‘And they built this city, Pittsburgh –’

by David McCullough

They came from Serbia, Lithuania, Bohemia. They came from the banks of the Vistula, and the Po, and the Arno, and the river Shannon. They came from Connellsville, the cotton fields of North Carolina, and the mountains of West Virginia and Tennessee. They came from China, India, Africa, every point on the compass.

John A. Roebling, the great suspension bridge genius, came from Mulhausen, Germany, and founded the community of Saxonburg, north of Pittsburgh. Willa Cather came east from Red Cloud, Nebraska, and wrote the first of her monumental works of fiction in the upstairs room of an old house that still stands on the top of Murray Hill. Jonas Salk came here from New York City by way of Michigan.

And they built this city, Pittsburgh — hundreds of thousands of people, most of them nameless now. They built libraries and factories, churches and schools, parks and universities. They built the first general hospital in the world; the first radio station; the first educational television station. They built the propeller on Lindbergh’s airplane. They went into factories that were a horror: 12 hours a day, six days a week, some people working seven days a week, some working the hated long-turn where they would go for 24 hours without stop. They went into mills and the mines where conditions, at times, were beyond our imagining.

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David McCullough, writing here in place of Executive Director John Herbst, is the host of the Public Broadcasting System’s “The American Experience.” The latest of his numerous books is the biography, Truman (Simon and Schuster, 1992). An Historical Society trustee, McCullough is also Honorary Chairman of the capital fund campaign to build the Pittsburgh Regional History Center. This article is adapted from his May 20, 1992 speech at the first annual History Makers Award Dinner, sponsored by the Historical Society.

It can be said that there is no such thing as the past, there is only somebody else’s present. It can also be said that the supposedly dead past is full of nothing but life. Stir around in the past and that’s what you always find — life. Human beings. And because the vast majority are nameless, anonymous to us, it doesn’t for a minute take away from the fact that they were our fellow mortals. And to cut ourselves off from them, to know nothing about them, to feel nothing about them, is to cut ourselves off from a major experience in life. There are all kinds of reasons to be interested in history, but one of the main reasons is that it is an extension of life. Why deny ourselves the knowledge, the enjoyment, the enrichment that comes from all those people who preceded us, to whom we are so greatly indebted?

Now Pittsburgh has been through terrible times in years past, and Pittsburgh has always recovered. One of the reasons we read the past is to take the present with greater tolerance and confidence — to know, for example, that we have been through hard times before. We, today, are beset by times that seem nearly overwhelming. The country seems almost lost for the moment in a kind of self-doubt over problems that seem to have no solutions. But in fact, the nation has faced much greater problems, the Civil War as an example. In 1877, this city was nearly burned to the ground. By some accounts, 61 people were shot or killed or beaten to death in riots then. But the city went on. Pittsburgh went on after riots, went on after flood, went on after fire, went on after epidemic disease. Great cities don’t die. We’ve seen it in our
own lifetime: Stalingrad, Berlin. There was no reason for them to recover, but they did, mainly because life goes on and because one thing, indeed, always does lead to another.

Now a country or a city does not simply move forward and be vital and innovative just of itself. It takes leadership and it takes commitment by the part of those who follow. We have been blessed in this community with strong leaders in education, in finance, and in industry. Our corporations have become some of the most famous in the world. Our universities have achieved increasing renown. Pittsburgh's pre-eminence in medicine is among its greatest accomplishments of the last 20 years. And such things don't just happen any more than a great museum or a great library just happens. It takes leadership.

What we're doing tonight, in honoring our leaders — our "History Makers" — is to say that history is a living process. We are all, each of us, only part of a chain that goes on and on. If you cannot perceive the past, then you are probably incapable of perceiving the future. One tends to live in isolation, thinking, "Oh, it's just me. My time. Now. That's all that matters." We have digital watches. They might be seen as a symbol of some of our narrow-mindedness. A digital watch tells you only what time it is right now.

Beginnings are always exciting. There has never been a History Makers Dinner, and this is the first of many to come. There will be pictures passed down of the dinner back in 1992 when the History Makers event began as an annual occasion in the city of Pittsburgh. And you will know that you were there. And take pride in that. Because what we are saying is that we are committing ourselves to the continuity that is the essence of civilization.

We are founding in Pittsburgh a History Center. And this, too, is a very exciting, very important development. Here in our city, in just a matter of a few years, the finest urban history center in America will be opened in a building that has 160,000 square feet of floor space. It is the old Chautauqua Ice Company with walls of brick four feet thick; it was built like a fort to insulate and to carry its weight of the ice in an era when ice was cut on Lake Chautauqua and brought to Pittsburgh by railroad.

The Center will provide library space. It will provide archival space, professional archival maintenance for the great treasures of our past. There will be facilities for scholars to gather and do work of importance with the collections. And, of course, there will be ample representation of the different peoples who came from so many parts of the world to make their home here.

This is an event of national importance, just as the city's history is itself a measure of the nation's history. If you were to take a prism and put it down somewhere on the map of America and say, "This is where we might see the whole story of our national life," there is no better place than Pittsburgh. From the history of the Native Americans who lived in these magnificent valleys long before the coming of Europeans, through the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, the opening of the West, on through the Civil War, to the tumultuous change that began in 1869 when Andrew Carnegie literally saw the light of the Bessemer process, and on into our own time. This is the workshop of America, the foundry of America, a center of continuing innovation in a dozen fields. If we don't understand what happened in Pittsburgh in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we do not understand the character and the nature of our nation when we turned from a largely agrarian people into the great industrial power of the world with its attendant responsibilities.

We should be so proud but we should also be so humbled by that past. What brave people they were. What staunch faith they must have had in the old American concept that tomorrow can be made better than today.

I have not lived in Pittsburgh since I went away to college. And people often say to me, "You work so hard." But then that's how we were raised here. That was how you expressed yourself. It's not a Puritan ethic, it's a Pittsburgh way of life. John Kane, the brilliant painter who came here from Scotland, said, "In Pittsburgh I did every kind of work a man can do." His pride, his self-respect, his self-expression was in his work.

The bridges, the buildings, everything we have that evolved out of this dynamic of Pittsburgh has to be understood if we are to understand the country. The most important single event of the 20th century was the Second World War. The decisive factor in the outcome of that war was America's productive capacity. And where was it centered? Here. Right here. This is the place where atomic power came into being. This is the place where we have faced (as well as it has been faced, which is not to say altogether successfully) the strains and the difficulties of racial relations. The Pittsburgh Courier is one of the greatest newspapers in America.
How many of us in this room know the part that the *Pittsburgh Courier* has played in American life? Just that one newspaper.

I think we are living in a time that will be viewed in the future as one of those momentous transitions. The Cold War is over. Imagine. The mushroom cloud's shadow no longer hangs over our lives. Imagine. Imagine what opportunity that can mean. Imagine what opportunity it can mean for a vital, innovative, hard-working community like this one.

Many years ago, H.G. Wells said, “More and more, the story of human history is a race between education and catastrophe.” We are embarked on a venture in education with this History Center project that will be a standard for other cities in the country to measure themselves by. It is now estimated that when the History Center opens, more than 100,000 students a year will come. I’m often asked, “How do you get people interested in history? How do we break through this amnesia that seems to be afflicting the new generations coming along?” The answer is not very complicated. Tell stories. That’s what history is — it’s our story. If there’s no history, there’s no story. And if there’s no story, then how do we know who we are? How do we know what we have to live up to?

This city has a tradition of founders — the founding of the first great Carnegie Library, the founding of corporations, hospitals, the founding of our museum — and that’s not just something that happened in the supposed past, that’s an idea that never ends. We, too, in our time, in our generation, can be founders. We can build something like the new History Center, the new airport, the science museum. We can create our own additions to this great tradition of Pittsburgh, so that someday they’ll look back and say, “Look what a job they did.”

You may wonder why I come back to do this, why I give my time. I do it out of affection and gratitude for all that this city has given to me and to my family. And I do it because Pittsburgh is one of the most exciting cities in the world.

On you go.