IN 1968, THE DISCOVERY IN A MAINE BASEMENT OF AN EXQUISITELY ENGRAVED SILVER PUNCH BOWL, MADE BY TIFFANY & CO. OF NEW YORK, RENEWED A RELATIONSHIP BEGUN A HALF-CENTURY EARLIER BETWEEN GEORGE G. MCMURTRY AND WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA.

McMurtry (1838-1915), who was born in Belfast, was still a child when his family emigrated—first to Detroit. As an adult, business brought McMurtry to Pittsburgh, though service in the Army during the Civil War interrupted his work. He was involved in several steel concerns in Pittsburgh and Apollo, Armstrong County, before becoming president of the Apollo Iron and Steel Co. In 1894, he purchased nearby land in Westmoreland County, hired the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, and set about building the planned community of Vandergrift and a new sheet steel rolling mill. In 1901, the Vandergrift mill became part of the U.S. Steel Corp., and McMurtry, as a division president, moved his residence to New York City.

On October 4, 1902, McMurtry was back in Vandergrift, ostensibly to attend a business meeting. As his car pulled into town, he was greeted by two brass bands playing “Hail to the Chief” and a crowd of about 2,000 mill workers from Vandergrift and the surrounding towns of Hyde Park, Leechburg, and Saltsburg. Amid cheers, they escorted McMurtry’s car to a platform set up in front of the Casino theatre building. There, a surprise awaited him.
James Daugherty stood on the platform and offered McMurtry an ornate punch bowl. "Upon this platform," Daugherty began, "stand representatives of the two great factors in human existence—capital and labor. One is just as important as the other and one cannot exist without the other. Here capital is doing all it can to promote the interests of the laboring classes.... Labor on the other hand, by sobriety, industry and the careful handling of the trust reposed in her, is doing much to advance the interests of capital."

Daugherty's words are especially interesting when one considers that this was not the first meeting of the two men. This was an era of constant tension between owners and workers in the steel industry. A few years earlier, Daugherty had crossed the picket line during a strike at one of McMurtry's mills, earning himself a rapid promotion. Now he had been chosen to make the presentation of the punch bowl to a man he described as "beloved friend, president and benefactor." Daugherty then referred to the punch bowl as "tangible proof of our love and esteem in the form of this beautiful token, emblematic of your life's work."

The punch bowl is indeed a beautiful token, emblematic in its design and decoration of McMurtry's life, especially his work in the steel industry. The bowl contains 429 troy ounces of silver and occupied the attention of more than 20 craftsmen at Tiffany & Co. Records in the Tiffany archives valued the bowl at $7,000, and the labor alone cost $2,621 (in 1902). It is unclear, however, because the records are not available, who originally ordered and paid for the piece. Although the mill laborers offered McMurtry the gift, their average hourly wages of about 11 cents per hour likely did not cover its cost.

The bowl does, however, celebrate work in the sheet steel industry. Six vignettes are featured on the bowl, four illustrating production processes including casting, galvanizing, annealing, and blooming. Another vignette shows the mills in Vandergrift. Built in 1895, they are still in production today, operated by Allegheny Teledyne to make stainless steel.

A portrait of McMurtry appears on the front of the bowl with a tribute beneath. The base is a round platform upon which is rendered a hand hot mill and four workers, each holding a tool. The designer of the bowl likely worked from either photographs or detailed drawings done on site to capture so exactly the scenes portrayed.

It is not known what McMurtry did with the punch bowl after he left Vandergrift that day. Obviously it did stay in the family, for the basement where it was found in 1968 was that of his son and his wife's home. Louise McMurtry Anderson, daughter of McMurtry's son—the steel magnate's granddaughter—later that year donated the punch bowl to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

It may be seen today in the "Points In Time" exhibition at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, serving as a testament in silver to steel's importance in the region's history.

NOTES: 1THE WESTMORELAND DEMOCRAT, OCT. 8, 1902, NUMBER 41, 1. 2IBID. 3IBID.