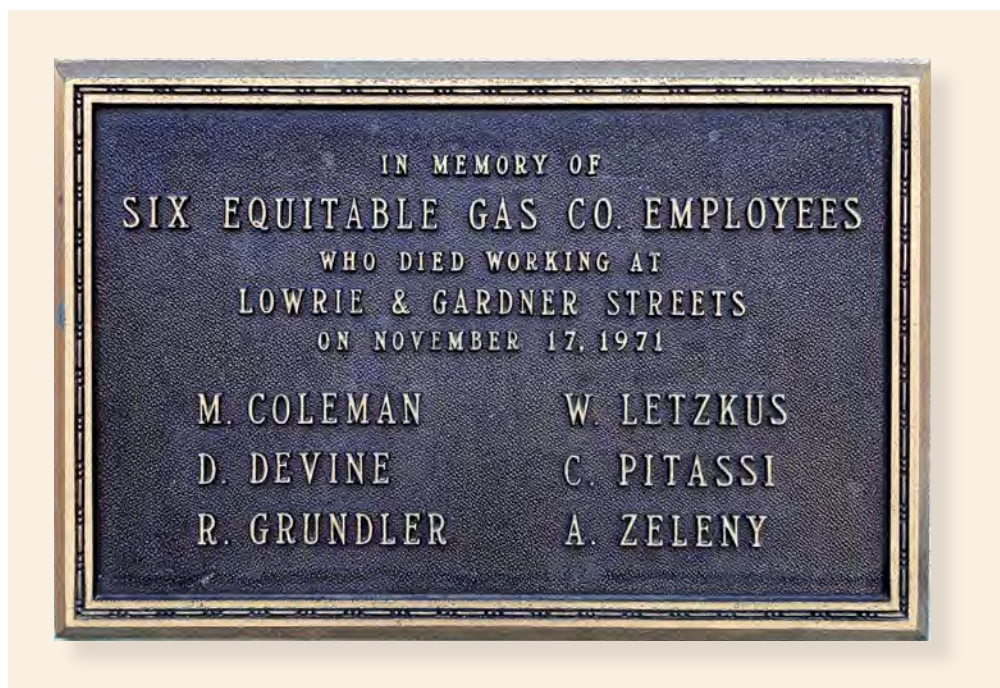
Recognizing the escalating emergency, crewmen above ground initiated rescue attempts to save the lives of their three endangered coworkers below: Monroe J. Coleman, Donald R. DeVine, and John J. Ladasky Jr. Ladasky was the first to collapse. Coleman and DeVine struggled to move him toward the exit ladder where Raymond J. Grundler had descended into the vault. With the aide of Edward Klingensmith, Grundler managed to hoist Ladasky to the surface, saving his life. Grundler, a Mount Troy native and a 1957 North Catholic graduate entered the vault

yet a second time in an ill-fated attempt to rescue Coleman and DeVine. Others then followed desperate to rescue their coworkers, but to no avail. In the end, six gas company crewmen died of asphyxiation on that November day. In addition to Coleman, DeVine, and Grundler; William H. Letzkus, Charles J. Pitassi, and Albert Zeleny also perished.

A memorial plaque commemorating their passing was affixed to an exterior side wall on the former North Catholic

High School building. Five of the men were posthumously awarded Carnegie Hero Medals in 1972. These medals are presented exclusively to those individuals who risked their lives to an extraordinary degree saving or attempting to save the lives of others. Then in 2018, Raymond J. Grundler was posthumously inducted into the North Catholic High School Hall of Fame.

Fifty years later we pause to honor their courage and to reflect on their heroism.



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A SOLDIER WHO SERVED

BY CHRISTOPHER W. GEORGE

AS LEN BARCOUSKY AND other authors have lamented, there is a good bit of our history that has become hidden by time. As the years and decades march forward, what was once important and noteworthy becomes blurred. Many things are simply forgotten and left waiting to be rediscovered. This is why the ways in which William Witherow served his country and the cities of Allegheny and Pittsburgh are worth digging up and re-examining.

William was born in Ireland to Esther and James Witherow in 1843. His family would emigrate to the United States during his early childhood and settle in Allegheny (today's North Side). It was here that he would go to school and eventually begin working in one of its local retail stores at the age of 14.

As was the case with so many young men in the early 1860s, William would be swept up by the strong currents of the Civil War. He originally committed to serve his country in August of 1862 when he enlisted in what became Company E of the 123d Pennsylvania Volunteers (Col. John B. Clark). He joined this local regiment, which was formed in the basement of the 2nd United Presbyterian Church of Allegheny, at the age of 18. During his term of service, he would see the devastating results from the battles of Bull Run and Antietam before directly facing the horrors of war at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. After being mustered out with the rest of his nine-month regiment in May of 1863, he would re-enlist in July of that year and serve with a number of Pittsburgh men in the 1st Delaware Heavy Artillery until the end of the war in 1865.

Returning home to Allegheny, William worked in a number of clerkships that included the Pennsylvania Railroad, the U.S. Depository in Pittsburgh, the Allegheny County Sheriff's Office, and the Allegheny County Clerk of Courts. Then, in 1881, he would be nominated for Treasurer of Allegheny County. The local papers took note of his candidacy:

¶ He is recognized as a rare accountant, which makes his selection as a candidate for Treasurer especially fitting. His experience and special talents in this direction ensure a perfect administration of office. Personally, Mr. Witherow is an exceedingly popular man. He is a man of very pleasant address and makes friends wherever he goes . . . As a representative of the city of Allegheny on the ticket his nomination is an especially strong one, and his triumphant election with the rest of the ticket is already assured.

15 Jun 1881, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Mr. Witherow would be elected and serve as Treasurer until the completion of his term in 1884.

After leaving public office, William would become deeply involved in the Republican Party. He would attend the Republican National Conventions of 1892 (Minneapolis) and 1900 (Philadelphia) as a delegate. Additionally, he was given the honor of helping William McKinley become the 25th President by conveying Pennsylvania's 32 electoral college votes to Washington, D.C. in 1896.

While rising through the ranks of his political party, Mr. Witherow had decided to serve the citizens and the visitors to Pittsburgh in a new and different way. In early 1889 he took ownership of the well-respected Hotel Duquesne along with his half-brother and several other investors. The hotel itself was located directly across from Pittsburgh's City Hall in the 500 block of Smithfield Street, and first opened to the public on June 1, 1886.

¶ The Hotel Duquesne will be open to the public to-morrow. It is undoubtedly the finest furnished public house in the city . . . To say that it is supplied with "all modern conveniences" is putting it very mildly . . . The beautiful front of the hotel has been admired for some time, and people will be surprised to find that the interior is even more beautiful than the outside . . . It is the intention to run the hotel as a first-class establishment in every respect . . . Altogether the Hotel Duquesne, judging from its elegant appointments, will be heartily welcomed by the traveling community.



Situated as it is right in the heart of the business portion of the city, commercial guests and others . . . will find the Duquesne a most desirable and comfortable headquarters.

31 May 1886, Pittsburgh Daily Post

Notable visitors in its early years would include Japanese engineers visiting Pittsburgh to study its railroads, bridge-builder F.W. Roebing, the Countess of Craven from England, U.S. Senators J. Donald Cameron and Matthew S. Quay, and numerous others looking to engage in politics or do business in Pittsburgh and its environs.

Additionally, the café, the bar-room, and the many dining rooms (both large and small) of the Hotel Duquesne were often the setting for important social gatherings. These events included the annual Press Club banquets, wedding receptions, Republican political meetings, and most importantly to Mr. Witherow – reunions for Company E of the 123d Pennsylvania Volunteers. For years Mr. Witherow would entertain his old comrades on December 13th, the anniversary of the Battle of Fredericksburg.

¶ The survivors of Company E, One Hundred and Twenty-third Pennsylvania volunteers, held their sixth annual reunion at the Hotel Duquesne last night, Col. William Witherow, proprietor of the hotel, who was one of the privates of Company E when it was organized in Allegheny . . . was the host of the occasion, and he entertained his old comrades in a truly royal manner. A sumptuous banquet

was served to the veterans . . . followed by a feast of stirring camp and battlefield stories.

The affair was held on the thirty-seventh anniversary of the battle of Fredericksburg . . . In this battle Company E lost many of its men . . . Out of about 50 survivors of the company 35 were present.

14 Dec 1899, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

These formal reunions would occur every year until the number of old soldiers left alive dwindled to the single digits around the start of World War I. As these regular gatherings of old comrades took place, William Witherow would find himself in the middle of yet another battle. This time around, the fight was not for his life but for his livelihood.

In June of 1903, it was reported that the Hotel Duquesne, leased to Mr. Witherow all these years, was being sold to a competitor. David F. Henry, owner of the Hotel Henry located on 5th Avenue just behind the Hotel Duquesne, looked to consolidate the two establishments. He wanted to create “the largest commercial hotel outside of New York and Chicago” that would have over 500 rooms and the ability to accommodate and feed up to 1,000 guests.

The sale of the six-story building was contested by Mrs. Sarah L. Black, the actual owner of the Hotel Duquesne, as well as by a family that had real estate interests in the same block of Smithfield

Street: the Mellons. It had been rumored as far back as 1891 that Mr. Witherow was backed by a wealthy man of Pittsburgh, and it took this powerful family’s resources to stave off Mr. Henry’s attempts to acquire the hotel with various legal maneuvers. Eventually, toward the end of 1903, Andrew W. Mellon took ownership of the Hotel Duquesne and granted a 10-year lease to Mr. Witherow with plans to make \$50,000 worth of improvements. However, the following prescient note occurred at the end of an article describing the Mellon legal victory:

¶ For the past year rumors had been afloat regarding a gigantic building project, to be backed by the Mellon interests. The rumor was that the largest structure in Pittsburgh would be built at Fifth avenue and Smithfield street, front down to Virgin alley and including the Duquesne hotel property.

23 Oct 1903, *Pittsburgh Daily Post*

While the Mellon family continued to develop their long-range plans for this important stretch of Pittsburgh real estate, William Witherow continued to manage the Hotel Duquesne up until several years before his untimely death on July 17, 1914. He lived long enough to enjoy 32 years of marriage to Alice May Douglass and see his three children into adulthood. At his funeral, several surviving members of the 123d Pennsylvania Volunteers served as

honorary pallbearers as their old comrade was laid to rest in Union Dale Cemetery.

As for what became of the Hotel Duquesne, it only outlasted Mr. Witherow by a few years. After gaining ownership of the 500 block of Smithfield Street, the Mellons started to put their building plans into action.

¶ The first floor of the building which a number of years ago was one of Pittsburgh’s most exclusive hostelryes, the Hotel Duquesne, at the corner of Smithfield street and Oliver avenue, has undergone a wonderful change during the past few weeks by workmen and decorators, who have remodeled it into one large, attractive room, which is now the home of the bond department of the Mellon National Bank. Not only the first floor was changed to make way for the expansion of the financial institution, but three stories of the building were removed to make it the same height as the other buildings in the block, thereby obliterating all trace of the old landmark.

11 Dec 1918, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Then, six years later, a new Pittsburgh landmark was built and opened to the public in March 1924. This important city block, after the remnants of the Hotel Duquesne and other buildings on Smithfield Street were cleared, became the site of the massive Mellon Bank Building.

¶ One of the most beautiful banking houses in the world, a granite monument to industrial and financial progress in Pittsburgh and to the family whose noted scion is now Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, was dedicated Thursday, March 20 . . .

The building covers the full block frontage of 232 feet on Smithfield street and its depth is 117 feet on Oliver and Fifth avenues. Of four-story construction, disguised to show to the eye a single unit of wall and column, it rises to a height of 116 feet above the sidewalk. It has a basement and sub-basement, giving 131,000 square feet of floor space. Of this 27,144 square feet are on the ground floor.

26 Mar 1924, *The Ligonier Echo*

Although the memory of the “Cathedral of Earning” is now gathering dust and becoming a bit blurred by time, its origins connect back to the 19th century, William Witherow, and his many years of serving friends, visitors, and comrades at the forgotten Hotel Duquesne.



The 500 block of Smithfield Street prior to 1918, with the Hotel Duquesne in the foreground, the taller Hotel Henry behind (left), and Kaufmann’s Department Store in the background.

OLD ST. JOSEPH'S PARISH

BY CHARLES SCHNEIDER

EARLY MANCHESTER was laid out adjacent to the Ohio River in 1832, and the area was incorporated as a Borough in 1843. The population continued to grow over the years. The first Catholic church for the people of Manchester was St Mary's on Lockhart Street in Allegheny City.

The German Catholic population of Manchester was concerned that their spiritual needs were not being met. In 1865, St Mary's pastor, Fr. John Stibiel invited church members from Manchester to meet with him to discuss the building of their own church. Nothing came from that first meeting. It was difficult to secure a site. Fr. Stibiel called another meeting in January 1866. This time the group was more successful. They found a site at the corner of Fulton and Franklin Streets. They paid \$2,000 for a lot 120 feet by 120 feet. The church committee received approval from the Public School Board of Manchester to use the old school building at the corner of Chateau and Fayette Streets as a temporary church.

Excavation was begun by a large group of men on a Sunday when the men had the day off from work. The cornerstone was laid on Sunday, June 24, 1866. By Thanksgiving, the building was under roof. When the building was complete, Fr. Stibiel brought sacred vessels, vestments and other items with him from St. Mary's so that mass could be said in the new church. There were a number of priests who also served the new church when Fr. Stibiel could not be there.

In March 1868, the Bishop assigned Fr. Ignatius Reiser as the first resident Pastor. In only a few months time he had prepared a class of forty-two boys and girls to receive their First Holy Communion. Father Reiser remained the pastor until January 1873. He was succeeded by Fr. Peter Kaufmann, who was pastor for the next 33 years.

Fr. Kaufmann added a second floor to the school and began looking for ground to build a new church building. The growth of the German Catholic

population made it necessary to create a new parish in Woods Run. The Bishop gave approval and placed the new parish under the patronage of St. Leo I. The new St. Leo's parish absorbed a great portion of the territory of old St. Joseph's. The territory that remained was almost equivalent to the boundaries of Manchester Borough.

Fr. Kaufmann began to plan for the creation of a larger church. He chose the plot of ground at the corner of Liverpool and Fulton Streets adjacent to the existing church. The contract price for the church was \$44,990. That did not include the art glass windows, heating system, pews, or interior decoration. Most of these items were contracted out in late 1897. The Carrara marble altars donated by a parishioner and a bequest from Fr. Kaufmann, were installed in 1907. The old church was converted to a modern well-equipped school in 1902. In 1901 a house and lot were also purchased on Liverpool Street for a new rectory.

Over the years, a number of priests were assigned to the parish. The neighborhood itself was also in a state of change. Many of the long-time families began to move to the outer neighborhoods of the North Side and to the suburbs. In 1962 the area west of Chateau Street was being readied for industrial development and expansion. Homes were razed and families had to seek housing elsewhere. The population declined between 1950 and 1964. Manchester lost nearly half of its residents.

In 1950 the estimated population was 15,500 and in 1964 it was reduced to 8,000. Manchester was also faced with the declining condition of the structures, absentee ownership, and the general transient nature of the community.

Many parish families who once lived in the neighborhood moved away. Some regularly came back for Sunday mass. St. Joseph Parish, in trying to meet the needs of the people, had to sell the gymnasium building because it was in need of repair. Also sold was the original church, which was turned into low-income



The new church on Liverpool Street was dedicated on September 11, 1898.

housing for neighborhood families. There was no money to have the interior of the church painted so parishioners did the painting. When it became too expensive to heat the church, mass was said in one room of the school.

Fr. James Garvey was appointed Administrator in January 1886. Fr. Garvey was to remain full-time Director of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in the Hill District and be the part-time Administrator of St. Joseph's Parish. He continued the programs that were in place when he arrived. However, the number of active members continued to decline. Fewer than 30 people regularly attended the 9:00 am Sunday mass. At times as few as 16 people attended the 10:30 am mass. Bishop Anthony Bevilacqua decided to close St. Joseph Parish on July 1, 1987.

The author is indebted to Fr. Garvey, his cousin, who wrote a commemorative booklet upon the closing of the parish. He generously gave his only copy of that booklet to aid in the writing of this article.

BETTE McDEVITT'S STORY

BY DAVID S. ROTENSTEIN

PITTSBURGH WRITER AND NORTH SIDE RESIDENT Bette McDevitt received the 2022 William M. Rimmel Award. Bette writes about Pittsburgh history, and her “Neighborhood Stories” columns appear in the Sen. John Heinz History Center magazine, *Western Pennsylvania History*. Though Bette grew up in New Castle, her family has deep ties to the North Side.

At the May 4th Annual Meeting, Allegheny City Society President David Grinnell introduced Bette. David explained how he first met her while he worked as an archivist for the Heinz History Center’s predecessor, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Just before the awards ceremony, David reinforced the meeting’s theme, “storytelling,” by inviting attendees to pick a theme from cards placed on each of the tables inside Riverview Park’s Chapel Shelter. Each person then was asked to tell a story related to a theme.

Bette’s story at her table and in her Rimmel Award acceptance speech drew from memories of Pittsburgh’s once rich numbers gambling culture. Numbers is an informal and illegal daily street lottery that arrived in Pittsburgh in the 1920s. It was an African American invention introduced in Harlem in the years just after the turn of the twentieth century. The game relied on a three-digit number derived from daily financial market returns published in daily newspapers. If bettors picked the correct three-digit number, they could convert a nickel into \$30 and a dime into \$60 – much more than the average pay for many Pittsburgh residents.

The numbers racket supported a large ecosystem of racketeers – runners, writers, and bankers – as well as people who owned the

front businesses that doubled as numbers stations: barbershops, cigar stores, and pool rooms. These folks handled the racket’s supply side; housewives, millworkers, and city employees comprised a large pool of potential winners looking for just one big “hit.”

The North Side had its share of infamous numbers bankers, including Jack Cancelliere (who owned the longtime mob hangout the Villa Rosa restaurant at East General Robinson and Sandusky Streets) and Phil Lange whose exploits including backing the ill-fated Guyasuta Kennel Club in O’Hara the summer of 1930. Bette’s family wasn’t part of that crowd.

At the ACS annual meeting, Bette recounted a summertime visit during the 1940s to her aunts and grandmother who lived in a house on Brighton Place. Bette was about 12 years old at the time. She described being handed some coins wrapped in paper with a note instructing the numbers writer down the street how to play the bet.

“Three women, plus my grandmother, who was an important person there – they all played the numbers,” Bette recalled in a subsequent telephone interview. “They all played the numbers and in the morning when they woke up, they got the dream book out to see which numbers they should play.”

Bette remembered taking the bet to a Charles Street store. Bette’s Aunt Jen usually took the daily bet. “One day, she told me that I could do that and be the runner,” she said.

As in many Pittsburgh families, “numbers” was an important part of daily life in Bette’s family’s household. Her aunts and grandmother lived in an apartment above a barbershop run by a man named Henry. “He used to come up the steps every day to the apartment and stand on the top step and he would ask, ‘What was the number today?’”

Though Bette only spent one week in the apartment that summer, the experience made an indelible mark in her memory. That memory is now part of a polished storytelling repertoire. Bette explained, “When I do tell people that, it seems so unlikely to them, you know, this white-haired old lady that was a messenger or whatever it’s called. It gets a great reaction from people because it’s out of character for me.”

Bette also credits those fond memories for influencing her move to the North Side. Like many good historical storytellers, Bette uses the built environment to teach people about the past in an entertaining way. “I moved here, to this neighborhood, probably because of all the good memories I have from being around here,” she confessed in our interview. “I can find family sites all over the North Side.”

David S. Rotenstein is a Pittsburgh public historian and folklorist. He is currently researching the history of numbers gambling in Pittsburgh. Dr. Rotenstein teaches in Goucher College’s graduate historic preservation program.





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ACS TOUR OF WEST VIEW CEMETERY

