

You Couldn't Keep an Iron Man Down: *Rowing in Nineteenth Century Pittsburgh*

By John J. Kudlik

THE Monongahela, Allegheny and Ohio rivers had been, by the mid-nineteenth century, home waters to every form of traffic from Indian canoes to steamboats. In the years just before the Civil War, the rivers at the heart of Pittsburgh began to host something new: competitive rowing.

The idea of recreational boating began in England at the end of the eighteenth century, and quickly spread to America.¹ The first recorded race of any fame on this side of the Atlantic took place in New York City in 1811. Within a few years, clubs were organizing competitions from New England to New Orleans.² By the 1850s, some American champions rode the wave of popularity to professional status and lived semi-nomadic existences from one metropolitan regatta to another.

Its topography of rivers and valleys made Pittsburgh a natural for such a sport. As early as the 1840s, several associations, among them the Keystone Boat Club, the Diamond Alley Boat Club, and the Eclipse Barge Club, attracted members from all social strata.³ As the name "Barge Club" implies, their flat-bottomed wooden boats could be large and heavy, up to 30 feet long and 4 feet wide, scarcely resembling the sleek racing shells of today. At one time the club

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boasted a luxury craft with red velvet lining and silver trim on the bow.⁴ Far more common for competition, however, were ordinary rowboats. Dressed in flannel shirts, sailor pants and straw hats, the earliest Pittsburgh rowers looked more like crewmen from a man-of-war than sportsmen. But amateur and, on occasion, professional sportsmen, they were. Pittsburgh began producing rowers of renown as early as the 1850s. A championship race held in the city in 1859 saw \$15,000 in prize money change hands.⁵

By 1860, some 11 clubs had affiliated to form the Allegheny Association, an outgrowth of the earlier Row Boat Association. The rhythmic motion of single- and double-oared sculls as well as four-, six- and, on occasion, eight-man shells, became a fairly common sight on the local waters.

Rowing was America's first mass spectator sport, and featured both male and female athletes. By the 1850s, its popularity had spread throughout the Pittsburgh region, both as a sport to watch and as a sunny afternoon pursuit.

(One or two persons, each rowing with two oars, is sculling; a person handling a single oar in a larger multi-crewed shell is crewing or sweeping.) More serious rowing led to radical alterations in boat designs that improved their efficiency. Newer crafts were much lighter on the water than the old fashioned excursion barges and rowboats. Sliding seats replaced fixed platforms, bringing more freedom of movement and leg

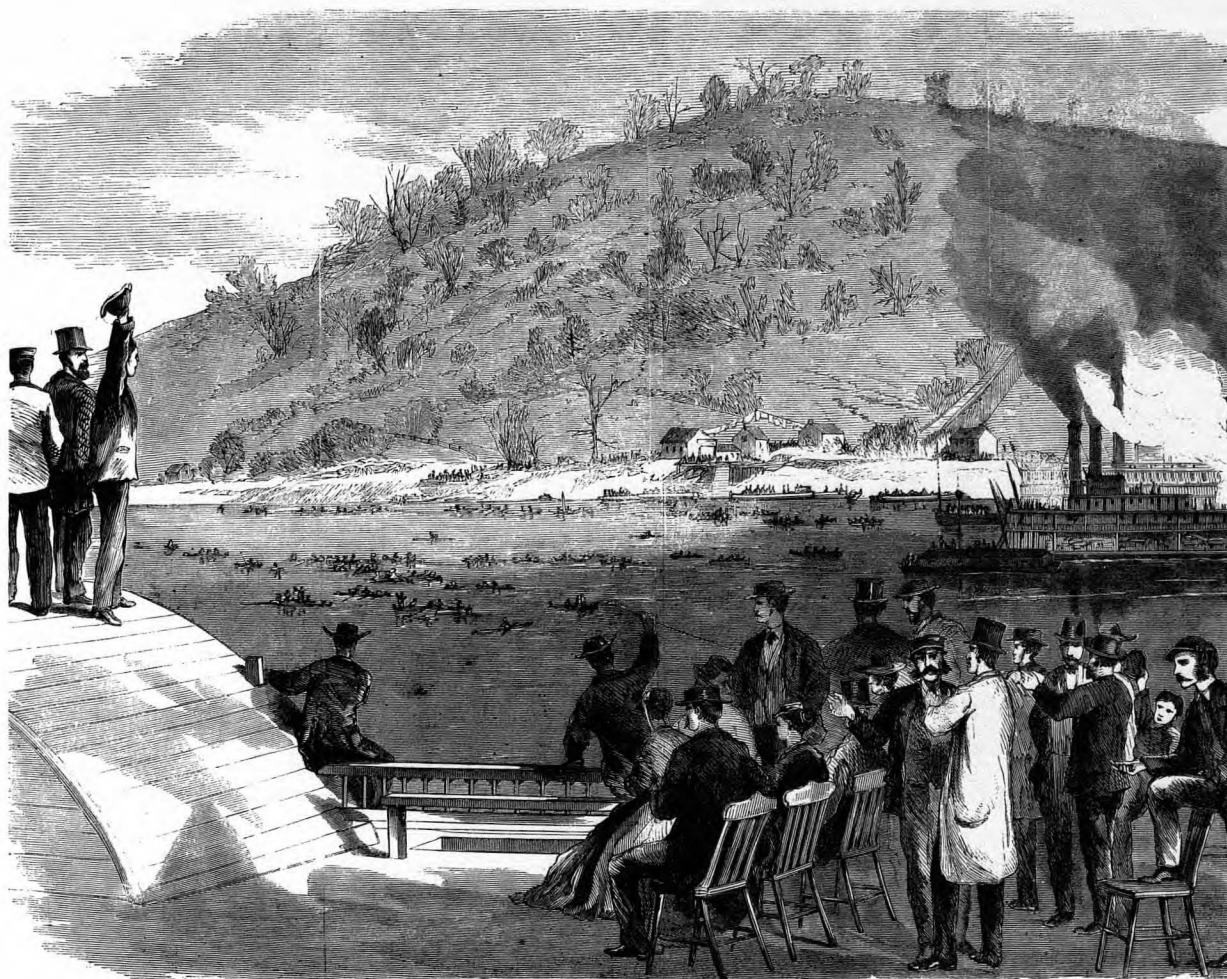
power to the rower. Outriggers braced to the hull held the spruce oars firmly in place, increasing their sweep and balance. Sometimes, depending on the type of boat, a coxswain was added to steer the racing craft. Nationally, events tapered off somewhat during the Civil War, but the sport was serious enough in Pittsburgh that races continued throughout the conflict. Following the war there was an even greater resurgence of activity. Across the United States, aquatic sports reached new levels of popularity. Public excitement for boat racing led to club organizations in more than 200 cities. It was actually part of a wider social phenomenon: the birth of urban leisure pursuits. Among the many root causes of this was the return home of thousands of veteran soldiers who ritualized in athletic clubs and other voluntary associations the camaraderie they had grown used to in the field.⁶ These organizations also added a bit of comfortable social upholstery to the rickety, often grim, world of the working and lower middle classes.

From the 1850s on in the Pittsburgh area, rowing more than any other sport evolved from the casual

pastime of a few into an immensely popular spectator and participant activity. And although primarily a male endeavor, rowing was one of the first public sports in America to include competitive contests for women. Non-competitive rowing was just as common, and there were dozens of points along the rivers where citizens could rent a boat and take to the water on a sunny afternoon. The sport's popularity may be attributed in part to the effects that the first phases of industrialization and rapid demographic growth were having on the city. Rowing associations took root, for example, in old and new neighborhoods, among groups of factory employees, craftsmen and artisans in glass works, or in the bustling iron and steel mills.⁷ As a form of popular culture, sporting associations were more than recreational outlets. They helped articulate the special ways citizens reinforced communal bonds and sublimated the tensions of neighborhood and workplace.⁸ From the mid-1860s through the 1880s, boat races captivated the imagination of the citizenry, and brought national attention to Pittsburgh's waterways. Now, after disappearing from the rivers for a century, competitive and casual rowing are making comebacks.

In the last century, factory employment was extremely strenuous and long work days did not allow much time for fun. Workers sought amusements when and where they could find them, especially in the summer months. The number of sporting activities that could attract huge crowds, however, was quite limited. Horse races had long been popular but were semi-legal at best, and dangerous, as they were often run on public roads. "Saloon sports" (as they were called) such as billiards had a strong following; bowling fell in the same category. But neither of these were particularly exciting to watch.⁹ German immigrants introduced organized gymnasium activities to the city. Footraces were more suited to an audience and were very common. Cricket (and later, baseball), football, boxing (legal and otherwise), and rifle competitions among militia companies were to the liking of many. In the pre- and post-Civil War days, genuine rivalries developed around these matches, but most were still "corner lot" affairs lacking the drawing powers of professional "stars" and big prizes. Urban growth in America was creating a different environment and demand for new forms of spectacle, camaraderie and ritual celebration.

With national-level baseball and football heroes still a thing of the future, rowers competing on highly visible stages became the first real mass spectator sport in Pittsburgh as the fever spread through the 1860s and 1870s. Boats were moderately expensive; but even the best imports from the East Coast were affordable to the collective purse of a club. Some clubs built their own craft, while others swore by the rowing sculls manufactured in south Pittsburgh by M.F. Cassidy.¹⁰

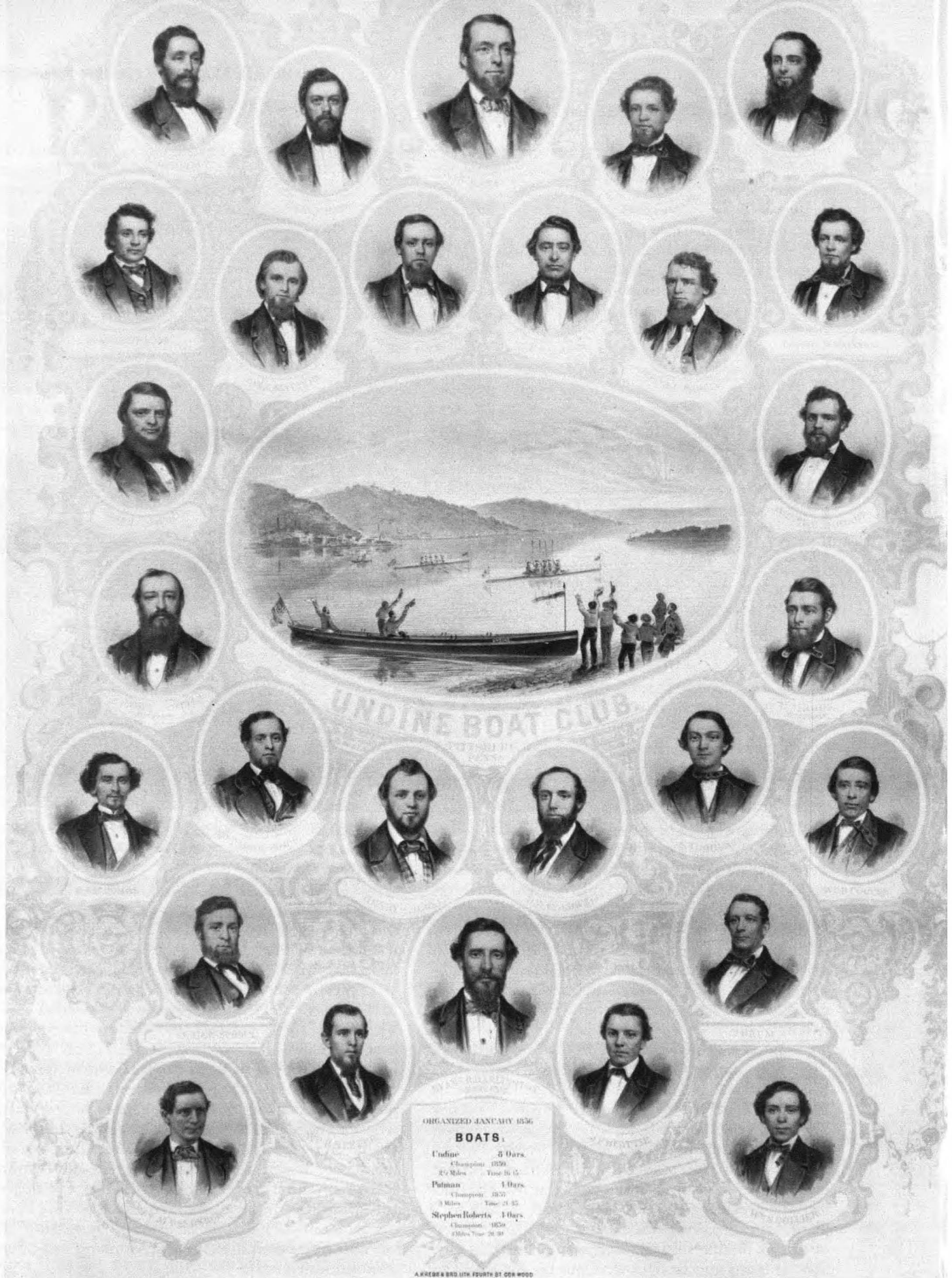


The requisite strength and stamina for pulling oars came naturally to many industrial laborers, and the waterways were well-suited, with their sloping banks providing a natural stadium. Regattas and individual competitions were the best-attended athletic events of the day in cities with watercourses all over America.¹¹ With sporting emotions running so high, a boat race was naturally enough one of the publicized highlights of the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Several venerated Pittsburgh scullers participated.

Banner newspaper headlines were common: "Exciting Contest Upon the Allegheny," "The Pittsburgh Crews," "Championship of America on the Monongahela," or "The Female Regatta."¹² They heralded scenes of thousands of people crowding river banks, jamming suspension bridges, or standing on riverboats, railroad cars or cinder piles to applaud their favorite crew and shout malevolence at the adversaries. The greatest races were held in conjunction with picnics at various recreational groves along the water, or during holiday festivals such as the Fourth of July. Special trains and trolleys were put on the tracks to

Although the drawing suggests a sedate audience, sculling races, like this one on the Monongahela River on October 31, 1867, often were raucous events.

move fans eager to witness the excitement. One contest on the upper Monongahela was described as attracting not less than 10,000 people who arrived on 10 excursion trains and steamboats from as far away as McKeesport.¹³ Oil City, Pennsylvania, Wheeling, West Virginia, and Steubenville, Ohio, frequently sent their best oarsmen to Pittsburgh contests, but crews were just as likely to arrive from Boston, Philadelphia or New York. It was not unknown for prize winning purses to be enlarged with money from the railroads, whose managers rightly assumed the greater the purse, the greater the excursion traffic. When the fans arrived, beer flowed, fists occasionally flew and betting was usually quite heavy. The Pittsburgh experience of the 1850s-'80s was typical of American rowing in its exuberant infancy; mass leisure meant "relaxation" in the midst of high spirited eating, drinking and often tumultuous contests.



Dozens of clubs along the rivers, from McKeesport to Wheeling, promoted boating. Often founded and supported by neighborhood residents, iron and glass factory workers, or skilled artisans, the clubs embodied the values and attitudes of what some historians have called the “Craftsmen’s Republic” era.

As interest grew, racing sculls and shells were stored in 20 or more permanent boathouses along the three rivers' shores. Back in the 1850s, the clubs seemed to have been content with temporary tents set up during racing season. But according to city newspapers, by the end of the 1860s, elaborate two-story buildings complete with enclosed balconies and social facilities were being raised. Such a clubhouse was the Adrienne at 17th Street on the Allegheny River; equally famous for its splendor was the Clipper. The latter was home to red-shirted crews who brought back national honors many times to their double-decked boathouse in the Strip District at 14th Street.¹⁴ The names of the clubs often reflected their origins and membership: the Allegheny, the Diamond Alley and the Soho were neighborhood organizations, as were the McKee, situated along the Monongahela in old Birmingham, and the Xanthe on the Ohio in Manchester. The Columbia was originally organized in 1869 from the old Columbia Fire Company. The men of the Juniata mill formed a club of the same name in 1870 and trained several nationally renowned oarsmen.¹⁵ City maps do not indicate any structures specified as boathouses near the mills; possibly management permitted workers to use existing sheds for boat storage?

Politics were often mixed in with sports. Political activities were one of the great bonds of male sociability in the nineteenth century and often took on some of the trappings of a participant/spectator sport. A boathouse christened in 1867 was the Blackmore, named after a popular judge whose social sympathies were apparently identified with working-class interests. He later became a Democratic mayor of the city.¹⁶

Some boathouses well known by the 1870s and '80s were: on the Allegheny — the Chambers, Duquesne, Howard, Independent, J.R. Jones, Pittock, and Undine; on the Monongahela — the Beck, Pat Luther Club, and the Max Moorhead and the Juniata (neighbors to each other by the mouth of Soho Creek). There were other clubs — the Wave, the Atlanta, the Port Perry, the Fisherman and several more — but their locations are difficult to document. Over the years they came, went and amalgamated. Newspapers were filled with accounts of picnics, parades, dances and political rallies sponsored by oarsmen. They even attempted to elevate city culture with brass and banjo band serenades from the porches of their boathouses. When the Max Moorhead Club decided in June 1870 to put on an addition that included a library "with a fine selection of books," the *Pittsburgh Post* thought it worthy of an article.¹⁷

Pictures would speak louder than words, but unfortunately a search of local library and archival resources failed to turn up a single illustration of one of these buildings. This search led to another odd dis-

covery. Detailed city street maps of the 1870s-'90s do not reveal the existence of one single boathouse, even when specific site locations are known from historic sources. This curious fact is something of an enigma, but may be partly explained by one source:

The new boathouse of the Columbia boat club of Allegheny has been completed and is now moored at the Allegheny wharf between Hand St. and the 9th Street Bridge. It is probably one of the finest houses of the kind in the state. It is 110 feet long, 26 feet wide; the lower cabin is 95 feet long and 24 feet wide and 11 feet high...with 9 single sculls, 2 doubles and 2 four-oared boats on the rack.¹⁸

Apparently some of even the biggest and best clubs were on huge rafts anchored to the shore. The Columbia, for instance, had a 42-foot-long upper cabin neatly furnished with an apartment and a reception room. The latter was fitted with hanging oil lamps on bronze pendants, Brussels carpet, desks, chairs, bookcases and "handsomely framed photographs of all the prominent rowers of the country."¹⁹ It is difficult to generalize about whether this method of fixing buildings to the shore was common. Since the Columbia's house excited no special comment during its inauguration, it is probably safe to assume that the way in which it was moored was not unique.

Neighboring communities with rowing clubs received more than just passing attention in the Pittsburgh papers.

Commenting on a race in McKeesport, one paper mentioned that the "little town had every occasion to be proud of their regatta."²⁰ But the competition could just as easily turn nasty. During a race in McKeesport, a drunken individual on the Market Street wharf "drew a revolver and fired twice in the direction of the (Pittsburgh) rowers...while two policemen standing beside the shooter made no attempt to arrest the man!" No one was injured, but the bullets did strike the boats.²¹ Under another headline, "Saturday's Sham," trouble between towns was again reported. It seems one Mike Filan, the "Italian Champion of Pittsburgh," was denied entry into a high prize race when his opponent, Jim Bulger of Wheeling, refused to row against him. A Pittsburgh reporter wrote a blistering article admitting that Filan did have a sleek, modern 28-pound boat and was trained by the best rowers available, while Bulger's boat was an

Sporting clubs had broad social and cultural purposes, promoting not only their special interest — rowing — but also civic celebrations and political rallies. Some clubs even sponsored brass bands and libraries.

ancient 400-pound "tub." What's more, the West Virginia novice learned a bit late that a training diet of "beer and ice cream" was possibly ill-advised! The Pittsburgh visitors found all of this no excuse for the race being cancelled and were even more indignant when Bulger saw fit to consult a lawyer. "The whole matter is a subject of regret...our hard-working, down-trodden millmen had denied themselves actual necessities for the last week...to lose their hard earned money by such sculduggery!"²²

Many of Pittsburgh's top rowers were true sportsmen and gentlemen throughout their careers and retired on prize purses honestly won. Patrick Luther was one; he later opened a boat rental business at Ninth Street. James Hamill, retired as a national champion of the 1860s, returned to Pittsburgh to what seems to have been the favorite occupation for

a number of ex-oarsmen: he opened a saloon. Much more so than today, saloons served as semi-official neighborhood recreational centers. The Belvedere House, an inn on the Allegheny River some distance south of Sharpsburg, was a favorite meeting place at the conclusion of many a race.²³ At Alex Murray's Saloon in Manchester, many serious, high stake challenge or acceptance contracts were drawn up. Big races were always well-planned events, and newspaper coverage en-

sured that many sportsmen would achieve local "immortality." Legally binding nine-point articles of agreement were always published and quite precise as to prizes, location, judges to be employed, terms of forfeiture, acceptable weather conditions and the like.²⁴

Rowing did indeed attract all classes, but in the Pittsburgh area, it was particularly thought of as a working man's sport, and working men of those days were a bibulous lot, as highlighted in an 1871 newspaper account:

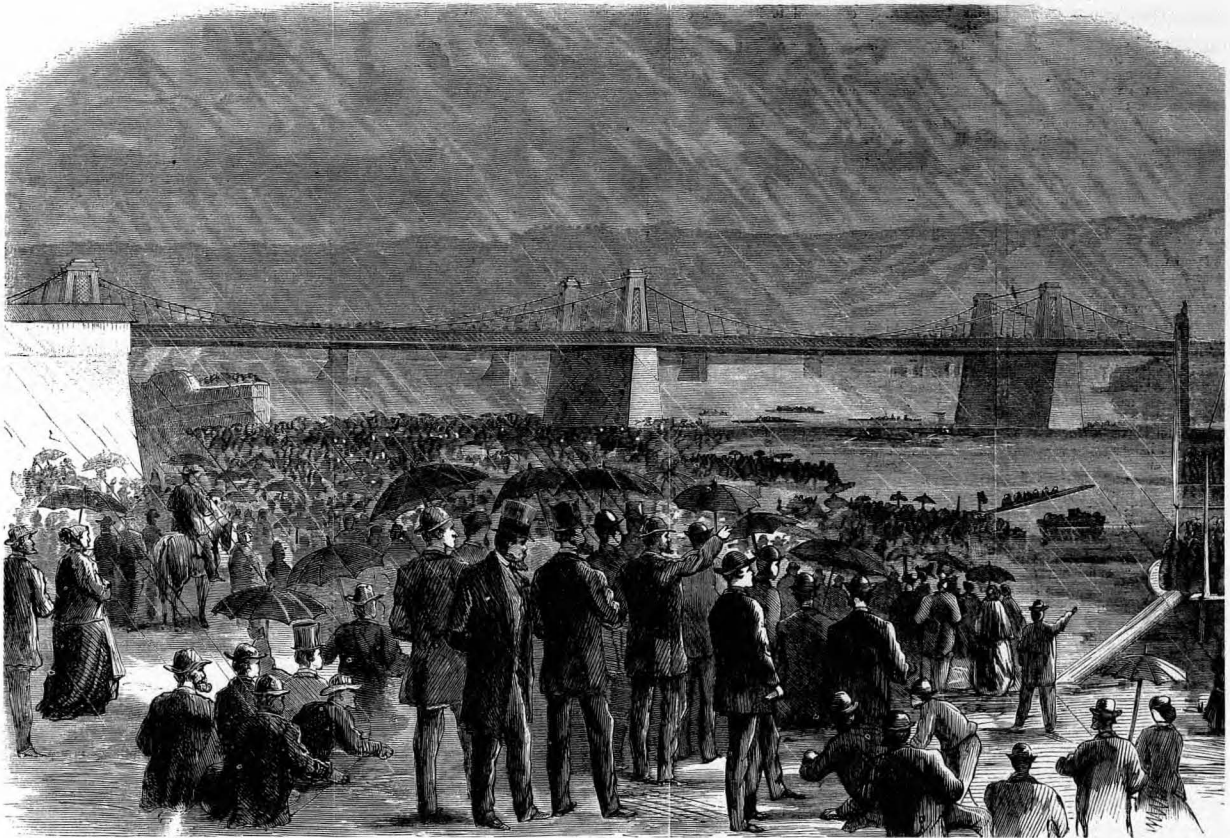
Two well known amateur handlers of the "spruces" belong to the Columbia boat club of Allegheny; while sitting the other evening over their beer, the conversation turned to boating, and after considerable chin music from both of them and their respective friends, an impromptu race was agreed upon...the stake to be a half barrel of beer...either party failing to put in his appearance to forfeit double the wager.

At the appointed time both men were on hand neither having slept any of the previous night and both having gone through a severe course of training which consisted of taking a half tumbler of water mixed with whiskey, that dose repeated at intervals of twenty minutes.²⁵

During the race, the oarsman in the "The Noisy B" faltered after a short while, when "the effect of the severe training he had undergone the previous night began to tell fearfully on him." He recovered to win the 25-minute, 3-second race in a torrent of rain. (His opponent had stroked so furiously that at one point he flew into the air and landed in the river a length ahead of his own boat!) Both men, pretty much soaked inside and out, proceeded with their friends to "demolish beverages and fluids in the quickest time on record considering the size of the layout" and proposed another race at double the wager. Men were men in those days!

Various historians and anthropologists have written that sports serve as an important emotional release among workers, neighborhoods and social groups. In Victorian America, fellowship commonly extended to various sports clubs, plus volunteer firehouses, glee club or barber shop singing groups and so forth, all of which enabled folk to better cope with the tensions of their world and harden their social bonds. Unfortunately for the historian, popular recreations leave few remains after their days are over. Very few membership lists, bylaws, photographs, and other historical data for rowing associations of the 1860s-'80s have survived. As nearly as the story can be reconstructed, the individuals most prominently mentioned in association with Pittsburgh aquatics rarely were listed in the city directories.²⁶ There were hundreds of them in the old city wards, but many, if not most, apparently were younger workers who did not own property. When the names and professions of oarsmen can be recovered, they most typically are tradesmen, iron workers, nail workers, forge operators or akin laborers, and skilled industrial craftsmen.²⁷

The glassblowers and iron workers of old Birmingham seem especially to have favored rowing as a recreational experience. Among them, the iron puddlers lifted 200-pound ingots of molten metal many times a day as part of their work. The lung capacity of glassblowers and the brawniness of iron workers provided them with the endurance for strenuous river sports. If they chose to row, it must have been for the sociability and the urge to compete, not because they lacked good aerobic workouts. Newspaper sports columns testify that these individuals frequently rowed three- and six-mile course races — half upstream, half downstream — turning around a stationary stake boat. During a singles scull race on the Allegheny in the 1870s, one "Neut" Feigly came in second in a three-mile event by frequently spurting at a remark-



able 42 or 43 strokes a minute, to compensate for 3 inches of one oarblade having accidentally broken off!²⁸

Brawn was not always the key to success; some of the finest rowers were not giants. James Hamill, born in Pittsburgh in 1838, began rowing races at age 20; he was 5-foot-8 and weighed only 150 pounds. But his years as a glassblower at Bakewell, Pears and Co. must have developed his powers of endurance remarkably. The full power, short, choppy rowing burst of 60 strokes a minute gained him great fame and the nickname "The Little Engine."²⁹ By the 1860s, he had become a national figure, winning purses as high as \$2,000 in Philadelphia and New York regattas. In Boston, he once crossed the finish line so far ahead of the competition that incredulous judges refused to declare him the winner, until other rowers confirmed that he had indeed completed the full course.³⁰ Once in England, he was presented with a fine pocket watch inscribed: "Presented to James Hamill, Aquatic champion of America, as a mark of respect from his friends in Newcastle, England, for the honourable and manly manner in which he conducted himself when residing there; and for the honest and straightforward way in which he rowed two races on the Tyne, July 4 and 5, 1866." Hamill went on to become a Yale University coach for a time.³¹ He died in Pittsburgh in 1876, truly a fine symbol of his era.

"Eph" Morris, an iron puddler's helper in a rolling

Races attracted thousands, with railroads running special excursion trains to handle the load. Spectators sometimes jammed the bridges but always lined the rivers where slanted banks formed a natural stadium.

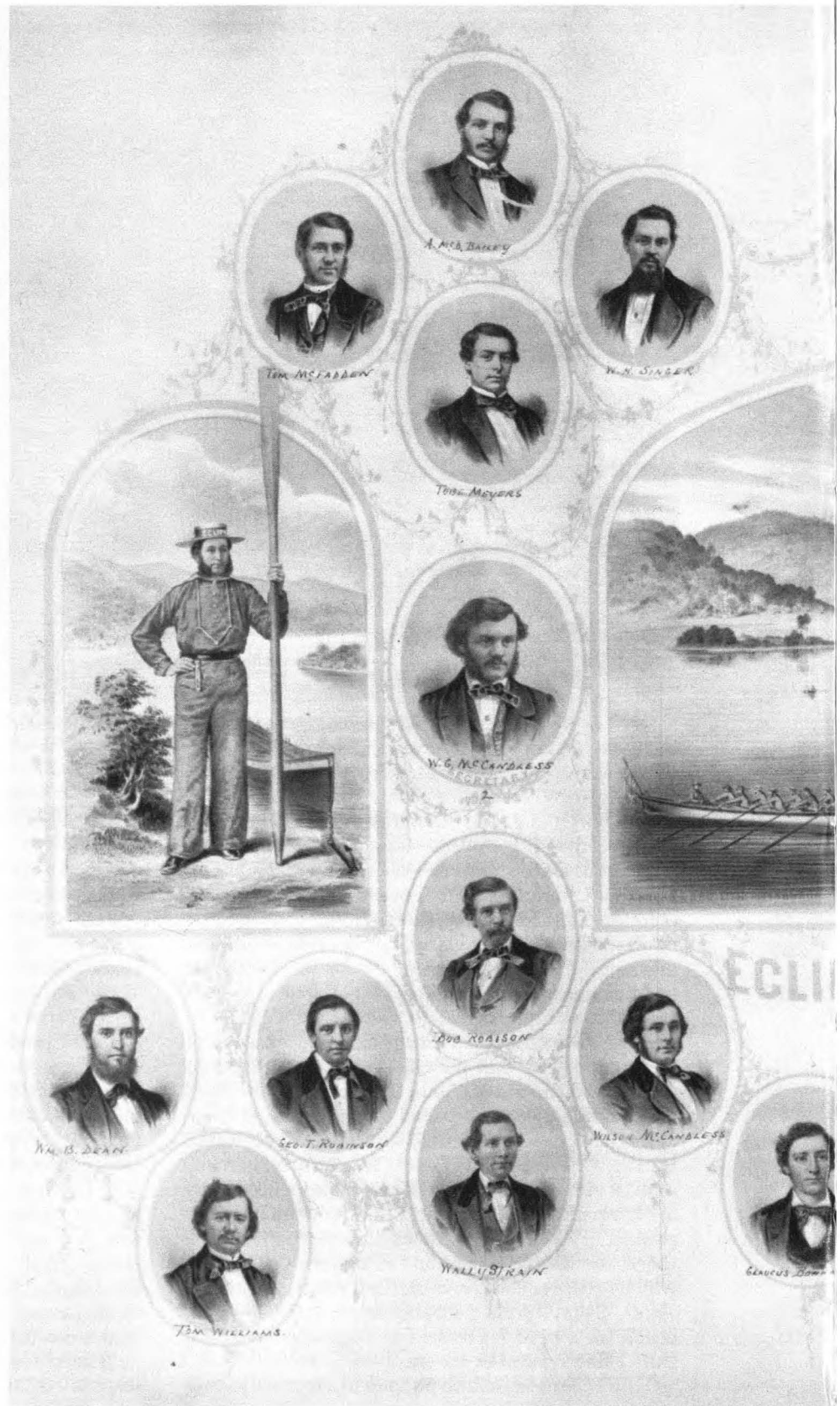
mill, was a local sculler in the 1870s. He began his sports career with the Clipper Club and went on to achieve national recognition. He shocked the established rowing fraternities of Boston and Toronto by beating their top oarsmen in five-mile contests. At Toronto, he once rowed a double scull in a regatta with another Pittsburgh-area champion, Henry Coulter from Manchester; the two succeeded easily in cleaning out all competitors, including the crack oarsmen of Canada. At the time of his first contests on the East Coast of the United States, Morris was a total unknown; after defeating Boston's best in a Fourth of July regatta, his competitors asked, "Who are you?" "Oh I'm just a scrub-rower from Pittsburgh, that's all," he replied. An astonished spectator then asked why they had never heard of him in the rowing gazettes; "Well we don't do our rowing on paper in Pittsburgh," he said with a laugh.³² He permanently resided in old Allegheny when not on the road and died there in 1897. His partner in the Toronto event — "Hank" Coulter — had been an apprentice plough-share caster, but at an early age mastered "the science

of feathering the spruces" with the Xanthe Club on the Ohio.³³

By no means was the aquatic scene wholly dominated by men. This was quite an achievement, given Victorian America's preoccupation with the social conventions of patriarchy. In August of 1870, a Rose Steele of McKees Rocks published a challenge "...to any lady in America...to row me a two mile scull race over the Allegheny River course."³⁴ Several females were headline rowers and active club members. On July 16, 1870, the Nonpareil Club sponsored a women's regatta in tandem with a festival at the Glenwood Grove picnic area on the upper Monongahela. The Max Moorhead entrant in this contest was 16-year-old Lottie McAlice of "Pipetown" in the Sixth Ward. Newspapers described her as residing in a boathouse and having been practically reared on the water. The Chambers Boat Club was represented by Maggie Lew of Brownstown. This one-mile event was attended by an estimated 8,000 to 12,000 spectators, drawn no doubt by the gold watch-\$2,000 prize purse and all the national attention. A headline in Frank Leslie's popular *Illustrated Newspaper* read: "The Women's Rowing Match at Pittsburgh, Pa." An illustration showed throngs of fans lining the shore and hanging from trees. McAlice was the winner. The *Pittsburgh Post* and other newspapers described everything from her athletic training (she had been rowing her father to work across the river since she was 7) to her costume (tights and a loose white dress with a red jacket) and her rosy cheeks (slightly browned from exposure). Accounts of her victories also were published over the years in prominent European sporting journals.³⁵

McAlice's race was won on the

The Eclipse rowing association, or "barge" club, was one of the city's first.





upper Monongahela. This was one among several courses preferred by Pittsburghers when rowing their home waters. The Hulton Dam area on the upper Allegheny was frequently mentioned, as was another three-mile course on the lower Monongahela in the Saw Mill Run area. In the 1850s and 1860s, competitions on the Allegheny, from the Sixth Street Bridge to the south tip of Herr's Island, appeared in the sports columns, as did a one and a half-mile Allegheny course from the Columbia boathouse at the Hand Street Bridge (now Ninth Street) to the railroad suspension bridge to the south. Most of these contests were rowed at a full clip, upstream and downstream around a stake boat.

It was not unusual for regattas and famous oarsmen in one-to-one

The Industrial Revolution resulted in polluted rivers crowded with commercial shipping and a work force with less leisure time. By the late 1880s, after huge gambling scandals, rowing was doomed... until recently.

competition to be, as one newspaper put it, "the talk of the town for weeks." In the spring and summer, three- or four-column articles fueled the public interest under headlines such as "Sketches of the Men and their Rowing Methods" or "The Boating Season is Here!"³⁶ Sporting news was filled with personal data and racing records of various champions, and details of their boats with such names as "Rum," "Blood Tub," "Let Her Go By" and

"Maggie May." Judging by the local coverage, the newspapers must have calculated the events to be a great bonus to circulation.

Whether a spirited local race, a regional competition, or a regatta in a distant city, betting could be furious. Financial backers frequently sponsored their favorite rowers and set up big money contests. Under the headline "Exciting Exhibition of Science and Muscle," we are informed in a Pittsburgh paper of the 1870s:

The sculling championship of America was lost and won yesterday on the upper Allegheny course, amid the vociferous plaudits of ten thousand persons who lined the shore. It was not to calculate the science of physical forces, however, which attracted thousands to the spot. To most it was a matter of curiosity, to a great many a matter of money...beer stands were improvised and an occasional fight broke the monotony.³⁷

On another occasion, after many "small pieces of green paper began to fly around the crowd," several crews came into the home stretch, and an anxious cry

went up from the losing parties, "Where are the others?" Some looked suspiciously at the winners and "even ventured an opinion that the missing crews had been foully murdered and their bodies sunk into the Monongahela River!" Fortunately the tardy crews showed up before a riot broke out.³⁸ The *Pittsburgh Post* was pleased to note that during McAlice's celebrated victory in 1870, many prominent clerics, bankers and merchants were in attendance, as was "the full delegation of the rough element," which on that occasion, at least, contained itself with proper respectability and decorum.³⁹

Victorian moralists were rarely pleased with the form or consequences of popular pastimes, especially if they had a reputation for concomitants such as gambling and drinking. The special comment the McAlice race received is perhaps better understood when seen in the context of an era in which it was not uncommon for contests to be quite rowdy. Crowds were less than disposed to applaud the opposition. Judges who went against a local hero or civic pride in favor of visitors risked mob fury. Falling prey to gambling interests was another serious problem. Boats occasionally were sawed in half on the eve of a big contest. Pittsburgh celebrity "Eph" Morris was unfit to row one race in Boston because, he alleged, a drink of water had been purposely drugged to make him sick.⁴⁰ In some American cities, scullers were often followed by pilot boats crewed by men who "protected" their favorites and intimidated others with every imaginable sort of scurrilous trick. During one of James Hamill's five-mile Hudson River races, two men armed with pistols backed him up, as 50,000 New York City spectators were betting more heavily than anyone had ever witnessed before and could not be trusted to allow an honest contest.⁴¹

For certain members of the "sporting set," competing for high wagers in specially arranged matches was a source of income and the central experience in an athletic contest. The attention that came with these events accounts for some of the mass excitement these matches could generate, as well as the occasional scandals that marred them. For the majority of Pittsburghers, however, rowing was an honest recreational outlet through the 1880s, a sociable escape from the doldrums of summer when the glass factories and iron mills customarily closed down due to the heat.⁴² On this level, the sport retained a mixed amateur and semi-professional character. For a neighborhood club, the most exciting moment was a victory that brought home the silken flag of an opponent organization. Only for a few local men like Hamill, Morris, William Scharf and Patrick Luther did rowing mean distinguished careers, national recognition, gold and silver trophy cups, cash prizes, and medals.

Towards the end of the 1880s, Pittsburgh's 58-member Columbia Boat Club was praised by local

newspapers because its reputation and that of the city had not been smudged "in the various match races that have made Pittsburgh notorious in the boating world as a place where no fair racing could be had."⁴³ Pittsburgh was by no means alone in being so tainted. Professional rowing across the United States became heavily stigmatized by misconduct. The general public grew more convinced that any race involving big money would be dishonest. It was perhaps for this reason that some of the best professional oarsmen gave up and began new careers as college coaches.⁴⁴

The Columbia was an old organization and the new boathouse members built in the early 1880s was one of the last to be established. Not long afterwards, rowing began to rather quickly disappear from the rivers. A race held on the Allegheny River in the autumn of 1886 or 1887 between members of the Columbia and Adrienne clubs is thought to have been one of the final public contests. Scandals had really hurt the sport. Francis G. Couvares, in his excellent book, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh*, mentions:

...changes were occurring in the realm of sports. The last boat race on the Allegheny River took place in 1887, and the clubs soon passed out of existence. Their disappearance was the result of growing demand on river property by industry and of the departure of the skilled craftsmen from the old city. For years thereafter professional oarsmen from Pittsburgh continued to race in national competitions, but they were increasingly plagued by scandals involving gambling and race-fixing.⁴⁵

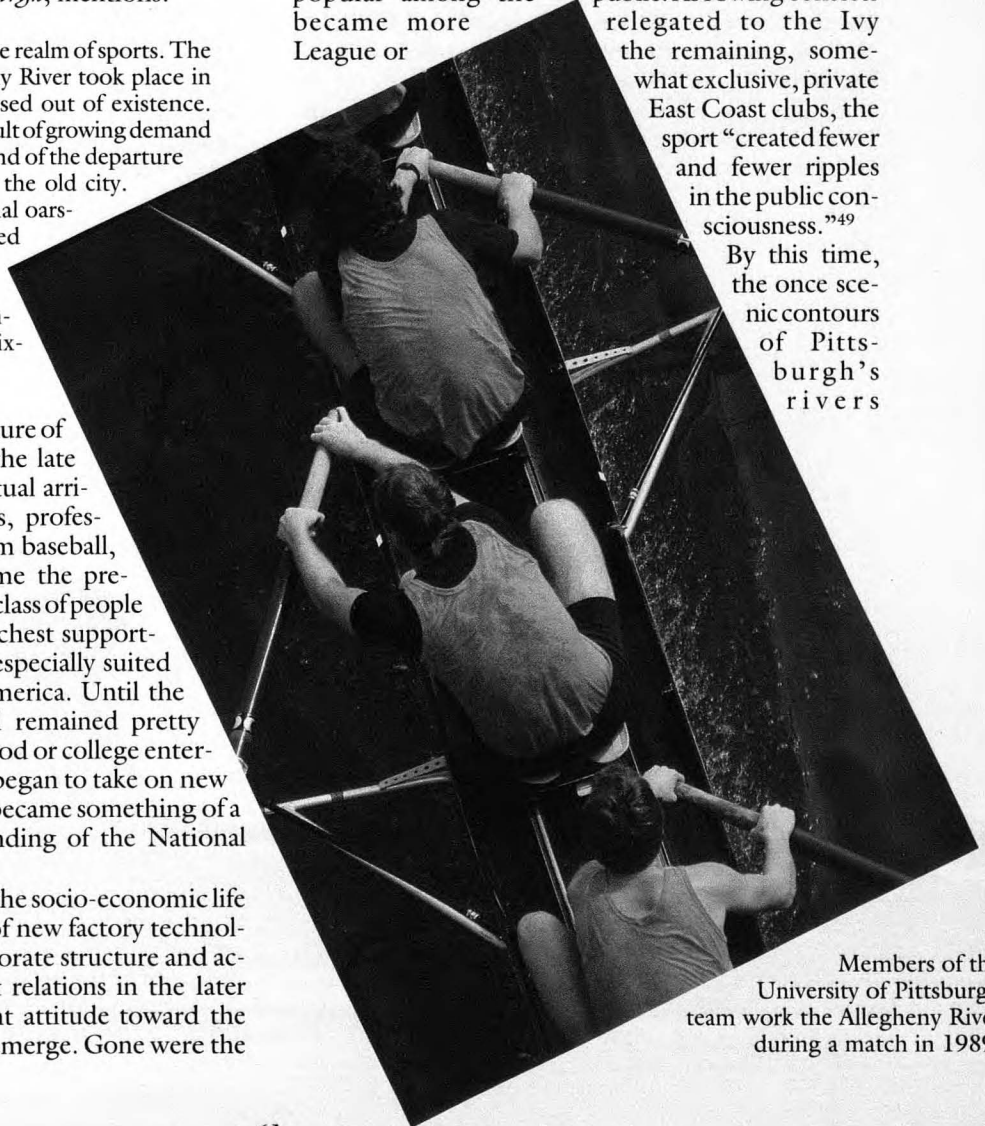
The social and economic structure of Pittsburgh was changing by the late 1880s, as well. With the eventual arrival of large amusement parks, professional boxing, and regular team baseball, these and other things became the preferred amusements among the class of people who had been rowing's staunchest supporters.⁴⁶ Baseball seems to have especially suited the fiber of the new urban America. Until the turn of the century, football remained pretty much either local, neighborhood or college entertainment. Baseball, however, began to take on new respectability, and eventually became something of a national mania with the founding of the National League in 1876.⁴⁷

Popular recreations reflect the socio-economic life of the times. With the arrival of new factory technology, a more consolidated corporate structure and acrimonious labor-management relations in the later nineteenth century, a different attitude toward the value of leisure time began to emerge. Gone were the

summer breaks that afforded workers an opportunity for concentrated periods of recreation involving travel and regattas. Rowing lost much of the sustaining public spirit it had enjoyed, as the traditional manufacturing/artisan society of mid-nineteenth century Pittsburgh gave way to a new industrial economy bent on effective and often remorseless labor discipline. The new immigrant populations flooding into "Big Steel" Pittsburgh gave their attention to many popular enthusiasms, but rowing was not among them.

Times were changing on the national scene as well. As workplace or neighborhood clubs disappeared, amateur rowing reformed around colleges. Varsity crews cleaned up competitive events and radically transformed the rule books to conform with established European, especially British, university programs. By the 1890s, the sport was socially redefined as well, resulting in a narrower appeal to the more educated middle and upper classes.⁴⁸ Gone were the days of professional cash prize rowers who had been so popular among the public. As rowing contests became more relegated to the Ivy League or the remaining, somewhat exclusive, private East Coast clubs, the sport "created fewer and fewer ripples in the public consciousness."⁴⁹

By this time, the once scenic contours of Pittsburgh's rivers



Members of the University of Pittsburgh team work the Allegheny River during a match in 1989.

had radically changed as well. Shore property became too valuable commercially to allow open space for boat-related recreational facilities to remain. Period photographs show coal barges sided up and docked sometimes six or eight across, along river fronts that once had been open enough to have served as sports arenas. The three rivers had become so heavily travelled by industrial traffic that safety concerns rose, recreational use dwindled, and aquatic sports became a thing of the past that would not be revived again until modern times.

After a couple of false starts in the 1970s, rowing again became part of the aquatic scene in Pittsburgh, with the founding of the Three Rivers Rowing Association in the 1980s. Their new two-story rowing center on Washington's Landing (formerly Herr's Island) rivals its nineteenth century predecessors, the Clipper and Adrienne clubs, in providing accommodations for a workout on the Allegheny River.

The Three Rivers facility is now home to crews from Duquesne University, the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University and Chatham College, along with non-collegiate rowers of both sexes and all ages. Also promoting activities on the water are the Allegheny River Rowing Club, the North Hills Rowing Club, several local high schools, and hearty crews of Irishmen who have revived a

tradition of pulling oars in "currachs," an ancient type of Celtic fishing boat. Pittsburgh has regained a national reputation with the annual Head of the Ohio regatta held every September along the Allegheny banks of Roberto Clemente Park. Once dislocated from our rivers by economic and social change, rowing is alive again. It is very much part of a new Pittsburgh and a renewed community attitude toward our rivers.⁵⁰ ■

¹ Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society* (London: 1973); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* (London: 1980).

² Samuel Crowther and Arthur Ruhl, *Rowing and Track Athletics* (New York: 1905), 152, 165.

³ Soeren Stewart Brynn, "Some Sports in Pittsburgh During the National Period, 1775-1860 — Part Two," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 52 (January 1969), 57-79.

⁴ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, 16 July 1870.

⁵ *Pittsburgh Post*, 9 Nov. 1859.

⁶ Francis G. Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877-1919* (Albany: 1984), 31-50.

⁷ Couvares, 31, 44.

⁸ William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World* (Chicago: 1988), 107-112.



⁹ Baker, 110-111.

¹⁰ Brynn, 68.

¹¹ Baker, 111.

¹² *Pittsburgh Post*, 18 July 1870; *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York), 6 Aug. 1870; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, 16 July 1870.

¹³ R. Brown, ed., Scrapbook of articles on sculling, rowing, swimming and boxing from unidentified newspapers (Pittsburgh, c. 1860-1880), Western Pennsylvania Historical Society Collection.

¹⁴ James A. Beck, "The Old Fifth Ward," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 28 (Sept-Dec. 1945), 123-24.

¹⁵ Couvares, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Post*, 6 June 1870.

¹⁸ Brown, "The Columbia Club's New Boat-house."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Brown, "The McKeesport Races."

²¹ Brown, "McKeesport Aquatic."

²² Brown, "Saturday's Sham."

²³ Brynn, 68.

²⁴ Brown, "Published Challenges-Challenge Accepted."

²⁵ Brown, unknown newspaper, 27 Aug. 1871.

²⁶ Couvares, 45.

²⁷ Couvares, 45, 142.

²⁸ Brown, "Sculling Contest."

²⁹ Crowther and Ruhl, 149.

³⁰ Crowther and Ruhl, 150.

³¹ Robert F. Kelley, *American Rowing: Its Background and*

Traditions (New York: 1932), 28-9.

³² *Pittsburgh Gazette*, 16 July 1870.

³³ Brown scrapbook.

³⁴ Brown, unknown newspaper, 27 Aug. 1870.

³⁵ *Pittsburgh Post*, 18 July 1870; *Illustrated Newspaper*, 16 Aug. 1870.

³⁶ *Pittsburgh Evening Telegraph*, 15 July 1876, 12 July 1873, 12 July 1883, and 4 July 1887. *Pittsburgh Gazette*, 4 July 1867. *National Labor Tribune*, 19 Dec. 1874, 10 July 1880.

³⁷ Brown, "Morris the Champion."

³⁸ Brown, "The Boat Races."

³⁹ *Pittsburgh Post*, 4 July 1870, 18 July 1870.

⁴⁰ Brown, "Eph Morris after Ellis Ward."

⁴¹ Crowther and Ruhl, 156-7. As early as 8 July 1856, the *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch* complained of "sold" races and too many "bruised heads and bloody noses" at purse races.

⁴² Couvares, 10.

⁴³ Brown, "Columbia Boat Club."

⁴⁴ Crowther and Ruhl, 162-202.

⁴⁵ Couvares, 123.

⁴⁶ Couvares, 120-23.

⁴⁷ Baker, 115-17; 138-150.

⁴⁸ Couvares, 123.

⁴⁹ Baker, 176.

⁵⁰ For an excellent historical perspective on some of the causes for these changing attitudes, see Edward K. Muller, "The Legacy of Industrial Rivers," *Pittsburgh History* 72 (Summer 1989), 64-75.



Symbolic of changing attitudes about the use of urban rivers, the region now hosts a national competition — the Head of the Ohio Regatta, on the Allegheny River near downtown Pittsburgh. Sponsored by the Mercy Hospital Foundation and the Three Rivers Rowing Association, the event attracts several thousand visitors to the city every September.