

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

HOMEWOOD AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

DONALD C. SCULLY

WHAT follows is a personal recollection about that part of Pittsburgh's East End known as Homewood at the turn of the century. I am jotting this down because I feel an attempt should be made to do so before things worth remembering are forgotten. While doing this I have tried to be exact, as one who records the past must be very careful not to exaggerate or distort the facts.

At that time other cities had their North Sides, South Sides, West Sides, and East Sides. Pittsburgh's East End was among the finest. Concentrated in the Homewood area alone were many mansions and considerable wealth. It is a pity someone blessed with literary ability has not researched carefully this historical section for here lived pioneers in steel, oil, coal and coke, pickles, cork, electrical energy, natural gas, railway safety devices, retail and wholesale merchandising, and banking.

In the comparatively short distance from Beechwood Boulevard and Fifth Avenue to Braddock and Penn avenues, and a few blocks either way, there were more than a score of large estates, most of them surrounded by stone or brick walls, sedate iron gates, or a combination of the three, each one with a stable filled with carriages and horses — maybe a pony or two — luxurious gardener-kept lawns, and accompanying flower and vegetable gardens. Many had the large greenhouses which were in vogue before the craze for swimming pools. Some had their chosen names carved in the gateposts: "Beechwood Hall," Frew; "Pennham," Jackson; "Clayton," Frick; and the Heinz estate, "Greenlawn."

Today these estates are either subdivisions or parks. Old "Blue Books" give the names of the staunch owners, starting near Beechwood Boulevard, as: William N. Frew; Charles Arbuthnot; R. B. Mellon (old house); William Thaw; William Carr; John B. Jackson; Francis (Frank) Bissell; Dr. William B. Irish; John W. Kirkpatrick; Joseph Woodwell; Judge William Wilkins; H. J. Heinz; George Westinghouse; William W. Card; Henry M. Curry; John A. Murtland; Henry Clay Frick; Alexander R. Peacock; Charles D.

A member of a prominent Pittsburgh family, Mr. Scully died December 18, 1975.—Editor

Armstrong; W. W. Blackburn; Henry R. Scully; Robert McConway; Thomas Morrison Carnegie; George Lauder; Durbin Horne; Joseph G. Holmes; Francis T. F. Lovejoy.

Several became millionaires when J. P. Morgan, in 1901, combined Carnegie Steel with eight other companies to form the United States Steel Corporation.

The nucleus of all this, the most historic and, sad to say, the most neglected, was Judge William Wilkins's homestead, which he called "Homewood." The mansion was built around 1832 with large Greek columns, high ceilings and windows, and massive doorways, and impressive surrounding buildings. This gem of architecture should never have been torn down. The whole should have been saved for posterity. I believe, though, that portions of the mansion are sheltered in the Carnegie Museum.

Authorities say Henry Clay Frick was a genius in organization and was largely responsible for the remarkable growth of the Carnegie Steel Company, along with his vast coke and other operations. He was a millionaire by the time he reached the age of thirty. Later he received fifteen million dollars for his stock in the Carnegie Steel Company.

After a presidential speech downtown, July 4, 1902, Theodore Roosevelt visited Frick's home. I remember well the escorting parade and the thrill of seeing a president of the United States and horse-drawn cannon and marching soldiers, never thinking that not too many years hence I too would be a soldier.

To go back to greenhouses, Frick's head greenhouse-keeper specialized in tropical plants and beautiful roses. Mr. Armstrong loved orchids and brought back exotic plants on his many trips to faraway lands in search of the world's finest sources of cork. I will never forget the Armstrong apple orchard on Lexington Avenue. We would cut a whiplike shoot from an apple tree, sharpen the tip into a point, impale thereon a small green apple, and aim it at a target like casting for a fish. In the spring, these whiplike pointed shoots, green apples, and unguarded greenhouses made a tempting combination. I can still hear "The Devil made me do it" sounds of breaking glass. It is hard to imagine now that horses and cows were pastured near the orchard in a field at the head of Lexington Avenue, which is now the north-west border of Frick Park.

At the corner of Homewood and Penn avenues, there was an odd-shaped iron security coop large enough to hold one or two lawbreakers until the patrol wagon arrived. It also served as a call box, but at

that site it was a waste of city moneys, for "Big Sam," the Irish patrolman, often bragged that in all his many years on the Homewood beat he had never made an arrest.

Long ago a nurse named Amanda was taking her young charge for a walk along Penn Avenue. When passing this police box and the Frick property, an immaculately dressed gentleman carrying a cane strolled by. The little boy looked up and said to his nurse, "Mammy, that's a dude." The gentleman, Henry Clay Frick, evidently amused, turned, and patting the boy on the head, said, "Whose little boy are you? You will go far." Years later, that little boy, who was my brother, Arthur Murtland Scully, became trustee, among other things, for all the land that eventually became Frick Park.

Bruce's Pond, long filled in, was the underground source of Ninemile Run, which flowed through the deep ravine to Fern Hollow, now Frick Park, to the Monongahela River. The pond was situated where Wilkins Avenue, not cut through then, crosses Beechwood Boulevard. Down from the pond was an unbelievably deep and narrow ravine bordering the Wilkins, Woodwell, Curry, and Frick estates. Around 1904 or 1905, this ravine was filled in to a little beyond the Homewood Avenue entrance to the Homewood Cemetery. Steam shovels and horse-drawn scoops leveled the high red clay hill paralleling Lang Avenue and the Wilkins estate to make the fill. A little known fact: if some future archeologists were to do some digging at Lang Avenue and the fill, or at Homewood Avenue and the fill, they would find two graceful arches made of huge blocks of granite. Flanking the bridges were massive railings. They were removed when the fill was completed. Later, when the downtown "Hump" was removed, these railing stones were used to patch around the courthouse.

Reynolds Street, as it is now, was not cut through then due to the deep ravine. The original tiny Sterrett Schoolhouse was at Homewood Avenue and the fill. It was torn down and the present Sterrett School on Lang Avenue was built in 1898. Frick donated a powerful telescope for the new school and paid for the observatory dome and science room to house it. At the time of Halley's comet, in May 1910, it is said that more city officials used the facility than did students.

Down Homewood Avenue from Penn Avenue was "Chester Manor," the home of John Morrow Murtland. Many years ago he gave the Pennsylvania Railroad the land on which to build the Homewood Station, including the entrance strip paralleling his orchard and the tracks from Lang Avenue to Homewood Avenue. Lang Avenue,

then known as Lang Lane, later separated the Murtland and Westinghouse properties. I remember as a youngster some of the original trees still stood. Unbeknownst to our elders, we played an exciting and somewhat dangerous game by placing apples on the railroad tracks. The boys' track was the "applesauce track," and the girls' track was the "apple sass track." After the trains roared past we would rush out and see which track had the most juice. The vibration of the oncoming train would sometimes dislodge the apple, but a little chewing gum placed secretly on the boys' track helped us to win.

Cradled among all this, like a medieval castle, stood Engine House No. 16. One who has never experienced it cannot know the thrill of seeing galloping horses, manes flying, polished hoofs pounding, bells clanging, "rolling equipment to a fire." The preheated pumper sometimes belched forth more smoke than the fire it was supposed to put out. Someone once said, "One thing about nostalgia — It makes a lot of things seem wonderful that were 'so-so' at the time." Not to me. To the neighborhood children and me, No. 16, with all its glitter and romance, was our Disneyland. The slide-down poles and the red and gold equipment sparkled. There were polished, hand-pulled brass bells and gongs — not push-button sirens and whistles as there are now.

The firemen, as well as the horses, were friendly — especially Joe — when awake. It is a fact that some horses sleep standing up, but not Joe. Joe spent most of his time on the straw. They say that he slept so soundly that sometimes he did not hear the alarm. To remedy this, his firemen friends rigged up some tin cans on a string so that when the stall door flew open the cans would fall on Joe's head. When the next alarm sounded, Joe was so startled by the cans that instead of stopping at his station under his collar and harness suspended from the ceiling, he dashed out the door and down the street instinctively towards the red glow in the sky. By the time they captured Joe and had him back in the firehouse, the red sky had turned back to midnight blue. Later, a short circuit in the stalls electrocuted all the horses — including Joe.

Two fads, now current, were popular then — bicycling and tennis. There were tennis courts of both grass and clay. The winters seemed longer and colder then. Some of the clay courts were diked and covered with water and frozen for skating. Some of the best amateur hockey players in the country learned to skate on frozen courts and later attended St. Paul's Episcopal School in Concord, New Hampshire (the acknowledged cradle of United States hockey),

and went on to win their varsity letters from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Bruce's Pond, mentioned before, was also a good place to skate. I sadly remember a promising boy broke through the ice and drowned.

Bicycles were used for pleasure and transportation to schools. Shady Side Academy was, and still is, a good school. The ride from Homewood to Shady Side did not seem long then, but when you look at it today it seems quite a distance. Two of the boys owned motorcycles. Gale Nutty rode an Indian and J. Knowles Woodwell a Yale. The boys were greatly envied, for of course they could leave much later for school and arrive home earlier. There were no long-distance passengers then. When anyone was given a ride it was a short one around the block on the handlebars.

In closing, I look back to many carriage rides through Highland and Schenley parks and to Carnegie Music Hall to hear lectures, and to the annual winter visit of Burton Holmes with his magic lantern slides of foreign countries. He would use a long bamboo pole to point out spots of interest, and a cricketlike clicker to tell his assistant in the aisle when to change the slide. As a boy I felt sorry for the carriages lined up on Bellefield Avenue during the long, cold wait for the performance to be over. But the horses had their blankets and doubtless many a bottle was hidden in the pockets of the anklelength livery coats the coachmen wore. Many of these faithful men were bachelors and lived upstairs over the stables, next to the hay mows, in very cozy dens. Some became chauffeurs and were left comfortable amounts of money by their employers. Upon arrival at the carriage entrance facing Bellefield Avenue, the driver was given a duplicate numbered ticket. When the performance ended, the number was flashed on a large board — a forerunner of modern electronics. On the journey back and forth, the riders were warmed with robes and Clarkes charcoal foot warmers, or with a metal canister covered with carpet containing a hot brick.

Hot bricks and horses,
Those were the days.