I know that Mr. Heinz got his start by selling vegetables out of his mother’s garden. How long did his company keep growing crops there, and with all the pollution this area had, how could they have grown produce at all?

– Michael Dobson, Wilkinsburg

It’s difficult to determine exactly when the company ceased growing crops in Sharpsburg; while historians have dug up the roots of the horseradish garden that provided Henry J. Heinz with his first bottled product, it’s hard to get much dirt on when it stopped providing crops to the company. Records at the History Center are silent on the matter, and two company histories I consulted had little to say on it.

The seeds for the Heinz empire were planted in 1852, when H.J. Heinz first began selling the produce from his family’s Sharpsburg vegetable garden. At the time, the area was still fairly rural; as a boy, writes Robert Alberts in his Heinz biography, *The Good Provider*, Heinz had earned 25¢ a day plus meals by picking a local farmer’s potatoes. Finding the soil especially hospitable to the growing of horseradish, he and a partner bottled it as a relish under the name of Heinz and Noble in 1869. According to a corporate history on file at the History Center’s Library & Archives, “The entire plant consisted of a single room of a small two-story building ... and only three-fourths of an acre of horseradish was cultivated ... during the first year.”

But even by then, Pittsburgh’s pollution wasn’t quite as pervasive as we are sometimes led to believe. (The Heinz company itself was partly responsible for the impression; one of its advertisements boasted that Heinz was “A Clean Spot in Pittsburgh” and showed the company’s North Side plant gleaming like the New Jerusalem amidst clouds of Stygian smoke.) Long after Pittsburgh was well-established as an industrial powerhouse, Heinz himself lived in a mansion known as “Greenlawn,” located near several similar estates in Point Breeze. The mansion’s grounds included 10 greenhouses, suggesting that some sunlight was poking through the haze. Many of his wealthy contemporaries had summer homes in Sewickley Heights, sufficiently far away to distance themselves from the stench of their own industries.

A more immediate threat than the growth of Pittsburgh industry was probably the growth of the Heinz Company’s own appetite. According to the corporate history, by 1872, Heinz’s Sharpsburg garden had expanded to 25 acres with another 100-acre farm nearby. The company was growing quickly; in 1875, Heinz bought 600 acres.
in Illinois to pursue “new sources of cucumbers.” In fact, the farm was too productive; Heinz agreed to buy its entire output, and it produced so many cucumbers that he went bankrupt trying. But he started over in 1876 and soon was opening plants near huge farms around the world. Given the scope of Heinz’s ambitions, the tiny Sharpsburg plot was soon unable to feed the company’s growth and space in the industrializing region was at a premium. By 1904, Heinz moved the abandoned Sharpsburg “House Where We Began” to its North Side works, “there to serve as a museum … and a memorial where everyone could read at a glance every step in the evolution in his company,” as Robert Alberts put it.

By 1908, The Story of Pittsburgh and Vicinity, a glowing account of Pittsburgh’s business community printed by a local paper, claimed that Heinz managed 30,000 acres, each as carefully watched as the company’s original tiny garden. In the longest sentence this side of Les Misérables, the corporate account boasts, “Accepting only absolutely pure and sound materials, never in any way using artificial preservatives, coloring matter, adulterants or substituted ingredients, employing none but the most improved methods, insisting on scrupulous cleanliness in every detail, the company is in a position to, and does, without reservation, guarantee not only the purity, but the wholesomeness and honesty in every respect of its products.”

It’s just lucky Pittsburgh’s industry didn’t blow this much smoke back in 1869 or the Heinz Company might never have taken root.

By 1952, room was needed for further expansion. The house was again disassembled — bricks were marked for proper rebuilding — and moved to Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Mich.

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Our region’s reaction to a national tragedy

A discussion with audience participation

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6:30 to 8 p.m.

at the History Center

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Held in conjunction with

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Bearing Witness To History

an exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution at the History Center

Sept. 11, 2004 — Jan. 2, 2005

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