OVER THE COURSE of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania's century of service, its Library and Archives has grown to become a major research library, offering the largest collection of books and manuscripts dedicated exclusively to the history of Western Pennsylvania. The holdings cover all areas, with special emphasis on business and industry, work and family, ethnic groups, and women. But it was not always this way: until very recently, the holdings were much less inclusive, concentrating on prominent people and major events.

Long Tradition of Collecting

For over 100 years, the research and reference service in the Library and Archives was the core program at the Historical Society. From the time the Society was formed in 1879, the collection grew modestly as friends and members donated books, public records, business records, personal family documents and correspondence, literary and historical manuscripts, photographs, and maps. Early collections reflect the interests of the founding members: frontier settlements, the Revolutionary period, Pittsburgh's founding families, the Civil War, and 19th century business and industry.

In 1931 the Society's director, Solon Buck, received a grant from the Buhl Foundation to conduct the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, the first systematic survey of historical materials in Western Pennsylvania. This was the driving force for the first major expansion of the Society's archival collections, and many prominent Pittsburgh families donated...
collections during this period: the Denny-O’Haras, from a long line of landowners and businessmen; the Thaw family, early entrepreneurs and bridge builders; and Dr. William J. Holland, chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh at the turn of the century and later director of Carnegie Institute. These collections were among the valuable 18th, 19th, and 20th century materials brought in by the survey staff. A collaborative project with the University of Pittsburgh Press, the survey produced nine books which are now classic texts on the region’s history.\(^1\) After the survey ended in 1936, collecting again slowed. For the next half century, the Historical Society continued to resemble a small private club, providing monthly lectures, occasional motor tours, a library and archives, and publishing a quarterly journal for its members, but making few connections to the general public.

The mission of the institution changed dramatically in 1986 when the Board of Trustees gave newly appointed executive director John Herbst a mandate to build a professional staff of archivists, librarians, curators, historians, and educators, and to create a more public institution, one that would appeal to a diverse audience. To fulfill this mission, Herbst immediately established an aggressive collection development policy to expand the scope and size of the 20th century collections.

Over the next 10 years, the archivists and librarians systematically identified and collected archival materials, with emphasis on documenting the cataclysmic economic and social changes in the second half of the 20th century. There are now substantial primary resources on ordinary as well as extraordinary families; more material, both books and manuscripts, on cultural life in the region; and the collection is remarkably stronger in business and industrial history. The archival materials have increased from 2,000 to 10,000 linear feet, and photographs have doubled in number to 400,000 images. With the addition of about 1,000 books a year, the printed materials have grown to about 35,000 volumes.

**Diverse Holdings**

The Historical Society is just one of several institutions in the region collecting historical materials. The University of Pittsburgh established the Archives of Industrial Society in Hillman Library and was actively collecting between 1960 and 1980. But many periods of change in Western Pennsylvania remain undocumented; for example, Pittsburgh’s Point was once a beehive of business and industrial activity. After the many establishments packed into that small area were cleared away for Renaissance I, few records were preserved to tell the story of generations of life and work in that district.

The Historical Society is working to avoid such omissions. With a systematic collection strategy, and the knowledge that we would have more space for archival storage in the new History Center, the Society’s archivists and curators contacted regional corporations to encourage directors to donate retired records to the Archives. With this approach, over 1,000 boxes of materials have been acquired from Mellon Bank, H.J. Heinz Co., USX, Alcoa, Joseph Horne Co., Gulf Oil, Mesta Machine, and others. These materials would otherwise have remained unavailable for historical research, moved out of the region, or been discarded.

We also collect records of small family businesses, the backbone of the U.S. economy. After a friend of the Society informed us that Wilkinsburg Hardware was closing after 100 years on Penn Avenue, the family donated the records stored on the second floor of the building. One hundred boxes of customer accounts, financial ledgers, photographs and memorabilia tell the story of family and finance. They will take their place in the archives with other, more-familiar local businesses such as G.C. Murphy of McKeesport, Joseph Woodwell Hardware, Harbison-Walker, Mackintosh-Hemphill, and Hamburg Brothers Appliances.

Records of business and industry tell only part of the story of the 20th century. Community and civic organizations, and cultural, religious, political and social activities all contribute to the character of the region. Regional philanthropic organizations have played a major role in the economic and social development of the area by supporting research, redevelopment, and social services that improve the basic quality of life here. Several foundations have donated their records to the Archives, including the Buhl Foundation, The Frick Educational Commission, and the Maurice Falk Medical Fund. Substantial collections from the Pittsburgh Public Schools, the YWCA, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development and the Health and Welfare Planning Association, the Mt. Lebanon Women’s Club, Links, Altrusa, and other non-profit organizations and clubs are also valuable historical resources.

Books and other printed materials like journals, pamphlets, programs, annual reports, and privately published church histories provide researchers with a comprehensive body of material to examine the people and institutions of Western Pennsylvania, focused on the seven-county region of Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland counties. Of great interest is a complete run of Pittsburgh city directories to 1974, numerous blue books, and several directories of industry. Subject strengths support the archival and artifact collections on frontier life, the Revolution, the Whiskey Rebellion, and regional industries such as glass, aluminum, petroleum, and steel. The library holdings on glass are especially important for research because they document the Society’s glass collection, one of the largest regional collections in the country. Materials from other areas or in adjacent states are also sometimes collected if they relate to regional history.

Family papers have gained more recognition as historical resources in recent years for two reasons. First, historians have
Opposite: A family autograph book of Ruth and Helen Garfinkel. When they immigrated to the U.S. from Janow Podlaski, Poland, in 1924, friends and relatives signed the book, adding good luck wishes in Yiddish for their new life in America. Above: Workers at Harbison Walker's Hays Works, 1925. Harbison Walker Refractories Co. was founded in Pittsburgh's Strip District in 1864 as the Star Fire Brick Company, and is now a world leader in refractory products. Fire brick, used to line furnaces and coke ovens, was in great demand at the turn of the century for the coal and steel industries. The collection includes the company's financial records, shareholder reports, catalogs, correspondence, photographs, and an oral history.
new respect for the power and influence of local social and political trends in the nation. Diaries, correspondence, memorabilia, and photographs from family collections help historians piece together an aggregate picture of family life, ethnic customs, migration patterns, and occupational and social trends. Second, genealogical research has also changed. Formerly a field dominated by those seeking proof of noble ancestry or basic family tree information, genealogists are now looking at their families in the broader context of social history, including immigration trends, work patterns, and even the health and medical history of their ancestors.

Collections of family papers range from a few documents to hundreds of boxes. A typical family collection recently donated by the descendants of William McKnight contained 30 boxes of papers that date back to 1839. Among the many papers of William’s descendants are a journal by Robert McKnight, (William’s son) describing Pittsburgh’s Great Fire of 1845; a Princeton diary (1846-1847) kept by son Charles that tells of college life; and a journal (1890-1915) kept by Eliza Cochran McKnight, an active participant in community life and philanthropic work. William’s grandson, Charles McKnight (1863-1926), was a founding member of the First National Bank of Sewickley and many other successful businesses. The letters and journals in this collection are well-written and offer much insight into turn-of-the-century middle class life, business ventures and leisure activities, and their interconnections with prosperous local families.

Working class families’ papers are also welcome additions to the Archives. They are harder to find because most families do not leave written records that reveal their everyday activities. However, in 1992, the Historical Society had the rare opportunity to acquire the house of an immigrant Polish family. The Kins’ house, and many of the furnishings, artifacts, family records, and photographs that were left in the house tell the story of a family that lived and worked in Lawrenceville for most of the 20th century. These and other family records add depth to the growing archival resources on the history of people in the region, and help historians better understand the immigrant experience.

Ethnic advisory committees help us collect materials that document everyday life among immigrants and their descendants. The Society collects materials from all ethnic groups in the area, with five special initiatives — Jewish, Polish, Italian, African American, and Slovak. These are growing collections and they have made major contributions to the publications and exhibits. The Jewish Archives is the oldest and largest ethnic collection, and in addition to photographs, scrapbooks, correspondence, and business records, it contains the records and non-sacred artifacts

Long-time librarian Ruth Salisbury Reed sits in the Bigelow library’s reading room, in 1962. This is the same area pictured on pages 54-55, but from the opposite angle.
Above: Book and archival collections quickly outgrew the Bigelow library. The upper balcony was added in 1976. Opposite: This group of c. 1920 Victor records is in the Society's Archives, which collects videotapes and tape recordings in addition to photographs and papers. The records were part of a bequest by Miss Laura Fruchs which also included a Victrola record player.
from Machsikei Hadass Synagogue. When the Homestead Hebrew Congregation Rodef Shalom also closed recently, it funded an oral history project to record oral interviews with the last members of the congregation. The tapes are now in the Society’s Archives where they will be preserved and made available for research.

**Processing Collections for Preservation and Access**

Long-term preservation of books and papers, and providing access to the information they contain, are responsibilities in conflict. We routinely look for ways to maximize access while minimizing wear and tear. Processing archival collections is labor intensive, but we have been fortunate to receive grants from federal and state agencies and from local foundations to help with this work. Processing makes it possible to find information in a collection and improves long-term preservation: an archivist arranges a collection in a logical order for research, stores it in acid-free boxes and folders, and writes an inventory explaining the scope and content of the material. It is then cataloged under several subject headings; a researcher interested in steel makers, for example, may find information under "steel" or "Carnegie," but will also be directed to any coal company collections that include material about steel. Cataloging is the final step in the process to make the collection available for research.

One of the features of the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center is the large Reading Room on the sixth floor. In addition to the inspiring view of downtown Pittsburgh, researchers finally have comfortable seating and a computerized catalog for full access to the collections. The facility offers six computer stations for public catalog access, a separate microfilm room with new equipment, and a media room for viewing videos, slides, and film. The books and manuscripts are kept behind the scenes in a storage area with separate temperature and humidity controls to protect the collections for long-term preservation. The main Reading Room can seat 100 researchers, with additional seating in an adjacent periodical room.

**Exhibiting the Treasures**

Exhibit space in the former Society headquarters in Oakland was so limited that there was almost no opportunity to display any of the priceless documents preserved in the Library and Archives. With the opening of the History Center, hundreds of rare documents will be seen in exhibits for the first time. A sweeping exhibit on the second floor called “Points in Time: Building a Life in Western Pennsylvania, 1750–Today,” will permit visitors to see artifacts and documents that help tell the stories of life in Western Pennsylvania. The displayed materials in the new facility will be in a stable humidity-controlled and air-conditioned environment.

One of the archival highlights of the exhibit is the Fort Pitt Daybook (1779–1781), a well-preserved record of the transactions at the military outpost. From the 19th century commercial city are personal letters and household account books from the William and Eliza Thaw collection, a family of early entrepreneurs; a c. 1820 toll keeper’s record book showing fees collected for crossing the first bridge over the Monongahela River; and Robert McKnight’s journal describing the Great Fire of 1845. Records are more plentiful from the period after the fire, a time of industrialization and labor unrest in Pittsburgh. The exhibit includes original photographs (c.1863) of the Lyon, Shorb Company iron workers, and pictures of the Railroad Riot of 1877. Many recent documents will help tell stories about work and family life right up to the present time.

Historical scholarship changes over time, and we cannot predict what kinds of records historians will want to study in the future. The Library and Archives staff keeps up with current events and social and political trends to help shape the collection development policy and inform the collecting process. When future historians write about late 20th century and early 21st century Western Pennsylvania, they will find substantial and broad-reaching research collections at the Historical Society’s Library and Archives.

**Notes**

1. Leland Baldwin, Pittsburgh: The Story of a City (1937), Whiskey Rebels: The Story of A Frontier Uprising (1939), and The Keelboat Age on Western Waters (1941); Solon and Elizabeth Buck, The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania (1939); Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Guidebook to Historic Places in Western Pennsylvania (1938); Randolph Chandler Downes, Council Fires on the Upper Ohio: A Narrative of Indian Affairs in the Upper Ohio Valley Until 1795 (1940); Russell Jennings Ferguson, Early Western Pennsylvania Politics (1938); John W. Harpster, Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania (1938); and John E.T. Wright, Pioneer Life in Western Pennsylvania (1940). Two other products of the survey were: Inventory of Files of American Newspapers in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (1933), and Inventory of Manuscripts and Miscellaneous Collections of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania (1933).