

# Exhibit Review: The Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center

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*The State Museum of Pennsylvania*

Courtesy of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania



*Exterior of the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, once the Chautauqua Lake Ice Company, located one block from the David Lawrence Convention Center in downtown Pittsburgh.*

Allegiance to tradition may be Pittsburgh's most valuable asset. Despite an uncertain economy, an aging population and the standard drug/crime problem, the city's ethnic neighborhoods remain remarkably intact, replenished by young couples who return to the city of their birth to raise their own children. To outsiders accustomed to the studied impassiveness of most cities, Pittsburgh is a metropolis with deep roots and a big heart, the kind of place where lost visitors (common victims of the city's jumble of hills and twisting, one-way streets) are frequently escorted to their destination by kindly motorists. To locals, it's a place that inspires undying devotion. Remarking on a group of former residents who habitually return to one of the city's Italian neighborhoods "just to loaf," a local realtor remarked "they haven't lived in the neighborhood for 30 years, but if you ask them where they're from, they'll say Bloomfield. I've seen this in other neighborhoods too. People like this city."<sup>1</sup>

The new Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center is in many ways a monument to Pittsburgh's attachment to place and past. After nearly ten years of long-range planning and an ambitious capital campaign that permitted the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvanian (HSWP) to move from its cramped headquarters in the city's Oakland section, the history center opened in April of this year to rave reviews and steady crowds. The HSWP estimates that between April and Thanksgiving of 1996, close to 100,000 visitors filed through the doors of the center, located in a former ice warehouse in the city's Strip District, an emerging "entertainment" district adjacent to downtown. The popularity is understandable. From the moment visitors set foot inside the recently restored former Chautauqua Lake Ice Company and enter the cavernous "Great Hall," a massive, two-story-high open space, icons of historic Pittsburgh beckon—a restored streetcar that once traversed the city's twisting, cobbled streets; a multi-paneled, almost surrealistic panorama of Pittsburgh and environs; and large neon signs from local landmarks like Isaly's, the home of the Klondike ice cream bar, and U.S. Steel, once Pittsburgh's largest employer and a symbol of the industry that focused most Pittsburghers' lives for the better part of this century.

All of these are evocative, but the most sublime is "The Visible City," artist Douglas Cooper's multi-paneled mural that's installed in the right hand corner of the Great Hall. Although not commissioned for the history center, the HSWP wisely acquired Cooper's mural after it was first exhibited at the Carnegie Museum of Art in 1993. Rather than paint the city as he alone saw it, Cooper enlisted the support of older residents of Pittsburgh who described for him memories of their own neighborhoods. The artist integrated their descriptions, and in some cases, crude drawings, into his own wildly imaginative view of Pittsburgh's undulating topography as seen from the top of the South Side slopes and other vantage points from Neville Island in the west to the steel town of Duquesne in the southeast. The result is an evocative, 72-panel panorama that conjures up "a place part physical, part psychological."

Like Cooper's mural, the orientation video at the entrance to the center's permanent exhibit, "Points in Time," aspires to integrate personal memory into the larger context of Pittsburgh history. As most orientation videos are obliged to do, this one provides something of an overview of Pittsburgh history, focusing on themes of immigration and industry. What distinguishes this piece from its genre, though, is the way in which it emphasizes the connection between cherished objects, personal memories, and the larger social fabric of the city. After opening with an aerial shot of contemporary Pittsburgh at the Point, the video extends into a series of brief vignettes of contemporary Pittsburghers whose stories about the most common object or heirloom evokes passionate memories of deceased relatives and city neighborhoods. One of the most poignant is the story of John Antonucci, whom the camera follows to his

garage, where he's safeguarded his grandfather's knife-sharpening machine. Antonucci explains that his grandfather carried the machine on his back almost every day for forty years in an effort to provide for his family after settling in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

For visitors accustomed to thinking of museums as repositories of valuable antiques, these segments do wonders for redefining what is "collectible" and for establishing the simple but profound methodological premise of the exhibits at the history center: even the most ordinary object has a story to tell. As the Pittsburghers on the screen tell their tales, or rummage through an old family chest, several of the visitors sitting next to me "oohed" and "aahed" with recognition. "Sometimes," one of the subjects being interviewed says, "you don't know what history you have"; visitors again nodded in recognition. What this video withholds in expected, textbook history—one gets only a passing impression that Pittsburgh was the steel center of the universe at one time—it compensates for in solid storytelling.

After the orientation video, visitors proceed into a central courtyard for "Points in Time." Although this core exhibit has been organized chronologically, the courtyard presents visitors with the option of entering Pittsburgh history through one of three portals, each represented by a partially reconstructed exterior of a representative domestic space: an eighteenth century Scots-Irish log cabin, the gateway to frontier Pittsburgh; a late nineteenth century wood-frame building, representing an Eastern European immigrant courtyard and the the industrial city; and a circa. 1950 suburban tract house, representing the "blue collar suburbs" and Renaissance Pittsburgh. Since there's no main theme, as such, and no introductory text panel, each of these structures reinforces the emphatically personal, domestic experience that the exhibit tries to convey (as suggested by the its subtitle, "Building a Life in Western Pennsylvania"). It works extremely well, particularly for those conditioned to thinking of history as the story of large, impersonal institutions or distant events.

The core exhibit, which spreads out over 16,000 square feet and occupies the center's second floor, is divided into six major sections covering anywhere from 30 to 75 years of Pittsburgh history. Main sections range from "The Contested Land, 1745-1820," the opening section which explores frontier life and settlement, to "Renaissance City, 1955-1995," the exhibit's final chapter which presents Pittsburgh's economic transformation from manufacturing to service. Although all the world knows Pittsburgh as the steel city, this theme is only treated explicitly in the exhibit's third section, "The Industrial City, 1870-1930" and then largely as a social, not economic or technological, phenomenon. (Understandably, the broader processes of industrialization—and de-industrialization—colors the themes presented in many of the other sections). Remaining sections explore Pittsburgh's commercial and social development

from 1815 to 1875 ("City on the Move, 1815-1875), the social life of Pittsburgh's Hill District ("The Hill: A City Neighborhood, 1900-1945), and the contours of post-WWII suburbanization ("Suburbs, Pittsburgh-Style, 1945-1960).

Each of these main sections includes a series of related themes. "The Hill: A City Neighborhood" devotes an exhibit area to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, arguably one of the most influential and respected black newspapers in the country during the 1930s and 1940s and an institutional centerpiece for black Pittsburgh. Visitors to "The Industrial City" learn about the allure of downtown department stores, the rise of mass leisure, and lifestyles of the rich and famous, as well as something about life in the region's coal patches and steel towns. Each main section also features smaller exhibits that highlight Pittsburgh's role in national events like wars and depressions, or describe stories that, although not directly related to the section theme, warrant attention. "Suburbs, Pittsburgh Style" includes a sidebar on the career of Dr. Jonas Salk and the discovery of the polio vaccine in 1950s Pittsburgh. In "Pittsburgh on the Move," there are panels and artifacts devoted to the Great Fire of 1845, the sizable Free Black community, and the city's role as the arsenal of the Union during the Civil War.

A series of full-scale environments, distributed evenly throughout the "Points in Time," are the biggest crowd pleasers. For visitors who move counterclockwise through the exhibit, the first of these is the McConnell loghouse and stone trough, sections of an eighteenth century Scots-Irish farmstead that museum curators based on an exceptionally well-preserved farm in Washington County. The core exhibit also includes a full-scale interior and exterior of a late nineteenth/early twentieth century immigrant dwelling or "courtyard"; the interior of the Machsikei Haddas Synagogue in the city's Hill District; a living room and kitchen based on a typical 1950s tract house from the blue-collar suburb of West Mifflin; and a small but visually effective set of lockers recovered from the former Duquesne Steel Works in Pittsburgh's Mon Valley.

Appropriately for Pittsburgh, the most substantial of these environments is the immigrant courtyard scene. The exterior of this environment is based on photographs and descriptions of immigrant "courtyards" like the ones that were common in Homestead and other steel making districts. In one such courtyard, in 1907, social investigator Margaret Byington counted 43 families sharing a single privy vault (a replica of which appears in this exhibit). For the interiors, the curators have reconstructed two rooms: a circa 1910 kitchen, based on a Slovak immigrant household, and a "front room" which has been reconstructed as the site of a wake for a young child whose closed coffin lies in state, as was the tradition among Eastern European immigrants. With few words, these rooms effectively convey a sense of the cramped, harsh conditions

and the overwhelming sense of danger and mortality of industrial life. Smaller displays help to interpret other aspects of life for “new immigrants,” including work conditions, social and religious institutions, and ethnic traditions.

Even when the environments are not large enough to actually walk through, they still invite visitors to investigate. An outline map of each of the environments identifies the objects that have been placed in each room or scene and supplies brief descriptions. It’s a simple touch, but a particularly effective alternative to cumbersome object labels or no labels at all, which is characteristic of more conventional period rooms. So are well-placed labels that encourage visitors to ponder the meaning of an artifact in context, as when a label at the McConnell loghouse asks visitors to find the tool that would have been “most important for daily survival.” These full-scale replicas are also just plain fun. The 1950s suburban homestead seemed to attract the most attention, since visitors are treated to excerpts from 1950s Pittsburgh television programming, and hear some wonderful, self-deprecating regional humor from Rege Cordic, a popular morning radio host at that time. (The “Cordic and Company” episode pokes fun of outsider’s misconceptions of Pittsburgh, a situation that continues to this day: “Every year, the mighty Susquehanna overflows its banks in Pittsburgh,” or “Pittsburgh is a dark, grimy hovel where the sun never shines.”) On more than one occasion, I heard visitors—presumably natives—snickering about how much their own homes still looked like the displays.

In addition to these larger environments, “Points in Time” includes a handful of “interactive models” designed to integrate some section of the city or region’s geography with some chunk of the city’s past. One such model in the exhibit’s section on the Hill District features an enlarged map of the Lower Hill with a video monitor suspended directly above. By pushing a button, visitors view one of five short video programs pertaining to various aspects of life in the Hill and compiled from historic photographs, documents, and oral histories. Places mentioned in the video correspond to locations on the map, which helps to underscore the historic vitality of this now blighted neighborhood. At another video station in “The Industrial City,” visitors enter the name of a town on a computer screen, and are treated to a capsule history and a sample of digitally reproduced photographs from the Society’s archives. It’s a simple program, but one that seemed to attract a lot of attention from visitors eager to catch a glimpse of their hometown. Historic film footage also appears at a few other video monitors in the exhibit, including continuous loop footage of circa 1970 steel production installed near the end of the exhibit.

The exhibit makes more liberal use of audio. In some cases, as in the immigrant courtyard, designers have piped in the white noise of industry, from mill whistles and train rumblings, to complement the soot-covered building and cobblestone street. Other audio stations are designed to enliven

a chapter from Pittsburgh's past, often by having actors read from a diary entry or other period document. In the immigrant courtyard, visitors can push a button to hear excerpts from letters written by Polish immigrants to relatives in the Old Country; at another station, visitors can eavesdrop on an exchange between two young lovers as they carried out their proscribed courting ritual in the early part of the nineteenth century. Another audio track, drawing on original sources, presents the Seneca creation story and another repeats the words of a black preacher espousing abolition in 1850s Pittsburgh.

While preferable to long-winded label copy, some of these audio tracks are simply too long. Many visitors seemed to wander away after a minute or so, and it was difficult to concentrate on the audio if more than one track had been activated. I was also distracted by the use of actors to convey the text; in most cases, of course, the original creator of the words had long since died, but accents often sound contrived. Bad Hollywood films notwithstanding, we can hardly know what Cornplanter actually sounded like. (I would have been satisfied if the center had made this point in the label; it would also have been consistent with the exhibit's efforts to draw attention to the fragmentary nature of historical evidence and the need for artificial supplements.) The exhibit would have also benefited from a clearer, more consistent set of maps that would permit those unfamiliar with Pittsburgh to figure out where the McConnell loghouse was located in relationship to downtown, or why the Hill District was called the Hill District, a question I overheard one visitor ask. (A series of relief maps fixed to central beams within the exhibit is intended to do this, but they're too non-descript and blend into the background.)

Still, "Points in Time" is relatively free of contrivances or the minor design irritations that contribute to museum fatigue. The exhibit's designers have managed to incorporate enough visceral riffs to make the experience interesting and enough recurring features to insure visual continuity. "Please touch" stations appear at regular intervals where kids can push, pull, or otherwise manipulate any number of props—from a fowling rifle to a saxophone and a computer keyboard. The designers have also managed to practice restraint in the use of labels. There are actually just a handful of large text panels, and these appear only at the beginning of a main section. For those visitors who tend to be defeated by dense labels, the curators have highlighted the first sentence of each label. This permits visitors with little tolerance for "book on the wall" exhibits to simply scan the main headlines and still get the gist of the section, while permitting those who prefer more information to indulge their appetites, or come back for a second, third or fourth visit. The label copy is also immensely readable and conversational in tone. Finally, there are plenty of rest stations, no small consideration in an exhibit of this size, although designers overlooked seating for the interactive models, where visitors are forced onto the floor.

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The most laudable accomplishment of "Points in Time" and the other temporary exhibits at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center is the way in which they illustrate for visitors the process of "doing history" by analyzing primary sources. Throughout the exhibit, visitors get their hands on census records, diaries, oral histories, artifacts, and as much as possible, are asked to make sense out of it themselves. "What kind of work did women do?" a label next to an 1815 city directory asks, noting the paucity of women in official histories of the period. The answer is that although we know them to be there, the nature of most historical sources make them difficult to find. Another section asks visitors to guess at the way in which a particular artifact might have been used. At the interactive model on the Hill District of Pittsburgh, visitors learn the ways in which something as seemingly mundane as census tract information can be squeezed for important social data and supplemented by oral history. This is something that science museums have known for a long time, but which history museums have been slower to emulate. It's refreshing to see the new history center in the vanguard of this trend.

The fragmentary nature of much of the evidence presented in "Points in Time" provides a much needed corrective to the common perception of history as a tight compendium of facts and dates. Rather than being intimidated or overwhelmed by the complexity of historical evidence presented throughout the exhibit, visitors seemed smitten by the idea. On one of my exhibit walk-throughs, visitors were actually queuing up to look through a reproduction of a Pittsburgh city directory, described as "the telephone book of its day," in the label, and one of several "flip books" installed throughout the core exhibit. After perusing the portraits of mid-nineteenth century iron workers from the Lyon Shorb Iron Company album, a couple of teenagers commented that "it looks like a family album." That's precisely the point in this section on small-scale manufacturing in nineteenth century Pittsburgh, but not something that would have carried the same weight in a didactically labeled, glass-impaneled case.

The emphasis on understanding artifacts and other historical sources as "clues" permeates other sections of the museum. In the children's discovery room on the third floor, for instance, educators have designed an interactive exhibit where kids can "interview" artifacts by flipping up a picture of items like a plastic cup with a Pittsburgh Penguins logo and ask why it might have been saved, what its use would have been, and what meaning it may have held for its owner. Inside the discovery room children can almost literally step into the shoes of a child from Pittsburgh history at one of eight "activity stations" based on real individuals from various periods. At each station, children are invited to tinker with the types of objects that would have been available to

that particular historical character. By comparing these objects to their own possessions, younger folks can consider how different their lives might have been had they been born in a time when work and daily survival took precedence over play.

Another indisputable achievement is the way in which "Points in Time" and other exhibits focus on stories and objects of ordinary people. One particularly effective, low tech device used to this end are a series of "biography posts" that appear at regular intervals. The exhibit equivalent of sidebars, each of these posts features an image of some historical character along with a brief personal history. Individuals immortalized on these posts run the gamut from the well known, like baseball great Honus Wagner, to the unknown, like Anne Moskal Pato, the daughter of Polish and Ukrainian parents who was born into poverty in a Western Pennsylvania coal patch. Because they stand out physically from the panels, visitors are forced to ponder these individual stories, and implicitly encouraged to reflect on their own "place in history," an oft-repeated banality of social history museums that actually achieves some substance here.

Visitors who tour "Points in Time" are also likely to encounter actors dressed in period costume who have been hired to roam the exhibit and provide visitors with a simulated encounter with someone from Pittsburgh's past. Each of the actors is based on an actual historical character that emerges from one of the sections of the exhibit: an African American preacher from the 1850s, and an immigrant Slovak woman, as well as more well-known characters from Pittsburgh's past, like Stephen Foster and Andrew Carnegie. After orienting visitors to the main exhibit, the actors drift back to their respective section of the exhibit, where they are available to answer questions—in character, of course—and perform monologues in one of a handful of "mini-stages" within the exhibit. (The living history program is called "Stages in History.") Although more common to living history sites than museums, the use of these roving professional actors helps to make touring the exhibit more of an experience than a solemn visitation.

Focusing on real people has obvious interpretive advantages over textbook label copy. Instead of listening to a lecture or reading an involved label on immigration or racial discrimination, visitors absorb the same information through firsthand accounts and personal stories, whether through actor, videotaped oral history, audio recording or artifacts. This people orientation also permits the museum to achieve an unusual level of intimacy, as evinced by the nearly constant stream of chatter from visitors excited to see a kind of history they could recognize. Even the abandoned locker room scene pulsates, in an odd way, with a sense of life as familiar objects bring us closer to what many still regard as the region's greatest tragedy. One local journalist who reviewed the exhibit was shocked to see a plastic cup with a "Welcome Back Kotter" logo sitting on the top shelf of one of the lockers, exactly as the steelworker had left



it, as if expecting to come back the next day; it touched him in the way that detailed monographs on the subject never could.

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Having engaged visitors on an emotional level, how effectively does the history center's core exhibit tell them why things happen and, more to the point, why and how things change? Like most exhibits, "Points in Time" is better at description and evocation than analysis. Exhibits are bound by their tools of storytelling—namely, material culture, historical photographs, reproduced sound, etc.—and as we know from a comparison of television and newspapers, even the most artful combination of audio and video fails to match the level of complexity that language allows. Museums that strain to provide "context" and aim for more complex interpretations often fail to keep visitors' interest, as is the case with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's well meaning, but dull permanent exhibit, "Finding Philadelphia." On the other hand, curators and designers versed in objects and visuals and other exhibit sleight-of-hands often don't have the time or expertise to create a painstakingly researched storyline.

Not all of its parts are equally compelling, but "Points in Time" commendably avoids overly ponderous labels without succumbing to visual or period-room clichés. The reconstructed interior of a blue-collar suburban home in West Mifflin contains not just the by-now conventional postwar, consumer-culture artifacts, but also a workman's lunchpail and a framed print of the Last Supper, mounted above the television set. Both of these artifacts are light brush strokes, but they go a long way to dispelling the notion that suburbanization eviscerated all forms of class and ethnic identity. It's also a stellar example of the shades of detail that can be conveyed when curators are given an opportunity to do primary research rather than illustrated secondary research.

But in other cases, "Points in Time" does not ask the kinds of pointed questions that might have provided visitors with meaningful historical perspective. The section on the Hill District, for instance, describes but does not examine the implications of "cultural diversity." Even if one accepts the unstated premise that racial and ethnic conflict in the Hill District was muted by its universal poverty, the exhibit's explanation seems remarkably simplistic. At the interactive module, for instance, the omniscient narrator notes that "although housing conditions were poor, people remember the Hill fondly." True enough, but what might this tell us about the tendencies of interviews with former residents to smooth over historical tensions, particularly in the face of other evidence to the contrary? An opportunity to examine the fallible nature of historical evidence—in this case, oral history—is overlooked.

Likewise, one wonders why, if life on the Hill was so remarkably rich and diverse, people left at all. This is a complicated question, but one inherently worth asking, particularly given the subsequent section on suburbanization and what most Pittsburghers know to be the sorry state of the Hill District today (which, perhaps predictably, goes unmentioned in the exhibit, although addressed to a degree in the catalog). Postwar urban renewal provides some clues, but it is an insufficient explanation for the wholesale abandonment of the Hill by white ethnics and many blacks. Why not interview former residents of the Hill District and ask why they decided to move to, say, Penn Hills and compare their responses to those who chose or were forced to stay behind?

The failure of the exhibit to raise critical questions is even more apparent in the final sections that examine the decline of the steel and the appearance, in its place, of a largely service-oriented economy. After a terse (but emotionally effective) treatment of what historians have labeled “deindustrialization,” “Points in Time” segues to a cluster of three-dimensional bar graphs designed to represent the relative proportion of various financial sectors in the city’s “new economy.” This final section is not only confusing—a handful of visitors hovered in front for a few minutes before remarking “I don’t get it”—but it is also disingenuous. The steel industry is gone and is likely to be replaced by high tech as the region’s number one employer, but what might that mean for “building a life in Western Pennsylvania”? Based on preliminary evidence offered in the final, eloquent chapter of the exhibit’s catalog, the future does not look particularly bright, depending on which end of the increasingly stratified service economy one winds up. Here, then, would have been a fine opportunity to point up the dilemma of many Pittsburghers who remain staunchly devoted to their neighborhoods and their city but feel understandably anxious about a future that looks as precarious now as it might have to their grandfather or great-grandfather, working for pennies a day in a hot blast furnace.

The point here is not to insist that museums tell only the bad, depressing side of history. Instead, the goal of any exhibit should be to tell a story, within the limitations of the medium, that addresses why things are the way they are. Even artifacts as prosaic as a trolley car might have been made to transcend the safe confines of nostalgia had the exhibit’s designers been more deliberate in this regard. A continuous loop video program installed inside the restored car flickers with old film footage and stories about neighborhoods that this early form of mass transit used to service. But one again has to ask why such an immensely popular form of transportation was consigned to the junkheap of history to begin with. Contrasting the trolley ride with rush-hour gridlock on the Parkway, or even examples of cities where trolleys have successfully been resuscitated might have been enough to set visitors’ wheels in motion. Instead, the trolley has become just another example of “places (and in this case, things) that aren’t there anymore.”

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If "Points in Time" occasionally neglects the historian's voice, at other times it seems to have been too mindful of its sponsors. Shortly after the exhibit opened in April, representatives of a local corporation which had contributed to the center's capital campaign objected to a specific label which they felt did not adequately convey their perspective on an admittedly sensitive issue. Museum curators are rewriting the original label to reflect their concern. Hypothetically, one wonders how much corporate support the history center would receive for an exhibit or public program that focused on an honest vetting of the opportunities and pitfalls of the new economy. Because museums are beholden to a wide variety of sponsors, including local corporations with deep pockets, intellectual freedom is something that is finessed, not conferred. When the time comes to mount an exhibit on the history of Heinz, or the local glass industry, as the Society intends to do in the coming years, what assurances will museum visitors receive that they're not being subjected to history-based infomercials?

The threat of corporate-contaminated story lines points to another, perhaps less likely source of sponsorship problems: the general public and its appointed representatives. Early on, the HSWP began spawning community advisory committees in an effort to raise money for programs and exhibits and as a source of artifacts and images for the permanent and temporary displays. The first to form was the Jewish Archive and Collections Committee, followed by advisory groups for Italian, Slovak, Polish, and African Americans. These advisory groups have been extremely beneficial to the history center, bringing in money, artifacts and new members, but their involvement has not come without strings. A transparently upbeat message of Pittsburgh as the land of opportunity for Italian immigrants, as embodied in six "success stories" from that community, compromises an otherwise fine temporary exhibit on Italian immigration and community life in Pittsburgh. The society's Italian-American committee, which paid for the salary of its curator, did not dictate the story line, but it was understood that the committee expected to see a positive story.

The largely optimistic tone that pervades both the core and temporary exhibits underscores a troubling paradox of people-oriented history exhibits. Once given access to the official narrative, "the people" are no more likely to embrace critical and objective assessments of history than "the great white men" so clearly out of fashion in new history museums in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Paul and other American cities. Since the opening of the history center in April, the Society has received complaints from some groups who feel as though they have received far less attention than others; one ethnic advisory group, according to museum director Bill Keyes, actually counted

the number of “their” artifacts on display and, predictably, found the number to be insufficient. And with at least one of the current exhibits supported through the largesse of an ethnic advisory committee, the center has created the unmistakable impression that money can secure one’s story. This isn’t, ironically, the first time that Pittsburgh’s ethnic groups have sought to fund their place in history; when the University of Pittsburgh began building the Cathedral of Learning in the late 1920s, local ethnic groups were encouraged to create their own shrines as part of the building’s nationality rooms. The problem, according to Italian-American archivist Cathy Fratto, is that “people think of us as the new nationality rooms.”

Getting people to “see themselves in history” and “tell their own stories” deflects the old charge of elitism, but community-brokered exhibits breed other dilemmas. In time, the HSWP may be able to resolve this dilemma, but it won’t happen anytime soon, judging from the comment cards I perused on my three visits—“what about the Greeks?” and “don’t forget the Serbs,” among others—and from the steady stream of suggestions that have poured into the Historical Society from both hopeful and aggrieved ethnic groups. Nor will it be a good thing when these strongly felt ethnic allegiances do subside, since the resilience of ethnic identity has become an important form of marketing for the exhibit and, of course, a critical source of support in an era of decreased public funding for non-profits of all shapes and sizes. Maintaining the sovereignty of the museum’s curators, historians, and educators, without alienating their audience—be they corporate or community-based—will require delicate diplomacy.

Another possible solution would be for the history center to insist on supplying the type of context that personal stories, while appealing, simply cannot do. The section on industrialization, for instance, is the logical place to talk about the structure of an industrial wage economy, but the exhibit fails to do so in any meaningful way. There’s a brief description of the Homestead strike, but it seems out of sequence and not particularly relevant to conditions in the coal patch, so effectively conveyed through personal testimony. Exhibit curators and designers might have gently broadened the perspective, without a lot of labels, simply by contrasting the experiences of immigrants and their families with the views expressed by a coal baron or other captain of industry. History is certainly about ordinary people, as the exhibit makes exceptionally clear, but it is also about larger historical forces and institutions—in this case, the corporate structure of American industry and concentration of economic power—that effect people’s lives. This is a fine case where simply “seeing one’s self in history” is insufficient for understanding one’s place in history—be it at the top, middle or bottom of the social structure.

None of these shortcomings are insurmountable so long as the HSWP continues to attract visitors to its immensely worthwhile exhibits and public

programs. As we've seen from the repudiation of the National History Standards, the controversy over the interpretation of the Enola Gay, and other recent catastrophes, the general public does not like to be force-fed social history, an approach that often comes off as just so much "politically correct" dogma. By focusing on the stories of ordinary people, and the notion of history as process, not product, the new Pittsburgh regional history center serves up the new social history in small bites. The true measure of success will be whether it can also generate exhibits which address visitors' instinctive interest in historical perspective on issues that matter to them.

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Along with the exhibits mentioned in this review, the Heinz Regional History Center currently features three other temporary exhibits: "Pittsburgh Rhythms: The Music of a Changing City, 1820-1950" (through 1998), an upgraded and expanded version of an exhibit that originally opened at the HSWP's headquarters in Oakland in 1991; "Afloat on the Ohio, 1894," a series of period photographs from a riverboat journey down the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers (through 1996); and "Toy Bop," a short-term exhibit (through January, 1997) featuring toys and games from the fifties and sixties. Major exhibits on western Pennsylvania glass and the history of the H.J. Heinz Company are also being planned. "Stages in History," the center's living history program, is scheduled to run through April 1997, and with funding, beyond. The sixth floor of the center houses a spacious archives and library reading room, where visitors can peruse many of the documents on exhibit in the lower galleries, and then some. In the coming years, the archives hopes to process major collections from Alcoa, the Allegheny Conference and U.S. Steel, currently available, unprocessed, by appointment. Even if you're not interested in doing serious research, it's worth a visit to this floor for the impressive view of the Pittsburgh skyline.

Among other items on sale in the history center's first-floor gift shop is *Points in Time: Building a Life in Western Pennsylvania*, a lavishly illustrated booklet intended to accompany the permanent exhibit. The catalog features a series of chronologically-organized essays authored by exhibit curators, with contributions from historians such as Thomas Schlereth and Philip Scranton. As is true of most catalogs, *Points in Time* elaborates on themes suggested in the core exhibit, and contains both historical photographs and images of artifacts on display in the exhibit. While most of the essays are based largely on secondary research, they are succinctly written and contain some wonderful images that alone make it worthwhile. The center's gift shop also stocks an impressive range of Pittsburghiana, from a series of post cards by local artist Chuck Biddle and a full stock of Pittsburgh history titles and videos, to toys and games and

gifts with a 'Burgh flavor, including Heinz pickle pins and puppets from *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*.

The Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center is open daily from 10 AM to 5 PM. Admission is \$5.75 for adults and \$4.25 for children and senior citizens. The library reading room is open from 10 AM to 5 PM, Tuesday through Saturday. Memberships are available. If you are planning a visit or would like more information, call (412) 454-6000 or write to the History Center at 1212 Smallman St., Pittsburgh, PA 15222.

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#### Notes

1. Quoted in Michelle Fanzo, "After the Renaissance, 1865-1995" in Paul Roberts, ed., *Points in Time: Building a Life in Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1996), 113.