

# Securing History

by John A. Herbst

I have just completed David McCullough's monumental biography of Harry Truman. It is a fascinating "read" about a president whose achievements were built on strength of character shaped by many trials and adversities. I was struck by the depths to which Mr. McCullough (who is an active trustee of the Society and honorary chairman of our capital campaign for the Pittsburgh Regional History Center) was able to plumb for his assessment of Truman.

In fact, Harry Truman is made fathomable in this biography because of the wealth of primary sources, written and oral, that the biographer had available. Personal letters, photographs and interviews with those around Truman helped Mr. McCullough write truly excellent history and give us an immense feeling for the man and his times.

The Historical Society is in the business of securing such history for historians of all degrees — from the professional biographer to the family historian. We are the repository for the region's primary source data which will allow your grandchildren and great-grandchildren to gain knowledge of our own and former times.

Since 1879, we have been collecting correspondence, records, journals, diaries, newspapers, photographs, city directories and maps — the kinds of information sources needed to write and tell history. This data base is growing all the time, and recent additions to the Society's Archives are significant ones. The recently acquired Board of Education collection, for instance, includes 400 linear feet covering the years 1850-1980. There are papers and outstanding photographs which document the birth and growth of an entire urban school system, plus its policies, progress and varied activities, including efforts to desegregate and consolidate the schools. This information will prove invaluable for research of many kinds. The depositing of these materials in our Archives saved them from further shuffling around between various storage areas while the Pittsburgh city schools attended to other obvious and appropriate priorities. A wise decision was made to let us care for these materials and to let the school system attend to education.

Another fascinating new collection came from the United Jewish Federation and its related agencies. In this vast collection we find materials relating to many

aspects of the Pittsburgh Jewish community, including health and welfare, education, housing, resettlement of immigrants, civil rights and recreation.

These donations are only a few of those given to us over the last few months — sure signs that the region we serve is responding to a professionally operated institution. All of these materials are being stored in environmentally controlled areas. An expanded Library and Archives professional staff, supported by trained volunteers, is processing these collections, which will be placed in our research facility at the History Center, opening in mid-1995.



Extension classes offered by the Pittsburgh Board of Education at the Irene Kaufman Settlement House in the Hill District, February 1927 — from the Pittsburgh Board of Education Collection, recently acquired by the Historical Society.

A major boost to our archival efforts is the grant awarded this summer by the National Historic Public Records Commission. This federal agency works with the appointed state archivists and archives commissions to assist in the preservation and cataloguing of significant historical resources. A federal grant of \$101,000 will be used to hire specialists to process 170 collections in our Archives and to enter references to them in an international computer data base.

One of the most frequent requests we receive,

since my arrival here in 1986, is for Historical Society staff to interview people in the community whose experiences and reflections represent valuable historical records. Although we have done interviews with such people — “oral histories” — in connection with our exhibits on Homewood-Brushton, Homestead, and Schenley Park, and occasionally through memoirs and other personal historical accounts published here in *Pittsburgh History*, we would like to do more. We would especially like to do oral histories that are not necessarily related to preparations for an exhibit.

As part of the capital campaign for the History Center, we are searching for a donor to endow a staff position of Oral Historian. Having someone in this

position would enable us to respond to suggestions for interviews simply because the person has historically valuable things to say. The interviews would be taped, transcribed and catalogued like our other historical resources in the Library and Archives.

In *Truman*, David McCullough noted: “For a biographer, the great body of surviving letters, diaries, private memoranda and autobiographical sketches... is a treasure beyond compare.”

The current efforts of the Society to expand its archival capabilities and to house them in a dynamic new facility will offer just such a treasure to many more people seeking to learn more about the history of the region. ■



Another image from the Historical Society's Board of Education Collection, at another extension course — apparently involving dinner table etiquette — offered at the residence of a “Mrs. Porter,” February 1927.