

Memoir, 1910-1922

By Evelyn Pearson

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prosperity.*

WHEN my father graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in 1903, he came west to "Pittsburg" to be a newspaper reporter. He survived a typhoid epidemic, one of the last of many that ended when a water filtration plant was built in Aspinwall, a small town north of the city.

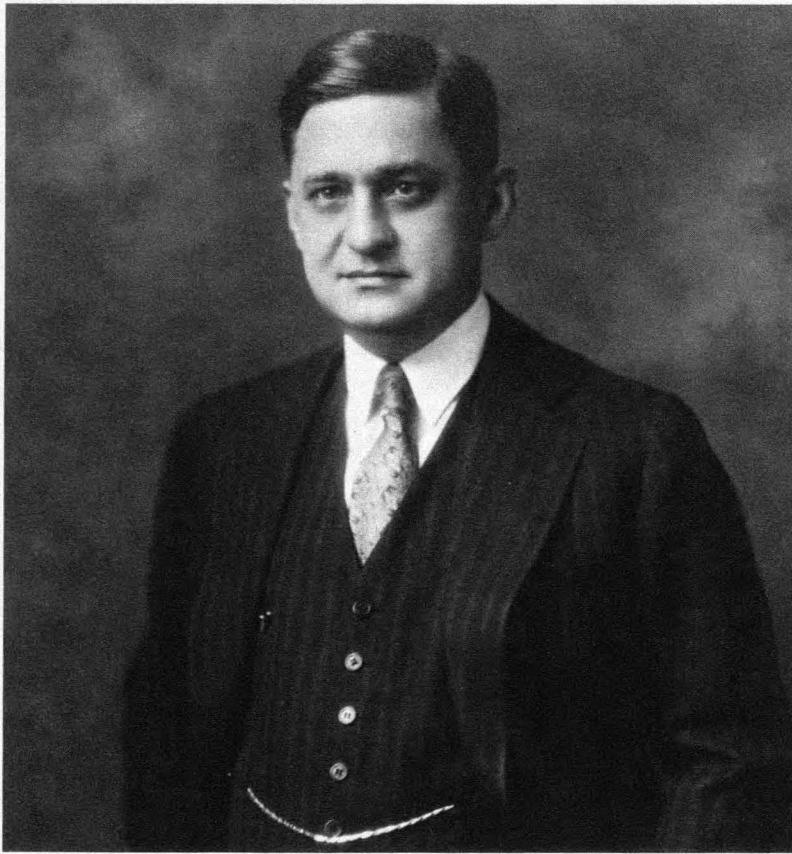
Pittsburg was thriving. Coal smoke from factories filled the air until noon became like midnight. Midnight became noon when the Bessemers blew and the sky flamed and the rivers reflected prosperity.

Harry Bitner's first assignment was to go out at night in the city on Second Avenue, along the Monongahela. He saw the fiery sky made by the mills, sought a rare telephone and called in. "There's the damndest fire you ever saw out here!" Apparently this was the first assignment for every rookie reporter. I read the same story years later in a book issued during Pittsburgh's bicentennial celebration.

Some 12 newspapers were published in the city at that time. Harry claimed to have been fired from each one until he settled at the *Pittsburgh Press*. He moved to an apartment on the corner of Alder and Emerson streets in Shadyside, with three other men. Across Emerson lived three girls and their brother, last name of Hanna. Harry liked the one named Evelyn best, sometimes staying so long courting that he had to run to the end of the street and jump on the train to the city as it slowly picked up speed after leaving East Liberty Station.

Evelyn had been christened Eva Mathilda. She once admired the name Randolph on a flower shop window in East Liberty. At the time of her confirma-

The author, shown at left with her mother and baby brother in 1913, graduated from the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College) in 1933. She married Karl Henry Pearson in 1934 and raised five children. A lifelong resident of Pittsburgh, she has served on a number of local boards, including the chair of Goodwill Industries. Now the grandmother of 14, Mrs. Pearson lives, paints, and writes in Squirrel Hill.



Harry Bitner rose through the ranks in the Pittsburgh newspaper world to become an editor by the mid-1910s. The family lived in O'Hara Township next to Aspinwall. The Bitners, like countless other families around the city and across America, were pioneers in the suburbanization so dominant today. Attractive real estate prices, innovations in transportation — the streetcar, inter-urban train system and the automobile — and new set of social values fueled the exodus.

tion in East Liberty Presbyterian Church, when the minister asked her name, she replied, "Evelyn Randolph Hanna," and so she became, her birth records having been lost in a courthouse fire.

Evelyn agreed to marry Harry if he built her a house. They were married in the Dutch Reformed Church on Highland Avenue and found a lot in O'Hara Township where Aspinwall paving ended and the air was clean. After a honeymoon in Atlantic City, they moved into a white U-shaped brick house at the top of Lexington Avenue that they built with a bank loan and probably help from Harry's father. It was almost the edge of the world. There was one house

below on the road down to where a tiny rustic bridge crossed a creek to a narrow valley. Except for three houses on nearby brick-paved Delafield Road, only woodland was visible.

Several steps led from the road to a boardwalk; then steps to a porch. Inside to the left was the dining room, with a built-in sideboard, a wood-burning fireplace and a big window. In the living room, bookcases covered the north wall except for a window seat where I read or sketched. Next to the books was a door to the den and a lavatory.

Just outside the kitchen door was a storage place dug out of the hillside. Apples and root vegetables were stored there, as well as home-canned fruits and vegetables and jellies. We called it the "cooler." Ever afterward, Father called any refrigerator the "cooler."

A narrow backyard was crossed with clotheslines, where Halloween winds blew our union suits into witches. The rest of the property slanted uphill in terraces where our garden grew. When I saw snakes there, I ran back through the kitchen and dining room to the stairway opposite the front door, up two steps to the landing, and straight up to my room, past high windows and a closet locked against mysterious contents. In my room, the sun showed only the woods beyond, and the moon lit a mysterious landscape where crickets chirped, an owl hooted, and frogs sang their nightly songs.

The bathroom, with tub, the toilet on which I had to kneel for shampoos, and the basin where my front tooth got chipped, separated my room from where my parents slept in mahogany splendor. I was born in their big brass bed in the evening heat of June 20, 1910, as the constellations swung in their courses from Gemini to Cancer. I was attended by Dr. John Simpson, a college friend of my father's. As they awaited my arrival, my father admitted to ig-

norance of female anatomy, so he and John repaired to the cellar toilet cubicle where John drew a diagram on the wall. It was still there when the house was sold.

Next to my parents' room was a tiny space for my brother, born in December 1912. My first memory is of seeing my blue-eyed brother in his bassinet — Harry Murray Bitner Jr. — a big name for such a small bundle, so we called him "Buddy." Then I was called "Sissy."

When Buddy was small and slept with me, we had a live-in "girl" who stayed there. Curiosity took my steps into her room and I ran her comb through my curls. Mother spent many hours searching for lice, snapping them in two with her fingernails, and dousing my head with kerosene.

The house site, six uphill blocks from the center of Aspinwall and its railroad station, may be the reason I remember few visitors. Relatives occasionally visited, but I recall no entertaining. Mother

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told me that my father was so shy that she had to carry the conversation ball. This reversed as they grew older.

Mother was definitely the boss in the house. She cooked, cleaned, sewed, shopped, repaired. On

Mondays, the laundress came. She washed, boiled, rinsed, put clothes through the wringer, starched and hung them. Tuesdays Mother spent with the sad-irons, one being used, the other heating on the stove. The clink of the handle changing irons and the sizzle of hot iron on sprinkled clothes was the Tuesday song. Tuesday dinner was usually vegetable soup and apple dumplings.

I remember sitting on my father's lap, stringing glass beads for the Christmas tree. In the den behind the living room were Father's desk, his mandolin with frayed ribbons, and a telephone on the wall. The den was locked for weeks in December. Christmas morning the door opened to a glorious tree alight with candles clipped onto the branches, and



Aspinwall (here, 1907) was a village of 400 until the 1890s, when land speculators began selling lots for suburban housing. By 1930, the population stood at 4,200. As if to complement Aspinwall's status as a remedy to urban ailments, the city of Pittsburgh built a water purification plant there in 1914.

baubles too delicate to touch. In our stockings hanging from the mantle were Woolworth toys, nuts, candy and an orange. Underneath the tree were brightly wrapped mittens, scarves, tassel caps and, always, books.

Reading was our constant pleasure. I loved "Dorothy Dainty" and hated "Elsie Dinsmore." From one disremembered title, I learned a handy truism, "Pretty is as pretty does." My *Mary Frances Cook Book* had recipes, and the companion *Mary Frances Sewing Book* had real tissue paper patterns for doll clothes. In one volume of our *Book of Knowledge* was a double page showing planets on one side, and on the other, eight train engines, on tracks that disappeared into the void, aimed at the planets. The text explained how long it would take a train to reach each planet.

We waited every month for *St. Nicholas* magazine while we read Grimms' and Anderson's fairy tales, Stevenson, Lamb and the scary stories of Poe and Sax Rohmer. We enjoyed Theodore Roosevelt's *Letters to My Children*.

We played inch-thick Edison records on our Victrola with the Little Nipper on the horn, and watched slits in the paper rolls make music as we pumped the player piano. Buddy usually requested, "Play number seven" (an excerpt from Beethoven's symphony). When he wanted to make me cry, he played "From the Land of the Sky-blue Water," a sad piece about an Indian maiden who died for love. The first notes I remember, though, were Father's whistle when he came home from work — the cardinal's call. Mother answered — same notes, from wherever she was in the house. Mother had a high soprano voice that hurt our ears. Her favorite song, of course, was "I'm Just Wild About Harry."

My little doll had a real china tea set that Aunt Jean had given me. My doll had clothes that I washed one day and strung across

the Taylor Burner to dry. The gas was lit, but Mother rescued us before the clothes caught fire. (Taylor stoves were sheets of asbestos set in a narrow chimney above gas jets, framed in shiny brass.) Shooting marbles with mannies and glassies, roller skating and playing mumblety peg were outdoor fun. On the Fourth of July, we were allowed to shoot off big firecrackers that boomed, and packs of little ones that, if lit at one end, popped off all in a row.

I liked to visit my cousins in Edgewood who had a set of red ceramic blocks with arches and steeples for building houses and

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towns. I admired their dolls which had lacy, beribboned clothes sewn by their grandmother, and a miniature wardrobe trunk for storing them.

On bright spring days, I was kept indoors when the gypsies came by on their annual search for dandelions, which they dug out of front yards with their sharp knives. I had such tangled dark curls and big brown eyes; Mother was afraid the gypsies might steal me. Once, when I ran away, down across the rustic bridge, over the "crick" and up the valley toward a sawmill where the gypsies camped, mother spanked me with a wood-backed hairbrush. Other times I was locked in a closet as punishment.

Buddy and I were our own best friends and worst enemies and only companions. Even after I had school-time friends, we lived so far out the dusty road that youngsters couldn't come to play. One older

girl and boy sometimes stopped on their investigations to check us out. They taught us to wrap newspaper around corn silk when the corn in the garden ripened and silk dried to tobacco color. They had matches and helped us light our "cigarettes." Mother saw us and we were spanked.

I remember Mother putting strawberries and sugar on platters, covering them with glass and setting them in the sun to make preserves. Once every summer we could hear a bell slowly coming closer, then over the hill would appear the scissors grinder, pushing his emery wheel. Mother took him her knives and scissors. He pushed a pedal and made the wheel spin as he ground the metal with a sound like chalk screeching on a blackboard.

A square card would be hung in the front window showing the number of pounds of ice you needed. At his wagon, the ice man pulled out a hug slab of straw covered ice, took his pick to split off the right size, grasped it in great tongs, hefted it to his burlap covered shoulder, and came around to the kitchen door. The milkman came to the back door, too. He left milk in quart glass bottles that had a kind of bubble at the top. Milk was not homogenized and cream rose to the bubble. It could be poured off for our oatmeal and Father's coffee by tipping the bottle very, very carefully until milk started to seep into the top.

Every week, hucksters in their horse-drawn wagons came calling their greens and groceries. We followed Mother out as she made her choices, staying behind her skirts, well away from the horse. Mother's skirts were long and full. Underneath she wore a shimmy (chemise); a corset stiff with metal stays and grommets for the laces that had to be pulled tight and left a faint rib-and-lattice pattern on her skin; a corset cover; bloomers and a petticoat. The corset had three garters on each side to hold up her



The Bitner house, c. 1910,
“where Aspinwall paving
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stockings. On her feet, she wore high-button leather shoes. Her hair was softly pompadoured and she never left home without a hat and gloves.

Children also wore high button shoes. When the leather was new and stiff, a button hook had to be used to fasten them. When a button pulled off, the original holes had to be found to pull the needle through the leather and sew it back on. I was overjoyed to get my first pair of buckle shoes and insisted noisily on wearing them to the circus at Exhibition Hall. Elephants had passed the entrance and I stepped into a paddy up to my new blue socks.

Everything fastened with buttons, even the back flap on our union suits, which we wore all winter. After the Saturday night bath in the claw-footed tub with a showerhead as big as a sunflower, we wore clean neck-to-ankle underwear. On Sunday, pulling our long black stockings over the tight legs was easy, but every day thereafter a bigger and bigger fold had to be made in the ankle end. In summer we wore cotton pantywaists. They had buttons down the front and along the bottom for fastening underpants to. Girls wore ribbons like stiff, giant butterflies in their long hair. Boys wore suits with short pants, and a necktie

“for good.” Mother had a sewing machine and made most of our clothes.

I walked to school and home for lunch. A nasty dog barked at me every trip. If you did well in class, you were rewarded by being allowed to take the chalk erasers outside and clap them together to let the white dust fly.

Father watched our schoolwork carefully. We had better know our spelling and syntax! He taught us the power of parsimonious prose. A sentence must be lean. If someone said, “I’ll fix it up,” the editor said, “Why ‘up’?”

Every summer 5- and 6-year-olds wore isinglass bubbles on their

The Saints/Hanna Family

MATHILDA Saint, born in 1831, was the daughter of Isaac and Sarah Giles Saint who had left Yeovil, in the Somerset area of England, under a cloud of unspecified disgrace that was still remembered when a grandson visited years later. They settled in O'Hara Township, Pennsylvania, to farm. Mathilda married John Jimison Hanna on October 18, 1854. Their second son, Henry Thornton Hanna, was born at Sharpsburg in June 1858. Henry earned good marks at Sharpsburg Academy and became an auditor with American Window Glass Company. He worked on river boats and the Pennsylvania Railroad during frequent economic depressions when jobs were scarce.

The Saints moved to Valencia in Butler County, where they were neighbors to the Owens family. Henry visited his grandparents there, met Louella Kathryn Owens and married her. Katy, as she was called, suffered an officious mother-in-law and a

husband whom some called a "city slicker." Of Henry and Katy's five children, the oldest son died in January 1887; that year, after the family moved to Collins Avenue in East Liberty, Eva, my mother, was born. Grandmother Katy died when I was 6 weeks old.

Great-grandmother Mathilda had been a member of Aspinwall Presbyterian Church. Buddy and I were sent there to Sunday School until the minister came to call and discovered that we had not been baptized. I was 5. In shock, he said, "These children are going straight to hell!" This so incensed my parents that it ended all church-going for the family until it was required when I ended boarding school.

I called my Grandpa Hanna "Cuckoo" because after Katy died he went to live with my aunt and uncle in Edgewood, who had a cuckoo clock in their house. Although I was very young, I remember well the little bird's sound on the hour. Cuckoo died three years after Katy.

arms. School attendance required vaccinations for smallpox. The doctor came to your house and scratched your arm with a needle that looked like one of those fancy paper-sheathed toothpicks in restaurants. The vaccination had to be protected from infection, and the bubble was taped to your arm until the vaccine "took" and the scab came off.

Any child who had measles or whooping cough or chicken pox or diphtheria was quarantined. (An infantile paralysis epidemic closed the schools in the fall of 1916.) Big cardboard warning signs in various colors were posted by the front door. My friend, Betty, had a red sign by her front door: scarlet fever.

Until a large space was dug out of the hillside to house our first automobile, we walked everywhere—to the train station, to the street-car, into the woods to pick violets

and spring beauties and May apples. Mother drove Father to the train every morning, then she went to shop in East Liberty. We walked to the zoo in Highland Park, across a bridge so old that the green Allegheny was visible far below through the shrunken wooden planks. On Saturdays we walked into Aspinwall to the nickelodeon to squeal at Pauline's perils.

Father's companion on the train to the city was J.G. Mark, a lawyer with the firm of Reed, Smith, Shaw and McClay. The Mark family lived near the center of Aspinwall, and we sometimes visited them and their two children, Charlotte and Jimmy. One snowy night, we were bundled warmly and taken by sled down the hill to their house when a neighbor's house caught fire and sparks blew toward our roof. We were warmed with cocoa and put

to bed with their children. Sometimes Charlotte would let me ride on the handlebars of her bicycle through the filtration plant roads. Their house had a sun porch, a colored glass window on the stair landing, and four bedrooms upstairs separated by two bathrooms. I thought the house was a mansion.

Aspinwall started as a center for area farmers. Brilliant Avenue opposite the train station had a few stores and the nickelodeon. The train crossed the river then and went to East Liberty. Upper middle-class people built homes and commuted to town. Not until the 1920s did city people begin to build in the woods and on farmland farther out, naming their area for a chapel built by a family named Fox.

Saturday nights we were allowed to stay up till midnight and

The Bitner Family

MY father's parents were born in Centre Hall, Pa. Their ancestors had been farmers and artisans. Henry Franklin Bitner taught English Literature and "Mental Science" at Keystone State Normal School in Kutztown. Before that, Cora Murray had been Henry Bitner's brightest pupil at Centre Hall Academy, before they married.

Henry earned a Ph.D. in chemistry from Wooster (Ohio) University in 1890. He read law with a local judge until Cora convinced him that teaching was his *forté*. Later, while Cora taught music and Sunday School classes and raised four children, Henry became preceptor and head of the natural sciences department at Millersville Normal School, near Lancaster. He was an active member of the Dutch Reformed Church and was often sent as a delegate to its conferences.

His son — my father, Henry Murray Bitner (always called Harry) — was born Christmas Eve, 1883, in Kutztown. My father said he spent his youth in the library.

My family visited Grandpa Bitner every summer, at first by train, squirming on the plush green seats, eating the lunches Mother packed, waiting for the hissing engines to be changed at Cresson, leaving the backbone of the Alleghenies to be sped downhill to Horseshoe Curve, where we saw both engine and caboose at the same time.

Grandpa had retired to Centre Hall, and after Cora died in 1908, married her older sister, Agnes. She had graduated from the School of Pharmacy of Buffalo University and had worked in their father's Centre

Hall drugstore.

Grandpa always had a big garden, chickens, and two pigs, every year named Dunder and Blitzen, whose bacon we enjoyed the next winter. Bud and I watched him scramble for a dinner chicken, wring its neck and let the headless thing dance its final moment in the yard.

A Model "T" Ford, with brass headlights and radiator front, replaced his horse and buggy. He drove us to ancient relatives on farms in the area, and once took us to nearby Penn's Cave, where cold dripping rock walls were lit only by the lantern on the prow of the boatman's craft.

Grandpa was short and round and had a good lap for sitting on to hear his stories. The only one I remember is that in the summer of 1863, he was sent to visit relatives on a farm near Gettysburg. Union soldiers came and took away all their horses for the battle raging nearby.

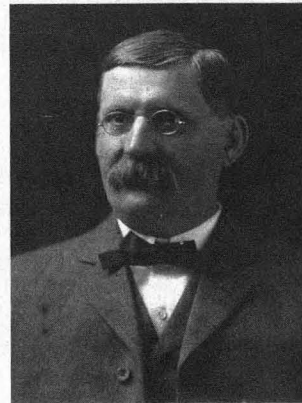
The first Bitner in America had arrived in Philadelphia in 1735. He bought

land in Lancaster County and earned enough from his first crop of tobacco to buy the indenture of the sweetheart he had met on the boat from Germany and to marry her. Several Bitners served in the Revolutionary army. Grandpa sent me this information so I could join the Daughters of the American Revolution, but it came at the time, in 1939, that the DAR refused to allow Marian Anderson, a black woman of glorious voice, to give a concert in their Washington, D.C. auditorium, so I never joined.

Grandpa died in 1949, age 96.



Cora Murray Bitner, c. 1888



Henry Bitner, c. 1887



The Aspinwall Train Station at Freeport Road and Brilliant Avenue (here, May 1906) ensured access to work and leisure activities outside the borough. Rail service was vital to the growth of suburban residential communities, where most corporate managers and trained professionals lived by early this century.

drive to town with Mother to wait on Oliver Avenue for Father to put the Sunday paper to bed. Mother did most of the driving. (Father drove as though cantering a horse down an empty road.) Downtown, the only light in the street was in the window of the Martha Washington Candy Shop, across from the alley where pressmen in folded newspaper hats slipped around the corner to relieve themselves. On the corner of Oliver and Wood streets was the tobacconist where every year we bought Father's twin birthday and Christmas present: two drums of stogies. He said they never tasted as good anywhere but Pittsburgh.

Sunday mornings we read the funnies on our stomachs on the living room floor. We enjoyed the "Katzenjammer Kids" and "Tillie the Toiler" and "Barney Google" while we waited for the big noon dinner of roast chicken and mashed potatoes. For Sunday supper, we had bread and milk and sugar in

blue bowls.

On some Sundays we drove to visit relatives north of the city, returning home in the dark past scarecrow oil wells flaming with gas at their tops. We heard frogs croaking under the moon along Thompson Run Road, and rumbled down the wooden paving on the Butler Plank Road. Occasionally we visited Aunt Annie Gibson in Gibsonia, where we had to push and pull the long handle on the pump outside the kitchen door when we wanted a drink of water. After supper, we sat in her high front yard to wait for the pufferbelly to roar down the tracks below and shoot sparks in the night sky.

Before Grandfather Hanna died, we went to see him, too. He lived in Edgewood with my aunt and uncle. I liked to sit on their front porch in the evenings and watch the lamplighter making his way down Hutchinson Avenue, opening the little doors and holding his magic wand to the gas mantles to make them glow.

We had gas lighting until Father contracted to use electricity from the filtration plant for a dollar a year. He paid to have the wires strung up the hill to our house.

In 1917, even Buddy could read the big red headlines in the *Press*, WAR! We marched about, knees high, sticks over our shoulders. We played trench warfare in a nearby vacant lot, and had to eat awful margarine on our bread. Then Uncle Ted came to say "goodbye" in khaki and puttees, and we learned that Father's brother also had been commissioned into the army.

November 11 of the next year was a bright warm day. We were roller skating when the siren blew and church bells all over town rang the end of the war. The most vivid memory of my childhood came four days before, however. My father sat at the dining room table in an aura of blackness, head in his hands, sunk in guilt. As managing

editor, he had printed the wire service report of the end of the war — the false armistice — and disappointed anxious readers waiting for the good news.

By 1919, we had outgrown the honeymoon house and moved to Barnsdale Street in the East End, a fine long hill for speeding down belly-guts on our Flexible Flyers in the snow.

It was an area of single family homes, a few row houses and two-story apartment buildings. We lived in a double house. Most of the women were housewives, the men junior executives. The brother of one of my friends later became president and board chairman of U.S. Steel. Houses were bigger around the corner on Northumberland, and even grander two blocks away on Beechwood Boulevard.

The day we moved in, Abie, our new neighbor, came across the street and said, "Are you'n's Jews?" We had to ask Mother,

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"What's Jews?"

Buddy and I had other companions for the first time. I heard my first naughty joke: "Spell

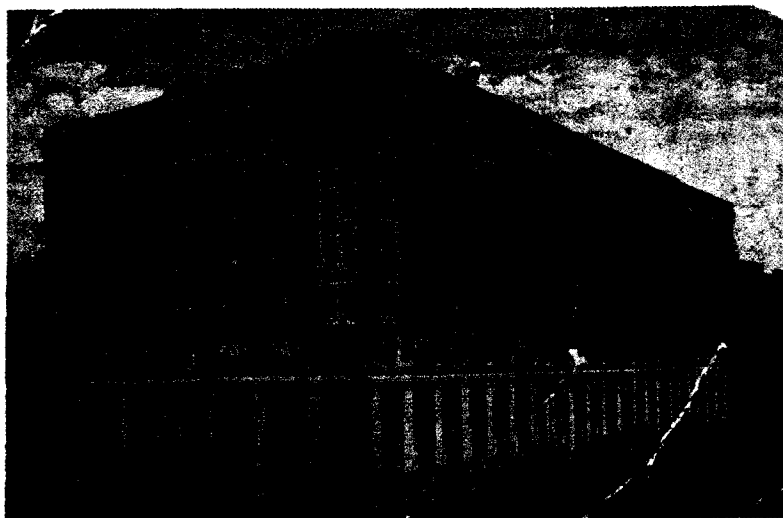
'oilcup' and leave out the 'l'." We went to Linden School, where girls had to wear bloomers and middy blouses for gym. My friend and I thought it was dumb to have to change clothes twice a day in school, so we wore our bloomers to class, and were promptly sent home.

We were invited to parties. One friend's mother came for us and took us home again in her electric automobile. It had glass all around, like a queen's crystal coach, a tiny flower vase, a long bar for steering and another for braking.

On Forbes Street near Murray Avenue were shops where we bought groceries and sundries, but we were now city folks and did most of our shopping in town. For my clothes we went to Oppenheim-Collins on Penn Avenue, or McCreery's in the building now capped by the Press Club; for Bud's, we went to Browning, King.



The boys from the Press — Bitner fourth from the right — on an outing, c. 1915.



Reymers restaurant in the Jenkins Arcade, *top*, and McCreery's dining room, were among the Bitners' favorite spots in downtown Pittsburgh during the 1920s.

McCreery's had a pleasant dining room where red and green parrots perched beside big windows. We lunched there until the room closed after a patron, we heard, died of psittacosis she had caught from one parrot. Reymers in the Jenkins Arcade was another fine place to rest and have lunch or tea. We oc-

asionally met my father in the evening to dine in the new William Penn Hotel, or in the blue-and-white tiled Fort Pitt Hotel dining room. At our dinner table, we heard talk of the League of Nations — “no foreign entanglements,” said Father — and about President Harding, who had appointed Andrew Mellon as Secretary of the Treasury.

Mother drove us to town on Fifth Avenue or Centre until Bigelow Boulevard was built with its handsome concrete wall that retained rocks and slides from Heron Hill. Two inclines crossed high above the roadway, from the hill to the Strip District far below. The view revealed rivers and bridges and half the city.

Harry Bitner had moved up the editorial staff of the *Press*. His salary increased, and in 1922 he was able to think of building a house on Aylesboro Avenue near Forbes. Blueprints were spread on the dining room table, and construction began, but we were not to live there.

One of my father's duties was to choose features for the paper — Arthur Brisbane and other columnists, Neil Brinkley's feathery girls, cartoons and comics. In New York he met with an important man for King Features Syndicate. He agreed to recommend Father to William Randolph Hearst but first wanted to meet Mother. The three dined elegantly until the executive made a pass at Mother. She said, “Take your hands off me, you big fat slob.” Nevertheless, Mr. Hearst asked Father to be editor-in-chief of the *Detroit Times*, which Mr. Hearst had recently bought. We moved again. ■