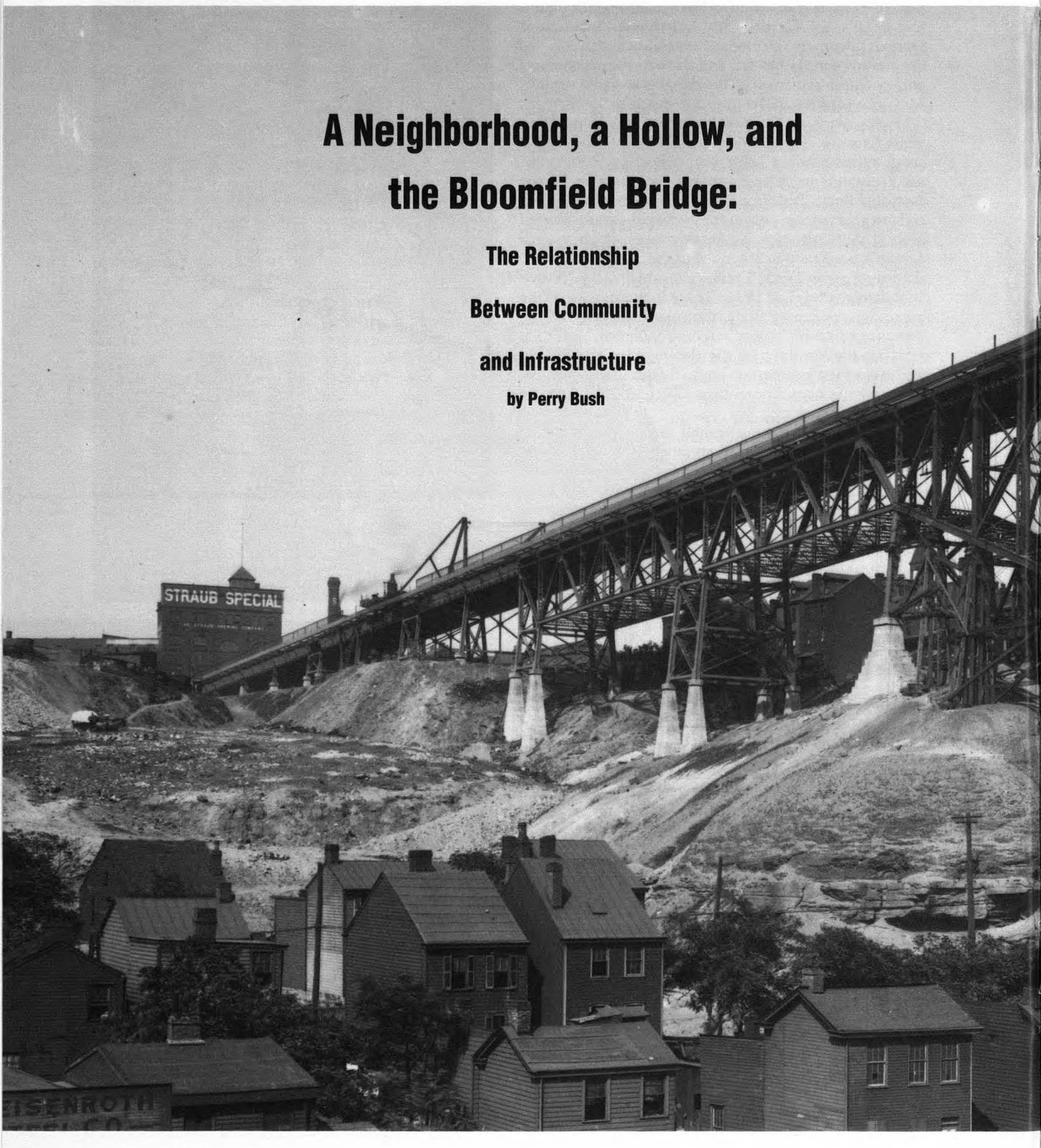
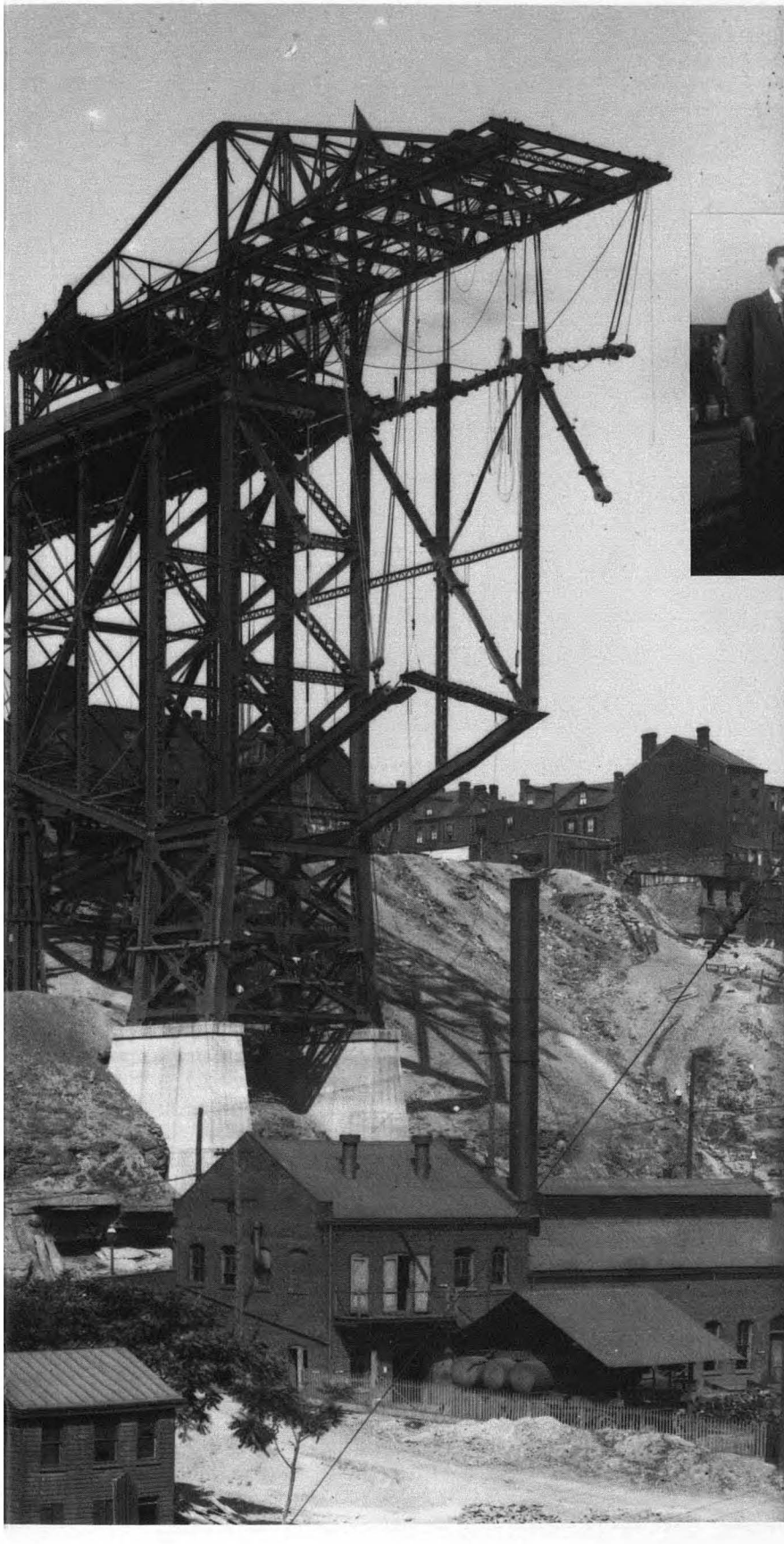
A Neighborhood, a Hollow, and the Bloomfield Bridge:

The Relationship Between Community and Infrastructure

by Perry Bush





ON a Thursday in November 1914, residents of Bloomfield and Polish Hill, two working-class Pittsburgh neighborhoods, were among those who turned out *en masse* to dedicate a brand new bridge across the ravine between the two communities. The subject of years of patient lobbying, the structure had won political approval four years earlier. Now finished, it would be recognized, in the words of the *Pittsburgh Sun*, as "the longest, the highest, and one of the most expensive structures of the kind that has ever been erected by the city." The laboring folk came out determined to mark its completion, but not merely with solemn speeches. The dedication of the new Bloomfield Bridge called for nothing less than what one newspaper termed a "Monster Celebration," a day of theater complete with a touch of scandal. A Bloomfield couple had announced their determination to get married that day on the structure, despite the vigorous protests of area clergymen. With police under orders to prevent the wedding, the couple managed to pull it off. Standing in an open automobile on the middle of the bridge, the band ahead of them stopped to play and a

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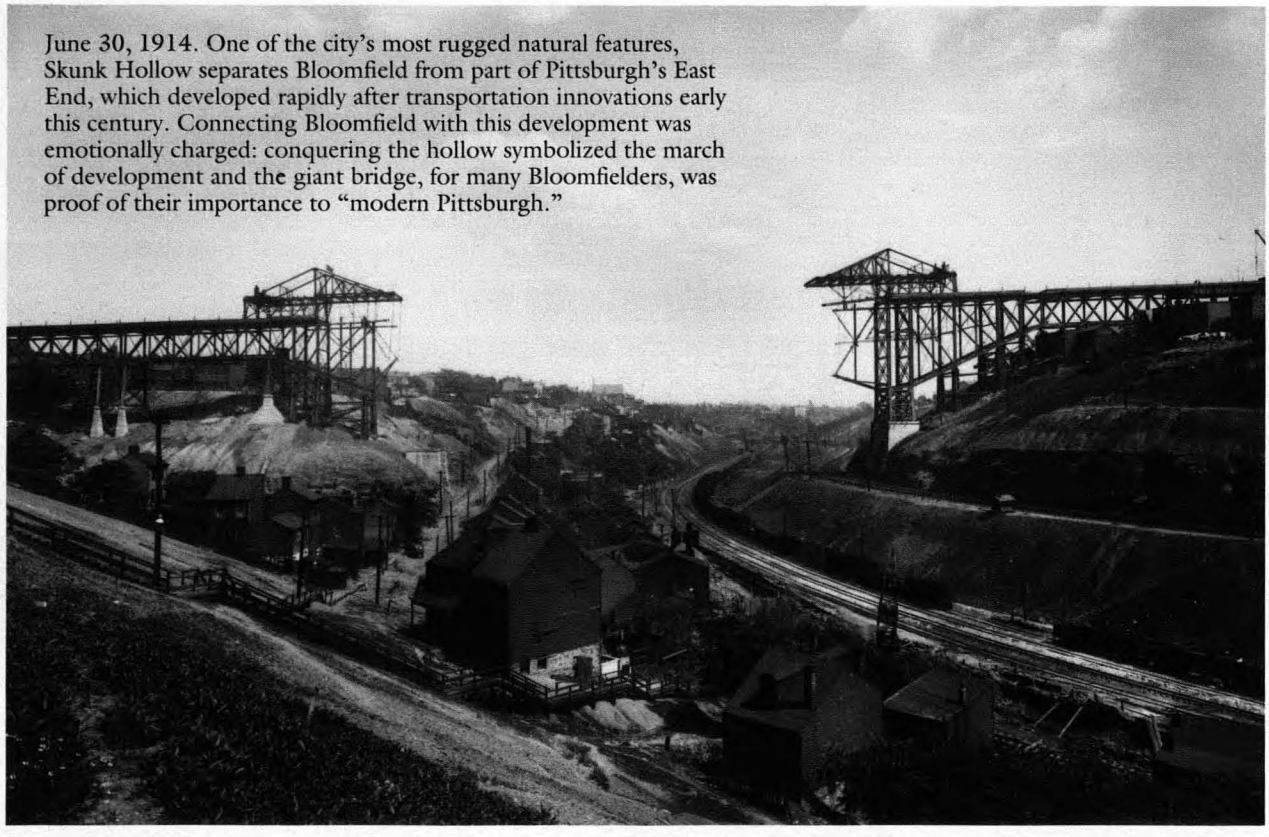
Perry Bush is an Assistant Professor of History at Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma. *Photographs*: The Bloomfield Bridge being built, July 1914; below the bridge at a Bloomfield Rams semi-pro football game, October 1946 (from left): Humphrey DiGiacomo, twins Tom and Jimmy Liberatore, and Johnny Carlino.



June 30, 1914. One of the city's most rugged natural features, Skunk Hollow separates Bloomfield from part of Pittsburgh's East End, which developed rapidly after transportation innovations early this century. Connecting Bloomfield with this development was emotionally charged: conquering the hollow symbolized the march of development and the giant bridge, for many Bloomfielders, was proof of their importance to "modern Pittsburgh."

consenting minister led the new Mr. and Mrs. George Webb through their vows. The day had begun with a parade through Bloomfield, orchestrated by a special bridge celebration committee, with marching bands, floats representing local businesses, military drill groups, and local cowboys, cowgirls, Indians and pioneers. The night featured street dancing in a festive "Mardi-gras" party, under electric lights and colored bunting stretched across the avenues. The mayor of Pittsburgh and other public officials spoke after being introduced by the president of the Bloomfield Board of Trade. The celebration was nothing less than a community coming-out party.[1]

On November 1, 1987, nearly 73 years later, residents turned out once again to celebrate the opening of a replacement bridge between the neighborhoods, and linking Bloomfield once again to Bigelow Boulevard, a major traffic artery that runs along the side of Herron Hill. Organized by the Bloomfield Citizen's Council, civic leaders cocked an eye to the past, and persuaded — no shades of scandal now — another Bloomfield couple to grace the day with their public wedding. A Bloomfield district judge performed the ceremony, welcoming the crowd "to the wedding of this couple and the opening of this bridge." More festivities followed. A parachutist descended onto the arch; politicians orated, bands played, and Mayor Richard Caliguiri kicked off the parade by smashing a bottle — not of champagne, but of locally brewed beer — on the clean cement. After an eight year lapse between the closing of the old bridge and the opening of the new one, residents gave the structure, in the words of a daily paper, "a war hero's welcome." "It's something that Bloomfield has wanted for a long time," explained the president of the Citizen's Council, "something that belongs to Bloomfield."[2]

This article concentrates on the issues and decisions behind construction of the first bridge and argues that its history represents one of the last episodes in a collapsing neighborhood-based political system. To a lesser extent, this article considers the symbolic importance that this monumental structure, as well as the second bridge, took on for Bloomfielders. The bridges became a focal point of community identity and pride. Alan Trachtenberg notes in his examination of the Brooklyn Bridge, for example, that countless numbers have exalted that bridge as something that "might incite dreams of possibility, might yet become a symbol of what we ought to be."[3] For Bloomfielders, their bridges came to mean something similar.

Understanding the various issues surrounding the first bridge's construction requires some geographical orientation. To the immediate south and west of Bloomfield, across the ravine, rises Herron Hill, a large lumpy mass which ascends to the height of 1,240 feet before a gradual three-mile decline westward to Pittsburgh's central business district. A local writer in 1906 waxed poetically that Herron Hill "...in gloomy grandeur, looms up into the empyrean blue like a Mt. Blanc or a Pike's peak without the summit of snow." Real estate

plat books show that even by 1910 the eastern areas of Herron Hill, closest to Bloomfield, were more sparsely settled than the area across the ravine. Although the southern part of Herron Hill tended to have larger plots and wealthier residents, the area adjacent to the bridge site had homes scattered haphazardly among a good deal of vacant land; Herron Hill had few stores and shopping areas, even in the more densely packed quarters of the neighborhood on the hill known as Polish Hill.[4]

Because Herron Hill dominated much of the wedge leading to Pittsburgh's "Golden Triangle" downtown, thoroughfares from residential areas of the city's East End were restricted to five main arteries. These routes at the turn of the century were essentially the same as they are today: two along the Monongahela River (Forbes and Fifth avenues); one going over Herron Hill (Centre Avenue to Wylie Street); and two along the Allegheny River to the north (Penn and Liberty avenues). As early as 1890 city engineers realized that these narrow roadways would soon prove inadequate to handle the rush of traffic downtown from Pittsburgh's rapidly growing residential suburbs, and that another route would soon be needed. In 1895 Public Works Director E.M. Bigelow persuaded the City Council to fund construction of a new road along the north face of Herron Hill. Slower and heavier horse teams and delivery wagons were excluded, and upon its completion in 1901, Grant Boulevard (renamed Bigelow Boulevard some years later) was one of the first roadways to be reserved primarily for commuters. In 1895 this meant light carriages; but 15 years later landscape planner Frederick Law Olmsted's report to the City Council noted that "...Grant Boulevard seems likely to remain confined to light passenger traffic, chiefly automobiles."[5]

The Herron Hill baseball squad, which used Dean's Field below the Bloomfield Bridge as its home park, proudly represents its neighborhood in a team photo, c. 1900. The bridge connected Herron Hill to more densely populated Bloomfield across Skunk Hollow.

Across the valley from Herron Hill, turn-of-the-century Bloomfield was already establishing itself as an immigrant working-class ward, noted mostly for the knee-deep mud of its streets and the conservatism of its residents. Located about three miles east of downtown Pittsburgh and nestled between the neighborhoods of Garfield and East Liberty on the east and the mills of Lawrenceville bordering the Allegheny River to the north, the initial homes and shops of the neighborhood were built during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The community finally took shape around a business district centered on Liberty Avenue. A large number of Germans settled in the area, constructing their homes and family businesses along narrow, packed streets in the style of their villages in the old country. A 1906 article on the Sixteenth Ward (the Eighth Ward, after redistricting in 1910) maintained these Germans were the "backbone and sinew" of the ward, "...honest, industrious, and frugal." Along with these qualities, Bloomfield's Germans exhibited, according to the reporter, "a certain phlegmatic and stubborn spirit that opposes all improvements in the Ward...." The article described the community's small but thriving business district along Liberty Avenue. Since 1892, the number of stores in the heart of Bloomfield increased from "scarcely a dozen" to "a hundred or more." While the shops of this district were not "large or imposing," and certainly paled by comparison even to those on Penn Avenue, the other main road running roughly parallel to Liberty through the area, they were still "substantial, and...being gradually replaced by other more ornate houses."[6]

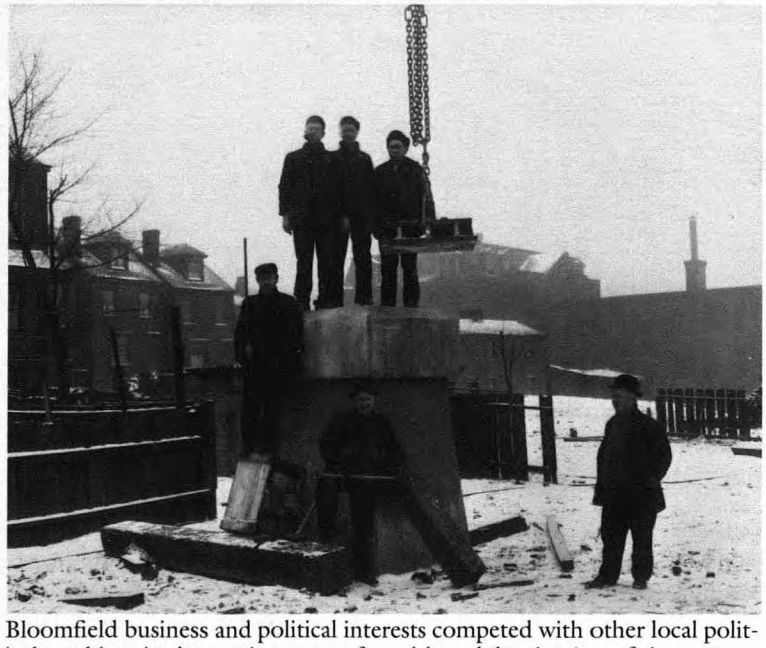
A 1917 report to the mayor by Traffic Commissioner E.K. Morse included a map of the number of employees residing in different sections of the city. The map shows Bloomfield as primarily a residential area. Plat books confirm this, noting two breweries and an oil refinery on South Mathilda Street as the only industries in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, many local residents undoubtedly found employment with the Pennsylvania Railroad, which had extensive operations in the ravine.[7]

Property title transfers for some 80 homes along Cedarville, Juniper, and Lorigan Streets, south of Liberty Avenue, shed additional light on the makeup of Bloomfield at the turn of the century.[8] The *Pittsburgh Leader* noted in 1906 that "hordes of Italians" had recently moved into the community, mostly of "the poorer and less desirable class." Title transfers confirm that Italians had managed to secure a neighborhood beachhead, obtaining rows of homes along several avenues.[9] New immigrants were more apt to buy homes throughout the area.[10] City directories and the U.S. census for 1900 and 1910 establish that population densities were even higher for the newly arriving Italians. Sixty percent of the Italian homeowners listed their occupation simply as "laborer," further verifying the working-class nature of the community.

Between Herron Hill and Bloomfield lay the small valley known then as Skunk Hollow. Along the ravine's floor ran the busy tracks of the Pennsylvania and the Baltimore and Ohio railroads, and many trains daily coursed down the valley to and from downtown Pittsburgh. The hollow was a dismal place in 1910. It was nothing less, observed Florence Larrabee Lattimore in the 1908 *Pittsburgh Survey*, than "a pocket edition of civic neglect." She enumerated the problems: poverty, prostitutes, truant children playing in gutters, drunks, flies, open sewers, disease, reputed criminals wandering free. Lattimore found sewers running the length of the hollow, and a surface drain trickling near the edge of a cow stable and then emptying into a well from which people drew water. All together, the hollow between Bloomfield and Herron Hill was, in Lattimore's words, "a settlement of mill-ends: mill-ends of people, living in mill-ends of houses, on mill-end jobs, if they work at all."[11]

Before addressing the political wranglings that figured most prominently in the decision to build the bridge, it is important to consider who city planners predicted would use the bridge the most.

Historians have estimated that by the first decade of the twentieth century, as many as 100,000 people traveled daily to downtown Pittsburgh to work, shopping, or entertainment. As for Bloomfield, of the 5,980 neighborhood residents whom he surveyed in 1917, E.K. Morse counted 1,503 who traveled downtown to work. A bridge to fast-moving Bigelow Boulevard might ease their daily commute.[12]

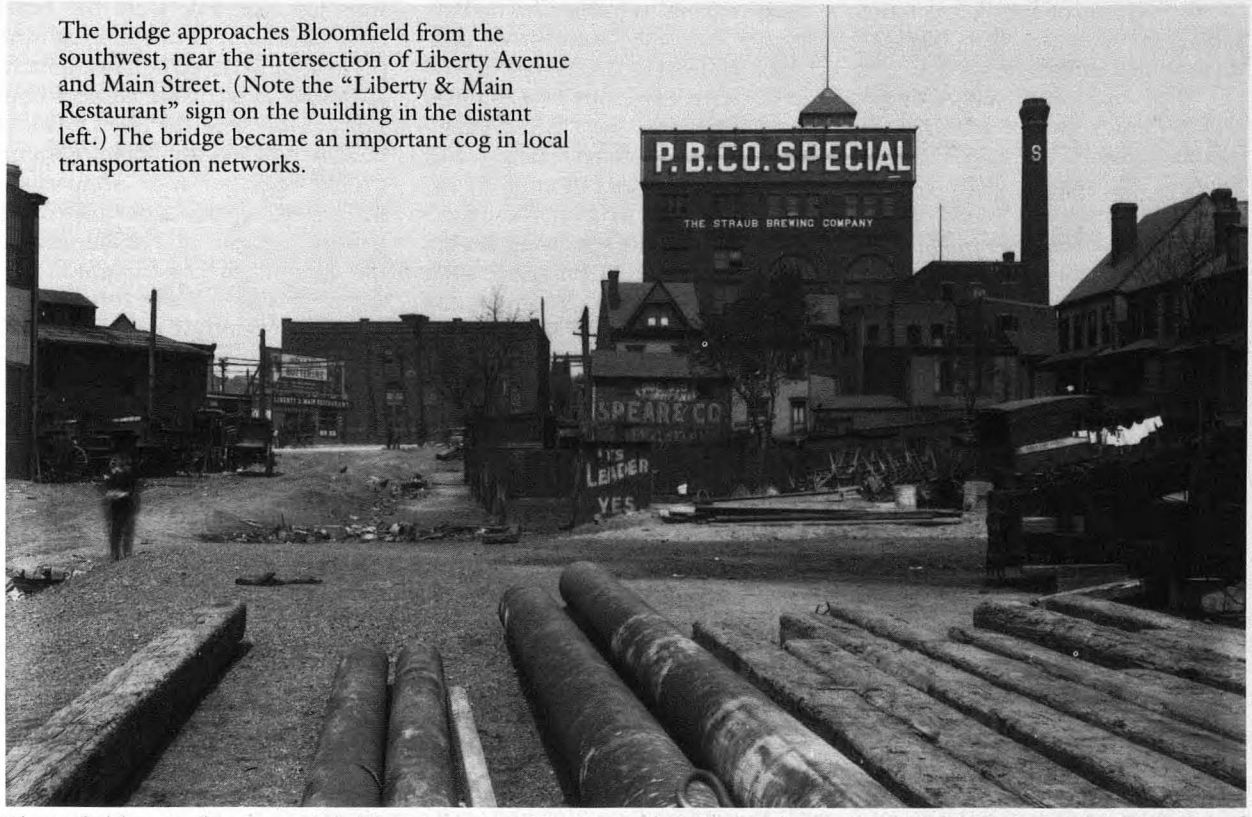


Bloomfield business and political interests competed with other local political machines in the waning years of ward-based domination of city government. After several years of wrangling, workmen "set the first iron" for the bridge on March 19, 1914.

But it is clear that the demand for the bridge did not come from working-class Bloomfield, primarily because in 1914 automobiles were the exclusive province of the wealthy. Historian Joel Tarr calculates that as of 1910, only 1,601 automobiles were registered in Allegheny County, or one to every 636 persons. It would be some years before Henry Ford's Model T would be priced low enough for the working class. Most Bloomfielders traveling to work by mechanized transport went by streetcar on Penn and Liberty avenues. Bion J. Arnold's *Report on the Pittsburgh Transportation Problem*, commissioned in 1910, provided a map showing the load on average rush-hour streetcar traffic. Penn Avenue from Bloomfield/East Liberty to downtown was the most heavily traveled streetcar line in the city, with an especially heavy volume on Liberty. Morse counted some 14,000 people working in the mills between Liberty and the Allegheny River, in the present-day Strip District and Lawrenceville. Bloomfield residents who worked in those districts generally commuted by streetcar or on foot.[13]

So, what were the important traffic considerations? The most salient ones are to be found in Tarr's study, which demonstrates how suburban areas south, north and east of Pittsburgh developed rapidly from 1910 to 1930. Bigelow Boulevard was the key link for these new suburban dwellers. Olmsted, in 1910, had described traffic on Bigelow as "chiefly automobiles," and a 1917 traffic count verified it as the busiest artery to downtown.[14] The city built two other bridges over the hollow to access Bigelow via Baum Boulevard, in 1911 and 1913 respectively. Baum became the principal access route to Bigelow for commuters from Squirrel Hill and other wealthy, quickly growing East End suburbs. Although Centre Avenue provided a link to Bigelow, streetcar track maps show that, like Penn and Liberty, Centre was choked with trolley lines. No streetcars obstructed Baum, and no heavy local commercial traffic existed to slow commuters.

Some city officials and newspapers suggested that the Bloomfield Bridge would benefit businesses along Penn and Liberty avenues in Bloomfield by bringing more auto traffic into the district. "The citizens of the Bloomfield district have been fighting for such a bridge for the past 12 years," the *Pittsburgh Sun* observed in 1914. And the Department of Public Works, discounting the value of the faster approach to downtown, reasoned that the bridge would provide "a shorter means of access" to Bloomfield and adjoining areas from Bigelow Boulevard. These arguments, however, do not seem valid. Although Herron Hill residents could walk to Bloomfield, the area had little industry, with only 783 persons working in the Bloomfield-Garfield district in 1917. In addition, Olmsted recommended in 1910 building a "feeder route" from Penn and Liberty to the bridge, and hence to Bigelow Boulevard — the net result would have made movement in and out of



The bridge approaches Bloomfield from the southwest, near the intersection of Liberty Avenue and Main Street. (Note the "Liberty & Main Restaurant" sign on the building in the distant left.) The bridge became an important cog in local transportation networks.

Bloomfield easier by car — but his suggestion was not heeded.[15]

So, while commuter considerations were germane, they had less to do with the Bloomfield Bridge being built than the political developments of the era.

A number of factors and factions swirled around the decision to build the bridge, and understanding them requires going back to the bond sale that provided the funds for the project in 1911, three years before the bridge opened.

Momentum began to build in 1910. Originally the Bloomfield Bridge was included in an omnibus bill which provided for the erection or rebuilding of seven other bridges. On September 12, 1910, the Common Council —the name of one of the two chambers of city government before sweeping reforms a year later created a single-chamber council — passed a resolution in support of the omnibus bill. Interestingly, the account of the legislation in the next morning's *Pittsburgh Post* reported that the Bloomfield span was the only bridge in the group to provoke any dispute. Councilmen Charles Martin and A.C. Magill, both of the Ninth Ward (Lawrenceville), proposed amending the bill so that the bridge would be built from Herron Hill to the end of Cayuga Street in the heart of Bloomfield. Martin and Magill apparently believed that placing the terminus of the bridge in that location would benefit Lawrenceville in some way, but their proposed amendments were rejected.[16] Public Works Director Joseph Armstrong had previously pledged that "the people of Bloomfield should decide where the bridge should be built."[17]

Within two weeks, City Council authorized a bond election that November to pay for building or repairing the eight bridges. Voters would be asked to approve a $10.3 million package, not only for new bridges but also for a new city hall, updated sewer and water systems, a new tuberculosis hospital, and other improvements.

Mayor William Magee moved to nail down the question of the bridge site by holding several meetings. On the private level, Magee met with councilmen from the Sixth, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth wards, and with representatives from the Bloomfield and Lawrenceville boards of trade. The results of these negotiations remain ambiguous. Vague promises were made to settle the question before the election, but it was obvious to the *Pittsburgh Post* that "the Bloomfield site will likely be chosen." True to Armstrong's promise to let Bloomfielders decide the site, Magee met on September 27 with "several hundred people" on Bloomfield's central corner, Main Street and Liberty Avenue. If nothing else, argued the *Pittsburgh Press*, these very numbers demonstrated "the strength of the movement" to have the proposed bridge erected at Cayuga Street.[18]

At this point, it is vital to gain a better sense of the political currents flowing through Pittsburgh in 1910 and 1911. In his exploration of municipal reform in the Progressive Era, historian Samuel Hays argues that "...the source of support for municipal reform around the country did not come from the lower or middle classes, but from the upper class." This reform effort, Hays continues, often took shape as an effort to central-

ize the system of municipal representation. As a practical measure, this meant a shift from ward-level to city-wide election of school boards and city councils. The official argument offered by the upper-class reformers was that only by electing councilmen city-wide could the voters ensure that the city would pursue affairs of general importance rather than the peculiar needs of particular neighborhoods. But beneath the rhetoric lay a less altruistic motive, according to Hays. Examining a 1911 pamphlet issued by the Voters' League of Pitts-

The Bloomfield Rams, Steel Bowl Conference champions in 1955, played on Dean's Field under the bridge. The most notable Ram was Johnny Unitas, who quarterbacked Rams teams before his fame with the NFL's Baltimore Colts.

burgh, he concludes that "reformers, therefore, wished not simply to replace bad men with good; they proposed to change the occupational and class origins of decision makers." The ward system of council representation awarded political power to men elected from particular communities, and in a city like Pittsburgh, with its many working-class neighborhoods, this meant a council in which upper-class representatives were greatly outnumbered.[19]

By the first decade of the twentieth century, behind the skirmishing around the bridge, upper-class, "centralizing" reformers battled the locally oriented, ward-based machine. In 1901 reformers had moved in the state legislature to pass a new city charter creating a "strong mayor" system, centralizing and strengthening the power of the executive branch. By 1910 these forces of "reform" were moving to alter the city's legislative branch to their liking. They succeeded with the city charter revisions of 1911. The most important revision did away with the two-house ward-elected council of 387 members in favor of a single council of just nine members elected city-wide. The act, moreover, took place immediately. The new councilmen, consequently, would be men with the resources and backing to campaign city-wide, and were predominantly members of the upper classes.[20]

Viewed in this context, the political scuffling around the bridge and the bond issue can be seen as a smaller battle in a broader political war. On one side were the bond issue opponents who, judging from their organizations and arguments, appeared as altruistic citizens concerned only with the city's financial health and future development. Pulled together into nonpartisan watchdog organizations called the Voters' League of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Civic Commission, these citizens — led by former mayor George Guthrie — objected to the bond issue for a variety of reasons. In its report on the bond issue, presented a week before the election, the Voters' League charged that the cost of many projects had not been stated in specific detail and that "in many cases the amounts specified are less than those required."[21] Moreover, the report warned that authorizing the bonds would "reduce the debt contracting power of the city to an extent it would prevent the carrying out of large pending improvements." Other objections sprang from a basic distrust of the ruling municipal administration. Attacking Magee as "extravagant," these civic groups cited "a big increase in the payroll" as reason for suspicion, and cautioned that the mayor would have entire control of the proceeds of the bond issue. As a final salvo, reformers claimed that Magee had "forfeited the confidence of the community" by retaining in office two department heads under indictment at the time. Altogether, the do-gooders came up with a potent attack on the bond issue, in a city with a history of corruption on exactly these sorts of projects.

Hays notes that the success of the Civic Commission and the Voters' League in stripping away a ward-elected council also made possible the election of people from the occupational ranks represented on their panels: "managerial, professional and banker occupations...." These were the men who opposed the city bond issue of 1910.[22]

Mayor Magee and Public Works Director Armstrong rallied the forces

on behalf of the bond issue. Differing somewhat from the famed Flinn-Magee machine of the late nineteenth century led by Christopher Magee as mayor (William's older brother) and construction mogul William Flinn,[23] the experiences of William Magee and Armstrong were largely rooted in ward-based political organizing. Magee went out campaigning in the community, linking the bond issue to the fortunes of the municipal republican ticket. Rallying around him were local neighborhood leaders: principally, notes Hays, "small businessmen — grocers, saloonkeepers, livery stable proprietors, owners of small hotels, druggists, and white collar workers such as clerks and bookkeepers, and skilled and unskilled workmen." Given the socio-economic makeup of Bloomfield, these men would be exactly the sort of grass-roots leaders that working-class communities turned to for influencing the governmental system.[24]

By the day of the bond issue election, November 8, 1911, Magee had made over 60 speeches in the neighborhoods on behalf of the bond issue and appeared on the edge of a "nervous breakdown," reported the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*. Like any good politician, the mayor tailored his message to the concerns of his audience. To mill workers in the Fifth Ward, for instance, he pointed out that the proposed extension of Kirkpatrick Street would allow them to reach their jobs in the Penn Avenue manufacturing district more easily. To other audiences, he harped on regional rivalries. In a closing rally a few days before the election, he argued that in the last 10 years "Pittsburgh has not progressed as it should....[T]he increase in population was only 16 percent while our rival city Cleveland advanced at a rate of 46 percent. Now is it a strange and striking coincidence that during the ten years that Pittsburgh did not advance, no public improvements were made...?" Bond issue supporters did not hesitate to lambaste the opposition. In a rally in Oakland, for instance, one speaker denounced detractors as "knockers...the kind of men who thought nothing was right unless they did it themselves." This was the old ward-based machine on one last campaign. The Bloomfield Bridge became a testing point for the power of the wards and their working-class representatives against crusading upper-class reformers.[25]

Voters approved the bond issue overwhelmingly, with the papers reporting "phenomenal" voter turnout. The returns, however, offered some surprises. The bond item which included the bridge, allocating $1.975 million for the Point Bridge downtown and other bridges, was actually defeated by Eighth Ward voters. They rejected almost all other measures in the bond issue by wide margins (averaging 245 votes), and the measure including the bridge by a very small margin (28 votes). The only items to pass overwhelmingly in the Eighth Ward were ones which eliminated tolls on Allegheny River bridges and two other universally popular "humanitarian" measures: improvements in the water system and funds for a new tuberculosis hospital.[26]

'[P]olitical scuffling around the bridge and the bond issue can be seen as a smaller battle in a broader political war.'

There are several possible explanations. The ward's voters didn't rule on the bridge alone. A second view suggests that the forces of "reform" may have already begun to take hold in Bloomfield. A 1906 article in the *Pittsburgh Leader* mentioned some fine homes in the community (and the arguments of the Voter's League may have held some sway in these wealthier precincts along the border of Shadyside), already developing as an elite neighborhood. Finally, although the small businessmen Magee targeted in his campaign could be expected to side with him, it does not necessarily follow that the new development Magee and the papers promised would have benefited the great mass of laborers. Perhaps the voters saw this.

While the bridge would in fact improve Bloomfield's physical tie to the rest of the city, it was never presented as indispensable. Magee and other bridge supporters, in fact, often talked of general and vague benefits, saying the bridge would enhance "communications and transportation." Generalizing about the response in Bloomfield to such arguments is difficult. The papers say hundreds rallied for the bridge in September 1910, but specific perceptions of "working men" on how such a bridge would affect their lives remains unclear.

As a footnote, it should be noted the bridge did not spark a major commercial expansion in the area. In fact, not until the last two decades do any reports of business activity suggest extraordinary commercial success along Liberty Avenue.

Yet perhaps there was more to the hope of "development" than solely economic calculations.[27] We must take the larger perspective that the Bloomfield Bridge was not built due to specific economic or commuter inducements, but rather due to the citizenry's more general interest in modernization. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many American cities concerned themselves with developing their infrastructures. Pittsburgh was no exception. These were years of tremendous city expansion and construction. After a bitter court fight, Pittsburgh managed to annex the city of Allegheny in 1907, and between 1905 and 1916 garnered 11 other individual acquisitions, raising its total area from 28- to over 42-square miles. Infrastructure expanded at an even more furious pace, producing a period that the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* called "the great bridge-building era," a "blessing"

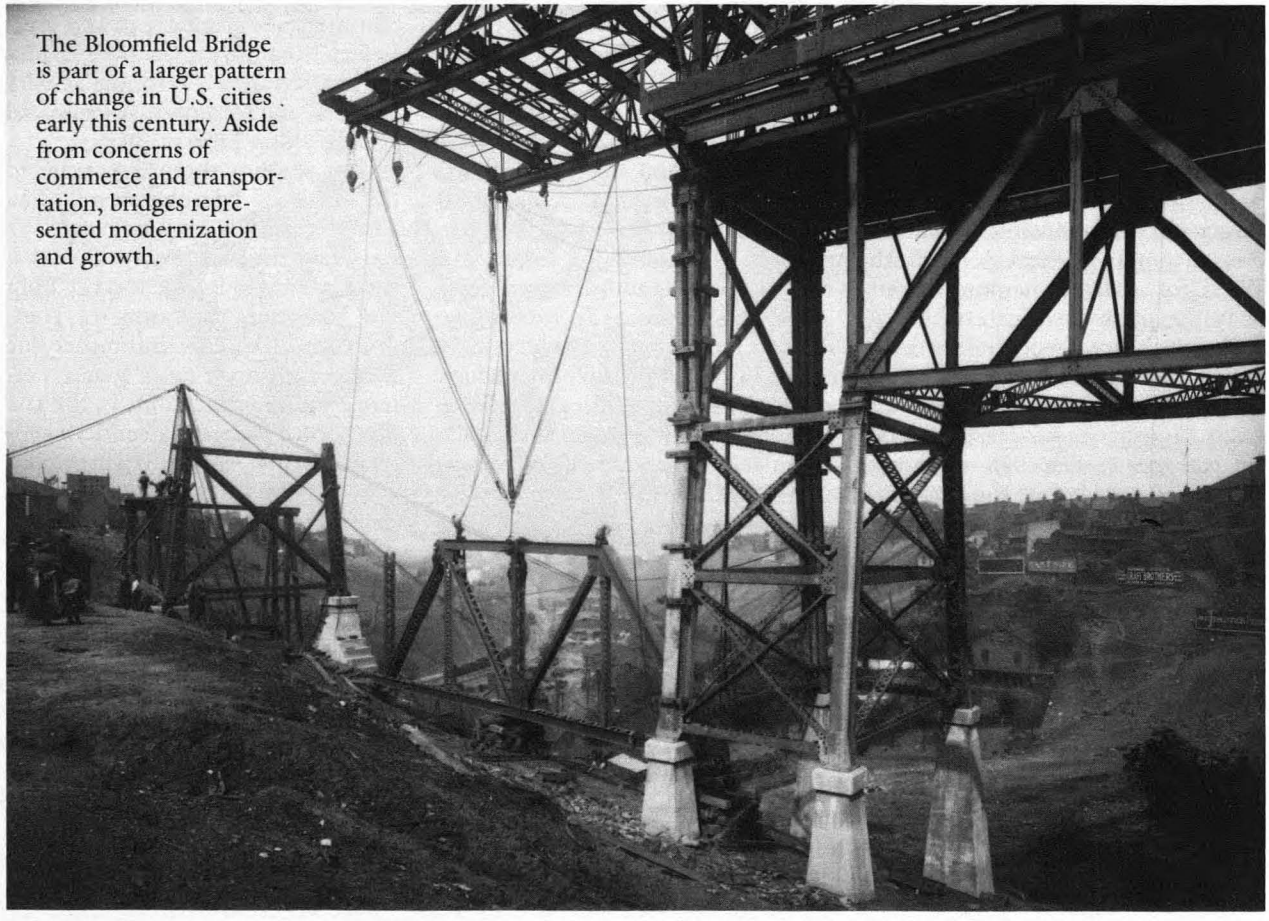
for the city. Scholars such as Tarr and Peter Farrington outline in detail some of Pittsburgh's development in the first few decades of this century, such as city planning under the Civic Commission in 1909-1912 and the resulting Olmsted, Freeman, and Arnold reports; the construction of the Boulevard of the Allies and the Liberty Tunnel; and the widening of Bigelow Boulevard. No longer a mere city, Pittsburgh was becoming a metropolis.[28]

In 1912 alone, the mayor's annual report listed eight new bridges under construction besides the Bloomfield span, with major repair work being done on 13 others. The Department of Public Works report four years later listed at least seven bridge projects in Pittsburgh's East End alone. Moreover, this bridge-building spree continued no matter whether Magee or his reformer opponents had the upper hand and was, like the Bloomfield span, financed by bond issues which won regular approval from the city's voters. Thus, in an energetically expanding young metropolis, it seems reasonable to conclude that the cause of increased internal cohesion and integration was justification enough to the majority who approved the bridge's construction.[29]

In early January 1913, the City Council's Committee on Finance authorized $435,000 for the project from the sale in 1911 of "Bloomfield Bridge Bonds." On January 7, 1913, Mayor Magee signed the legislation. After years of lobbying by Bloomfield citizenry, the final approval of the bridge occurred with little discussion. Local newspapers carried no editorials on the event and issued no opinions, merely printing the full text of the bill with a routine discription of the council's other actions. Thus, with little fanfare, the city gave final approval to the construction of one of the largest and most expensive physical structures in its history.[30]

The bridge was completed within a year at a cost of under $500,000. A steel viaduct with a concrete substructure, the bridge had a main 400-foot-long cantilevered span, with two cantilever arms. The bridge stood 185 feet above the floor of Skunk Hollow and measured 914 feet from end to end, with a 34-foot-wide roadway between two 8-foot-wide sidewalks.[31]

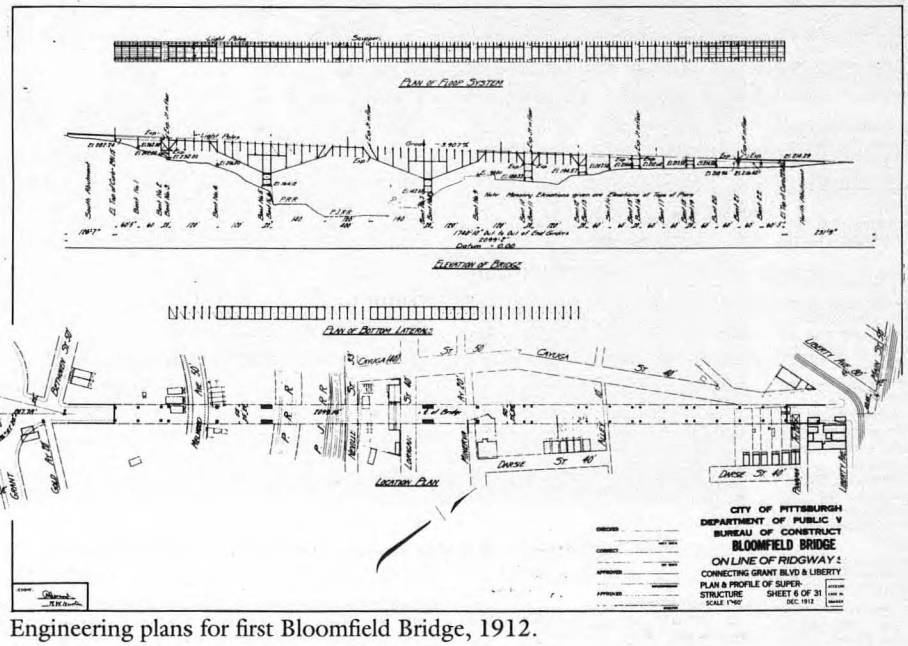
As the years wore on and the bridge became integral to local transportation patterns, it also became part of Bloomfield's identity. It provided a focal point for the community and is part of several cherished legends of local history. According to the Bloomfield Citizen's Council, old-timers still tell stories of Hollywood actor Gene Kelly dancing for nickels as a boy on Lorigan Street, which skirted Skunk Hollow and passed underneath the old bridge. Even more popular are tales of legendary football star Johnny Unitas quarterbacking a top flight semi-pro team called the Bloomfield Rams on



The Bloomfield Bridge is part of a larger pattern of change in U.S. cities early this century. Aside from concerns of commerce and transportation, bridges represented modernization and growth.

Dean's Field, directly underneath the bridge. The team was owned by Dan Cercone, the self-styled "Mayor of Bloomfield," who, as of four years ago, still ran a barber shop on Liberty Avenue. The way Cercone tells it, Unitas was cut by the Pittsburgh Steelers and played for the Rams until the Baltimore Colts picked him up. "The rest is history," spouts Cercone.[32]

Over the years, the bridge ran up a repair bill nearly four times the cost of its original construction. In 1948 it was first closed for two months for repairs. The span was closed again in 1958, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971. In 1972, major renovations kept the span closed for three months. By the time repairs were complete, the city had spent nearly $2 million, with an estimated cost of a whole new bridge only $2.5 million. The city said the bridge would remain open "for good" after those repairs, to the immense relief of the estimated 30,000 motorists who crossed it daily. However, in the spring of 1978, city engineers inspecting the span found major support beams eaten through with rust, other portions of the structure severely twisted, and concrete from the deck's underside beginning to fall. On May 15 the city permanently closed the bridge, occasioning a public furor. "Prepare for traffic jams, east end dwellers," began one lengthy newspaper story, "because the Bloomfield Bridge is going to be demolished and its replacement won't open for about 5 years." Brief hope flickered that band-aid repairs costing between $300,000 and $500,000 could keep the bridge open for as long as four more years, but by August 1978, further inspections revealed the extent of the decay and convinced nearly everyone that the old span had to go.[33]



Engineering plans for first Bloomfield Bridge, 1912.

"Five years," thundered the *Post-Gazette* in an editorial, "is too long to have this artery closed." To the paper, the span simply served "a crucial and obvious transportation need." Other news media treated the bridge's closing like the passing of some great statesman. Local residents issued statements which fueled such declarations. As the president of the Bloomfield Businessmen's Association wrote to Public Works Director John Ruff, "the Bridge is a vital link to hospitals, schools, and is important to the overall economic picture of our community." One snafu after another followed, including a lawsuit over a low bid, a controversy concerning how to deal with toxic waste uncovered at the site, a redesign of the structure, a freeze on federal funds, and bureaucratic red tape galore. Accordingly, every year brought a new promise of the bridge's completion date: from a confident assertion of 1981, to headlines vowing a new bridge by 1982, through predictions of 1984 and 1985 and "the spring of 1986." The bridge finally opened in November 1987 at a cost of nearly $33 million.[34]

As the years had dragged on and no bridge had reappeared, Bloomfield discovered what this article suggests: the structure held no fundamental economic importance and acted as no "indispensable" traffic artery. A Liberty Avenue hardware store owner observed that "the closing of the bridge didn't help us much and its reopening hasn't either." Others noted that "while some of the merchants [were] hurting" because of the bridge closing, it might have sparked other enterprises by funneling commuter traffic through the area. And although traffic along Liberty Avenue was bad while the bridge was closed, it had always been bad.[35]

Thus it seems that the realities of economic disaster or widespread commuter inconvenience were not reasons for a new bridge for Bloomfield. Instead, it was public feeling, a neighborhood "mentality," which proved crucial. As officials responded to community grumblings, the new Bloomfield Bridge — like the first one — became a potent political issue. After the bridge was condemned in 1978, officials began to consider three options: not building the bridge, building it from Herron Hill to 40th Street, or rebuilding it at its present location. The first two options were quickly discarded. One important reason for their dismissal was "the public's participation in the decision-making process," reported a preliminary engineering report. "The Bloomfield Bridge is a local bridge...." Through informational meetings and questionnaires, local residents overwhelmingly de-

STANDING OUT

Bloomfield sandlotters line up for reunion

By Jean Bryant
The Pittsburgh Press

They were the "bad boys" of Bloomfield's sandlot football. "Shiv," "Packrat," "Bimbo" and "K.O." were just a few of the names they gave themselves to carry off that image.

That was 40 years ago. Today, they are "pussycats." Mellowed out.

But in the 1940s, the Trojans were a team to be reckoned with and, although they didn't keep statistics, they were largely undefeated.

They practiced on the treacherous, muddy, dirt ground at Dean's field. The tight-knit band of Italian teens swaggered victorious after games to share pizza at Del's on Liberty Avenue, then danced the night away at the VFW hall in Oakland.

They were a macho group. But some things cut right through that tough veneer — and hurt.

For instance, there was the time they were scheduled to play the late Bob Prince's Mt. Lebanon Wild Cats and were turned away because they weren't fully uniformed. Oh, they all had on the Trojan's blue and white jerseys. But not all of them had helmets or shoulder pads.

On the other hand, the Wild Cats were spiffy in their football uniforms.

The ragtag Trojans arrived in an old borrowed beer truck. "We pulled up to the field with our jerseys and a lot of guts," recalled Mick "Bimbo" Walton.

"We kept saying, 'Look at all that grass,' " recalled Bob "K.O." Scullion. They had cheerleaders, a band. I thought, here we are, about 20 guys that day coming out of Bloomfield in a beer truck."

"They stopped us at the gate, wouldn't let us through," Walton said. "If we had played them, we would have killed them."

That thought evoked raucous laughter from Scullion, Walton and three others, Vince "Dapper" Palmiere, Frank "Stuff" Guerriero and Benny Mannella, one of the same one who would yell at the top of his lungs, "Why weren't you at practice?" if a teammate missed practice and he caught him later.

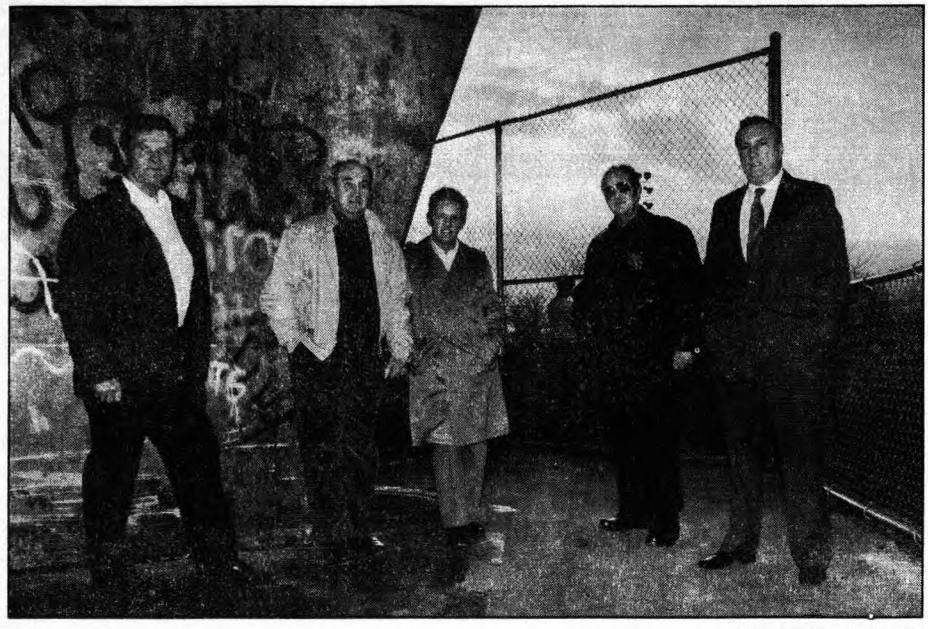
respect for adults.

"If you didn't respect the elders, they'd belt you one," Guerriero said.

But opponents on the playing field got no

Gas Co.

Mannella grew up on Carroll Street and lives with his family in the same house in which he was raised. An employee at Black



Vince Musi/The Pittsburgh Press

Trojans, from left: Bob Scullion, Benny Mannella, Vince Palmiere, Frank Guerriero and Mickey Walton

More than 75 years after it was constructed, the bridge remains a community icon, as a *Pittsburgh Press* photographer suggested by this 1986 article, with a span of the bridge as the backdrop.

manded rebuilding the span at its present location. The Public Works Department study in 1979 expressed this emotional weight even more clearly: "The Bloomfield Bridge is of significant local importance.... The no-build alternative would be detrimental to community cohesion...."[36]

In 1979, for example, a member of the Bloomfield Citizen's Council called the bridge's closing not just an inconvenience or an economic disruption but a "heartache." In the 1978 gubernatorial race Republican Dick Thornburgh blamed his rival, Democrat Pete Flaherty, "for cutting taxes to win voters instead of maintain[ing] bridges." The bridge also entered mayoral politics in 1985, as Controller Tom Flaherty pointed to the bridge as an example of Mayor Caliguiri's "ineptitude." Caliguiri, however, had a firm grip on the political pulse in the neighborhoods, and frequently visited the construction site to reassure residents. An adept politician, Caliguiri realized the emotional importance of a prominent piece of the city's infrastructure. "We want it to look nice," Caliguiri said, soothingly. "We don't want an old, drab bridge." The mayor dogged officials in Washington, D.C., for years and gained federal funds for the project.[37]

Thus, with this sort of public demand at the bottom and the corresponding political commitment at the top, Bloomfielders once again came together to celebrate the opening of a bridge over old Skunk Hollow. The city had built the first Bloomfield Bridge in an era of urban expansion and as forces of political reform threatened the existing machine. The bridge ultimately transformed the community of Bloomfield, not by making it dependent on the structure in an overwhelming tangible way, but rather in a more emotional sense: it became a part of the neighborhood's symbolic landscape.

In a letter about the first bridge to the director of Public Works in 1978, a restorationist with the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation said, "[A]lthough the Bloomfield Bridge is a dramatic and long remembered element of the Pittsburgh landscape, it is not of historical significance and we have no objections of (sic) its demolition. Neither do we wish to retrieve any artifacts from the bridge."[38]

Years later a prominent local politician, though, would state:

> In fact, when it was torn down, my family felt we ought to get a piece of the old bridge, and we went down

where the old bridge was torn down and picked up some pieces of metal work. My one son John made up a little mosaic, pasted together with an old railway tie and a couple of pieces of steel and made a little presentation, which we still have and display, believe it or not, in our front room....[39] ■

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[1] *Pittsburgh Post*, Nov. 20, 1914; *Pittsburgh Press*, Nov. 20, 1914; *Pittsburgh Sun*, Nov. 19, 1914.

[2] *Pittsburgh Press*, Nov. 2, 1986; *Pittsburgh Press*, Sept. 16, 1986.

[3] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (New York: 1965), 170.

[4] "Bloomfield Bridge Replacement: Report for Determination of Classification of Action," Pittsburgh Department of Public Works, March, 1979.(Hereafter referred to as "Ruff Report.") *Pittsburgh Leader*, Jan. 21, 1906; *Real Estate Plat Books of Pittsburgh* (Philadelphia: 1910).

[5] John Brunner, "The Grant Boulevard, Pittsburgh," *Engineering Record* 45 (Jan. 18, 1902), 55; Frederick Law Olmsted, *Main Thoroughfares and the Down-town District of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: 1910), 7.

[6] "Bloomfield" brochure, Bloomfield Citizen's Council, Pennsylvania Room, Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh; *Pittsburgh Leader*, Jan. 21, 1906.

[7] E.K. Morse, *Report of the Traffic Commissioner to the Mayor* (Pittsburgh: 1917). Actually Morse divided the Pittsburgh metropolitan area into 65 separate sections. Bloomfield's section, E-3, appears to also include Garfield and portions of present day Stanton Heights and Shadyside; *Real Estate Plat Books of Pittsburgh* (Philadelphia: 1910).

[8] I am indebted here to seven fellow members of Dr. Michael Weber's Spring 1986 graduate seminar in urban history at Carnegie Mellon University. This group researched the following documents: property titles for 80 homes along Cedarville, Juniper and Lorigan Streets; U.S. Census and manuscript census for 1880, 1900, and 1910; Pittsburgh city directories for 1900 and 1910; Hopkins real estate plat books for 1880, 1900 and 1910; and Sanborn Real Estate Insurance Maps, 1927.

[9] The U.S. Census for 1900 reveals that the homeowner percentage of Pittsburgh's foreign-born citizens was significantly higher than that for native-born whites (30.2 to 23.6 percent).

[10] John Bodnar, Roger Simon and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana: 1982), 155, 172-74.

[11] Ruff Report, 8; Ella Burns Myers, "Some Italian Groups in Pittsburgh," MA Thesis, Carnegie Institute of Technology, 1920; Florence Larrabee Lattimore, "Three Studies in Housing and Irresponsibility. 1. Skunk Hollow: the Squatter," in Paul U. Kellogg, ed., *The Pittsburgh District: Civic Frontage*, in *The Pittsburgh Survey*, 6 vols.(New York: 1914), 124-28.

[12] *Pittsburgh Leader*, Jan. 21, 1906; Joel Tarr, *Transportation Innovations and Changing Spatial Patterns in Pittsburgh, 1850-1934* (Chicago: 1978), 25; Morse, 58.

[13] There is some question whether the workers of Bloomfield could even afford to ride the streetcar, much less own an automobile.Tarr, in his *Transportation Innovations*, concluded from his reading of Morse's 1917 *Report* that a majority of industrial workers in the sample walked to work, a conclusion underscored by his findings in other cities. Historians have documented that at this time, laborers in the steel mills were paid 16.5 cents per hour, or $1.98 for a 12-hour day, while street work for the gas company — the employment of many of Bloomfield's Italians — paid about 13.5 cents an hour. It seems questionable that such workers could afford to pay 10 cents, nearly an hour's wage, to ride the streetcar back and forth to work each day. Tarr, 20-38; Bion J. Arnold, *Report on the Pittsburgh Transportation Problem* (Pittsburgh: 1910); Morse, 59; Bodnar, et. al., 19.

[14] Tarr [page number not supplied by author]; Olmsted, 7; Morse, 55.

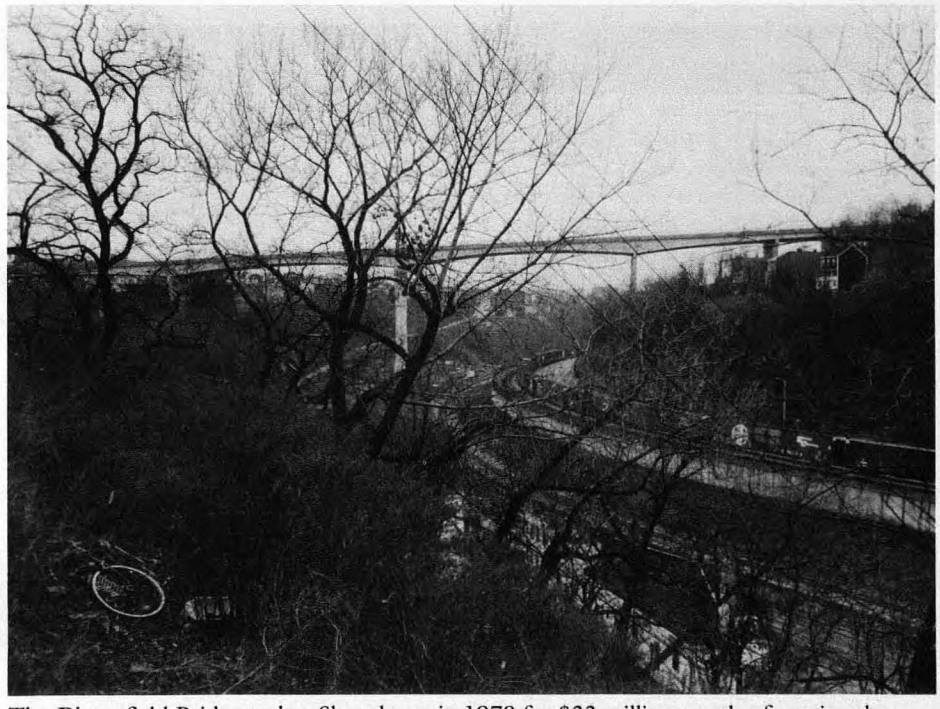
[15] *Pittsburgh Sun*, Nov.19, 1914; Pittsburgh Department of Public Works, 1916, 31; Olmsted, 58.

[16] Why these two councilmen made such a recommendation remains unclear.

[17] City of Pittsburgh, Municipal Record 1910-1911, 171; *Pittsburgh Post*, Sept. 13, 1910.

[18] *Pittsburgh Post*, Sept. 28, 1910; *Pittsburgh Press*, Sept. 28, 1910.

[19] Samuel Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," in Harlan Hahn and Charles



The Bloomfield Bridge today. Shut down in 1978 for $33 million worth of repairs, the bridge was reopened in 1987.

Levine, eds., *Readings in Urban Politics: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: 1984), 56-60.

[20] Hays, 60-67; Janet Daly, "Zoning: Its Historical Context and Importance in the Development of Pittsburgh," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 71 (April 1988), 104-05.

[21] This report was summarized in the *Pittsburgh Post*.

[22] *Pittsburgh Post*, Nov. 1, 1910, Nov. 4, 1910; Hays, 60.

[23] There is no evidence connecting the construction of the Bloomfield Bridge to Flinn's contracting company.

[24] Hays, 60; Roy Lubove, *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change* (New York: 1969), 21-22.

[25] *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, Oct. 21, 1910; *Pittsburgh Post*, Nov. 6, 1910, Oct. 28, 1910, Nov. 3, 1910, Nov. 9, 1910.

[26] *Pittsburgh Post*, Nov. 9, 1910, Nov. 10, 1910; *Pittsburgh Press*, Nov. 9, 1910.

[27] The minor importance of the Bloomfield commercial district is further illustrated by the exclusion of all of its shops or businesses from a 1907 promotional brochure put out by the Pittsburgh Board of Trade, "East End: The World's Most Livable Suburb," Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh. No mention is made in the brochure of any Bloomfield commercial venture designed to extol Pittsburgh's East End businesses.

[28] Peter Farrington, "The Allegheny County Highway and Bridge Program, 1924," MS thesis, Carnegie Mellon University, 1981, 11-13; Tarr, 25-31.

[29] Pittsburgh Department of Public Works, 1916, 38-40; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 19, 1978; "Annual Report of the Mayor, City of Pittsburgh, 1912," 552-55.

[30] City of Pittsburgh, Municipal Record 1912, 855, and Municipal Record 1913, 3; City of Pittsburgh, Department of City Controller, Minutes of Finance Committee, Vol. 2, Oct. 9, 1912-July 14, 1916, 76:18, 35; *Pittsburgh Post*, Jan. 8, 1913.

[31] Pittsburgh Department of Public Works, "The City of Pittsburgh and Its Public Works, 1916," 39, Pennsylvania Room, Carnegie Library; *Pittsburgh Sun*, Nov. 19, 1914, 2; *Pittsburgh Post*, Nov. 20, 1914, 2.

[32] "Bloomfield" brochure by Bloomfield Citizen's Council; *Pittsburgh Press*, April 9, 1984.

[33] *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 16, 1978; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 31, 1972; Bellomo-Keller, Inc., "East End Pittsburgh Transportation Systems Management Study, Final Report: October 1981," Pittsburgh Department of Public Planning, 13; *Pittsburgh Press*, May 12, 1978; *Pittsburgh Press*, May 21, 1978; *Pittsburgh Press*, Aug. 13, 1978.

[34] *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 19, 1978; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 16, 1978; Letter from Edwin Staudt to John Ruff, Dec. 1, 1978, included as appendix in Ruff Report; *Pittsburgh Press*, April 3, 1985; *Pittsburgh Press*, June 4, 1986; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Oct. 3, 1986.

[35] *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 16, 1978; *Pittsburgh Press*, April 3, 1985.

[36] Gannet, Fleming, Corddry and Carpenter, Inc., Engineers, "Bloomfield Bridge Replacement: Preliminary Engineering Report," Pittsburgh Department of Public Works, 6; Ruff Report, 4.

[37] *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Jan. 28, 1979; *Pittsburgh Press*, May 21, 1983; *Pittsburgh Press*, April 3, 1985; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Jan. 22, 1985; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Jan. 28, 1979.

[38] Letter from Ellis Schmidlapp to John Ruff, March 1979, included as appendix in Ruff Report.

[39] Richard Givens, interview with author, May 26, 1986.

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