

## History Lost, History Saved—Pittsburgh's Story



Workplace safety was always emphasized, as seen in this U. S. Steel wall sign.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of LTV Corporation, MSP 33.

In the 1980s, Western Pennsylvania experienced a severe economic downturn as steel mills closed, corporate headquarters shut down, and the unemployed left to seek jobs in the Sun Belt. The local history community realized that an enormous amount of Pittsburgh's past was leaving the region, packed in the moving vans of the Pittsburgh diaspora or tossed in dumpsters by beleaguered corporations. Concerned historians, led by Jim Richardson of the Carnegie Museum, formed the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History (CPAH), and in November 1985 held a public conference to discuss the possibility of a city history museum to preserve and exhibit this material.

The response to the proposal was positive and community leaders slowly rallied behind the tiny Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania as the institution best suited to gather and archive these vulnerable collections. Over a period of nearly a decade, a coalition of corporate, foundation, and government leaders helped shepherd the

growth of the Historical Society from a modest building in the Oakland neighborhood into the seven-story, block-long Heinz History Center in the Strip District. Its goal was to celebrate what honorary capital campaign chair David McCullough called "the unprecedented character of the Pittsburgh story."

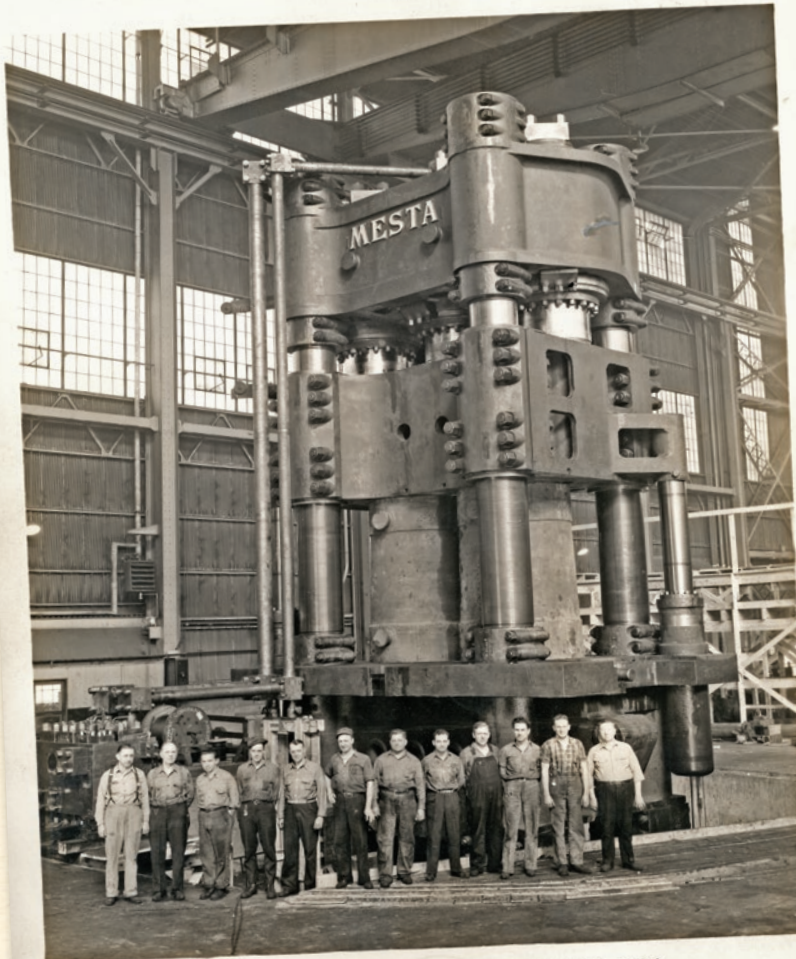
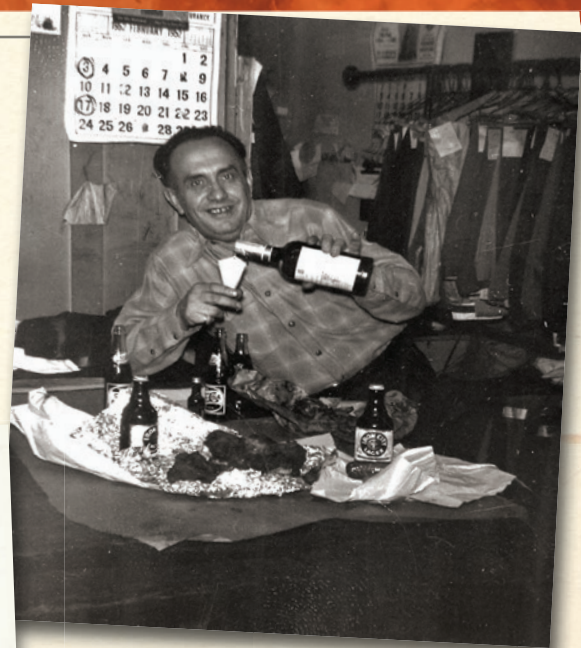
In the mid-1990s, as the History Center building became a reality and the professional staff grew, corporations began stepping forward to donate their collections. Although the initial concern was with the loss of industrial records, the History Center's mission quickly broadened to include many organizations and groups. Among the early donors were H.J. Heinz, U. S. Steel, Gulf Oil, Mellon Bank, and Alcoa. Over the years, many more collections have been offered, helping document the full range of work in the region—retail stores, family-owned businesses, white collar professions, education, and more.



Break time at Gerson Brothers Tailors, South Side, 1952.

Harry Gerson emigrated from Biala, Poland, in 1913 and set up a tailor shop on the South Side. The first in his family to settle in Pittsburgh, Harry was soon joined by his widowed mother, six siblings, and other relatives. He and his brother Sam opened Gerson Brothers doing alterations and dry cleaning on East Carson Street. The store remained in the family until 1996. Here Sam takes a break from dry cleaning to feast on a well-balanced meal of chicken, a large pickle, Coke, and Iron City.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Betsy Gerson, 2004.0015.



MESTA MACHINE COMPANY PITTSBURGH, PA., U.S.A.

Mesta workers dwarfed by machinery, West Homestead, 1940s.

Mesta Machine was founded in 1898 when George Mesta merged two smaller companies to create what became the world's largest steel equipment manufacturing company housed under one roof. The company worked on a huge scale, producing crushers, engines for blast furnaces, molded gears, and massive forging presses that towered over the workers who created and operated them. Spread over thirty acres and employing more than 3,800 people, Mesta helped win two World Wars but could not survive the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s. The company filed for bankruptcy in 1983.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Mildred Milfeit, 2000.0005.

Women at Heinz shucking clams, 1950s.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of H.J. Heinz Company, MSP 57.

