Ilkuvitz Store

If you drive down Miller Avenue in Clairton, the buildings, many now boarded up, remind you of the days when this mill town bustled with activity. Like many towns in the Mon Valley, Clairton’s population peaked in the 1950s and rapidly declined in the 1980s when the steel industry collapsed. Although the town is still home to the largest coke works in the world, the main business district and population never recovered.

At the corner of Miller and Waddell Avenue stands a long-shuttered building bearing the name “Ilkuvitz” above the second story windows. This building once housed the Ilkuvitz Clothing Store, with the family living in an apartment above. The store, a local institution that catered to the working class neighborhood for over 70 years, prospered and struggled just as the community it served grew and then declined. When History Center curators visited the store in 2012, we found a time capsule of history locked inside that preserved the story of the family, the town, and an industry whose fortunes affected both.

Edward Ilkuvitz, an Orthodox Jew from Hungary, immigrated to the area in the early 1900s. He started out as a peddler catering to local mill workers and, as his business improved, he built a permanent store and apartment in the 1920s. His son Norman helped in the store as a child and eventually took over. When the steel industry collapsed in the 1980s and Ilkuvitz’s sales dwindled, Norman stopped ordering new inventory, but didn’t close the store until 1995. Some
of the items sat on the shelves unsold for 40 to 50 years as the store became a place for the older men of Clairton to gather and socialize. When Norman passed away, the family closed the shop, locked the doors, and left the contents largely untouched for years until contacting the History Center. The artifacts that remained inside speak to the multitude of everyday objects necessary for life in a mill town as well as the rich history of Western Pennsylvania.

• Throughout the year, West Overton offers many wonderful programs and events for the public including Parlor Talks, Wednesdays at West Overton, and sponsored visits to local historic sites.

• From September 5–28, 2014, West Overton hosts the Heinz History Center’s traveling Civil War exhibit, The Civil War in Pennsylvania. Throughout the month, West Overton will offer additional exhibits on the war, host re-enactors, and hold several public programs including a Kid’s Weekend, cocktail night, and a special Dog Day.

• West Overton Village is open Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. or by appointment.

• For additional information please visit www.westovertonvillage.org or contact the Museum at info@westovertonvillage.org or (724) 887-7910. West Overton Village and Museum is located just off of the Scottsdale exit of Route 119, at 109 West Overton Road, Scottsdale, Pa., 15683.

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 learn 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.