

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

North Side Neighborhoods

I've lived in Deutschtown on the North Side for 16 years and I knew nothing about the many adjacent neighborhoods, except one. I

knew the territory around California Avenue and Brighton Road that I had staked out as a child on summer vacations with my grandmother. Now I know more than a dozen neighborhoods, from Perry Hilltop on down to the Allegheny River, and especially the ones in between, after taking two tours last summer. "Spotlight on the Heartland, Quality of Place on Pittsburgh's North Side," sponsored by the Allegheny City Society, focused on five of these communities.

The five locations make up the core of the North Side: Marshall-Shadeland/BrightWood, California-Kirkbride, Charles Street/Pleasant Valley, Perry Hilltop/Perry South, and Fineview. We chugged along in a well-worn school bus with an intrepid driver who never faltered on steep hills and audacious bends. Local historians John Canning, David McMunn, David Grinnell, and Ruth McCartan—who had scouted out the route beforehand—shared their knowledge and extensive research they



East Ohio Street with the Carnegie Library (center), Buhl Planetarium (left), and the old Post Office (far left with dome), 1960s.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Al Mazukna, 1998.0030.

had done on each area. These five contiguous communities share many common features. In the 19th century, people who worked in the industries that developed along the banks of the Ohio and Allegheny Rivers needed places to live. Large farms and tracts of land were developed in these areas to provide housing, and business districts grew up around the housing.

John Canning pointed out that the electric trolley was integral to the development of these neighborhoods, allowing people to get to their jobs, even those across the river in Pittsburgh. He took as an example the trolley intersection at Brighton Road, California Avenue, and Charles Street. “This was an important intersection,” he said. “Along with the city steps, in this pre-automobile society, people could get to wherever they needed to be.” I can vouch for that; it was the precise location of my grandmother’s second and third floor apartment above a barber shop. The clang of the trolley rounding that was a pleasant wake up call.

Fineview streetcar at Magnet and North Streets. A set of city steps is also visible in the background.

Allegheny City Historic Gallery.



Children enjoying Allegheny Commons Park with the First Presbyterian Church in the background, 1970s.

Allegheny City Historic Gallery.




Housing and businesses along Rhine Street, 1925.

Allegheny City Historic Gallery.

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Just across the street was the business district that John told us sprang up at those intersections. There was an A&P that gave off the aroma of roasting coffee, a drug store that made sublime chocolate sodas, and a bakery, among a whole block of other shops. My grandmother and I hopped on the trolley in the mornings to go to the Market House, (later the site of Allegheny Center Mall, now Nova Place) and in the evenings hopped on the trolley again, heading for the closest church festival where she could play bingo and I could ride the Ferris wheel. Now there are vacant lots and the intersection looks like a deserted movie set.

This is an unfortunate feature that these communities share. After World War II, when industries closed or relocated, many people moved to the suburbs. The remaining housing deteriorated due to a lack of investment in urban communities and the inability of some long-time residents to afford the necessary repairs. But here is the good thing: we saw many stable neighborhoods, perched on hills with sweeping views of the city, an abundance of new and renovated housing developed through the efforts of citizen groups and government working together, and blooming vegetable and flower gardens in formerly vacant lots. The real story here is that we

gained an appreciation of North Side neighborhood history and became aware of the dauntless work of citizen groups throughout these communities to rebuild and restore these neighborhoods for present and future residents. 

Notes: The tours were sponsored by The Buhl Foundation, whose mission is to “create community legacies by leveraging its resources to encourage people and organizations to dream, to innovate and to take action,” and The Sprout Fund, a catalyst for community change.

The Allegheny City Society has put together a booklet with photos, *Spotlight on the Heartland*, based on the research done for the tours. It is available to purchase on the website of the Society: <http://alleghenycity.org>.

Three of the photos are from the extensive archives of the Allegheny City Historic Gallery, northsidehistory.org, where Bill Gandy knows every street of the North Side, even those no longer in existence.

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Craft sale in Allegheny Center, 1970s. Redevelopment of the North Side in the 1960s included a large swath of demolition along East Ohio Street which was replaced by an open, sunken plaza. The Old Post Office and Buhl Planetarium remain in the background.

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