



## NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

### Miss Edna: A Beautiful Time in the Hill District

I first saw this woman, a model of dignity, at a gathering at Freedom Corner, in the Hill District on the day of the Presidential Inauguration in January. She stood alone, leaning lightly on her cane, for more than an hour. She wore a bright red jacket and held a small sign. Everyone took her photo. I asked Glenn Grayson, Jr., who was the emcee for the event, who she was. "Oh, that's Miss Edna. She works at Hill House," he told me. Works? At Hill House? Miss Edna was at least my age, decades past retirement age. This would be a lady with a story.

I met with Miss Edna Council in her office at Hill House, where she works for the Hill House Consensus Group, tending to the needs of the residents of the Hill District. "That would be whatever they need, housing, finding jobs, immigration issues, or dealing with landlord problems," she told me. "I wanted to be a lawyer, but what I really should have been was a social worker." She may lack the degree, but after 50 years of experience, she knows where to go, whom to ask, and how to get the job done. "It's a funny story, how that came to be," she said, her whole face a smile:

I was a young mother, raising my kids, in Bedford Dwellings, and one day I turned on the water, and there were worms and leaves in it. I started by calling the Housing Authority, then the water company, and everyone said "Just boil the water!" So, I got a jar of the

water, worms and all, and went down to the Mayor's office. It wasn't hard to get into the mayor's office in those days. I told the Mayor to take a drink of the water, and he did. The next day he was in the hospital. They said it was some other ailment, but we got clean water.

Miss Edna said that was in the 1950s, and she doesn't recall who the mayor was but it was likely David Lawrence, who was in office from 1946 until 1959. "I have not drunk water from the faucet since then," she said. But the wormy water was her first lesson in working for change. Choose an issue that matters deeply to those involved, and build a group around them. She put that to work, first for the Board of Education, a Senior Center, and then at the Hill House, where she has worked on various

programs for the last 20 years.

Miss Edna grew up in the Hill District, mostly on Webster Avenue. "My father and my grandfather owned their own trucks and delivered groceries from the Strip District to the small grocery stores. My mother stayed home with me and my two brothers. We played outside till the streetlights came on, and then we went to sit on our own porch steps. All day we played, jump rope, jacks, games in the streets, like Red Light, Green Light. There were few cars then, and we rode bikes in the streets. The school, Watt School, had a recreation program, arts and crafts and lots of baseball teams." There were, she said, many immigrants in the Hill, and people of all colors. "It was a beautiful time."

When she was a young woman, she knew



**A policewoman directs traffic for school children at Watt Street and Bedford Avenue in the Hill District.**

HHC Detre L&A, Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, 1892-1981, MSP 285.B022.F10.101.

of August Wilson, well before he became known as the man who created the definitive record of African American life in the 20th century. “People would see him, in the barber shops and jitney stations. They would say ‘Who’s that crazy man sitting over there with the notebook?’ and tell him ‘You better not be writing down anything I said,’ but he did just that. August Wilson didn’t make anything up, that was how they talked.”

Now Miss Edna lives near St. Benedict the Moor Church, in one of the lovely homes built in Crawford Square. She was going to move into an apartment, but they made some of those houses affordable with government grants and agreements with the contractors: “Now I have a townhouse, with a garage, a living room, dining room, and three bedrooms.” And she has work that she is meant to be doing. Who could ask for anything more? 🌟

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Miss Edna on Inauguration Day, 2017 at Freedom Corner in the Hill District.  
OnePennsylvania.



Smithsonian Connection

## Wing's patent nine-lens multiplying camera, late model, December 4, 1880.

With the advent of the tintype in the 1850s, photographers increasingly sought new ways to produce as many images as possible from one plate. Simon Wing of Maine devised a “multiplying camera” in the 1860s that used nine lenses and a moving plate holder.



Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, L2016.8.1.  
Photo by Nicole Lauletta.