Midwifing History

By John A. Herbst
Executive Director

We often say that counselors and clergy involved in social services or various professionals in the health field are members of the "helping professions," but perhaps that classification might appropriately include cultural "helpers." One of our members recently noted that our staff has been serving as "the midwife" of area history. Indeed, our curators and historians have been busy working with various communities and civic groups on interpretive projects of the history of Western Pennsylvania. For instance, our museum staff assisted Port Authority Transit in celebrating its 25th Anniversary and creating an exhibit on transportation history; opening this summer at the City/County Building, this exhibit will later travel to various PAT stations.

Likewise, the museum staff has been under contract with the Charleroi Chamber of Commerce and the Main Street Project, playing a central role in the development of plans for a glass museum there. This involves staff historian Curt Miner, researching Charleroi's history; curator Robert Long, organizing the existing collection and formulating collections policy; and myself, delineating an interpretive strategy and an effective three-year implementation plan. Glass became a leading industry in Charleroi, a fascinating mid-Monogahela valley town, settled in part by French-speaking Belgians.

The Society is also cooperating with the Northside Development Corporation and the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History to restore a salvaged piece of the Pennsylvania Canal on the northern bank of the Allegheny River. This refitted weigh lock could serve as the centerpiece for a canal transportation center in the May Stern warehouse, a building being renovated by community development groups as a new business incubator.

The Society has undertaken a major initiative in conjunction with Pittsburgh Citiparks and the Schenley Park Centennial Committee. I sit on the committee which is preparing a master plan for the continued upgrading of this wonderful urban oasis. The Society will prepare a permanent exhibit on the history of the park to be housed in the former Nature Center across from Phipps Conservatory. The exhibit will be geared toward the folks who use the park, especially the families, and will convey the legacy of the park as it has evolved with changes in Pittsburgh.

Additionally, the Society has given birth to a more formal way of assisting small historical societies and museums. Through its Local History Resource Service, developed as a memorial to C.V. and Agnes L. Starrett, the Society established a revolving fund to support three aspects of this service.

First, several hundred books, leaflets, slide shows and videos were purchased as a "how to do" local history library. They are now available to volunteers and lone professionals who have the responsibility for so much of the community heritage of our region. Information on caring for historical photographs, restoring historical buildings, creating exhibits and raising funds is available through the service. This material, valued at over $4,000, provides smaller institutions with access to information and resources well outside their budgets; budgets all too often only meet basic operating expenses or vital capital improvements.

A second aspect of this service will provide a series of training programs dealing with common problems such as collection storage, computerization, museum-school collaboration and grant writing. An Advisory Council of leaders from 15 representative area groups is working now to identify specific topics for this workshop series and to oversee the development of this area of our services.

The third aspect will be to fund a full-time technical person who could make site visits to organizations in the region; this could have a major impact on the quality of historical work in Western Pennsylvania.

The Starrett Memorial Fund is dedicated to supporting these activities. Our thanks to the friends and relations of C.V. and Agnes L. Starrett for establishing the fund. A major $10,000 gift from the Buhl Foundation in memory of Mr. Starrett, a former foundation director, and a $5,000 gift from the Alcoa Foundation have been added to the fund. It will strengthen the ties among area organizations and foster cooperative approaches to common problems. Midwifing history is the first step in caring for and nurturing our heritage, and is, indeed, a fitting expression of our institution's "regional" nature.