Pittsburgh: Then and Now
By Arthur G. Smith

"What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder — out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance, and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life...it is the life of the inhabitants whose shells they are..." — Thoreau

PITTSBURGH has been many cities. Successive generations have occupied this site, each distinctively altering its appearance and history by incorporating influences of major events. Fundamentally, history is memory, but memory can be short and unreliable, thereby limiting us from clearly reflecting upon the physical effects of the passage of time. Historian Arthur G. Smith in his book *Pittsburgh: Then and Now* has provided us with the means to overcome this limitation and to witness the dynamic evolution of Pittsburgh and its neighborhoods from 1890 to the present. The vehicle he has chosen, photography, affords us perhaps the best possible way to "time-travel." Professor Smith has diligently collected vintage photographs from a number of sources and paired them with his own modern views taken from the same vantage point, affording the reader the opportunity to compare, in detail, Pittsburghs — then and now.

Our scrutiny is facilitated by the fact that the black and white images, both old and new, are generally technically well executed and nicely reproduced. This interesting book is the latest of a number of volumes to appear during the past decade that have used visual comparison — all of them fascinating in their demonstration of points worth contemplating: forces are constantly transforming our urban environment; change can occur at vastly uneven rates; and objects forfeited to decay or demolition are irretrievably lost in the wake of time.

In *Pittsburgh: Then and Now* there is relatively little explanatory text beyond brief captions which orient one to the content of each pair of photographs. This may be viewed not as an oversight by the author, but as an exhortation to the reader to assume the task of assigning meaning to the comparisons, which is what elevates such a book above the level of a curiosity.

Figures of people appear only incidentally or casually in these cityscapes. Yet, this is incontestably a book about people in the paradoxical sense that is often evident in the images of Walker Evans and other documentary photographers of the 1930s; the inhabitants' presence is accentuated by their very absence.

In 1989, photography celebrated the 150th anniversary of its presentation to the world by the French government. And since then, an ongoing controversy has ensued concerning the most appropriate role of photography in the visual arts and in society at large. Though born of painting, photography was quickly recognized as the quintessential agent of witness because of its ability to dispassionately and democratically record everything in view, even the most subtle details. Thus it earned a reputation as "the mirror with a memory." The French painter-photographer Brassai said that the "photograph...is the daughter of the world of externals, of the living second and as such will always keep something of the historic or scientific document about it."

Probably, the most familiar example of the documentary genre for Americans is the complete visual record of the Civil War organized and directed by Mathew B. Brady. A fashionable New York portrait photographer prior to the war, Brady came to recognize the power of photographic objectivity as a way to transform viewers into eyewitnesses to historical events at which they could not be present. As in Brady’s project, the bulk of vintage photographs in Professor Smith’s book were taken by skilled journeyman photographers who were able to subordinate much of their concerns about self-expression. That they did so does not at all diminish the images; rather it imbues them with extraordinary presence which confronts the viewer. The deceptive artlessness of the photographs invites attention similar to that which we accord to everyday experience — as happens when we are faced with pedestrian moments in our own lives, we are compelled by these photographs to make something significant of them by the very fact of their existence in front of us. In attempting to do so, we are required to make sense of the city’s past and our own place in its evolution.

The book’s images attest to a powerful alliance between human consciousness and the lens’s ability to record what that consciousness deems significant. The camera is the instrument which arrests these significant scenes and rescues them from time’s continuum. The early photographs were commissioned as a tool — a yardstick by which to measure future change, and more importantly, progress. As such, they invite comparison with their subject rather than contemplation as self-referential art objects. Ironically, these pictures, commissioned to celebrate progress, all too frequently can provide justification for regret. As Smith indicates, episodes of economic hardship have periodically provided occasion to strip local
architecture of its exuberant and cohesive decoration. Time and again we see evidence of distinctive windows, walls and doors having been replaced with relentlessly utilitarian aluminum, resulting in whole city blocks stripped of their original character. Further comparisons may reveal that an increasingly conspicuous feature of the present city is the element of extensive space. Although intended to provide aesthetic or recreational essence, these spaces and voids are instead frequently impoverished by vacancy; they have become locations shunned because of their surreal hostility to the human psyche.

From the illustrations, it is possible to infer that, for all the smoke and chaos of early twentieth century Pittsburgh, it was an intimate city, rich with a patina of texture that can only accrue over decades. Pittsburghers will appreciate that it is the condition of the streets which seem to have most consistently improved.

The culture of Americans is a young one, unusually given to marking time intervals, and to conferring significance to anniversaries; Professor Smith’s book is particularly about time, and naturally so, since the camera deals not in the fuzzy metaphysical time of much human experience, but in “real” time. Thus in the book’s photographs, we see Pittsburgh located in a series of unique pictures, each of which is precisely marked by intersecting coordinates of “real” time and space; for instance, “The Point” on January 8, 1939 and again as photographed by the author in August 1987. Like a flashlight in a dark room, the camera has tantalizingly illuminated for us incidental fragments of our past and it reminds us of the infinitely greater amount of ourselves that has been lost.

In achieving this collection, which is a more powerfully focused construction than the usual visual chronology, the author offers more than the fruits of persistent scholarship. He has performed the historians’s most effectual task: to provide his constituency with the materials and direction with which each reader is impelled to make sense of life’s change and its consequences.

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AIDS: The Burdens of History
Edited by Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox
back

Epidemics have provided historians with some of the best material for their craft. The traditional, the social, and the applied historian all have used various epidemics, from the great plague of the fourteenth century through concerns over polio and venereal diseases in the twentieth century, to focus on major issues within a broad societal context. Therefore, it should not be surprising that our most recent epidemic, AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), should generate a continuation of this historiographical trend. This volume, containing 13 essays by noted medical historians, sociologists, and social critics presents a variety of approaches to the ongoing dilemmas created by this disease.

These essays can be roughly grouped into three broad categories. Beginning with the introductory article by the volume’s compilers, Elizabeth Fee and Daniel Fox, seven essays examine how past epidemics can teach us about how we are attempting to handle AIDS today, as well as cautioning us about potential problems we will encounter. Fox and Fee warn about the danger of presentism in interpreting the lessons from previous epidemics and emphasize that social, moral and cultural values are key factors in understanding how a society relates to a disease. Guenter Risse, using an ecological model of disease causation, discusses the public’s reactions to the 1656 plague in Rome, the 1832 cholera outbreak in New York City, and that city’s 1916 encounter

Buck Fever: The Deer Hunting Tradition in Pennsylvania
By Mike Sanja

This book is bound to be of special interest to hunters, whose experiences allow them perhaps to see deeper into Sanja’s thicket of anecdotes, but scholars will probably find that the definition, dimensions and importance of the “deer hunting tradition” emerge in only fleeting glimpses. Although the book might be a good primer for the curious, the ground remains open for a thorough examination of this extremely worthwhile topic.

Search the Heart
By Michael J. Schultz and Grace Gunderman
Cooksburg, Pa.: Sawmill Center for the Arts, 1990. Pp. 76. Acknowledgements, illustrations. $9.50 paper, postpaid (payable to Sawmill Center for the Arts), Box 180, Cooksburg, PA 16217

“A subjective history of Loleta, Pa., a sawmill town,” is how the type below the title describes this narrative in verse form, which the authors say is based on the history and folklore of this lumber region in northwest Pennsylvania. The story, set in the early twentieth century, consists of eight personalized accounts. While people will undoubtedly disagree about the work’s literary staying power, the whole approach — plus the attractive color illustrations — makes the volume an imaginative presentation.