Ash Pile or Steel City?
H.L. Mencken Helps Mold an Image

by Edward K. Muller

In order to spur economic growth and to combat unfavorable publicity, Pittsburgh has down through the years put forth positive images of itself as, for example, the Iron City, Steel City, Renaissance City, City of Champions, and most recently, America's Most Livable City. Nevertheless, a negative image out of step with modern high-tech and Sunbelt trends persists today, detracting from Pittsburgh's efforts to regain momentum. The long history of such images underscores their perceived importance to the fortunes of the city. Many things go into the creation and acceptance of images; but writers, often from competing cities,

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sometimes contribute to the formation and persistence of images even though that may not have been their intent. This article explores the humorous but damaging contributions of one out-of-town writer to Pittsburgh’s national image.

Images do affect the flow of investments and people to cities; they matter. As the twentieth century rushes to a close, competition among cities for new businesses, conventions, tourist dollars, and national publicity is more intense, shrill, and expensive than ever. The competition employs modern marketing techniques, including the promotion of a positive city image. The promotional detritus of urban imaging is all too familiar — ranging from logos, slogans, campaign packets, and the boastful refrains of hometown editorialists to elaborate multi-media shows and extravagant movies. Image-making comprises only one element of a city’s broader, ongoing campaign for growth, which typically involves partnerships among public and private leaders, the media, and non-profit organizations. The visions of these pro-growth coalitions, as John Mollenkopf called them in his book, The Contested City, entail significant implications for a city, ones that not all members of the community can support or consider worth the price because they effect the establishment of community priorities, the allocation of resources, the disposition of land, and ultimately the differential success of various sections of the city.

The competitive promotion of cities carries on a long tradition of urban boosterism. In the early nineteenth century, optimistic town founders in the developing trans-Appalachian west projected glorious futures for their settlements in hopes of attracting people and businesses, who would fulfill their expectations and pocketbooks. They sometimes invoked the aura of eastern cities by mimicking their names, street plans, or street nomenclatures. Boosterism accompanied the spread of cities and towns across the continent, gaining momentum with the addition of land grant railroads to the process. Established cities also looked over their shoulders at commercial rivals and used political and economic muscle to vie for trade advantages. This muscle was often encased in booster rhetoric and logic that presumed the fundamental civic importance of economic and demographic growth and measured success in quantifiable terms. Cities also imitated their rivals in order to present a modern image lest they be perceived as lesser places. Thus, urban fashion led cities, or that is, their boosters, to adopt up-to-date amenities such as gas-lighting, horsecars, and cast-iron front buildings. Moreover, concern for a favorable image encouraged them to hide their blemishes, even to the extent of denying the existence of serious epidemics so as not to jeopardize the patronage of business travelers. Business leaders, other major property owners, public officials, and the local newspaper typically led the promotional campaign.

Pittsburgh has not been immune to the booster’s penchant for promotion and image-building. Today city leaders attack Pittsburgh’s pervasive national image as a dirty, smoky, tired industrial city with most of the traditional urban marketing tools. What chagrins most Pittsburghers is the resilience of this negative image despite considerable evidence to the contrary. The smoky label has been with the city for a long time, and this historical longevity, along with vividness of the image, makes it hard to exorcise.

Travellers remarked on the pall of smoke that hung over the city in the early nineteenth century. The deteriorating environmental and social conditions that accompanied the dramatic expansion of the iron and steel industries in the late nineteenth century became a source of frequent comment and criticism, culminat-

H.L. Mencken was one of the most widely read syndicated newspaper columnists ever in America. His persistent attacks on Pittsburgh’s industrial-strength ugliness from the early 1900s to the late 1920s helped establish a negative national image of Pittsburgh that endures to this day.
ing in the devastating six-volume *Pittsburgh Survey*, published between 1909 and 1914. Pittsburgh’s business leaders responded to this image issue by dropping self-serving salubrious characterizations of the city’s smoky air (as, for example, an antidote for certain kinds of diseases) and attempting instead to project the city, with some justification, as the workshop of the world.

Although the workshop image probably played well at home, it encountered competing characterizations in the print media of other cities. Boosters were busily at work in their own cities, fashioning favorable hometown images by attacking the reputations of rivals. In the early twentieth century, Baltimore had an unusually vituperative defender at the helm of one of its major newspapers. This champion was, of course, Henry Louis Mencken, or HLM, the renowned Sage of Baltimore. In his vigorous defense of his city and more generally in his commentary on urban industrial growth and the American way of life, Mencken frequently vilified Pittsburgh and thereby firmly etched a negative picture of it in his readers’ minds.

In his long career as an editorial writer for the Baltimore Sunpapers, between 1906 and 1948, H.L. Mencken often wrote proudly and defensively about his home town. But except for a brief period around 1910, he did not exhibit the style of a conventional urban booster. Rather, he is best known for his critical, irreverent, and iconoclastic views on most every other aspect of American life and ideas. Boosters were just the kind of American species that he relished mocking. Gogetters, Babbitts, boomers, and “booboisie,” he called them. He once defined a boomer as “a man who talks much, says little and does nothing.”

HLM considered himself almost devoid of public spirit, and he regularly ridiculed the sanctimonious policies, words, and behavior of all manner of Baltimoreans. Politicians were his favorite target, but businessmen, reformers, professors, clergymen, vice-crusaders, and “honorary pallbearers” were treated to frequent roasting.

But there is no denying Mencken’s love for Baltimore. In 1914, he refused to move his residence to the grander literary arena of New York when he became editor of the *Smart Set* magazine. He valued Baltimore’s “civilized” way of life and was concerned about its declining status and image among America’s largest cities in the early twentieth century. In his early editorial years, he defended Baltimore’s reputation by pointing out the inaccuracies of the U.S. Census, which cold heartedly recorded the city’s declining population rank. The decline confirmed its increasingly branch plant position in the industrial city pecking order. He soon turned to a spirited portrayal of Baltimore’s superior quality of life, arguing that mere quantity was not only an inappropriate measure of a city’s greatness but that a larger population was also often attained at the expense of a healthy, civilized community. By the 1920s, however, he used this theme to criticize Baltimore’s boosters. Looking back over four decades of Baltimore life, and often romanticizing his childhood years, Mencken regretted what he viewed as the ill effects of growth for growth’s sake, effects that the boosters of his town induced and that reminded him of less civilized places such as Pittsburgh.

Whether defending Baltimore or later attacking its boosters, HLM frequently employed the booster’s technique of making comparisons with other cities in order to place his city in a favorable light. In this endeavor, no city was spared if it was unfortunate enough to have caught his eye, but his favorite targets were Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. He maligned Pittsburgh frequently between 1909 and 1911 in columns in the Sunpapers read mostly by Baltimoreans. Short negative references continued, however, as his national reputation and readership grew during the next two decades. Many considered Mencken to be the most famous newspaperman of the day, and others such as Walter Lippmann believed he dominated the intellectual discourse of the 1920s through his essays, books, *Baltimore Evening Sun* columns, and editorships of *Smart Set* and *The American Mercury* magazines. In the 1920s, he published an especially damning essay on Western Pennsylvania which received national exposure.

H.L. Mencken did not create Pittsburgh’s dismal image, but his writing certainly added to it. HLM’s vigorous writing style and caustic wit made the negative image unforgettable. His journalistic portrayal of Pittsburgh suggests how an image could become bigger than life and in time present a serious obstacle for a city and its boosters.

Mencken devoted several early columns entirely to Pittsburgh and frequently made brief, even one-line, references to the city in many others. The opening broadside may have come in 1907 in a column entitled “A Preposterous Pretense.” The event that set off the attack was Pittsburgh’s controversial annexation of Allegheny City:

> **While his attacks on Pittsburgh were relentless, they must be seen in context: Mencken made a career out of criticizing most every aspect of American life.**

Pittsburgh has gobbled Allegheny City and set up shop as a first-class city. According to the Pittsburg papers, its population is now 521,000, and it has jumped ahead of Cleveland, Buffalo, San Francisco and Cincinnati. At the next census, they say it will outrank Baltimore. This last allegation, of course, is mere bravado. So long as the United States remains a civilized country Pittsburg will never outrank Baltimore.

The spectacular population increases of midwestern industrial cities alarmed *Baltimore Sun* editor Mencken, who believed that annexation was not a legitimate means of gaining status and promoting one’s city. The issue engaged him several times over the next few years,
particularly with the publication of the 1910 census that documented Baltimore’s decline from sixth to seventh largest city in the nation. Pittsburgh’s annexation exploit, which, in HLM’s words, “forcibly engulfed the town of Allegheny City,” remained his prime example of this process, but he attacked other cities on this issue as well.13 For example, he charged Omaha with the development of “the a priori method of enumeration,” whereby city officials predetermined the population they wanted and sent out school boy enumerators who were kept on the job until they found the required number.14

In the “The Preposterous Pretense” column, HLM sounded the basic themes of his future Pittsburgh attacks. To Mencken, Pittsburgh was an industrial upstart, a city of mammon that in the single-minded pursuit of industry and wealth created a place bereft of civilized culture and degrading to its workers:

The struggle of such glorified railroad yards and inhabited roundhouses to be regarded as real cities would be amusing were they not so pathetic. Pittsburg has been endeavoring for years to attract a large population, but in vain. The best she could do was 371,000 and of this number not more than 100,000 could speak English and not more than 200 knew how to eat soup without making a noise.

...[T]hose Alleghenians who have the price of a railroad ticket will move away, and that ‘Greater Pittsburgh’ will have less population a year hence.... The cause for this lies in the obvious fact that no sane man would be a Pittsburger if he could help it. People settle in the town for business reasons only, and as soon as they have made enough money they move away. They look upon their residence there as a period of exile.15

By way of contrast, of course, Baltimore was a better place to live, and Mencken always made his admiration for the home town explicit:

Here in Baltimore living is an art, and not an infliction.... [W]ealth is interpreted to mean leisure, culture and gentleness and a capacity for seeing and understanding beautiful things. That is something which Pittsburgh will never, never learn.16

In the article, he identified three aspects of urban life, to which he returned in subsequent columns. They were the environment, food preferences, and the manners of the upper classes, or in his words, a civilized lifestyle. From Mencken’s urbane perspective, sumptuous dining, a lively arts culture, and a pleasant, harmonious physical appearance signaled a city’s good breeding. Pittsburgh failed on all these points; Baltimore naturally displayed these traits:

The Baltimorean lives in a bright, sunny house, with clean marble front stoops and a garden in the rear. He wears clean clothes, eats the most delicious food known to the human race, and makes his living in cleanly ways. When he approaches the meridian of life he retires from business and devotes his time to decent amusements. The air of his town doesn’t choke him. He is not driven away.17

Like many travelers, Mencken found the coal and steel landscape of Western Pennsylvania depressing and ugly. During the course of three decades of writing, he frequently referred to Pittsburgh as “filthy,” “black and busy,” and “an ash pile.” In a 1909 article, HLM concluded that the pansies so common and delightful along the edges of water bodies in his region would not grow in Pittsburgh:

There is good reason to doubt, for example, that pansies would flourish along the Monongahela, particularly within sight, sound or scent of Pittsburg. The soil there is of a peculiar quality, being composed of almost equal parts of coal dust, grease and garbage, and is plainly too rich for small plants.... [W]e would suggest that the ladies plant the datura stramonium, or, as the vulgar would have it, the jimson weed. This is the favorite flower of the Pittsburgers, and is emblematic of their material success, their liking for broad effects and their general copiousness. At the gentle little pansy they would laugh, just as they laugh at Santa Claus, young love and the symphonies of Joseph Haydn.18

His most damaging and celebrated environmental piece came in 1926 in the Baltimore Evening Sun and was republished both in the Chicago Sunday Tribune and later in his book, Prejudices: Sixth Series. The article has been reprinted many times since then. Looking out the window of his Pennsylvania Railroad car, Mencken indicted the string of coal and steel towns that composed the Pittsburgh metropolitan landscape:

Here was the very heart of industrial America, the center of its most lucrative and characteristic activity, the boast and pride of the richest and grandest nation ever seen on earth — and here was a scene so dreadfully hideous, so intolerably bleak and forlorn that it reduced the whole aspiration of man to a macabre and depressing joke. Here was wealth beyond computation, almost beyond imagination — and here were human habitations so abominable that they would have disgraced a race of alley cats.

I am not speaking of mere filth. One expects steel towns to be dirty. What I allude to is the unbroken and agonizing ugliness, the sheer revolting monstrosity, of every house in sight. ...[O]ne blinked before them as one blinks before a man with his face shot away. It was as if all the more advanced Expressionist architects of Berlin had been drunk on Schnapps.... By the hundreds and thousands these abominable houses cover the bare hillsides, like gravestones in some gigantic and decayed cemetery.... On their deep sides they bury them-
selves swinishly in the mud. Not a fifth of them are perpendicular. They lean this way and that, hanging on to their bases precariously. And one and all they are streaked in grime, with dead and eczematous patches of paint peeping through the streaks.

Now and then there is a house of brick. But what brick! When it is new it is the color of a fried egg. When it has taken on the patina of the mills it is the color of an egg long past all hope or caring. Mencken was, of course, describing what he saw from a rail car, which typically traveled the industrial corridors of cities. He was probably familiar with more of Pittsburgh since his brother lived in suburban Crafton, but to the uninformed reader Mencken painted a vivid landscape that, while not without merit, was certainly devastating to the city’s image. It surely made working Baltimoreans pleased to reside in their long lines of brick rowhouses.

On the lighter side, HLM judged Pittsburgh inferior for the poor quality of its food preparation and preferences. He always considered the culinary delights of Baltimore and Maryland among his city’s outstanding qualities. Delicacies such as Maryland terrapin, crabs, and oysters made Baltimore distinctive to visitors. In contrast, the liver and onions, pot roast, rice pudding, and glucose apple pie of Pittsburgh were fitting with its generally uncivilized character. “In Pittsburg,” wrote Mencken, “any kind of pie is worse.” HLM saw little more merit in rice pudding:

In the Blue Ridge Mountains it is used as a poultice for lame horses, and on the Eastern Shore they feed it to horned cattle. In Baltimore it is entirely unknown. When we eat here we demand victuals, and are not satisfied with tasteless concrete. A waiter who set a rasher of rice pudding before a Baltimorean would pay for the insult with his life.

While attacking Pittsburgh’s mince (continued on page 58)
Photos courtesy
Allegheny
Conference on
Community
Development
filthy appearance, and to make public cleanliness a habit for Pittsburghers. City newspapers and radio stations cooperated in the media campaign that exhorted homeowners to repair, paint and beautify their properties, while millions were also spent scrubbing smoke stains off government and private structures downtown — black marks from a century’s worth of frantic industrialization. Coinciding with the clean-up were new municipal smoke abatement laws, passed in 1948, that reinforced a dramatic shift already underway from coal to natural gas as the preferred fuel for industrial, commercial and residential furnaces.

According to promotional material, businessman James Hillman spearheaded the clean-up drive because he had been “somewhat embarrassed for his city when visitors came to call among the soot” and “careless litter.” Hillman approached Mayor David L. Lawrence and Park H. Martin, executive director of the Allegheny Conference, and also wrote the first check to get the ball rolling.

Pa Pitt’s Partners had a downtown office, organized school brigades (the location of the photograph at left is unknown), funneled money into pollution enforcement, which included a platoon of “Lady Cops” who patrolled streets for litterers, and made city equipment and personnel available for neighborhood rubbish drives. Pittsburgh won national commendations (note the trophies in the bank window photograph) and the campaign continued, in varying forms, well into the 1950s.

Much of the promotional effort was aimed at stimulating residents of low-income neighborhoods — the city, in fact, built “parklets” on land cleared in four targeted city neighborhoods. That probably explains the use of African-American women in publicity stills, unusual for a period in which racial and class discrimination was rampant and ethnic models were generally shunned in mainstream advertising campaigns.
pie, Mencken also managed to take a swipe at the city’s immigrant population:

A Polish coal miner in Ohio, biting into a slab of Pittsburg mince pie, struck a rivet and broke off seven teeth; but, being extremely hungry and having no money to buy actual food, he kept at his grim task. A minute later he struck a stick of dynamite in the core of the same pie and was buried from his late residence the next day, leaving a wife in Poland and another in Ohio.22

Even his compliments were back-handed:

For many years we have been trying, by precept and example, exhortation and invective, to introduce the rudiments of modern civilization into the town, or hamlet, of Pittsburg.... In particular, we have railed against their fondness for barbaric adornment, for mesalliance and for grotesque and unsavory victuals. When it is remembered that less than a year ago fried beefsteak was still the favorite dish of all classes in the town, the excuse for our preachings may be discerned.

It is now our pleasant duty to take notice of a change for the better. The people of Pittsburg, moved at last, have begun to experiment with foodstuffs of a higher quality. During the summer, for example, they ordered nine or ten trainsloads of soft crabs from Baltimore, and since September they have been making a trial of the Baltimore oyster. The result is gratifying.... A Pittsburg civilized enough to appreciate the oyster is a Pittsburg that has made decided progress. A few years ago we well-nigh despaired of ever resouling the town from its hideous gems, its cafe weddings and its frying pans, but now we cheerfully admit (and perhaps we may be pardoned if some hint of self-satisfaction appears in our cheerfulness) that it has emerged finally from its Egyptian night. The start has been made: During the next thirty years Pittsburg may astonish us as Japan has astonished us.23

Of course, when Pittsburgers did recognize the superior quality of Maryland delicacies, they still did not have the culinary skills for proper preparation: “In Pittsburg, where embalmed soft crabs are offered in gilded lobster palaces and devoured by glutinous billionaires of that unearthly town, [the soft crab’s] flavor is that of glucose.”24

If the disgraceful food of Pittsburg reflected its industrial status — an “overgrown freight yard,” in HLM’s terms — then it also provided an explanation for the city’s lack of culture.25

Viewing that food, one is disposed to take a kindlier tone toward the vagaries of conduct for which they are noted. A man fed upon fried salmon and rice pudding is not to be blamed, perhaps, for seeking forgetfulness in cheap champagne, fisticuffs, bad art, worse music and the other concomitants of the Gay Life.26

Pittsburg, Mencken noted more than once, was a city that displayed “distressing extremes of wealth and poverty.”27 The single-minded pursuit of wealth degraded citizens at both ends of the spectrum. At one extreme, the plight of the working man was tragic:

There [Pittsburgh] we behold a city which exhibits to the full that restless, ruthless striving.... It is a town of enormous enterprises, of prodigious prosperity, of fabulous income. And yet it must be plain that Pittsburg offers far less hospitality to the average man than Baltimore. On the one hand its desperate energy makes millionaires, but on the other hand it also makes a wretched and degraded proletariat. The revolting revelations of the Pittsburg Survey show just how much (or how little) progress the city as a whole has made toward that comfort which is the rule in Baltimore.28

At the other extreme, the behavior of some of its millionaires was outrageous, and publicity surrounding their antics provided superb copy for HLM. While investments in Pennsylvania lumber, oil, coal, and coke resources spawned numerous fortunes by the end of the century, the formation of U.S. Steel in January 1901 from three large companies, including Carnegie Steel, created three dozen instant millionaires in Pittsburgh. The new fortunes brought immediate national awareness of the city’s fabulous wealth. Although conspicuous consumption by the industrialists contrasted glaringly with the conditions of their workers as reported in the Pittsburgh Survey, celebrated trials and divorces riveted national media attention on rich Pittburghers. The most infamous was the trial of Pittsburgh millionnaire Harry K. Thaw, who murdered New York architect Stanford White at Madison Square Garden in 1906 in a fit of jealousy over his wife’s earlier relationship with the architect. Mencken pounced on such opportunities to flesh out his portrait of Pittsburgh’s uncivilized vulgarity. In one particularly biting column in 1910, entitled “On Chorus Girls,” HLM made his case:

News comes from Charles Frohman, the eminent art fosterer, that the chorus of his musical piece, “Miss Gibbs,” is to be made up of English girls exclusively. Not a single corn-fed damsel from the Iowa steppes, not a single (or even married) ex—waitress from the dec-poh-kaff at Wheeling, W. Va. will cut the pigeon wing in that enchanting band.... Every girl will be British-born. It will be, in brief, a strictly exotic flock, and the pink fog-kissed beauty of its members is expected to lift our marrying maniacs to the highest pitch of exag-omous frenzy.... [S]carcely a day passes without one of them snaring a member of their native aristocracy, and when any considerable force of them crosses the ocean there are always loud calls for clergymen along Broad-way.... We are of the opinion that at least 20 of these fair ones will be married to young Pittsburg millionaires.
before they have been upon American soil 30 days..... It seems impossible, indeed, for a rich Pittsburger to resist the charms of a chorus girl, and particularly of an English chorus girl. Every Pittsburger worth more than $5,000,000 weds a chorister at some time or other. It is part of a millionaire’s education in that unearthly town. He does it instead of going to college or taking airships or making the grand tour.

At the end, he sarcastically brought in as evidence the recent divorce case of William E. Corey, second president of U.S. Steel, who was ousted by a board of directors outraged at the abandonment of his wife of many years for a young stage actress. “In view of this inevitability” (that young Pittsburgh millionaires will marry an English chorus girl), Mencken counseled the young and rich:

[1] It is better for him to make the venture in his nonage, when there is plenty of time ahead for a leisurely repentance, rather than to wait until middle age, when the enterprise may make it necessary for him to rid himself, by tedious legal process and the scandal of the human race, of his wife or wives and his numerous children and grandchildren. In this opinion we are supported by canon law, the Hon. Ellis Corey and Ehrlich’s theory of immortality.

The divorce of Andrew W. Mellon did not escape his attention either. In a 1911 Evening Sun column, derisively entitled “A Pittsburg Gentleman,” Mencken presented a mocking view of the affair, which questioned the decency and honor of Mellon and for that matter, Pittsburgh:

The efforts of the Hon. Andrew W. Mellon, of Pittsburgh, to get rid of his young English wife must provoke the enthusiastic huzzahs not only of all connoisseurs of cannibal carnage but also of all venerated of American manhood. Mr. Mellon’s technique is, in two words, both masterly and revolutionary. When, at the start of his campaign, he found that it would be impossible to keep the minutes of a jury trial out of the newspapers, he had the Legislature of Pennsylvania, that sweet-smelling parliament, pass a law abolishing the right to a jury trial in divorce cases. Then he surrounded his wife with a horde of spies. Then he sent a gang of catchpools to her house to tear her two children from her and throw her out....

Thus the fortunes of war favor the Hon. Mr. Mellon. His wife has been put out of her home, her children have been wrested from her, a complaisant Legislature has robbed her of her right to a fair and open hearing and the two gallant Englishmen who sought to come to her rescue are behind bars....

Pittsburg, no doubt, has its own standards of decency, its own notions of the actions befitting a civilized white man, just as it has its own unmatchable atmosphere and its own unique brand of crooked politicians.

In a brief Evening Sun column published in 1911, Mencken summed up his view of Pittsburgh and the lunacy of unbridled, booster-inspired growth. For him it was simply a matter of seeking development at the expense of quality of life, a theme that he would explore for Baltimore in his notorious “Free Lance” columns in the Sun between 1911 and 1915 and would develop at some length in the 1920s in his renowned “Monday Articles” for the Evening Sun: The boom fever has struck Pittsburgh, that darkling town, and the local Chamber of Commerce appoints the usual committees, subcommittees and super-committees of prominent citizens and seeks high and low for a skilled boomer. The aim, it appears, is to centre all the industries of the United States at the junction of the Allegheny and Monongahela. ... In vision the Pittsburghers see their town stretching from McKeesport to Sewickley — one great forest of smokestacks, one solid gob of grime.

Alas, we fear that they are on the wrong track. What Pittsburgh actually needs is not an increase quantitative but an increase qualitative — not more factories, but more air — not new and exotic industries, but a bath, a shave and a square meal. The town is already richer than Babylon ever dreamed of being. Its inhabitants, when they escape to New York or Paris, pour out money as the crusaders poured out blood. Let a fresh Pittsburgher strike Broadway or the Boulevard des Italiens, and the firebells are rung, taxicabs dash up by the thousand and all the head waiters begin buying bonds. No Pittsburgher, joined to a new wife, gives the clergyman less than $10,000. No Pittsburgher in good standing wears less than a gill of diamonds.

Why more factories? Why more money? Of what value would such things be to a town in which it is now impossible, and has been impossible for 30 years, to wear a collar more than 20 minutes or to get a decent meal? In the 1920s, Mencken reversed his boosterish posture in defense of Baltimore and assailed the consequences of unchecked industrial growth for his town. Baltimore’s quality of life, which he described in his stories before World War I, was in the 1920s disappearing under the onslaught of new industry and rapid growth. Pittsburgh was no longer just an uncivilized town, but an example of what Baltimore was fast becoming:

The discovery by Dr. John H. Shrader, of the Health Department, that the air of Baltimore now contains more dirt than the air of Pittsburgh need not be taken seriously. No one will dispute his report of what he found here for he is a careful and competent man, but it is highly probable that the Pittsburgh figures are considerably below the mark, for Pittsburgh has been sweating under its reputation for filth for years past, and so it is not unlikely that the scientific accuracy of the findings there has been ameliorated by patriotic passion. ... But that Baltimore has grown dirtier of late, and at a very rapid rate, is equally obvious...

The increasing smoke-nuisance, in fact, is but one
of the penalties that Baltimore is paying for its rapid growth since the beginning of the century. The old clean, neat and charming Baltimore is gone forever, and what now confronts us is a sprawling, noisy and filthy factory town, comparable to Manchester or Leeds.33

In Mencken's scheme of things, the responsibility for the declining environment and social affairs lay with the go-getting Babbitts. In a 1925 Evening Sun column, Mencken elaborated his argument, one which he made many times. The article also revealed his prejudice against the working masses:

The ideal of these Babbitts... is a Baltimore illimitably large. They see a city stretching from Laurel to Havre de Grace, and black with the smoke of ten thousand reeking chimneys. Every time they bring in a new soap factory they assault one another with loud felicitations. Every time another iron works begins pouring poisons into the river they resort to their accustomed houses of worship and give thanks to a surprised (and, I hope, indignant) God.... They long to see it as crowded as a near-beer saloon on Saturday night, as black and busy as Pittsburgh, and as full of stench as Bayonne, N.J....

But what of the people who come in to man them [the factories]? In the main, I believe, they are far worse than the factories. Has Baltimore gained anything valuable by the great increase in its population during the past ten years? I doubt it. Since the war boom began, and the Babbitts got a solid grip upon their jobs, probably 100,000 newcomers have moved in. How many of them are acquisitions of any worth? Probably not 200. The rest, in the overwhelming main, are simply so many more morons. They make Baltimore larger, to be sure, but certainly no sane man would argue that they make it better. Such are the fruits of un-intelligent go-getting, carried on by men whose idealism — i.e., whose greed for money — makes them dead to everything else. Their stupidity is not unlike that of the fanatics who advocate such things as Prohibition. Pursuing what they believe, often quite honestly, to be a public good, they bring in only a host of public evils.

Business is not an end in itself; it is simply a means. Its object is to supply the needs of human beings, not to make slaves of them.... When it is set up as an object of actual worship, as it is by the more romantic Babbitts — when we are asked gravely to subordinate every conceivable good to its welfare and modesty, including even the most elemental rights to peace, cleanliness and decency — then the cult passes over into the domain of the obscene.44

As the article makes clear, Mencken's criticisms of his city's boosters were not simply the crankiness of a naysayer. He believed that the mindless, almost patriotic, pursuit of industrial development came at too high a price. Over three decades of newspaper work, he worked out a consistent, reasonable, and unpopular position on the incessant, pro-growth promotions of local businesses and political leaders, who profited from such development. Although his criticisms may be dismissed as those of one unhappy with changes, or progress, which wiped out a simpler, romantically remembered Baltimore of his youthful years in the late nineteenth century, they came in fact from a more complex and coherent perspective on American life, which was first expressed by him around 1910, well before the wistful nostalgia of advancing age could have taken hold.38 In this light, HLM's comments on Pittsburgh should be seen not so much as mean-spirited, personal attacks on the city, but more as part of his larger argument against boosterism in urban life. Pittsburgh simply provided a convenient and telling comparison for making his points.

Whether partisan booster, as he was early in his newspaper career, or indignant critic of the booster mentality, HLM's wit and style left a lasting impression. Over the years, he sharply etched a dismal image of Pittsburgh for his Baltimore audience and, to some extent, for his national readership. At the same time, he assiduously propped up Baltimore's sagging reputation. Unfortunately, it was not enough to counter the change he noticed in the 1920s, and by the 1960s, Baltimore was known as a tired industrial city, a U.S. Route 1 eyesore on the trip between New York and Washington.

To be sure, Pittsburgh forged its own dismal image without Mencken's assistance, but the Sage of Baltimore affirmed this national picture in indelible terms. Over 50 years later, Pittsburgh still wrestles with its grimy image, despite a reconstructed downtown, a disproportionately high white collar labor force, cleaner air and water than most big cities, a decade as the City of Champions, the recent title of America's most livable city, and the relentless boasting by city leaders and promoters. A Greater Pittsburgh Office of Promotions and Greater Pittsburgh Convention and Visitors Bureau, armed with handsome budgets, work diligently to frame the image more in accord with reality. However, images fade slowly. H.L. Mencken has been dead since 1956, but his legacy for Pittsburgh endures in a small way through the persistence of its negative image.
Convention and Visitors Bureau and entitled “Strategic Positioning Study” (done by Ketchum Advertising of Pittsburgh), confirmed the persistence of the image problem.


10 Bode, op. cit., 238.

11 The City of Pittsburgh got the state legislature to pass an enabling annexation act, whereby a majority of the combined electorate of the two cities would determine the outcome. Pittsburgh’s significantly larger size gave it the decided advantage in the referendum.

12 “A Preposterous Pretense,” Baltimore Sun, Nov. 22, 1907.


14 “The Omaha Method,” op. cit.

15 “A Preposterous Pretense,” op. cit. Two years later, HLM wrote that “... later on, perhaps, they may discover, too, that living in Pittsburg is also a disease.” “Diseases Multiply,” Baltimore Sun, date unknown, 1909. In 1911, he similarly judged that “... in Pittsburg it [life is] penal servitude.” “Up Boomers, And At Him!” Baltimore Evening Sun, date unknown, 1911.

16 “A Preposterous Pretense,” op. cit. In “No Mean City,” in the Baltimore Evening Sun in 1911 (date unknown), he makes similar contrasts between Baltimore and other cities, with two negative references to Pittsburgh.

17 “A Preposterous Pretense,” op. cit.

18 “Pansies,” Baltimore Sun, date unknown, 1909.


21 “What They Eat in Pittsburg,” Baltimore Sun, d.u. 1909.

22 “Thoughts of Mince Pie,” Baltimore Sun, d.u. 1909.


26 “What They Eat,” op. cit.


28 “Explaining the Returns,” Baltimore Sun, d.u. 1910.


30 Ibid.

31 “A Pittsburg Gentleman,” Baltimore Evening Sun, d.u. 1911.

32 “Pittsburgh’s Dreams,” Baltimore Evening Sun, d.u. 1911.

33 “Smoke,” Baltimore Evening Sun, May 7, 1928. Things had sunk so low in his view that “Even in Pittsburgh, where it is to the plain interest of all the larger taxpayers to keep the proletariat illiterate, the library is paid $525,795 a year out of municipal funds — twice as much as in Baltimore.” “The Pratt Library,” Baltimore Evening Sun, Feb. 2, 1925.


The “City of Champions” legacy lives on in the hand-painted insignia at 2150 Straub Lane in the city’s Troy Hill neighborhood, and at Stilliman’s Italian Food Store, a Monongahela Valley landmark at 615 McKean Avenue in Charleroi.