

# What's in a Name?

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**W**HAT'S in a name? The question is quite a timely one for the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Like other historical societies, we are many things to many people: museum, library, archives, publications, and education. Our name conjures up various expectations from those living in Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. Since the Society is in transition, its expansion of programs and services has raised the question of how much of "Western Pennsylvania" we can adequately cover in any given sphere of activity.

Western Pennsylvania is a major area indeed. George Swetnam and Helene Smith have defined it as the 26 counties of Erie, Warren, McKean, Crawford, Venango, Forest, Cameron, Mercer, Butler, Clarion, Jefferson, Clearfield, Lawrence, Butler, Armstrong, Indiana, Cambria, Blair, Allegheny, Westmoreland, Washington, Fayette, Somerset and Bedford. There is a debate as to whether Potter County rightly belongs in this list. At any rate, Potter County or not, this is a tremendous bulk of the Commonwealth.

Let us consider how our forebearers saw the institution's turf. The Society underwent various metamorphoses in names: in 1834, the Historical Society of Pittsburgh; in 1843 and 1853, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania; in 1879, the Old Resident's Association of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. In 1884, the "Pittsburgh" was dropped.

Our charter reads as follows:

"... said corporation is formed for the purpose of collecting, elucidating and preserving... information concerning or relating to Western Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Northwest Territory and the States embraced therein..." It provided for us to be based in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

Now the trick is to apply to this empire of counties, states and territories our functions as an education center, museum, library and archives, and publications program. The Society has been Pittsburgh-based from its beginning, and except for a brief sponsorship of the Westmoreland-Fayette Historical Society, has had a one-site operation since the building of its headquarters in Oakland in 1912.

The absence of another society for Pittsburgh or Allegheny County has made the area most local to our headquarters a natural target for audiences, especially for public programs, and for a good bulk of our mem-

bership. How likely is it for us to think that Western Pennsylvanians from Warren, McKean or Cameron counties will venture a three or four hour car ride for one of our lectures? Conversely, would it make much sense for us to be running local history programs in counties which have their own historical societies?

This raises the issue of collecting artifacts and archival materials by a regional society *vis-a-vis* county and local efforts in the same region. People are quite rightly keen on keeping local history material in their own community, and even on risking poor storage conditions and a lack of curatorial care to do so.

Our staff has been wrestling with these problems and has developed some approaches:

1. Our regional nature might be best expressed by assisting smaller, local societies in the region with technical services and assistance. To this end, we have initiated the Local History Resource Service, a memorial to C.V. and Agnes Starrett, to begin bringing representatives of local societies in the region together to discuss needs and sponsor annual programs about "how to do" local history better.

2. Our quarterly, *Pittsburgh History: A Magazine of the City and Its Region*, will continue to publish articles on topics relating to the 26-county region.

3. We regard Pittsburgh and Allegheny County as our home area, because it is the regional hub.

4. The counties around Allegheny should be targeted for additional services and the seeking of audiences, and we should work closely with historical organizations already in place.

5. Our museum and library should maintain collections pertaining to all of Western Pennsylvania.

I would like to hear from members about these ideas; ours is but one proposal to a complex problem to be solved over time. In 1884, the Society's founders included Virginia and the old Northwest Territory in our mission. Our Society, like many others of that day, was a small group of antiquarians especially interested in the colonial period. Their commitment was to building a collection and to encouraging wide participation in education programs, and it mattered not, to them, if their geographical charge ranged wide. Our challenge is to keep a geographically broad perspective while clarifying a realm of possibility where we can supply services effectively, according to contemporary standards in state and local history.