As a subject, history is often thought to be merely a study of the past. I should like to propose that it is something far more than this. To my mind, history is valuable principally because it is, in essence, the study of change. It is the study not just of the glories—but of the mistakes of those who went before us in time, what they did or didn’t do to make this a better world in which to live.

As we re-open tonight this splendid facility for the contemplation of history, we should be aware of the dangers as well as the potentialities in any consideration of the past. Our historic and cultural heritage can, for instance, serve as a tranquilizer. Without much effort, we can become so enthralled with the past of Western Pennsylvania that we neglect the present and forego the future. Without much effort, we can use our heritage as a soft, reclining cushion. In that perspective, it will always be warm and comforting. We can continue in the dishonest belief that “life was better in those days”—whenever “those days” happened to have occurred—and that only a return to “them” will provide the security we seek.

One great danger of history is its seductive quality because we see in it only what we want to see. A community which seeks only security soon loses its sense of adventure in ideas and action. It becomes fearful of rocking the boat because someone may get splashed; it is better to be dry, safe, and mediocre. As we look ahead to the next fifty years, we might as well admit, however, that we do not
have now and probably we will never have any such thing as true security. Thus it is foolhardy to be preoccupied with the pursuit of the unattainable.

Such an out-dated and self-centered search, if long continued, can lead only to communal suicide. We may find ourselves echoing the prayer of the old Scotsman: "Lord, grant that I may always be right, for Thou knowest I'm hard to change." If there is always a better day yesterday, then there will never be a better day tomorrow.

I suppose that I am saying only this: the best historical society is the one which has but one eye on the past—and the other eye on the future. It draws from the past that which is relevant and useful for today and tomorrow. And this includes both the glories and the mistakes.

History is also dangerous because it can attract our gaze only to trivia. In the process, we fail to sense the full sweep of man's condition and endeavor. Several years ago a news article caught my attention—and I have never forgotten either the story it contained or the lesson it taught. The article was a commentary on a highly significant day in the life of the British Marquis of Cholmondeley, who had served to that time for 32 years in the House of Lords. In those 32 years, the Marquis had never uttered a word. He sat through a scorching depression, the terrible days of appeasement, the agony of World War II and of the Korean conflict, and the upheaval of the British Empire. When he finally rose to speak, to take his stand, to mark his place in history, he cast himself in support of legislation to outlaw and exterminate the rabbit. The United Press reported that his maiden speech started with these earth-shaking words: "My Lords, at long last I have been brought to my feet by the wish to do something about the rabbit."

Perhaps we have said enough about the dangers in the contemplation of history. What are the benefits? What, in essence, is the value of a society and of a building such as this? First of all, our contemplation of history should bring us knowledge, understanding, and acceptance (rather than fear) of change. It should kill within us the sometimes overpowering love of security for the sake of security. Change requires risks—and the study of history indicates that nothing ventured truly has meant nothing gained.

One of the classic examples of skeptical refusal was the action by the school board of Lancaster, Ohio, in the early 19th century. The board had been asked to grant a request for the use of the
school building for a discussion concerning the practicability of railroads. In reply, the board announced: "You are welcome to use the school house to debate all proper questions, but such things as railroads are impossibilities and rank infidelity. God never designed that His intelligent creatures should travel at the frightful speed of fifteen miles an hour." The study of history confirms that the incorporation of the Union Pacific Railroad occurred just one day before the final passage of federal legislation which led to the founding of most of America's state universities. Yes, there are risks involved in change and in the mere discussion of possible change.

I have often wondered what would have happened to the United States of America if one who loved only security had been placed on a Boston dock one evening late in the year of 1773. Supposing, for instance, the band of men dressed as Indians had been creeping toward the tea-laden vessel which was moored at the dock. Supposing the security-lover had stepped forward to whisper: "Now listen, fellows, let's hold off for awhile. Let's wait a week, or maybe a month. Time will take care of it. This whole thing will blow over."

The contemplation of history includes, per se, the contemplation of change—and perhaps an understanding thereof. In this country we owe a great debt of gratitude to a small few who caught a vision of democracy and made it a reality. We can talk a lot about our "forefathers." But what kind of men really were they? What sort of person helped to found this republic and this city? The answer is fairly simple: we exist in a free society today because a few men back in the late 18th century were willing to take a stand, because they resisted the pressure to play it safe.

The study of history confirms that these men had more than intellectual dedication to the idea of freedom. They also had the courage to stand up and be counted, to face the possibility of derision and defeat. But they believed so passionately in their cause that they were willing to stake their lives on it. They were revolutionists of the highest order. From their example we can draw but one conclusion: playing it safe, holding the line, never permitting the consideration of new ideas, refusing to allow controversy—all these directly deny progress, and inevitably encourage only mediocrity. As history tells us, if we wait to pledge our allegiance only to the sure thing, we ask that the status always remain quo. The "sure thing" is sure only because somebody else somewhere else had the courage first to prove that it would be safe.
The contemplation of history should give us also some much-needed confidence in the continuity of humanity. Through history we see that there has been many a time of great peril. But also that wise men repeatedly have prevailed over despotism. We also see the tragedy of those who hang their heads and run for cover. History shows us what happens to those who hide in their caves, plug their ears against the sounds of the world, and shoot the neighbors who seek shelter, whether they lived in the 8th century B.C., the 18th century, or 1962. History notes that there have been in the past those who both deny themselves and reject any confidence in the ultimate progress of humanity.

For these—and many reasons more—Pittsburgh as a community needs a strong historical society to help point to the lessons of the past as guides for the future, to help bolster confidence in community change and growth. The renaissance notion of a city such as this dies on the drawing boards if we are concerned only with sleek buildings of glass and metal and with round, shiny domes.

I suppose I speak here truly from the heart because I represent the only institution of higher learning in the city which is dedicated solely to the liberal arts and to that faith in man which emerges from the liberal studies.

I go back to the dictionary for clarification of this word "renaissance" which the City of Pittsburgh so loves to roll around on its tongue. Webster lists two definitions. The first is "a new birth or revival" but the second one is far more intriguing and important as a necessary corollary to the first. The second definition says that renaissance is "any period similarly characterized by vigorous activity along literary, artistic, or other lines." The "new birth or revival" is evident in Pittsburgh in the Golden Triangle and the Silver Dome, as well as numerous other projects. But are we equally vigorous along literary, artistic, or other lines?

No city, how beautiful on the exterior, is worth the metal and the glass which make it shine unless there is creativity and wisdom within. A live, vital, vigorous historical society is as important to Pittsburgh as the 55,000 seat stadium—if we want this city to be in essence and not by cliché the true "renaissance city of America." I congratulate you for what you have done—but I urge you to do it more fervently.