The relation of the old families to politics is also explored, notably in relation to the government of Pittsburgh. I do think more should have been said of the distinction between the politics of control in the city and politics in the mill towns along the rivers. A final and fascinating theme is the role of these old families in the early thinking about a “new” Pittsburgh. The path-breaking Pittsburgh Survey of 1907-08, which exposed the exploitation and poverty of the old order, was strongly supported by members of the old city elite, including those from the independent steel industry. From this assessment they moved on to become pioneers of the vision of a new, cleaner Pittsburgh, a distant prospect which was to be realised only in the second half of the twentieth century.

By the time of the post-World War II “Pittsburgh Renaissance,” the old independent mill sector was in rapid decline. It was shortly afterwards followed by the wholesale shrinkage of Big Steel. By the mid-1990s, in terms of its economic base, Pittsburgh had long ceased to be a steel city. John Ingham has reminded us of and effectively analysed a sector of Pittsburgh’s illustrious industrial history which has all too often been either ignored or given too little attention. His book is well written and therefore easy to read. There are still many points in dispute and a few inaccuracies of fact, but these scarcely detract from the author’s achievement. All economic and social historians of U.S. industrialisation will be indebted to his scholarship. Ingham’s book should be on the shelves of all who wish to be well-informed about the realities and the rich variety of Pittsburgh’s history as America’s premier steel city.

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Correspondence
Page 3 Greg Smith, Museum Programs Department, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
Page 26 University of Kansas Archives, Kenneth Spencer Research Library
Page 30 Top, Penn State Room; bottom, University of Kansas Archives

Art Farrar
Page 5-8 All photos from the Archives of the Historical Society, Art Farrar Collection

Skeletons in the Medical Closet
Page 9-17 All photos from the author’s collection

Director’s Gallery
Page 36-38 Kins Family Papers, Archives of the Historical Society

Discipline and Piety: Professor, General, and College President John Fraser
Page 24, 25 Penn State University, Pattee Library, Penn State Room

Doing justice to the Convict Inn

McAfee’s Convict Inn was built north of Pittsburgh along Route 19 in Wexford during World War II. Using second-hand lumber, William H. McAfee modeled his roadhouse after a similar place he operated in Connellsville, Pa. For some reason, lost to time, he used a jail theme at both places. Even his son, also named William McAfee and still living in Wexford, doesn’t know why his father went with the prisoner idea.

When the Convict Inn opened in 1946 it featured a bar and restaurant that had jail cells for booths (opposite page, bottom). When you sat down, the waitress closed the cell door on you! There was also a lunch counter, a dance floor, and 12 rooms for rent upstairs. On the roof was a chain gang of 12 convicts (top); their arms and legs were hooked up to a motor which made them swing back and forth.

Outside, the place offered a driving range and archery range, and on warm evenings, recalls William McAfee, his father would hang a bed sheet and show movies. The popularity of the movies led to the construction of a drive-in theater. McAfee became too sick to finish it himself, so it
was leased; it opened as the Wexford Starlite Theater in 1949. After two 20-year-long leases, the drive-in was closed after the 1989 season — the taxes were more than what the operators took in. [See the article on the inside back cover of Pittsburgh History, Holiday 1989]

The Convict Inn was leased in 1953. It was renamed Kelly & Weeks, then Starlite Lounge, Wexford House, and finally Brendan's. The nightclub burnt down in November 1990. Today, only a "Brendan's" sign marks the spot where the roadhouse with the convicts on the roof once stood.

— Text by Brian Butko. Top photo courtesy University of Pittsburgh Hillman Library, Archives of Industrial Society. Bottom photograph courtesy William E. McAfee.