EVERYONE wonders about their parents and what they were like before we were born. How was it for them when they were young and growing up? How did they feel about themselves and Pittsburgh, their friends, family and church?

Mine were born in the last year of the last century and were shaped as children and teenagers by the rules of their society in an expanding, provincial city. My life began in 1926, so I learned about the 1920s later from books, photos and hearsay, and I knew my parents only as adults with well-established and predictable manners and ideals. They were intelligent people who seemed to know who they were, what they liked and disliked, and what they expected from life.

My mother (nee Ruth Rankin) wanted a fine home, tasteful possessions, books, a garden, her church and children who would be leaders of the next generation. If one of her four sons had become a minister, that would have pleased her. If they could write, act, paint, play music, and work for the good of Pittsburgh, that would please her.

My father, Christian Hax McCullough (named for his maternal grandfather) was an athlete, card player, Mr. Fix-It and a resourceful, hard-working businessman. He wanted financial success and sons — and that’s what he would get. He

C. Hax McCullough, Jr., founded the Pittsburgh publishing firm of McCullough Communications. Retired after a long career as a writer and publisher, McCullough wrote or co-wrote five corporate histories. His special interest is Pittsburgh history, and he contributes articles regularly to Allegheny Cemetery Heritage and to the Historical Society newsletter, Making History. Given his interest in history, it’s also worth noting that his brother is nationally known historian and writer David McCullough.
liked to be with people and to get things done. He could recite limericks for over an hour without repeating himself. He could stand on his head, throw a curve with a baseball and charm anyone at a party. At the time of his marriage he had worked six years for W. T. McCullough Electric Co., the wholesale electrical supply business in Pittsburgh founded by his father. He succeeded his father as president in 1946 and held that position until his death at the age of 90 in 1989.

I was delighted when my brother, George, now owner of McCullough Electric and executor of my father’s estate, brought me a copy of McCullough Electric's scrapbook about our parents’ wedding, the wedding trip and the social events preceding and following the ceremony. It made me smile and say, “so that’s how it was.” The Pittsburgh of 1923 was a different world from that we know, with different manners and morals. My parents’ interests and ways were well expressed by their wedding and it was characteristic and definitive of their social group. In those days, family and friends meant more, and marriage was a high point in life — for a woman especially. Before it, she was a daughter. After it, she was Mrs. Somebody, a wife and a mother, perhaps later a grandmother and great-grandmother. The marriage of my parents was emblematic of how things were done in upper middle-class Pittsburgh in 1923.

Those who can remember the 1920s probably recall a spirited time when victory in “the war to end all wars” was followed by a decade of social and technological progress, emancipation for women, and confidence in the future. It was an age of Prohibition, invention, self-expression, experimentation and action.

Entertainment turned racy and humorists lampooned the vestiges of a staid society in which being circumspect came before being yourself. In 1923, the average yearly income was $2,126 and the average new house was $4,400. Gas cost 12 cents a gallon, round steak 34 cents a pound, and bread 9 cents a loaf. The first non-stop airplane flight across the country was made in 27 hours. Sound came to the motion picture, the Dow Jones Industrial Average stood at 94, and life expectancy improved to 54.1 years.

When Hax McCullough married Ruth Rankin (1899-1985) in the garden of her parents’ spacious East End home on Saturday, September 29, 1923, they made a commitment for life. Even though the great financier Andrew W. Mellon had been divorced from his English-born wife, Nora McMullen, a stigma about divorce persisted. Anyone who got one was considered improper and likely to be left out at parties and family gatherings. Some divorcees left town to begin again. Others lived on in limbo, or remarried to further criticism.

Mr. and Mrs. George Herbert Rankin’s Tudor-style house on prestigious West Woodland Road near Wilkins Avenue was full of handsome wood paneling and had a pergola in the garden at the rear. It made an ideal setting for the wedding, reception and dinner if the late September warm spell would hold (it did) ... and if the guests would be satisfied without alcoholic beverages (they weren’t). George and Mabel Rankin were lifetime teetotalers and guests came prepared for a sedate evening. Fortunately for some, there was an oasis next door in the Ernest Hillmans’ garage. Hax’s adventurous friends had installed a bar, and all evening long thirsty young men squeezed through the hedge separating the two properties. Hax would relate years later to his sons how one youthful wedding guest tore his trousers on a visit, but no one seemed to notice. The “garage of choice” was not closed until after the departure of the bride and groom.

As was fitting and proper for people of their kind, the fashionable marriage of Hax and Ruth was preceded by many festivities which the press considered socially significant. The merging of the two well-known families in 1923 was no less important than the joining of the two young people. George Rankin (1869-1928) was a successful attorney and church elder, and Bill McCullough (1869-1946) a prosperous business owner, club member and sportsman. As in any good union, there were prescribed customs which had their roots in religion, social class and the times. A wedding trip, probably an extended tour, was expected. Prenuptial gatherings typically were bridge parties. Everyone in their group played bridge or tried to. If the ladies were not as adept as the gentlemen, no apologies were expected. All aspects of these events were discussed and judged before, during and after. This included invitations, flowers, food and drink, place cards, score cards, new clothes, presents, press coverage, favors, caterers, menus, dressmakers, etc., etc.

Ruth compiled all details and preserved mementos of many in a scrapbook, including the wedding trip. Another volume, presented for the purpose by W.W. Wattles and Sons, jewelers at 517 Wood Street, lists all the wedding gifts plus the signatures of all 28 people at the bridal table. The 213 people who sent gifts are listed in alphabetical order by name and address; there is space for a description of the gift, where it came from, and for remarks and a check mark after acknowledgment was made. The gifts were of crystal, silver, brass, leather and porcelain, as well as lamps, chairs, clocks, desks, tables, vases, pictures, mirrors, rugs, candlesticks, finger bowls, bookends and more. From Paris, where Burd Dickson travelled with her parents, came silks and lace for Ruth’s trousseau. From Japan, where Ivy Burchfield Friesell travelled with Aunt Ivy Friesell Burchfield, came a kimono for Ruth which looks
as good as new today. Most gifts were costly things intended for use in a new home and intended to last a lifetime and beyond. One friend sent a set of Mah-Jong, a game popular at the time.

As gifts and out-of-town guests arrived, there were two weeks of parties, all designed to bring the family and friends together. Ruth and Hax’s attendants were announced in the newspapers. The maid of honor was Burd Dickson and the bridesmaids were Betty McCullough (Hax’s 14-year-old sister), Ivy Friesell, Mrs. Charles Reed, Ruth’s cousin Anna L. McCandless, Marie Voscamp, and Mrs. Clifford Watson of Worcester, Mass., a friend of Ruth from her years at Wellesley College. Betty Brown, a cousin of Ruth’s, was the flower girl. The best man was Hax’s brother, William T., Jr., and the ushers were a cousin, William Hax of Baltimore, Charles Reed, Charles Albertson, and James Bailey.

When asked recently about the event, Anna McCandless said that she went to most (perhaps all) of the parties. The warm weather on the wedding day lasted long enough for the ceremony, for which the guests stood, she said. As soon as the photos were taken and people were coming into the house, the weather turned cold. She remembers the evening as proper and impressive. George Rankin, she said, was an old-fashioned gentleman of Scottish heritage with kind, formal and quiet manners.

In Mainly About Pittsburg, published in 1903, George H. Rankin was described as “a leading member of the Pittsburg bar and an expert in Corporation law.” He was one of six sons of Dr. John Rankin, one of this city’s first homeopathic physicians. Dr. Rankin lived at Negley Avenue and Howe Street in Shadyside in a house that is now part of The University School. George Rankin was deeply interested in genealogy and traced his ancestry in Washington County back to the 1700s. He was married in 1897 to Mabel A. Brown, daughter of Theodore F. Brown (1845-1934), a Civil War veteran and a manager at the Pennsylvania Railroad.

William Thomas McCullough founded W.T. McCullough Electric in 1904 with the financial assistance of his father-in-law, Christian C. Hax. W.T. McCullough was an avid and good golfer and billiard player and a member of the Duquesne Club, the Oakmont Country Club, and the Pittsburgh Athletic Association. He ran a prosperous business and counted as friends some of Pittsburgh’s leading citizens. He dressed impeccably, drove an immaculate car (or was driven) and enjoyed card-playing, smoking, food and drink. In 1895, W.T. McCullough was married to Minnie W. Hax, daughter of Christian C. Hax (1844-1927), a successful tanner and bank official. W.T.’s father, William McCullough (1821-1901), also was active in Pittsburgh business and was one of the early owners of the A. M. Byers Co. (known then as Byers-McCullough and Co.) and the Creighton Glass Co., the first ancestor of Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., now PPG Industries, Inc.

Ruth’s wedding scrapbook also tells us about the clothes of the time. She saved samples of fabric used in the bridesmaids’ dresses, all in different colors. Anna McCandless’ dress was described as “mellon,” perhaps a natural spelling error for a native Pittsburgher. These colors today look as fresh and appropriate together as they must have been in 1923. The 1920s were dressy. Change had come so fast after the war that many people did not know who they were in society. They dressed well to define themselves. Ladies had dresses for morning, afternoon, teatime, and the evening. They were not interchangeable in those style-conscious days. Ladies wore gloves and hats and corsets when going out. In winter they wore fur coats. Gentlemen had business suits, work clothes, sports clothes, and evening clothes. To church they might wear a dark suit or a cutaway coat, striped trousers and, for some, grey spats. Many gentlemen wore Chesterfield coats with velvet collars to important social functions. Most men had collapsible top hats, derby’s and “straw boaters” for summer. Working-class people wore uniforms and hats if they expected to earn respect.

The pre-wedding parties began with a tea at Marie Voscamp’s on September 12, followed by a “bridge party of eight tables” by Catherine Cordes at her home on September 14, and a picnic the next day at Ted Aiken’s farm in Coraopolis Heights. Gertrude Dally hosted a bridge party for Ruth.
on September 18. Sarah Large and Isabel Siebert had a matinee theater party for Ruth on September 19 at the Alvin Theater to see "the new musical extravaganza, 'The Dancing Girl.'" On September 20, Doll Corrigan hosted an afternoon bridge party and Charlotte Harter an evening bridge party. On September 21, Ruth noted "Katherine Masten had an afternoon bridge party at the Country Club." Here, as for all events, Ruth listed "The Honor Prize," at least one of which she received at every party. On September 22, it was yet another afternoon bridge party, given by Betty Burnett.

On September 23, a buffet supper at the William T. McCulloughs seated 40 people, and on the 24th, Dorothy Brown entertained with an afternoon and evening picnic in Wexford. On the 25th, "Mil Reed had a bridge luncheon for the bridal table. Everyone brought something for me for a kitchen shower." In the evening, there was yet another bridge party, hosted by Eleanor McKenzie (later Mrs. Charles Albertson). On the 26th, Ruth noted, "I put out my hope chest things for everyone to see." That afternoon Ivy Friesell had a large tea at Mrs. A. P. Burchfield's house on South Negley Avenue. That evening "Billy Heckel had a dinner dance for Hax and me at the new University Club. There were 30 guests." Here, as in each case where place cards were used, she pasted hers in the scrapbook. The social whirl continued. On September 27, Betty Bier had an afternoon bridge party at the King Edward Apartments, and that evening Betty Goering gave a bridge party at her home on Walnut Street. "Everyone brought jelly for a jelly shower. My tally was so cute, a lolly-pop dressed up like a bride."

The Rehearsal Dinner was at 7:30 p.m. at the Pittsburgh Country Club (formerly on Beechwood Boulevard in a building later destroyed by fire). It was hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Charles F. Dickson (Burd’s parents). As was the case in many of these events, an advance newspaper article noted that “fall flowers will prevail."

At last it was the 29th and the tired, much-feted couple were married at 7:30 in the evening by the minister of the Third Presbyterian Church, Dr. William L. McEwan. It was a wedding of consequence for many people, yet its service was simple and dignified, in keeping with the couple’s religious beliefs. Both the Bulletin and the Index of October 6 — two former magazines which specialized in local and social events — covered the wedding with pictures. The Index reported: "The Rankin garden was fully illuminated for the occasion. Moving from the living room of the house, the bridal procession moved down the garden steps to the rear of a long, rustic pergola where the ceremony was performed — before an improvised altar banked with ferns, bamboo and crotons at the side of which stood tall standards holding clusters of dahlias in autumn shades. The Gothic design of the pergola gave the effect of a miniature church.” The Index account went on to say that "a gown of white satin, embroidered with seed pearls and trimmed with Duchesse lace that had been on her mother’s wedding gown, was worn by the bride. The full court train was embroidered with pearls and had clusters of orange blossoms. Her veil fell from a bandeau of lace.” Earlier in 1923, the wedding of the Duke of York (later King George VI) to Lady Elizabeth Bowes-
Lyon (now the beloved Queen Mother) took place at Westminster Abbey and earned international press coverage. Her veil fell from a bandeau of lace traditionally worn by the Queens of England and much like the one used by Ruth. All the men in the McCullough wedding were dressed in white tie and tails.


Ruth’s account of their wedding trip is headed “September 29 to October 27, 1923” and is documented with her usual thoroughness and emphasis on what she considered important. Here are some highlights:

Hax and I got away through the Hunt’s and Dickson’s places without a crowd following us. At 11:45 we got a local train at Homewood Station for Greensburg. The next morning we got our new Buick roadster which was waiting for us there and drove to Pennsylvania State College for the night. The next day we drove to Ithaca. At Syracuse we spent almost four hours at the Crouse-Hinds factory [an electrical manufacturer whose products were, and still are, sold by McCullough Electric].

After a night in Utica we drove through Saratoga Springs to Lake George. Thursday [October 4] we drove to the Lake Placid Club where we stayed until Monday as Mr. Crouse’s guests. It was his wedding present to us. We played golf, had a motorboat ride on the lake, drove about the nearby country and over to Saranac Lake. Two mornings we awoke to find it snowing and the peaks of the mountains covered. From Lake Placid we drove to Montreal stopping at Ausable to go through the Chasm. In Montreal, we went for a carriage ride through Mt. Royal Park and looked around the fur stores, etc. Wednesday in Quebec at the Chateau Frontenac and then back to the States.

Sherbrooke — St. Johnsbury — a lovely ride through the White Mountains. Saturday [October 13] we decided to drive the Buick up Mount Washington, eight miles up in second and low gears. We passed through beautiful autumn-colored trees, through the evergreen growth, through the scrubby growth and finally up to rocks and snow drifts and no vegetation at the summit. It took us an hour and twenty minutes to come down in low gear. Poland Spring, Maine... Portland, along the coast... Cape Elizabeth, a shore dinner... Bass Rocks... Boston and Wellesley. Then Worcester with Mad and Clif and New Haven. Friday on to Uncle John’s [Rankin] in New Rochelle, N.Y. Saturday [October 20] Hax took Aunt Helen, Janet [Rankin] and me to lunch and the theater. Sunday Atlantic City and then back.

At the Ritz Theater, 48th Street just west of Broadway, the group had seen the Vincent Lawrence comedy “In Love with Love.”

Once home, there were more parties: October 31, McCreery’s for lunch and the Nixon Theater “as guests of Mil [Reed], Burd [Dickson] and Billy [Heckel] to see ‘The Awful Truth’ with Ina Claire;” November 16, the University Club for a tea for the new Mrs. McCullough by Mrs. Emma W. Locke, Hax’s great aunt; December I, a reception (with formal invitations) from four to six by Mrs. William T. McCullough at the Twentieth Century Club in honor of Ruth and four other recent brides. Ruth notes: “We all wore our wedding dresses.” Both occasions merited newspaper articles, with the headline “Recent Bride Feted,” in which there were detailed descriptions of the receiving line, the floral decorations and the various “aides” in attendance. The “debutantes of the season” also were there. On December 11, there was another formal four-to-six reception for Ruth at the Twentieth Century Club hosted by Mrs. C. C. Hax and Mrs Otto C. Gaub (Hax’s grandmother and aunt). Even though it was mid-December, “pink roses and lilacs formed the decorations.” On January 23, 1924, Ruth’s last party entry is an engraved tea invitation from Mrs. Cooke Bausman “to meet Mrs. C. Hax McCullough.”

Two more envelopes complete the story. One contains “a few samples of my bouquets” and the other, “flowers from my bridal bouquet.” Here she notes “it was a large bouquet of lilies of the valley, orchids and greens tied with white ribbon and showers of ribbons with orchids on them.” The fabric samples look like new and the flowers (dried, of course) are almost perfect after more than 70 years.

What is the message of all these events, people, efforts and expense to us and our times? To me, it’s continuity, generations, friends, lifestyle, family, shared experiences and a socially correct and handsome wedding beginning a marriage intended to endure. While all marriages in 1923 did not last, it was society’s, the church’s and the family’s expectation that they would. The Presbyterian Church, its doctrines and traditions, mattered to Hax and Ruth’s social group. When Dr. McEwan said, “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder,” these solemn words were to be heeded by all in attendance — both a command and a demand. The ceremony also was a challenge to the young couple to be “significant” as much as “good.” It was an age when new ideas, technology and dreams were becoming reality. It was also an era of unprecedented opportunity for success and fulfillment. For the newlyweds, it was an excellent time to marry, work, mature, establish a home and bring up an educated and vigorous next generation.

Philosophers have likened life to a journey... and a marriage is one. So have they reminded us that every journey begins with a single step. The careful, joyful step taken on September 29, 1923, by Hax and Ruth McCullough began their journey together and a marriage that would last for over 60 years.

1923 Buick roadster, a wedding gift, carried the couple across New England on their honeymoon.