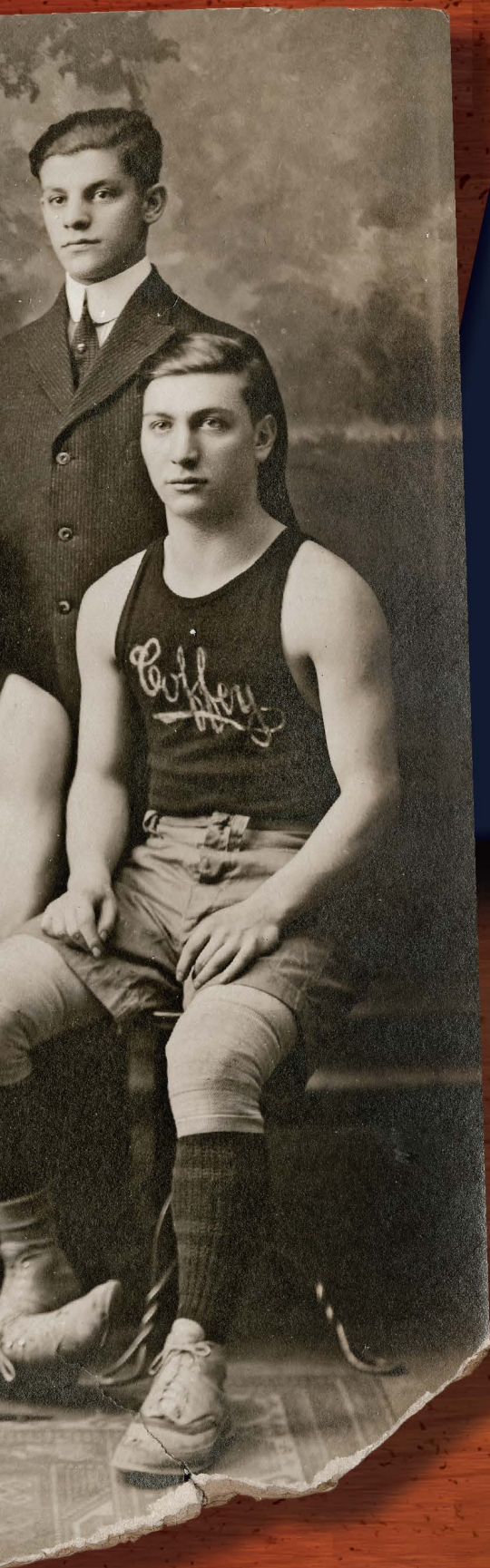




John Vincent Coffey (standing, far left) was an Irish-American newspaper distributor who started an athletic club composed of young Jewish men from the Hill District. The Coffey Club became one of the greatest local basketball teams of the independent era (seen here after the 1914 season).

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Jewish Sports Hall of Fame of Western Pennsylvania Photographs, 1914-1993, MSP 308.



AFTER THE BUZZER

The Coffey Club

By Eric Lidji

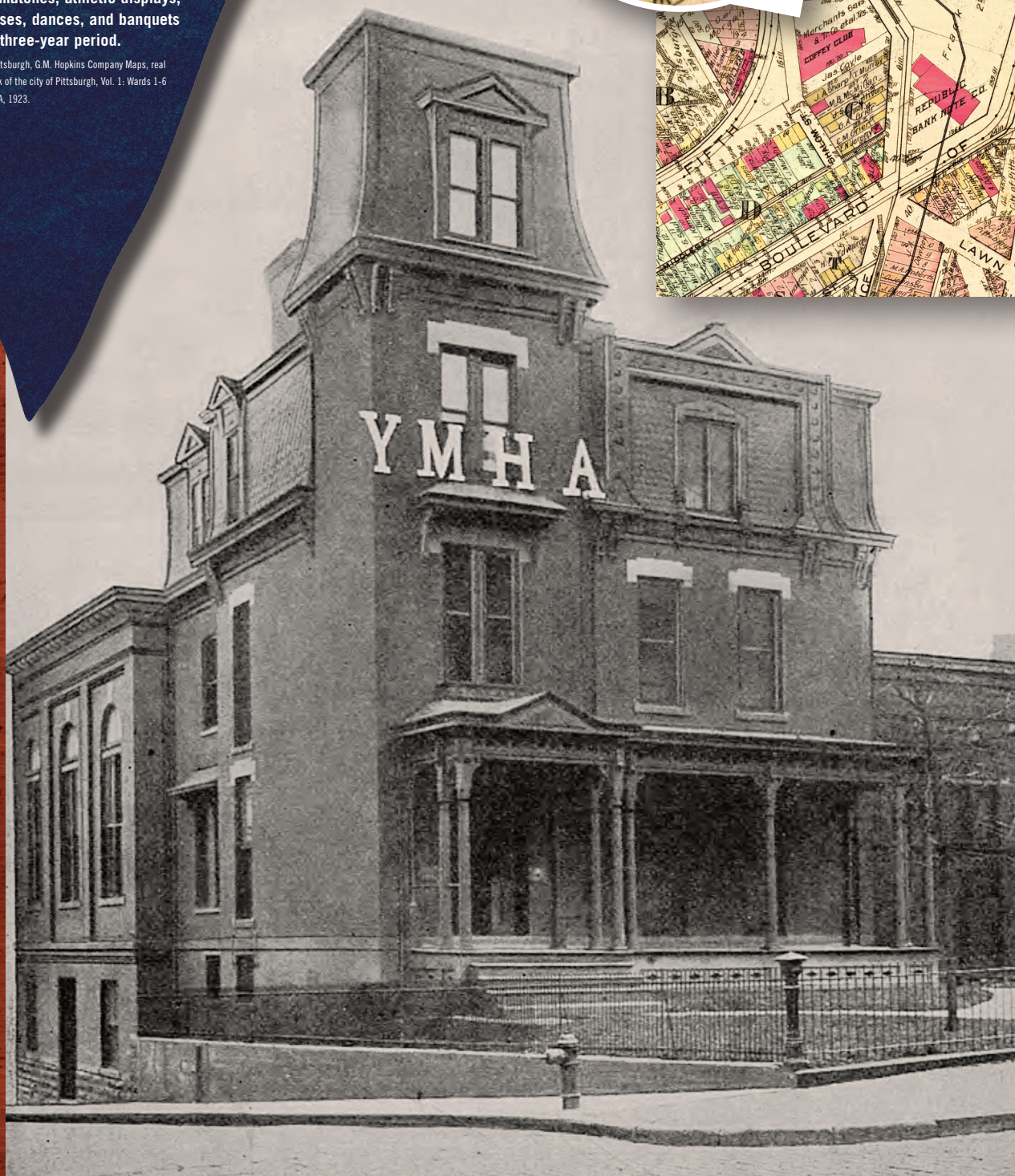
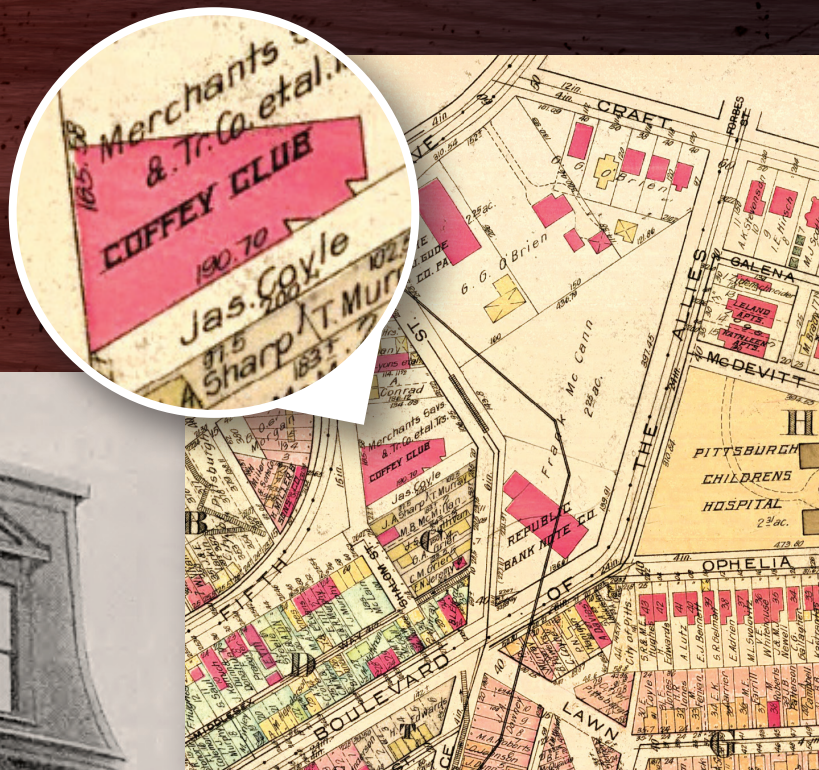
The independent era of basketball was defined by its affiliations. The Avalon Volunteer Fire Department, the Carnegie Library of Homestead, the East Liberty YMCA, and the Westinghouse Air Brake Company all produced competitive basketball teams in the first quarter of the 20th century. So did the towns of Beaver Falls, Kittanning, New Kensington, and Sharon. Some teams, by the nature of their primary affiliation, also had an implicit, secondary affiliation. The Loendi Five was sponsored by an African American social and literary club called the Loendi Club. It was also understood to be a “black team.” The greatest “Jewish team” in Western Pennsylvania during this era was the Coffey Club, and competition was fierce enough for the distinction to matter. The Zionist Institute, the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House, and the Young Men’s Hebrew Association all sponsored good basketball programs, as did independent Jewish outfits like the Dinwiddie Club, the Franklin Club and, after World War I, the Enoch Rauh Club, the Second Story Morrys, and several others. The student body at Central High School was disproportionately Jewish in those years, and often its basketball team was as well.

(BELOW) Throughout America's involvement in World War I in 1917–18, the Coffey Club played its home basketball games and hosted several large social affairs and charitable events at the Young Men's Hebrew Association at Fifth Avenue and Jumonville Street in the Uptown neighborhood between the Hill District and Oakland.

Jewish Criterion, June 27, 1919, p. 27.

(RIGHT) The Coffey Club acquired Montefiore Hall at the western edge of Oakland late 1921 and changed the name of the building to "The Coffey Club." The facility hosted sporting matches, athletic displays, gym classes, dances, and banquets during a three-year period.

University of Pittsburgh, G.M. Hopkins Company Maps, real estate plat-book of the city of Pittsburgh, Vol. 1: Wards 1–6 and 9, Plate 19A, 1923.



The Coffey Club can be called the greatest of these Jewish teams on the strength of its record, on the quality its players, and on its own insistence. It frequently claimed to be the greatest local team of any affiliation, Jewish or otherwise. One former player later ranked it as the third best in the entire country.¹ The Coffey Club certainly became the best remembered of the Jewish teams from that era, featuring in more than 60 years of reminiscences. The Coffey Club was also distinctive among Jewish teams in the area for reasons that had nothing to do with its athletic ability. While some of these teams were subsidiaries of larger Jewish organizations, and others were Jewish by composition but operated without any organizational influence, the Coffey Club was a stridently independent Jewish outfit that affiliated with both Jewish and non-Jewish organizations when the opportunity was right and dropped organizational partners quickly when better opportunities came along. In the years straddling World War I, when an immigrant Jewish population was searching for its place in America, the Coffey Club was a good yet fickle partner to the Jewish community. It helped the cause in order to help itself.

When the boys who founded the Coffey Club were becoming teenagers between 1908 and 1910, the best recreational facilities in the Hill District were at the Kingsley House. The organization had been founded in the Strip District in 1893 by Protestant clergy and had moved into a mansion on Bedford Avenue in the Hill District in 1901 to serve the growing immigrant population of the neighborhood. As the first settlement house in Pittsburgh, the Kingsley House introduced a new approach to improving social welfare in dense sections of the city—providing services rather than giving out alms.²

Jewish philanthropy was undergoing a similar shift. A new class of institutions served the ill, the elderly, and the thousands of Jewish children running around the dingy alleys of

the Hill District. It took time for these new Jewish youth facilities to match the Kingsley House. The Columbian Council School started as a one-room operation in 1896 and evolved into the six-story Irene Kaufmann Settlement House by 1911. If the boys in the Coffey Club had been born even five years later, they might have started their team at that large new center. Instead they gravitated toward the Kingsley House, which had earned the trust of immigrant Jewish families through its welcoming, non-evangelizing approach. “I have many hundred Jewish boys and girls among my people,” Kingsley House director Charles C. Cooper explained at the dedication of the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House, “and the aim of the Kingsley House is to mold them into American citizens of the Jewish faith; our Catholic boys and girls, American citizens of the Catholic faith; and our Protestant children, American citizens of their different denominations.”³

The boys who started the Coffey Club were mostly the American-born children of recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The arrival of their families and others like them increased the Jewish population of Pittsburgh from 2,000 in 1880 to 25,000 in 1907, on its way to a peak of 60,000 by 1919.⁴ Other immigrant groups were also arriving from overseas, and African Americans were migrating up from the American South. Downtown could not accommodate the growth, and Jewish arrivals moved into a section of the Hill District occupied by Irish families like the Coffeys.⁵ John Vincent Coffey was the American-born son of Irish immigrants.⁶ He was a newspaper distributor, and he employed several Jewish children from the Hill District as paperboys.⁷ By one account, he received his naming honors after buying uniforms for a group of boys looking to start a team.⁸ By another account, he actively created the team out of concern for the “moral welfare” of good kids living in a tough neighborhood.⁹ It is difficult to tell from these two accounts whether the Coffey Club

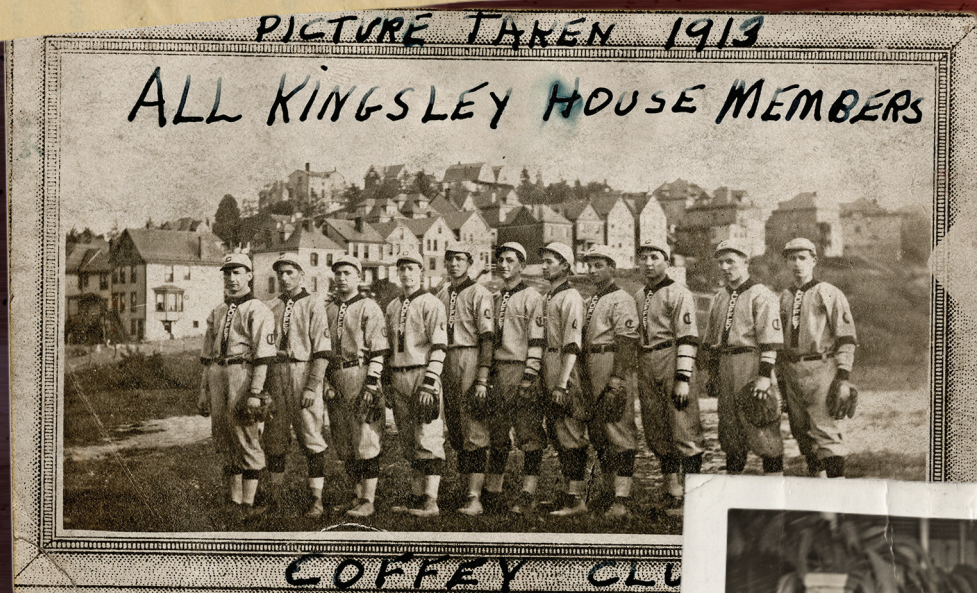
was meant to be a Jewish team or whether its Jewish composition emerged organically from the friendships of its founding members. It was rarely described as a Jewish team in its early years. It simply was one.

The earliest instance of an athletic team named for Coffey is a box score from May 1908 describing a loopy 11-inning baseball game between the Protectory Juveniles and

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the “Coffee AC”— spelled like the drink, not the newspaperman.¹⁰ The Coffey’s catcher that day, Morris “Moy” Marks, eventually became a stalwart of the club. An associated basketball team began playing as early as November 1910 as the “Coffey AA” or “Coffey AC” — presumably for “athletic association” or “athletic club.”¹¹ The first reference to “the Coffey Club” came in 1912.¹² The catchy name suited the sprawling ambitions of the group. The Coffey Club produced a basketball team, a baseball team, an occasional football team, and it counted a few boxers in its ranks.¹³ It sent 50 members to a track meet in May 1913¹⁴ and played in an unofficial volleyball league in 1923.¹⁵ The Coffey Club also pursued interests off the court. Its 3rd anniversary

JAKE	LEFTY	CHOC	MOY	TED	ABE	CHIL	DAVE	MIKE	APPLES	ALVIN
FRISHTMAN	ABRAMS	LEVINSON (DECEASED)	MARKS	KAHN (DECEASED)	LEVY (DECEASED)	MEYERS	MORETSKY	ROSENBERG (DECEASED)	MEYERS	MEYERS



The former members of the Coffey Club remained friends long after the organization disbanded in 1925 and regularly reunited to honor individual members, such as this banquet at the Mayfair Hotel. The guest of honor was star center Saul Adler, one of the few Coffey Club players who left Western Pennsylvania after retiring from sports. He moved to Monroe, La., where he was known as "Mr. Baseball" for his dedication to that sport.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Karl Meyers Family Collection, 1895-1938, 2002.0103.



The Coffey Club emerged from the athletic program of the Kingsley House. The non-sectarian settlement house was founded by Protestant clergy but earned the trust of immigrant Jewish families in the Hill District in the first two decades of the 20th century.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Karl Meyers Family Collection, 1895-1938, 2002.0103.

"entertainment and dance," in November 1913, marked "the first social affair to be held by the club," according to the *Pittsburgh Press*.¹⁶ These affairs soon became as important as the games.

The local *Jewish Criterion* covered sports half-heartedly in those days and completely ignored the Coffey Club until November 1914, when the team left the Kingsley House and joined the Zionist Institute.¹⁷ The Zionist Institute had emerged a decade earlier from local efforts to revive the Jewish homeland, but its mission was broadly focused on promoting Jewish peoplehood as a shield against the threats of an open society. It provided an alternative to the Columbian Council, which brought Jewish immigrants deeper into American life through language classes, cultural training, and job

programs. Both organizations understood the importance of recreation. The Columbian Council built a gym in 1903, and the Zionist Institute built a separate gym on the same block in 1905. As historian Dr. Barbara Burstin notes in *Steel City Jews: A History of Pittsburgh and its Jewish Community, 1840-1915*, the proximity of those two gyms "spoke volumes about the distance between the supporters of the two institutions. There was a real feeling among the Zionists that the Settlement simply did not focus on raising a Jewish, as opposed to an American, consciousness among the new immigrants."¹⁸

The partnership between a leading Jewish institution and a leading Jewish team was likely based on practical considerations, though, not ideological ones. The Zionist Institute's basketball program had become dormant, leaving its court available.¹⁹ A dedicated court made it easier for the Coffey Club to schedule home games. A home team attracted kids to the Zionist Institute. The Coffey Club brought attention to Zionist Institute causes, and the Zionist Institute amplified the boasts of its new squad. In what sounds like a choreographed



Zionist Institute

After growing up at the Kingsley House, the boys in the Coffey Club relocated to the Zionist Institute in late 1914. The new partnership was likely pragmatic in nature, allowing the basketball team to have dedicated access to a court for its home games.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Corinne Azen Krause Photographs, c. 1880s-1992, MSP 113.

event, the Zionist Institute hosted a banquet in honor of the Coffey Club in May 1915, and at the end of the meal the team held a meeting, right in the Fort Pitt Hotel, to launch a \$1,000 “Be-Brite” campaign for the Zionist Institute: new floor, fresh paint, and remodeled shower rooms.²⁰ Toward the end of that summer, as the renovations were wrapping up, the Coffey Club promoted a Zionist Institute membership drive.²¹ The Zionist Institute held another banquet for the Coffey Club in April 1916.²²

Aside from a charity match for the Palestine Relief Fund in April 1916,²³ the surviving record of the partnership is notably devoid of explicitly Jewish activities, either religious or cultural in nature. Individual members of the Coffey Club expressed their Jewishness in different ways and to different

degrees over the course of their lives, but the team never displayed any notable commitment to Jewish traditions as a group. Its third anniversary dance in November 1913 started after sundown on Friday, when religious Jews were welcoming the Sabbath.²⁴ The menu for its sixth anniversary banquet in May 1917 included consommé, chicken a la king, and ice cream, a blatant violation of the Jewish prohibition against combining meat and milk.²⁵ Jewishness was a point of fact for the Coffey Club. Its Jewish makeup allowed it to pilfer the entire Central High School starting lineup in February 1915,²⁶ but in a post-season press release sent out to various publications in May 1916, only the last names of the players gave any indication of the Jewish character of the organization.²⁷ During its three years

at the Zionist Institute, the Coffey Club proved it could be a good partner to a Jewish organization, and it received the attention of the Jewish press as a reward. But it remained independent at its core.

The Coffey Club left the Zionist Institute incrementally over the latter half of 1917, first by forming a joint baseball team with the Young Men’s Hebrew Association in June 1917²⁸ and then by moving its basketball team to the Y.M.H.A. in October.²⁹ The local Y.M.H.A. had been established in 1910, after five failed efforts by previous groups dating back to 1877.³⁰ The sixth iteration succeeded in part through athletics. It rented rooms in the Dispatch Building on upper Fifth Avenue for several years before acquiring a former Elks lodge at Fifth Avenue and Jumonville Street in



As their active playing days waned, several former members of the Coffey Club became elder statesmen of Jewish athletics in Pittsburgh. Coffey Club guard Morris "Moy" Marks (standing, far left) coached the Enoch Rauh Club in the late 1920s. His day job was merchandise manager and a director for Gimbel's Department Stores.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Jewish Sports Hall of Fame of Western Pennsylvania Photographs, 1914-1993, MSP 308.

The Coffey Club basketball team began playing together as early as November 1910 and quickly attracted attention for its athleticism and teamwork. The team was named in honor of John Vincent Coffey (standing, far left) who sponsored its early efforts. By the end of the 1913 season, seen here, the team had claimed back-to-back amateur titles in the region.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, David "Lefty" Abrams Photographs, 1900-1920, MSP 536.





THE ORGANIZED JEWISH COMMUNITY OF PITTSBURGH, LIKE OTHERS AROUND THE COUNTY, TURNED ITS ATTENTION OUTWARD BY CREATING MULTIPLE CAMPAIGNS TO HELP THREATENED JEWISH COMMUNITIES ABROAD, DESPITE THE PERSISTENT NEEDS AT HOME.

The Coffey Club was best known for its basketball team but maintained a competitive baseball team and was active in football, boxing, track and field, and volleyball.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, David "Lefty" Abrams Photographs, 1900-1920, MSP 536.

By June 1919, it had sent 24 members, including many key players, to the U.S. military.³⁶

The Coffey Club members who remained in Pittsburgh were called upon to rally Jewish youth. In late January 1918, the Federation of the Jewish Philanthropies of Pittsburgh launched a membership and fundraising campaign, hoping to redirect some charitable attention back toward local needs. World War I had been drawing distinctions between immigrant Jewish families living safely, although not always securely, in the United States and their relatives trapped in the crossfire of Europe's warring nations. The organized Jewish community of Pittsburgh, like others around the county, turned its attention outward by creating multiple campaigns to help threatened Jewish communities abroad, despite the persistent needs at home. Looking to canvas every Jewish household in Pittsburgh, the Federation tasked 31 community leaders to lead 16 "teams" and also named "team captains" for every Jewish

early 1916. The Y.M.H.A. wanted to become a hub for all Jewish youth activities in the city, and it worked hard to attract existing groups such as the Coffey Club.³¹ The *Jewish Criterion* described the partnership as the culmination of a "long period" of negotiations,³² and a notice published at the start of the 1917 basketball season added, "In the future, the Coffey Club intends to aid the Y.M.H.A."³³ in their general movement and plans have already been completed, whereas the Coffey Club will take charge of the Competitive

activities of the Y.M.H.A." The partnership allowed both organizations to compensate for their wartime losses. A fire at the new Y.M.H.A. building in early 1917 had exacerbated an already precarious financial situation just as the American entry into World War I began claiming all the young Jewish men who might become dues-paying members.³⁴ The Coffey Club faced a similar challenge. It held a "farewell stag" for its service-bound members in September 1917, shortly before try-outs opened for the upcoming basketball season.³⁵

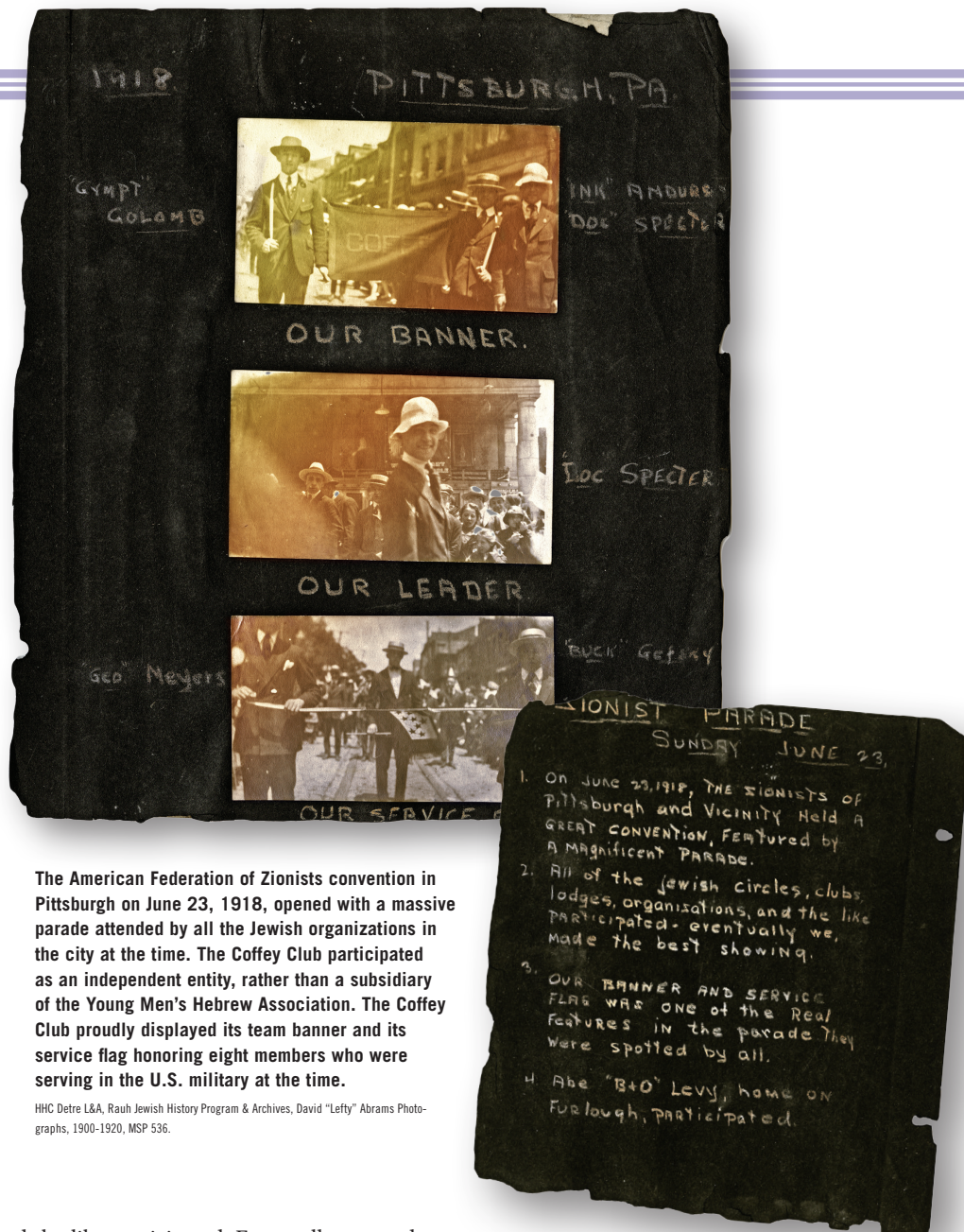
organization in the city. The list of teams defined the scope of the Jewish community at the time: congregations, charities, fraternal organizations, unions, Zionist organizations, and an array of Jewish literary, religious, and social clubs, including the Coffey Club.³⁷ The inclusion was noteworthy. A communitywide effort in May 1917 to select local delegates for the American Jewish Congress had ignored the Coffey Club, while inviting representatives from the Young Men's Hebrew Association and the Zionist Council of Pittsburgh.³⁸ Between May 1917 and January 1918, the Coffey Club had become worthy of participating in these communitywide efforts as an independent entity, at least when it came to fundraising.

The Coffey Club apparently didn't do much canvassing. It was not included in the final fundraising tally published in the *Jewish Criterion* in February 1918.³⁹ The Coffey Club revealed its priorities a month later, when the Y.M.H.A. replicated the Federation "team" model in an attempt to sign up 1,000 new members and raise \$7,500.⁴⁰ By the end of April, the Y.M.H.A. had reached the membership goal but raised only \$4,960. The Coffey Club had brought in \$1,020—the second-highest amount of the 12 teams in contention.⁴¹ Over the next month, the Coffey Club increased its total to \$2,315, of \$8,000 raised, "winning" the fundraising drive and receiving a loving cup for its efforts.⁴²

As these joint fundraising efforts were underway, the Coffey Club was also marking the boundaries between itself and its partner. The Y.M.H.A. dedicated a service flag in January 1918 with 135 stars, one for each member in the U.S. military.⁴³ Even though the total included at least seven of the eight enlisted Coffey Club members, the Coffey Club dedicated a separate service flag in March 1918 with eight stars.⁴⁴ Its members carried the flag in a massive parade for a national American Federation of Zionists convention in Pittsburgh in June 1918, marching as equals alongside dozens of local Jewish organizations. "All of the Jewish circles, clubs, lodges, organizations,

and the like participated. Eventually we made the best showing," forward David "Lefty" Abrams wrote in a memory book about the two wartime basketball seasons. "Our banner and service flag was one of the real features in the parade. They were spotted by all."⁴⁵

The Coffey Club closed out its basketball season in April 1918 with a charity game benefitting the Red Cross.⁴⁶ That summer it suspended athletic activities, pending the end of the war.⁴⁷ Its social program continued. It hosted a banquet at the Y.M.H.A. in early September 1918 to honor 60 servicemen home on furlough for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. The honorees were not Coffey Club members, by and large, but the Coffey Club considered itself important enough to host



The American Federation of Zionists convention in Pittsburgh on June 23, 1918, opened with a massive parade attended by all the Jewish organizations in the city at the time. The Coffey Club participated as an independent entity, rather than a subsidiary of the Young Men's Hebrew Association. The Coffey Club proudly displayed its team banner and its service flag honoring eight members who were serving in the U.S. military at the time.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, David "Lefty" Abrams Photographs, 1900-1920, MSP 536.

a community-wide function. "The regular attendance of this meeting was well nigh over the 200 mark and all who were there, including most of our prominent business men of the Hill, sure did see a grand element for a future Jewish generation of Pittsburgh," the team wrote in a press release afterward the banquet. The event began with a dramatic instrumental performance of the Star Spangled Banner. With its typical hyperbole and typographical bungles, the Coffey Club called it, "one of the finest scenes that one ever see in the Y.M.H.A."⁴⁸

The Coffey Club parted ways with the Y.M.H.A. in late 1918, as World War I was



ABOVE: The Coffey Club became a truly independent operation in late 1918 when it left the Young Men's Hebrew Association. In late 1921, the team acquired Montefiore Hall at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Robinson Street in Oakland and renamed it "The Coffey Club."

Pittsburgh Press, June 30, 1907, p. 7.

Tonight DANCE

with the

COFFEY CLUB

AT MONTEFIORE AUDITORIUM

*Repainted and
Remodeled*

*Repainted and
Remodeled*

The Coffey Club greatly expanded its profile in late 1921, when it acquired Montefiore Hall. The organization announced its new offerings through a series of advertisements and notices in the *Jewish Criterion*, marketing directly to Jewish youth in Pittsburgh.

Jewish Criterion, October 21, 1921, p. 21, and October 28, 1921, p. 47.

Coffey Club

announces an opening

DANCE

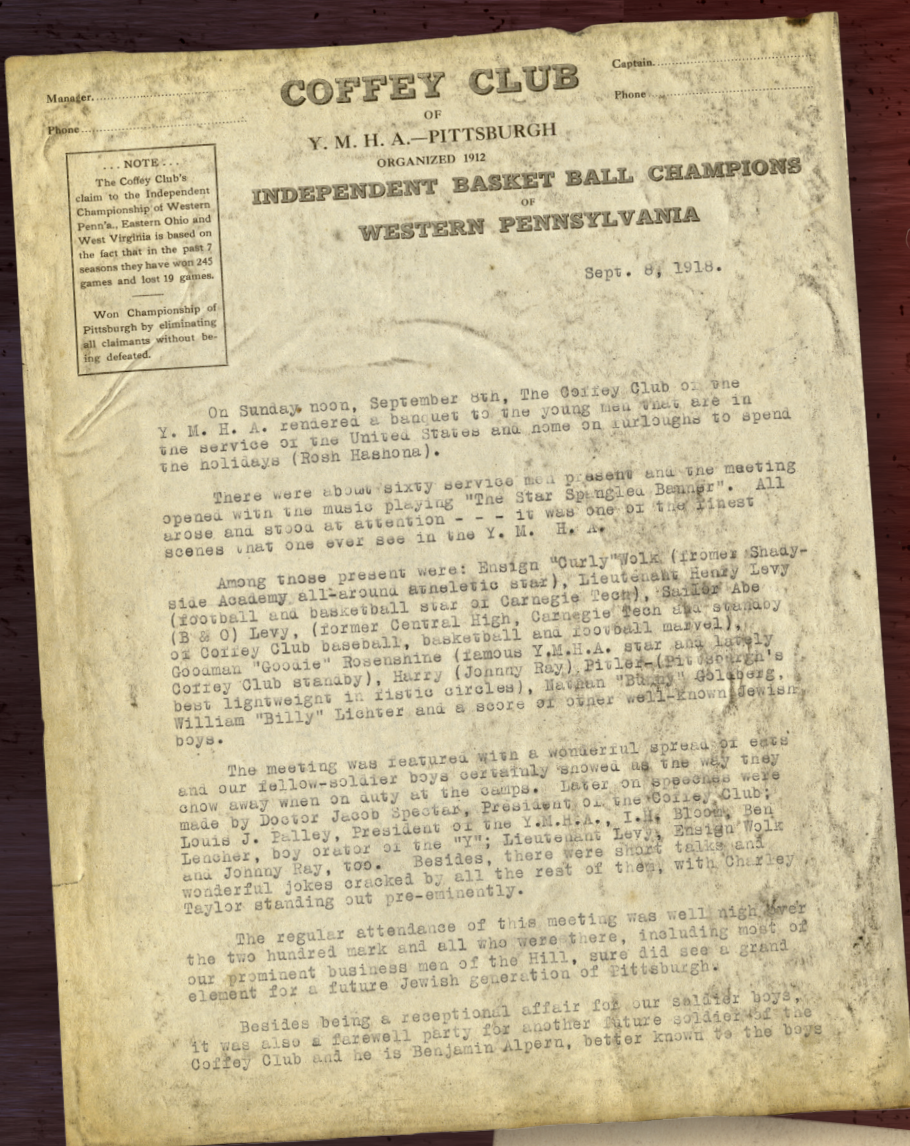
Tonight, Oct. 22, at their New Home

Formerly Montefiore Auditorium
BIG DOINGS

5th Avenue and Robinson Street
U B THERE

In the era before professional basketball leagues, championship status was often a point of contention. On its letterhead in 1918, the Coffey Club claimed to be the independent champion of Western Pennsylvania, Eastern Ohio, and West Virginia based on its record over seven seasons.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, David "Lefty" Abrams Photographs, 1900-1920, MSP 536.



The Coffey Club began holding social affairs in November 1913 as a way to generate revenue for operations and to increase its profile among the young Jewish men and women of Pittsburgh. Its sixth annual banquet in 1917 even included a speech by an aspiring non-Jewish politician who was seeking the Jewish vote in a race for sheriff.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, David "Lefty" Abrams Photographs, 1900-1920, MSP 536.



ending. Once again it did not publicly provide any reason.⁴⁹ For the first time in its history, the Coffey Club had no institutional affiliation. It was truly an independent team.

The Coffey Club played benefit games for Jewish causes in 1919,⁵⁰ but soon shifted its focus. After three peripatetic seasons, it acquired Montefiore Hall at Fifth Avenue and Robinson Street in Oakland in October 1921 and renamed the building The Coffey Club.⁵¹ "The epoch making transaction," as the *Criterion* claimed in a brief that was almost certainly written by the team, was "the first time in the affairs of Pittsburgh Jewry that an independent club composed of young Jewish men have taken over such large holdings."⁵² It was rare example of the Coffey Club describing itself as a Jewish organization. The announcement worried some of the existing Jewish communal organizations in the city, forcing the Coffey Club to release a second statement soon after, explaining its intentions: "Being primarily an athletic and social organization, its activities will necessarily be confined to these spheres of endeavor and will not go into the field of communal work directly, which we believe should be the sole purpose of organizations existing to take care of that work."⁵³ The Coffey Club legally incorporated in early 1922, becoming a business. "The purpose of the corporation is to promote, cultivate, and foster the physical, moral, civic and social welfare of its members, with a special reference to their engaging in indoor and outdoor physical and athletic games, exercises and sports," its charter proclaimed. The cost to join was steep. The \$5 signing fee, \$20 initiation fee and \$3 monthly dues would total several hundred dollars today.⁵⁴

The new facility was perfectly situated between the old Jewish neighborhood of the Hill District and the emerging Jewish neighborhood of Oakland, and the Coffey Club marketed its expanded social and athletic program directly to young Jewish men and women.⁵⁵ The offerings included gym classes on Thursday nights and Sunday afternoons,

dances every Saturday night, monthly swimming parties, and big annual banquets.⁵⁶ The Coffey Club even managed the short-lived Coffey Club League in 1923 and '24 with four basketball teams composed mostly of young Jewish players. The regular Coffey Club basketball games on Tuesday nights acted as a keystone keeping all these undertakings aloft.⁵⁷ The team expanded its schedule against the usual regional opponents by scheduling high-profile matches against some of the biggest names in basketball, like the Rosenblum Credits of Cleveland, the Buffalo Orioles, and the New York Celtics. The biggest draw was an unexpected local rivalry with the Second Story Morrrys, an upstart team sponsored by a Jewish clothier with a knack for publicity.

The dedicated hall, the popular dances, the games against out-of-state champions, and the rivalry with the Second Story Morrrys generated tremendous enthusiasm for the Coffey Club among local Jewish youth. The *Criterion* no longer needed a high-minded communal excuse to cover the team. It launched a dedicated sports page in 1923, and almost every installment included multiple items about the Coffey Club and its members.

The influx of revenue allowed the Coffey Club to transcend amateur status and become a semi-professional squad.⁵⁸ Star guard Meyer "Buck" Gefsky later claimed that he had earned \$82.50 each month working as a banker for Merchant's Savings and Trust and \$250 each month playing for the Coffey Club.⁵⁹ However, the success of the basketball team made it easy to overlook early signs of its decline. Coffey Club President Abe "B&O" Levy moved to New York in April 1920 to learn the wool business.⁶⁰ Star forward David "Lefty" Abrams quit the sporting life in March 1921 to focus on selling shoes, first in Pittsburgh and later in Indiana, Pa.⁶¹ Few players saw athletics as a viable career path.

The Coffey Club gave up its hall in late 1924, ending its social program.⁶² A year later, in November 1925, the Coffey Club basketball team shocked local sports fans by affiliating


with the Amerita Club, a rival semi-pro team.⁶³ Defending the merger in the *Pittsburgh Sunday Post*, the Coffey Club revealed that its social program had not been raising enough money to cover operational costs. It also noted that many of its stars had "good jobs" outside the team and could no longer get away for out-of-town games. The only way to afford the \$2,000 entrance fee into the semi-pro West Penn League was to partner with another outfit. The article also addressed a pressing ethnic question: how could a Jewish team like the Coffey Club join an Italian organization like the Amerita Club? In a statement that reveals much about the ethnic attitudes of the day, the Coffey Club sought to assuage these concerns by noting, "The organization is not wholly Italian as was announced, but is made up of all nationalities and religions. There are as many Jews and Americans as Italians in the membership of 500."⁶⁴ Without a dedicated court, the former Coffey Club members began playing their games at Duquesne University and booked practice time at the Kingsley House, where they had started as little kids.⁶⁵

By the end of the 1920s, all the former Coffey Club players had either hung up their sneakers or become dispersed throughout other teams. Jewish fans were turning out to see the next generation of Jewish basketball teams, particularly the Y program based out of new facilities on Bellefield Avenue in Oakland. For a few years in the early 1930s, the Y team closed out each season with an "old timers" game against a revived Coffey Club, always beating the 30-something legends by a respectful yet decisive margin.⁶⁶

The Coffey Club could have diminished into a footnote but remained relevant over the next half-century through the affection it had generated among local fans, especially those who became local sportswriters. Bob Lewis often wrote about the team in the *Jewish Criterion*. He included three Coffey Club players on his five-man "all-time Jewish team" in 1935.⁶⁷ Les Biederman of the *Pittsburgh Press* and Andy Dugo's "The Independents" column

in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* peddled Coffey Club nostalgia for years. The biggest Coffey Club booster was *Post-Gazette* columnist and sports editor Al Abrams. A child of Lebanese descent with a Jewish-sounding surname, Abrams had grown up in the Hill District and was about a decade younger than the stars of the Coffey Club—the perfect age difference for idolizing.⁶⁸ For 42 years, his "Sidelight on Sports" column regularly dished about the old Coffey Club team. His coverage was affectionate and intimate. He shared memories of classic games and revealed incidents that had been left out of earlier coverage, like the time Bernard "Buckets" Sandomire punched a heckler (and two associates) who had called him a "damn Jew."⁶⁹ Abrams also followed the players through their lives off the court: he congratulated them on job promotions, praised them for charitable endeavors, shared details about their family lives, and eulogized them after their deaths. He even offered prosaic details, like the time Joseph "Ziggy" Kahn and "Buck" Gefsky both had eye surgery.⁷⁰ On two occasions, Abrams had to clarify for readers that he wasn't "Lefty" Abrams. "I'm a righty," Abrams noted.⁷¹

So much coverage of an extinct team inflated the reputation of the Coffey Club beyond the bounds of reality. Its record improved, its embarrassing losses were forgotten, its crowds grew larger and louder, and its style of play became a symbol of an earlier era, before the NBA, before dribbling and dunking, back when speed, conditioning, and gracefulness were the prized skills of the game. These legendary accounts faded from local papers in the late 1970s and early '80s, with the death of the Coffey Club's original players, fans, and boosters, but the team was revived once more in 1982 through the founding of the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame of Western Pennsylvania. To date, at least eight Coffey Club players have been inducted into that Hall of Fame, a surprising accomplishment for a team that disbanded long before most voters were born.⁷² Those players were selected on

the basis of their reputations and also for the glory they brought to a small community in a mid-size city, neither known for basketball greatness. Inspiring such communal pride may have been the unspoken *raison d'être* of the Coffey Club all along and will ultimately prove to be its lasting contribution to regional Jewish history. 

Eric Lidji is Director of the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives at the History Center.

THE COFFEY CLUB COULD HAVE DIMINISHED INTO A FOOTNOTE BUT REMAINED RELEVANT OVER THE NEXT HALF-CENTURY THROUGH THE AFFECTION IT HAD GENERATED AMONG LOCAL FANS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO BECAME LOCAL SPORTSWRITERS.

¹ Meyer Gefsky Oral History, 1975, National Council of Jewish Women, Pittsburgh Section Records, 1894-2011, AIS.1964.40, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh (also available online at: https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt:ais196440.156/from_search/7e491a28446a81c7cc77a013f4abe66d-0).

² John Weaver, ed., *Kingsley House and the Settlement Movement* (Pittsburgh: Kingsley Association, 1933).

³ Cooper, Charles C., "Address of Charles C. Cooper, Resident Director, Kingsley House," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), April 7, 1911, 4-5.

⁴ Union of American Hebrew Congregations, *Statistics of the Jews of the United States* (Philadelphia,

1880), 16; "Directory of Jewish Organizations in the United States," *American Jewish Yearbook* 9 (1907-1908), 388; "Directory of Jewish Local Organizations in the United States," *American Jewish Yearbook* 21 (1919-1920), 555.

⁵ Jacob S. Feldman, *The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History, 1755-1945* (Pittsburgh: The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1986), 87.

⁶ *1900 United States Federal Census*, Pittsburgh Ward 11, Allegheny, Pennsylvania; Enumeration District: 0142, Page: 4.

⁷ "Death Takes John Coffey, 65," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 22, 1948, 6; "'Newsies' Rally for Red Cross," *Pittsburg Press*, May 26, 1918, 4.

⁸ "Coffey's Great Scoring Outfit," *Pittsburgh Sunday Post*, March 30, 1924, Section 3, Page 8.

⁹ The Pittsburgh Section National Council of Jewish Women, *By Myself I'm a Book: An Oral History of the Immigrant Jewish Experience in Pittsburgh* (Waltham, Mass: American Jewish Historical Society, 1972) 93-94.

¹⁰ "Protectory Juveniles Win," *Pittsburgh Sunday Post*, May 24, 1908, Section 3, Page 2.

¹¹ "Basketball Notes," *Pittsburg Press*, November 20, 1910, Sporting Section, Page 4.

¹² "Football Notes," *Pittsburg Press*, October 23, 1912, 19.

¹³ "Goldie and Zill Fight in Labor Temple Tonight," *Pittsburgh Post*, March 16, 1917, 11.

¹⁴ "Great Entry List For Boys' Big Meet," *Pittsburg Press*, May 11, 1913, Sporting Section, Page 7.

¹⁵ William Peet, "Treat Em Rough!" *Pittsburgh Post*, September 19, 1923, 12.

¹⁶ "Additional Society," *Pittsburg Press*, November 18, 1913, 10.

¹⁷ "Zionist Institute Athletics," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), November 13, 1914, 11; "Fair Tossers to Aid in Zionists' Opener," *Pittsburgh Post*, November 16, 1914, 10.

¹⁸ Barbara S. Burstin, *Steel City Jews: A History of Pittsburgh and its Jewish Community, 1840-1915*, (Pittsburgh, 2008) 302.

¹⁹ "Zionist Institute Athletics," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), November 13, 1914, 11.

²⁰ "Banquet of Coffey Club of Zion Council," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), May 14, 1915, 15.

²¹ "Zionist Council of Pittsburgh," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), August 6, 1915, 15.

²² "Zionists Notes," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), May 5, 1916, 17.

²³ "Zionist Notes," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), April 14, 1916, 17.

²⁴ "Additional Society," *Pittsburg Press*, November 18, 1913, 10.

²⁵ "Coffey Club Has Enjoyable Time at Annual Dinner," *Pittsburg Press*, May 3, 1917, 36.

²⁶ "College and School," *Pittsburg Press*, March 10, 1915, 28.

²⁷ "Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), May 5, 1916, 8; "Coffey Club Basketball Club," *Pittsburg Press*, April 23, 1916, Sporting Section, Page 8; "Basketball in Pennsylvania," *Reach Official*

Basket Ball Guide, 1916-1917 (Philadelphia: A. J. Reach Company, 1916) 64.

²⁸ "Combined Ball Teams Making Good Showing," *Pittsburg Press*, June 29, 1917, 40.

²⁹ "Coffey Ready for Season," *Pittsburg Press*, October 25, 1917, 32.

³⁰ Jacob S. Feldman, *The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History, 1755-1945* (Pittsburgh: The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1986), 126-128, 266-270.

³¹ J. Lewis Palley, "What the Pittsburgh Y. M. H. A. has Done and is Doing," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), June 27, 1919, 27, 29.

³² "Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), October 19, 1917, 13.

³³ "Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), November 16, 1917, 12-13.

³⁴ J. Lewis Palley, "What the Pittsburgh Y. M. H. A. has Done and is Doing," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), June 27, 1919, 27, 29.

³⁵ "Coffey Club Holds Stag Party in Honor of Draftee," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), September 28, 1917, 14; "Farewell Given Coffey Club Boy," *Pittsburg Press*, September 30, 1917, Sporting Section, Page 8.

³⁶ "Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), July 18, 1919, 19.

³⁷ "Jews to Raise \$135,000 for Philanthropies," *Pittsburgh Post*, January 24, 1918, 14; "Team Captains Representing Organizations," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), January 25, 1918, 6.

³⁸ "Proceedings of the Pittsburgh Nominating Convention, American Jewish Congress, May 13, 1917," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), May 25, 1917, 12.

³⁹ "Federation Drive a Success," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), February 8, 1918, 8-9.

⁴⁰ "Young Men's Hebrew Association of Pittsburgh," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), March 29, 1918, 16-17.

⁴¹ "Young Men's Hebrew Association of Pittsburgh," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), April 26, 1918, 6.

⁴² "Young Men's Hebrew Association of Pittsburgh," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), May 10, 1918, 16.

⁴³ "Y. M. H. A. Service Flag Contains 135 Stars," *Pittsburg Press*, January 28, 1918, 17.

⁴⁴ "Coffey Club Dedication Honor Boys in Service," *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, March 9, 1918, 10.

⁴⁵ David "Lefty" Abrams Papers, 1900-1955, MSS#536, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center.

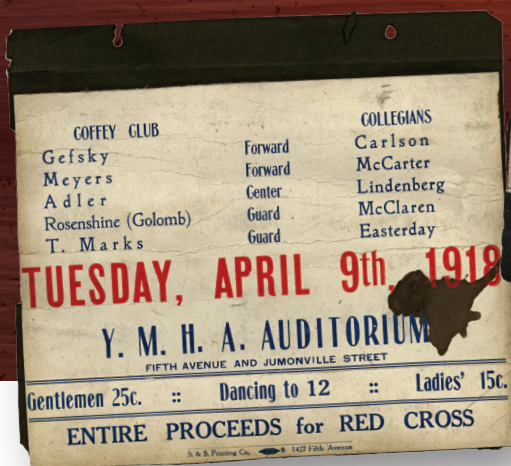
⁴⁶ "Strong Teams to Meet in Red Cross Benefit," *Pittsburg Press*, April 7, 1918, Sporting Section, Page 7.

⁴⁷ "Coffey Club to Celebrate Eighth Anniversary," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), December 13, 1918, 14; "Coffey Club Resumes Athletic Activities," *Pittsburgh Post*, December 20, 1918, 13.

⁴⁸ David "Lefty" Abrams Papers, 1900-1955, MSS#536, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center.

The Coffey Club closed out its war-hampered 1918 basketball season with a benefit game for the Red Cross. The team often used benefit games as a way to support local efforts.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives,
David "Lefty" Abrams Photographs, 1900-1920, MSP 536.



⁴⁹ "Coffey Club Secures Fine Playing Floor," *Pittsburgh Press*, December 24, 1918, 10.

⁵⁰ "Zionist District of Pittsburgh," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), April 4, 1919, 13; "Subscriptions to the Three Million Dollar Palestine Restoration Fund," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), May 23, 1919, 25; "The Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), October 3, 1919, 19.

⁵¹ Advertisement, *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), October 21, 1921, 21.

⁵² "Coffey Club Acquires Possession of Montefiore Auditorium," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), October 14, 1921, 17.

⁵³ "Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), October 28, 1921, 35.

⁵⁴ Coffey Club of Pittsburgh charter, Allegheny County Charter Book, Vol. 57, 347-349.

⁵⁵ "Coffey Club Acquires Possession of Montefiore Auditorium," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), October 14, 1921, 17.

⁵⁶ "Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), October 28, 1921, 35; "The Coffey Club," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), December 5, 1919, 23.

⁵⁷ "Greater Pittsburgh Amateur Floor League," *Pittsburgh Press*, December 16, 1923, Sporting Section, Page 6.

⁵⁸ The Amateur Athletic Union temporarily blacklisted the Coffey Club in 1916 by labeling it a "professional team," suggesting that the Coffey Club was paying players years before it went semi-pro (John T. Taylor, "Notes of the Local Amateur Athletes," *Pittsburgh Press*, January 23, 1916, Sporting Section, Page 6). A later article claimed that these blacklists had been a recurring problem for the Coffey Club (Bob Lewis, "Y. M. H. A. to meet Sphas Thursday," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), January 7, 1936, 27).

⁵⁹ Meyer Gefsky Oral History, 1975, National Council of Jewish Women, Pittsburgh Section Records, 1894-2011, AIS.1964.40, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

⁶⁰ "The Coffey Club of Pittsburgh, Pa.," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), April 23, 1920, 9.

⁶¹ *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, February 13, 1921, Third Section, Page 6; David "Lefty" Abrams Papers, 1900-1955, MSS#536, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center.

⁶² "Coffey Club's New Home," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), December 5, 1924, 34.

⁶³ "Coffey Club Gives Up Its Basketball Team," *Pittsburgh Press*, November 2, 1925, 24.

⁶⁴ "Coffey Club Explains Action in Transferring to Amerita Franchise," *Pittsburgh Sunday Post*, November 8, 1925, Section 3, Page 4.

⁶⁵ "Kingsley House Ready," *Pittsburgh Press*, November 16, 1925, 23.

⁶⁶ "Coffey Club Loses," *Pittsburgh Press*, March 21, 1930, 63; "Old Coffey Club Bows to Y. M. H. A.," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 27, 1931, 19; "Y. M. H. A. Quintet Meets Old-Timers," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 24, 1932, 15.

⁶⁷ "All-time Jewish Team Named," *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pa.), March 22, 1935, 20.

⁶⁸ Vito Stellino, "Al Abrams Dies at 73 of Heart Attack," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 4, 1977, 1, 5.

⁶⁹ Al Abrams, "Sidelight on Sports," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 12, 1973, 16.

⁷⁰ Al Abrams, "Sidelight on Sports," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 20, 1966, 25.

⁷¹ Al Abrams, "Sidelight on Sports," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 19, 1949, 14; Al Abrams, "Sidelight on Sports," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 16, 1968, 8.

⁷² Records of the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame of Western Pennsylvania, 1982-1998, MSS#308, Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center.