Self-Reflection

By John A. Herbst
Executive Director

This new version of the Society’s magazine reflects our effort to reach out to a broader audience, both in our publications and in our many other activities. As Editor Paul Roberts points out, we will continue to publish well-researched history, but we will also offer our readers articles on events and people closer to our own time (as exemplified by the interview with Jack Tankersley in this issue). And in each issue readers will find a few comments in this section about some aspect of our mission and ongoing activities.

From time to time, we will devote extra attention in the magazine to our work. An example is this issue’s lead article, which deals with an important aspect of Homestead’s twentieth century history, the result of research associated with our exhibit “Homestead: The Story of a Steel Town,” which opens this month. This article also highlights another of our efforts. Some of the most interesting illustrations for the article come from a family album of photographs from the 1920s and 1930s donated to the Society by Evelyn Sedlak, who grew up in lower Homestead. Many photographs from her album also will be seen in the upcoming exhibit.

Of similar interest is another recent acquisition, an album of photographs of 237 employees of Lyon Shorb & Co., an iron foundry that operated on Pittsburgh’s Southside near the Smithfield Street Bridge during the middle of the last century. Since learning of this acquisition, people from across the Pittsburgh region have come to view the album in hope of seeing the face of a family member known to have worked for the company.

Important both to scholars and the community at large was the establishment of the Jewish Archives at the Society in November 1988. This grew out of a survey of Jewish archival resources funded by the Allen H. and Selma Berkman Endowment Fund administered by the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh. The survey revealed an abundance of materials about this long-established community scattered throughout the city and led to the decision to collect these materials and deposit them at the Society.

Collections are at the heart of any historical society’s activities. The mission of historical societies and museums is to collect and conserve the materials of a community’s history and to make them available to the public through their exhibits, publications, and interpretive educational programs, as well as through their libraries and archives.

The Society’s collections made possible our exhibit “Homewood-Brushton: A Century of Community-Making,” which brought hundreds of visitors to our Oakland headquarters during the past two years. It also made possible “A Way to Be Seen: Women’s Fashions in Pittsburgh, 1870-1920,” which was on view throughout the fall of 1988. The value of costume collections in helping bring social history to life has been increasingly understood in the museum world. This exhibit demonstrated how much costumes can provide insight into the daily lives and activities of their original owners. The interpretive labels and accompanying brochure placed the costumes in context, reflecting the changing role of women in a changing society.

The Society’s public programs have a similar far-ranging character. In April the Society hosted a conference on religion and the ethnic experience in Western Pennsylvania, in concert with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the Pennsylvania Ethnic Heritage Studies Center, and the Pennsylvania Heritage Affairs Committee. Live performances by four ethnic choral groups accompanied the program.

In the following month, the Society organized a four-hour
cruise on the Monongahela River, during which Homestead business leader George DeBolt, Carnegie Mellon University Professor David Demarest, and architect David Lewis (organizer of the Remaking Cities International Conference of Architects) discussed the impact of the steel industry on the valley and the ways in which this heritage could be used in advancing the development of the region.

Other highlights include the Society’s republication in November of the 1876 Atlas of the County of Allegheny, the original of which has been receiving more use in our library than any comparable volume. In addition to 50 detailed maps, the reprinted edition includes a contemporary map identifying changes, an index of land plot owners, and an introductory essay by Professor Edward K. Muller of the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of History.

An important contribution by the Society in 1987-88 to the field of social studies education was the publication of two units for use by middle and high schools. The first, Frontier Democracy, marking the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, concerned itself with Western Pennsylvania’s reaction to the ratification. This was funded, in part, by the Allegheny County Bicentennial Commission. The second, SteelTown: Teaching about Growth and Change in Western Pennsylvania Steel Towns, 1860-1945, a case study of Homestead, was funded by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, and the Robert S. Waters Charitable Trust.

The units comprise materials for use by teachers and students, including text, illustrations, and bibliographical materials. The Society hopes to continue publishing such materials.

Perhaps the most encouraging event of recent months was the award of a $195,000 grant to the Society by the Richard K. Mellon Foundation, to enable us to carry forward our work developing the Pittsburgh History Center. With its projected major museum, library and archives, and educational division, the Center should ensure that the people of this region will never lose their history. As Garry Wills points out in his thoughtful article in this issue, “Historical preservation is, in the deepest sense, self-preservation.”