

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Tattoos

You cannot help but notice that more people have tattoos, or body art, as it is sometimes called. Seth Holmes, tattoo artist and manager of Wyld Chyld, in Brookline, suggests that tattoos are more than a popular trend. “Tattooing has been around since 2000 B.C., and has profound meaning to those who practice the art and those who choose to have it put on their bodies.” The topic has led me down some interesting paths, just for the asking.



Brian Page's coal miner tattoo symbolizes the heritage of Antrim, Tioga County.

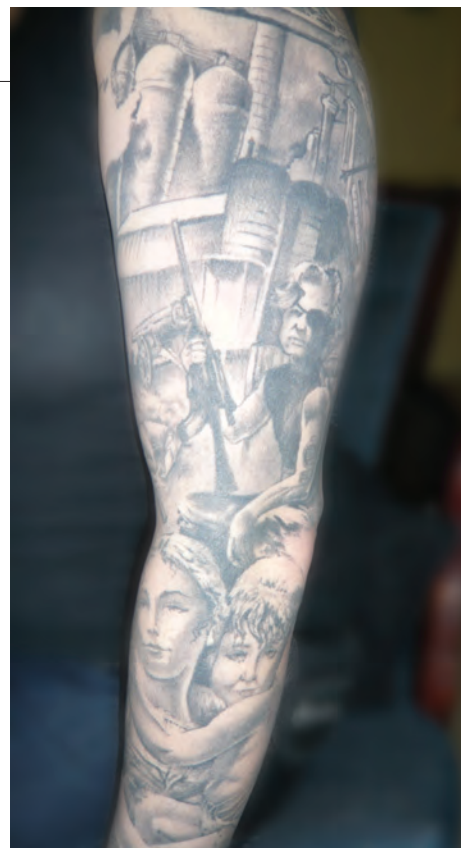
All photos by Bette McDevitt.

The History Center is planning an exhibit about the history of tattooing. Contact Fort Pitt Director Alan Gutchess at 412-454-6416 or AGutchess@heinzhistorycenter.org if you have a story or tattoo with a connection to our region's history.

Bryan Page, an environmental chemist, has three tattoos, one about cycling, one about chemistry—both interests of his—and one of a coal miner. The coal miner, on the calf of his leg, is his most recent. Bryan and Tim Daheny, his employer and working partner at BioMost, spent six months last year building a small hydroelectric plant in the coal mining town of Antrim in Tioga County. None of that time was spent sitting in an office. Page scampered up steep hillsides, dug trenches, cut down trees, then installed a small turbine that would capture the power of water seeping from acid mine drainage. The treated water roared down the hill, creating enough electricity to power 20 homes as well as the water treatment plant itself. “I knew the day I got there,” said Bryan, “that I wanted a tattoo of the coal miner, the symbol of Antrim, to honor the mining heritage and the transition to hydroelectric power. It's a simple tattoo, but very meaningful to me.”

Talon Smith, a barista at Coffee Tree Roasters in Bakery Square, has a highly complex tattoo on her arm, which caught the eye of Peter Oresick, a Pittsburgh writer with an interest in local labor history, as she handed him a cup of coffee. “Wait!” said Peter. “Is that the Battle of Homestead on your arm?” Talon affirmed that it was, in fact, a scene from the confrontation between workers at the Pump House of the Homestead Mill and Pinkerton police in 1892.

When Peter brought Talon to the Wednesday breakfast group of the “Pump House Gang,” she showed her arm to the people who would be the best audience possible. “I chose the Battle of Homestead,” she said, “because it is the most important



Talon Smith's family heritage, passion for labor history, and love of *Star Wars* are evident in her tattoo of the Battle of Homestead.



Pittsburgh's skyline has accompanied Michael Kraus through his deployments with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan.


event in labor history in Pittsburgh.” Talon takes some pride in the connections she has to the Homestead mills. Her paternal great-grandfather, Hungarian immigrant John Bulko, was fired from coal mining and came to work as a crane operator at the Homestead Mill. Her maternal grandfather, Andrew Weber, also worked at the Homestead Mill. Her father,

Garry “Plug” Smith, worked at the Edgar Thompson Works for a short time. Talon has an interest in Kurt Russell films and *Star Wars*, so there is a Snake Plissken character entwined in the scene, and a spaceship flying over it. Talon has more work in mind on her arm. “We want to do the Pinkerton barges coming down the river, catching fire.”

Holmes offered some cautions for those considering joining the ranks of the tattooed. “In Pennsylvania, there are almost no regulations on who can practice the art, so

anyone can buy a machine and start mauling their friends on their living room couches. We have to be as careful as dentists and doctors. Look for an artist with bloodborne and airborne pathogen training and certification, and a good portfolio. Make sure they have a steam autoclave for cleaning equipment, although many things, like needles, are disposable and not reused.”

On a recent flight, my seatmate was Michael Kraus, a U.S. Army soldier who has had many tours to Afghanistan. I noticed his

tattoo: the skyline of Pittsburgh on his forearm, a reminder of home. “I took the photo myself, of the skyline, and had a friend do it,” he said. Shyloh Hadley, who has cut my hair, has the logo of the 54C Port Authority bus on her calf. “It’s the only bus that kept the same route as the trolley,” she said. Who would have known? Such conversations enrich me, in more ways than one. 

Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer and longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.

The McKeesport Regional History & Heritage Center



- The McKeesport Regional History & Heritage Center (MRH&HC), formerly the McKeesport Heritage Center, is located at 1832 Arboretum Drive, McKeesport, Pa., 15132, which is nicely nestled in Renziehausen Park. The Center operates a museum and research facility dedicated to preserving and presenting the history of McKeesport and its surrounding communities. Founded in 1980 by a group of civic leaders, the Center moved to its present facility in Renziehausen Park in 1991. McKeesport is located approximately 12 miles south of Pittsburgh and is situated at the confluence of the Monongahela and Youghiogheny Rivers.
- The MRH&HC has numerous exhibits on local history that display many important and unique artifacts, including photographs, which help to tell the story of McKeesport. The Center also has an extensive library and archival collection that further documents local schools, churches, organizations, businesses, and families. Genealogical resources include copies of the *McKeesport Daily News*, obituary indexes, city directories, birth and wedding indexes, tax records, cemetery records, school yearbooks, and newspapers.
- Guided and self-directed tours are available. The Center also offers several outreach programs, including presentations on the history of McKeesport and the history of Renziehausen Park. These presentations can include a walking tour of the



Jason Togger.

park with an emphasis on the monuments and a discussion of the 1832 one-room schoolhouse that is now contained within the museum. The MRH&HC also organizes many wonderful programs and events throughout the year, including an annual Founders Day Program, Black History Month Program, Women’s History Month Program, and a Summer Speaker Series.

- The Heinz History Center’s traveling Civil War exhibit, *The Civil War in Pennsylvania*, will be at the MRH&HC from March 15, 2014, to April 8, 2014. On Friday, June 13, 2014, the Center will also host the annual conference of the History Center Affiliates Program.
- The MRH&HC is open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and also by appointment.

- For additional information please visit www.mckeesportheritage.org or contact the Center at mckheritage@yahoo.com or (412)-678-1832.

The History Center Affiliates Program, HCAP, is a membership-based network that allows local and regional historical societies and museums access to museum professionals and best practice standards through the Senator John Heinz History Center.

To find out more about HCAP or to apply for membership for your organization, please contact Robert O. Stakeley, Educator, at rostakeley@heinzhistorycenter.org or (412) 454-6359.