

# UP FRONT

## HISTORIC SIGNS

By Jennifer L. Baron

### Mother's Bread

We've all seen them on cross-country trips or rural Sunday drives, two short words in faded paint on a wooden barn: "Mail Pouch." Such hand-painted "ghost signs" advertised products that are mostly long-gone, but the messages survive, especially on brick buildings in urban areas. In Pittsburgh's many neighborhoods from the North Side to Dormont, these faded markers advertise an array of early 20th-century products, shops, and services.

One long-hidden sign again seeing daylight is the gigantic Mother's Bread sign on a clapboard house at 3209 Dobson Street in Pittsburgh's Polish Hill neighborhood. Vast numbers of Polish immigrants settled in the tiny community during the late 1800s to work in the region's burgeoning steel industry. Today, Polish Hill is home to third-generation Polish descendants, artists, musicians, young professionals, new and longtime business owners, and families.

The stunning 30- x 60-foot, hand-painted Mother's Bread sign was revealed after a fire destroyed the adjacent three-story brick duplex in 2008. It advertises a popular brand sold at the site's original grocery store,

which was owned by William Wisniewski until closing about 1918.<sup>1</sup>

Lawrenceville-based house historian Carol Peterson says the sign was probably hidden for nearly a century. "The house was built around the turn of the 20th century. The brick apartment building that was built right up to it, touching it, was built approximately five years later, by 1910," she said.<sup>2</sup>

Polish Hill resident Mark O'Connor, professor of English and Creative Writing at Slippery Rock University, has conducted oral histories with longtime residents, many of whom have reminisced about the sign. "After five years in Polish Hill I am still





amazed at how the neighborhood reveals itself,” O’Connor wrote in the *Polish Hill Voice*. “The advertisement is patriotic, everything red, white, and blue on wood siding, though the words are fading. Large letters, each with a drop shadow for emphasis, point neighbors to Wisniewski’s Fine Grocery (long gone), promising bread that is ‘100% Pure.’”<sup>3</sup>

According to O’Connor’s research, New York-based Ward Baking Company established a Baking Research Fellowship at Mellon Institute in 1909 and produced bread at a Liberty Avenue facility located between 31st and 32nd streets. Following several mergers, Mother’s Bread was dissolved in 1926, though one offshoot company marketed Tip Top Bread, the first nationally distributed enriched loaf.<sup>4</sup>

The bold, large-scale sign embodies the company’s pride in its product, which was underscored in print ads. O’Connor tracked down a 1904 newspaper ad that boasts the bread is “the ideal loaf, white, light, tasty, palatable, and nourishing.”<sup>5</sup>

Ghost signs are still found around the U.S., U.K., France, and Canada. Prevalent in decades preceding the Great Depression, many faded ghost signs dating to the 1890s—1960s remain visible. As signage advertising trends and formats evolved, less durable signs appeared in the later 20th century.

Ghost signs are occasionally discovered upon the demolition of later-built adjoining

structures. Now the subject of countless books, articles, and photo blogs, ghost signs are a rich piece of material culture, carriers of significant social, commercial, and historical data.

In Polish Hill, the Mother’s Bread sign has become a topic of lively conversation and a rallying point for community activity.

“You don’t see many ghost signs on wood anymore. That sign has changed so much since the first year it was revealed. The more it rains, it cleans the sign and becomes brighter, and we’re able to see more letters,” says Catherine McConnell, developer, real estate professional, Polish Hill resident, and Polish Hill Civic Association board member. “The historic fabric we have in Polish Hill is one of our biggest assets. I advocate for keeping that site as something other than new construction, such as a public park or amphitheater built into the hillside.”<sup>6</sup>

Leslie Clague, of the Polish Hill Civic Association, underscores the Mother’s Bread sign’s impact on the close-knit community and visitors. “Polish Hill is a very scenic neighborhood, and we see so many people photographing it. It is unusual to have a sign like this be so accessible. It really is a neat vantage point. The sign has become a landmark for people who come through.”<sup>7</sup>

Jim Young, who purchased the house in 2004 and is renovating it, concurs: “I was so delighted to see the sign on the side of the house. I’ll be working in my garden and

see people stopping, or trying to do a slow crawl in their cars—young hipsters and older people putting their hands on hips and scratching their heads.”

The sign resonates for Young, an Alabama native, on many levels; it recalls the Tennessee Valley roadside signs of his youth. “When they razed the house and I saw it for the first time, I was so drawn to the fact that I could walk up to the sign and touch the paint. I’d like to clean the dirt and add a clear coat. What I really wish is that I could procure the empty lot and attach it to my property. My backyard is an open garden, and I don’t want the sign to be covered up again.”<sup>8</sup> ☀

The interest in Pittsburgh’s many existing ghost signs has taken root beyond Polish Hill. In Tarentum, four ghost signs have been touched up by artist Bob Ziller, in conjunction with the town’s Allegheny Together initiative. A similar project in Garfield involved repainting a severely faded Star Soap ad. Look for a follow-up article in an upcoming issue of *Western Pennsylvania History* detailing these and other ghost signs.

**Jennifer Baron** is co-editor of *Pittsburgh Signs Project: 250 Signs of Western Pennsylvania* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2009) and Pop Filter Editor for Pop City Media.

<sup>1</sup> Carol Peterson, interview with author, June 9, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mark O’Connor, interview with author and *Polish Hill Voice*, May 28, 2011.

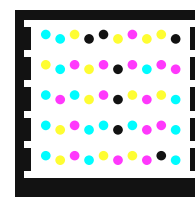
<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine McConnell, interview with author, June 9, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Clague, interview with author, May 25, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Young, interview with author, June 15, 2011.



**Bill, a “walldog” in the sign painting business in Pittsburgh for 32 years, blogs about his dying breed.**