COOL COLLECTIONS, POP CULTURE

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WHEN MIGHT THE Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman movie "Ishtar" be considered popular? Probably only when this box office bomb is considered a feat of "popular culture." Pop culture encompasses all varieties of popular entertainment and recreation, including television, radio, motion pictures, spectator and participation sports, theater, travel, and other forms of cultural and leisure activities.

It is unlikely that a complete history of U.S. pop culture could be written without attention to Western Pennsylvania's contributions. The Nickelodeon Theatre, the first moving picture theater in the United States, was the brainstorm of Sen. John P. Harris, who built his movie parlor on Smithfield Street in 1905.

Modern broadcasting was born in Forest Hills through the hard work and determination of Westinghouse engineer Frank Conrad, who designed the equipment for the first radio station, KDKA, in 1920. Westinghouse expanded its work on radio to become a leading force in television broadcasting as well.

WQED-TV, the first community educational television station, was founded locally in 1954 and has been a leader in network educational programming for children and adults. Gulf Oil Co. opened the country's first gasoline station in Pittsburgh's East End, and the automobile's role in expanding access to recreational opportunities is impossible to underestimate.

And what history of popular culture would be complete without mentioning the Ferris Wheel, designed by Pittsburgh engineer George Washington Gales Ferris in 1893 for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

These are highlights from a list of local companies and individuals that goes on and on. Despite the great role played by (continues on page 73)
Pittsburgh in the advancement of popular culture in America, the Historical Society did not have great archival resources on the subject. This changed recently, however, with the donation of two significant collections that will help the Society document the role of popular culture in the region and across the country.

This year, Hamburg Brothers, wholesale distributors of appliances and floor coverings, donated three boxes of photographs and publications documenting the first 70 years in the consumer electronics business in Pittsburgh. Elmer Hamburg opened his business in downtown Pittsburgh on Penn Avenue to sell commercially manufactured radio equipment to people who no longer wanted to rely on "homemade" units. As time progressed, Hamburg Brothers sold televisions, appliances, vacuum cleaners and a wide range of electronic equipment. The photographs in the collection primarily date from the 1950s, and provide fantastic documentation of the early years of television.

The Society also received recently nearly 100 boxes of archival materials from Robert Klingensmith, a prominent Pittsburgh figure in the motion picture trade. Klingensmith served as the publisher of Exhibitors Forum and also as regional editor for the trade journal Box Office. His papers include numerous publications from the motion picture trade, movie stills sent out for publicity purposes, programs from local and national conventions of theater owners, and other items. Maybe the most interesting item is a diary that records all major theater events in movie houses across the region from the 1930s through the 1950s.

When these collections are processed, historians will be better able to document Pittsburgh's popular culture, and its residents' contributions to the culture nationally, from the time that movies were king through the advent of television broadcasting.