THE SMELL OF PITTSBURGH WOOL STAYED WITH ME FOR A WEEK. NOT AN UNPLEASANT SMELL, BUT IT WAS THERE—ON MY SHOES, MY CLOTHES, AND IN MY CAR WHEN I OPENED THE DOORS AFTER IT HAD SAT LOCKED FOR A WHILE. THE SMELL OF WET WOOL AND CHEMICALS AND THE HARD WORK OF OTHERS. FRANK HAYSON, A WOOL PULLER AT THE COMPANY FOR 47 YEARS, TOLD ME HOW THE SMELLS OF WORK WERE ALWAYS WITH HIM—THEY SEEPED INTO HIS SKIN AND HIS CLOTHES AND DROVE HIS WIFE NUTS.

SMELL, more than smoke or sound, defined Pittsburgh's meat and meat by-product processing industries. For over 100 years, Herr's Island and a stretch of the North Side were home to stockyards and slaughterhouses, leather processors, wool pulleries, and soap manufacturers. Pittsburgh was a nationally prominent center for meat-processing and Pittsburgh Wool Co. was part of that mix. Using lamb pelts from the slaughterhouses, the company processed the wool for the textile industry and pickled the skins for the leather industry. Located at 1230 River Avenue, it was the last remaining wool pullery in the nation with intact machinery.

With the company's closing in the coming months, the industry will disappear; causes include changes in American eating habits that have sharply decreased the raising of lamb in this country and an increase in regulations and costs that have made tanning too expensive.

The Historical Society has recently completed a detailed industrial heritage project: Pittsburgh Wool. Between October 1999 and April 2000, staff worked to preserve artifacts and archives and to document the building, machinery, processes, and history of this North Side company. Working with company owners Roy and Jeff Kumer, and financed by a grant from the H.J. Heinz Company Foundation,
the project ensures that the story of the wool pulling and leather tanning industries in Pittsburgh will be preserved at the History Center.

The project began in the cold of January with the documentation of machinery at the plant. Roy Engelbrecht and Charles Uhl took a series of medium-format black-and-white photographs of both the exterior of the building and the interior, concentrating on the machinery. Two historical architects, Christopher Marston and Tom Behrens, from the Historic American Engineering Record in Washington, laboriously measured and drew the paddlewheel pelt washers, wool dryer, leather pickling drums, and other equipment. Copies of these drawings and a layout plan for the building will be available for researchers at the History Center and the originals will be archived with federal preservation records at the Library of Congress.

At the same time, historian David Rotenstein worked from his base in South Carolina preparing a written report that provided context on the Wool Company building, the firm’s history, and the importance of the wool pulling and leather industries in the region. A leading national expert on this subject, Rotenstein first partnered with the Historical Society in Spring of 1997 when he authored an article for this magazine entitled “Leather Bound: Nineteenth Century Leather Tanners in Allegheny City.” In addition to placing Pittsburgh Wool and the industry in historic context, Rotenstein has also provided transcriptions of four interviews conducted with Roy and Jeff Kumer between 1996 and 1999.

In February, Jeff Kumer ran the plant’s machinery one final time. With a camera crew from Argentine Productions on hand, Jeff, assisted by Wool Company employee Keith White and retired wool puller Frank Hayson, spent four days demonstrating the back-breaking steps in this industrial process. Cameraman Norris Brock, sound man Bob Lubomski, production assistant Matt Conrad and producer/director Peter Argentine worked under cold, difficult conditions to ensure that future generations could hear the slap of the wheels in the pelt washer and see the massive wooden pickling drums turn. The many hours of film will be edited into an 18-minute video that captures the steps in both the wool pulling and pickling processes. That film will be available for viewing at the History Center. Photographer Charles Uhl was also on hand preserving still moments of the process for the HSWP Archives.

As a final step, HSWP curatorial and archives staff collected objects and materials to add to the Society’s holdings. The wooden beam Frank Hayson worked over while pulling wool, his gloves and shears, the handwritten ledgers kept by Roy Kumer—these items and others connect us to the people and the place that was Pittsburgh Wool.