

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Preserving History with the Pump House Gang

The Pump House Gang has been ordering up breakfast for over 20 years, every Wednesday, at one shuttered diner after another in Homestead. Now they gather at Eat'n Park in the Waterfront, smack on the former site of the Homestead Works, one of the largest steel plants in the world. A bittersweet location, for the legacy of the steel industry is their reason for being.

The group takes its name from the mill's Pump House, where, more than 100 years ago, one of the most important conflicts in American history erupted. The events—capped by a barge of Pinkerton detectives arriving on July 6, 1892—are known as the Homestead Strike, Battle of Homestead, or just the Lockout.

Charlie McColleston, retired director of the Center for the Study of Labor Relations at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and a founding member of the Pump House Gang, regards those days in 1892 as the most significant, or at least the most dramatic, event in American labor history: "The invading Pinkerton agents, the aroused town and workers, the bloody confrontation, the burning of the barges, the gauntlet of women and children, the military occupation of the town, the failed assassination attempt on the company's chairman [Frick], the trials of strike leaders and the suppression of the union."¹



L-R, seated: Maria Stockman, Nicole McCandless, Joe Szalanski, Stephanie Stout, Mike Stout, Steffi Domike, Rosemary Trump; standing: Alan Diede, Joel Woller, Bill Yund, Charles McColleston, Mark Rylance, Norm Koehler, Jim Hohman, Kandi Stoken (our waitress), and Maryann Huk.

Photo by Bette McDevitt.

Homestead, one of Carnegie's most productive mills, was one of the few unionized steel mills. Under a previous contract, union members had a say in production and hiring and were paid by tonnage produced. Carnegie and his partner, Henry Clay Frick, proposed a new contract that would cut wages and limit worker input. Carnegie went to Scotland and left Frick in charge. Anticipating the workers' reaction to his contract proposal, Frick built

a fence around the plant and shut the workers out. Frick called in 300 Pinkerton Agency guards to secure the plant so that he could hire nonunion workers. When the Pinkertons came down the river, the workers, some armed, broke through the fence, and headed for the landing near the Pump House. McColleston says, "Words were exchanged and a shot was fired. No one intended to kill anyone, but once blood was drawn, things escalated." Seven



strikers and three Pinkertons were killed.

The state militia intervened, the union was defeated, and workers lost a voice in wages, hours, and working conditions, a watershed in American labor relations. McCollester wrote in *The Point of Pittsburgh*, “Perhaps the most devastating consequence of the union defeat, however, and one which in the long run led most directly to the industry’s decline, was the exclusion of the workers from any participation in decisions regarding the organization of production.”²

The Pump House Gang began meeting in the late 1980s to plan the Homestead Strike Centennial Conference for July 1992. Around the table with McCollester were Russ Gibbons, David Demarest, and Steffi Domike, a former steelworker then teaching at Chatham College and now employed by United Steel Workers (USW).

Gibbons, who died in 2010, was communications director of the USW, a crucial alliance because the USW grew from the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. Gibbons advanced the cause of labor unions, history, and education, using his pen, McCollester says, “like a sword.”

Demarest, who died in October 2011, was a retired English professor from Carnegie

Mellon University who learned about working-class Pittsburgh by hiking through the city’s industrial sites and neighborhoods. Along with McCollester, Domike, Gibbons, and Eugene Levy, also on the CMU faculty, Demarest edited an anthology for the Centennial Commemoration titled *The River Ran Red*. Domike and Nicole Fauteux produced a video of the same name that aired on PBS in 1993.

The group continued to meet after the centennial, focusing on the steel industry’s decline in Pittsburgh. Mike Stout, former grievance chairman of Local 1397 of USW at the Homestead Works, came to the group. Stout is co-owner of Steel Valley Printers in Homestead and known for his songwriting and performances in the Woodie Guthrie tradition. “Here they were talking about 1892, not talking about the whole shutdown process going on,” Stout says. “Most people were not aware of an effort to save the ‘big shop,’ by a U.S. Steel employee, Steve Simko. If all the forces had worked together for saving historic and productive parts of the mill, it would have been a longer struggle. When Park Corporation bought the mill from U.S. Steel [in 1988], they had to agree not to sell anything to a competitor. So they sold the equipment to Korea, Iraq, Pakistan, and India.



“Steelworkers Through the Ages” banners and posters created and photographed by Bill Yund.

UP FRONT

They cannibalized the mill and what have we got now? A mall.”

U.S. Steel, in its company history, acknowledged that the 1980s brought significant changes: “In response to economic changes in the steel industry, the corporation reduced its domestic raw steel production capability through a number of restructurings. In addition, the corporation entered into several steel joint ventures with both domestic and foreign partners.”³

Indeed, after the Park Corporation bought the 300-acre Homestead property, it dismantled the mill. Domike says that Randy Harris, a photographer, alerted the group to the disappearing physical artifacts and discovered the Bost Building on Eighth Avenue, the union’s headquarters during the Battle of Homestead.

When Park Corporation met with community leaders to discuss use of the vacated land, members of the Pump House Gang were there. “As Russ, Steffi, and I

attended the meetings, the Park people got more comfortable with us,” says McColester. “But at first, they wanted to call the road Pinkerton Drive, and the entire area Pinkerton Landing! We told them there would be a real battle [and] that if they destroyed the Pump House, there would be all-out war.”

Augie Carlino, president and CEO of the Rivers of Steel Heritage Corporation, remembers that conversation. “I kept quiet. The Park Corporation promised a lot but began to tear down many buildings. Tempers began to flare. Park began to feel the pressure by the community to save the core structures. We were not asking [for] preservation, just don’t demolish them.”

Things took an interesting turn with the issue of the Carrie Furnaces, the heart of the Homestead steelmaking process. Union Railroad donated the Rankin Hot

Metal Bridge to Rivers of Steel, giving them ownership of the access to the Carrie Furnaces. “That foothold,” says Carlino, “helped push negotiations for the county to acquire Carrie, which benefited Rivers of Steel and the communities of Rankin and Swissvale.” Tours of the Carrie Furnaces are offered by Rivers of Steel from April through October by former steel workers who tell about their work in the brutal structure.

After removing the scrap, Park Corporation sold the land to Continental Corporation, a developer who turned over the Pump House, the Water Tower, and five and one-half acres to Rivers of Steel. “They saw the Pump House as a draw for visitors to the area,” says Carlino.

The Pump House Gang became an official nonprofit group in 1997, and renamed itself the Battle of Homestead Foundation. “We even got to name the site around the Pump House the Battle of Homestead,” says McColester. Domike envisioned the Pump

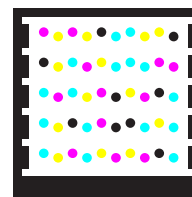


1960s




Courtesy
Charles McColleston.

Use your smartphone and a free Microsoft tags app to access content when you see this symbol.



Learn about the 45-inch mill at the Homestead steel works.
<http://www.riversofsteel.com/multimedia/videos/the-45-inch-mill>

of McColleston's *Point of Pittsburgh* exemplifies the group's ability for collaboration. Anyone who ever sat around the table helped with the publication. Bill Yund did the cover and illustrations, and Mike Stout wrote a dozen songs about Pittsburgh history and created a CD to accompany the book. A play based on the book and the music has been performed three times; there are plans to take it on the road.

Carlino wants the Pump House and Carrie Furnace site to become a national park. "There is only one place where you can tell the story of steel, and that's Pittsburgh and Homestead. It is the only place you can tell the story of labor: an immensely powerful story." The Pump House—and the Pump House Gang, "classic squatters," as Russ Gibbons liked to call his group—endure to remind us of labor's struggles and accomplishments. 

House's potential as a tourist attraction. Bill Yund, a group regular and retired asbestos worker and graphic artist, created 14 banners that cover the long windows of the Pump House. Ten banners depict Homestead steelworkers of each decade from 1880 to 1980, designed from various photos and resources of each era, and four depict an open hearth, a Bessemer blow, an interior scene, and a mill town by the river.

In 1996, when the AFL-CIO's national convention was in Pittsburgh for the first time, the Pump House Gang was determined that the heads of the unions come to Homestead. "We got them to come to the Pump House early one morning, on the opening day," says McColleston, "and we had Firefighters Local I, with bagpipes, and all the flags, and we ushered all the union officials in. It was foggy, looking out over the river, the bridge, and the Carrie Furnace, and very mystical."

Rounding out the breakfast table are a few writers, some union organizers, and others who find labor history fascinating. The publication

¹ Interpreting the Pump House, A Project Update, Battle of Homestead Foundation, January 1999.

² Charles McColleston, *The Point of Pittsburgh* (Battle of Homestead Foundation, 2008), p. 146.

³ Company history, at www.uss.com/corp/company/profile/history.asp

FURTHER READING

Out of This Furnace by Thomas Bell; *The River Ran Red* edited by David P. Demarest; *The River Ran Red* video produced and directed by Steffi Domike and Nicole Fauteux; *The Wolf Finally Came* by John Hoerr; and *Homestead: the Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town* by William Serrin.

VISITING

- A historical marker commemorating the workers who died is located near their gravesites at the corner of 22nd Avenue and Main Street in Munhall. In 1942, a memorial was erected by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee at the Homestead end of the Homestead Grays Bridge. State historical markers stand at the Pump House and Bost Building.
- The Battle of Homestead Foundation offers interpretative programs defining the site's historical role, and programs covering a wider range of labor history and current issues. A series of free films and lectures is offered monthly, April through October. Visit www.battleofhomesteadfoundation.org for information.
- The Bost Building, 623 East Eighth Avenue in Homestead, is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. Self-guided or docent-led tours are available.
- Guides for walking, driving, and bicycle tours are available through the Rivers of Steel website at www.riversofsteel.com/things-to-do/tours/ or call (412) 464-4020.
- A scale model of the battle scene, created by Don Sentner of Design Specialties, is on display at USW headquarters in Pittsburgh, corner of Stanwix and Boulevard of the Allies.