PRIVATE'S connections to history are often triggered by something intensely personal. The Historical Society is fortunate to be in the business of making such connections possible through many of the services we provide. Thousands of people each year discover a bit of themselves in our library and archives division as they come upon a relative’s name, address, and occupation in one of the ancient city directories we’ve preserved, or find their house and lot on one of the many plat maps in our collection. Young people discover the origins of the music they enjoy in our current museum exhibit, “Pittsburgh Rhythms: The Music of a Changing City, 1840-1930,” in which the development of jazz, among other musical traditions, is explored. Fostering connections to our heritage is what we’re all about.

On April 1, 1992 one of the personal connections to my own past changed drastically when my paternal grandmother, Louise Reif Herbst, died just some
months shy of 90 years of age. She and my grandfather, John S. Herbst, who died in 1978 at age 80, were my early touchstones to history, and the value they placed on knowing the past has had a lasting impact on the way I've worked and lived.

My grandmother was in all ways a very special person and especially loved by all around her. Although she didn't cut a wide swath across history in the way the greater world might see things, her steadfast devotion to home, family, and church made her central to the lives of the people with whom she came in contact.

Grandma's stories wove an interesting pattern of life stretching back to the German village, Balingen, in Baden, where her mother was born. Viticulture and linen-weaving were the pursuits of these south German peasants in cottages surrounding a church raised high on a mount in the middle of the village. In 1883, when my great-grandmother was 13, a fire in their barn forced her family to flee an economy badly hurt by the automation of the textile industry which needed fewer and fewer weavers to tend the looms. The entire family of nine emigrated, booking passage out of Cherbourg, France. The trip in steerage led them to New York and then to Patterson, New Jersey, where the family found work in that city's silk mills.

My grandmother was born in 1902 in a culture centered around a large extended family which included nearly 40 cousins in her generation. Large family gatherings, membership in Sängvereins (German singing clubs) and turnvereins (gymnastic clubs), the Steuben Society and church guilds, and work alternatively in the silk mills and a family-run dairy was the stuff of her childhood. In 1922 she married my grandfather, a pattern-maker in the city's machinery industry who, like her, was raised in a German-speaking household. They raised a family of four children, built up a business, and managed to survive the Depression and World War II.

As the family's first grandchild, I was treated to a
“historian’s feast” at my grandparent’s table. Language, lore, intricate family relationships, traumas, disappointments, and triumphs all helped to place me among a line of people whom I never met, but whose lives mean a great deal to me. These connections are now mine to pass along down the line with my own memories of a very lovely lady.

Church and ethnic cultural associations played an important role and reinforced social ties.