The Homewood Board of Trade Fair, 1902-1903.
By Pam Oestreicher

In the collections of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania are a group of photographs illustrating the Homewood Board of Trade fairs for 1902 and 1903, accompanied by the lavishly illustrated programs for each fair. They provide a glimpse of the promotional efforts of businessmen in the Homewood-Brushton area as they encouraged the development of their new suburb. As the Homewood Board of Trade constitution (1900) put it,

The purpose of the organization is the developing and protecting the Commercial interests of this community, and by concerted action to aid in every way the general advancement of this vicinity.¹

By 1902, the membership of the group stood at 185, with growth to four hundred expected by the following year. As part of their goal to attract both residents and businesses to the area, the organization set as one of its major projects the establishment of a branch Carnegie Library in the neighborhood.

The activity which took most of the group's energy and resources, however, was the annual street fair, begun in 1902. It was specifically intended to draw crowds to the avenues of the neighborhood.

The purpose of holding a Mardi-Gras Carnival and Fair, is to show the general public the many advantages of the 21st, 22nd and 37th Wards, in a business way, and as a desirable residence section, as evidenced by the phenomenal [sic] growth in the past three years. Also to create a fund to be devoted to the erection of a Board of Trade building, as a permanent home for the organization.²

The first year's program was not primarily an account of the fair, but a dramatically illustrated catalog of the development of the area, including street and housing construction, business establishments, schools, and churches. It detailed the recent explosion of construction: 263 buildings constructed in the 21st Ward in 1899, 325 in 1900, and 689 in 1901, with many more expected.³ The 1902 fair, titled Mardi Gras Carnival and Fair, was held September 1 to 6 on the property of E. M. Bigelow, Hamilton Avenue. The Pittsburg Railway Company provided car service to the fair, advertising, and electricity.

¹ Homewood Board of Trade, Mardi Gras Carnival & Fair, Official Souvenir Program, 1902 (not paged).
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
Country Store, Homewood Board of Trade, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1902. (Photo by M. H. Jacobs, 809 Smithfield Street)
Prospective members of the Homewood Board of Trade, about to board a Consolidated Traction Company car for a jaunt to McKeesport during the 1902 fair.
Gaskill-Mundy-Levitt’s Trained Wild Animals entrance, fair officials and attraction staff. The handwritten caption specifies the 1903 fair location: south side of Hamilton Avenue, east of Dunfermline.
Events in 1902 included pageants, free children's days, fraternal organization nights, a wedding on the midway (music by the Homestead Library Band), the coronation of a king and queen, and drawings for prizes.

In 1903, the fair was held for a full week in July, 4 to 11, again on Hamilton Avenue. The fair committee, now named the Homewood Carnival Association, boasted that $300,000 had been spent to provide the best in facilities and entertainment. They guaranteed that every show was "strictly up-to-date, new, novel, artistic, moral, and absolutely the best. . . ." Free events included a prismatic Electric Fountain, high diver Great Holden, and other dare devils. The Gaskill-Mundy-Levitt Carnival Company brought in and managed sixteen attractions. Their operation included such typical circus acts as acrobats, high wire performers, magicians, and a wild animal show. Various electrical displays, scenes from foreign lands, early movies, a Ferris wheel, and a wild west show were among the special activities receiving prominent billing. The schedule again included a wedding on the midway, a children's day, and fraternal events, but this year labor unions received special notice with their own day and evening.

During the week of the fair, the Pittsburgh Gazette ran daily stories advertising the events and reporting on developments. The fair drew large crowds all week, despite stifling heat, thunderstorms, and floods in some areas. "[The] big open lot on Hamilton Avenue was crowded from early afternoon until the conclusion of the free performances at 11 o'clock. . . ." July 7, the Gazette reported that all awaited the sensational dance among the lions of La Belle Salina. The crowd was treated to more excitement than it expected when the leopard attacked three people. A Miss Mazie Hall was saved by "William Grim (colored)," a man who earlier had saved lives in an electrical accident. By week's end, the paper reported that the fair was an unqualified success.

4 Homewood Board of Trade, Carnival and Street Fair, Official Souvenir Program, 1903 (not paged).
5 Pittsburgh Gazette, July 5, 1903.
6 Ibid., July 7, July 9, 1903.