



## NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

### A Fountain of Memories

The Northeast Fountain across from Allegheny General Hospital is a traffic stopper. From the street, people seated on the simple benches and children skipping around the graceful arcs of water create a tableau reminiscent of the past century. As I wait to make the turn onto Cedar Avenue, I always yearn to pull over and join the bench sitters.

The fountain is the reincarnation of a former fountain that held down that corner 100 years ago. The main jet sends a spray 10 feet high, rather than 70 feet as the original did, and smaller jets join in just below. The water is recycled, instead of sent off to the sewer, as the original did. The fountain setting is sedate and calming, though at night, when colored lighting makes the water dance, it gets pretty exciting.

The renewed fountain evolved from the work of a small neighborhood group who wanted to make a few improvements in the park, repairing the lighting and tidying up the landscaping. One thing led to another but now the city's oldest park, created from a common

grazing area in 1867, is getting needed attention.

Meg Cheever, president of the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, who guided many park projects in the city, was part of that initial group. In 1997, she invited Patricia Rooney to join in the Commons project. The request was serendipitous—the Rooneys had just moved back to the North Side to live in Dan Rooney's childhood home on the North Side.

"For me, that was like heaven," said Patricia Rooney. She had grown up on the North Side, with the park at her front door. "There was an alley behind St. Peter's Church with maybe six row houses. Each one had a family of at least eight children, and we had 10 children in our family."

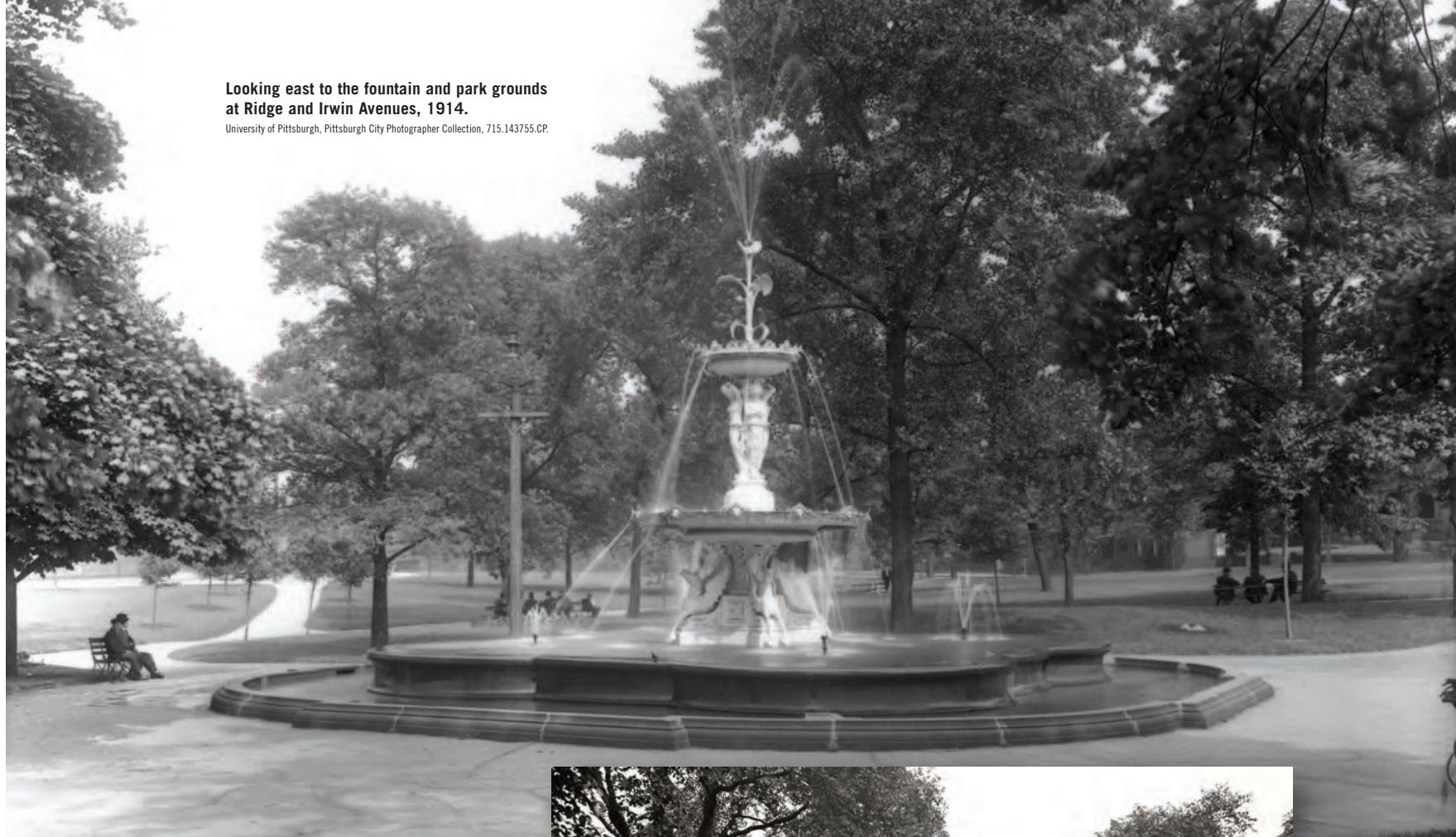


**The fountain in Allegheny City, 1890.**  
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, P-4655



**Looking east to the fountain and park grounds at Ridge and Irwin Avenues, 1914.**

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, 715.143755.CP.



It was the 1930s and it's easy to picture this first daughter, second child of 10, redheaded, freckled, turned up nose, skipping over to the park with her younger siblings in tow, leaving mother free to do the washing.

"Our neighbors were large Irish families, like us," recalled Patricia. "All our dads did construction work and when there was work, everything was wonderful. When they didn't work—times were hard in the '30s—we depended on the nuns and other people who helped us out. It was just a wonderful community, everyone looked out for the children. In the summer, there was a crafts program for children near Lake Elizabeth as well as crafts around Lake Elizabeth. We played many board games, I remember learning to play Parcheesi at the time."

"There was another place we liked and we called it the Greenhouse [a plant conservatory donated by Henry Phipps that later morphed into the Aviary]. My aunt took me there after



**The West Park Conservatory with gardens and sundial, 1937.**

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, 715.373353.CP.

my first Holy Communion, and I remember how warm and humid it was, with all those big plants in there. And the library! Remember the library before it got struck by lightning? We would go down these creaky iron steps to the basement every Saturday for story hour. You didn't need babysitters, everyone looked out for each other."

After the children took swimming lessons at Allegheny High School, behind their home, they were safe to swim in Lake Elizabeth in the

park. "That was our pool, and in the winter, we skated on it. At the west end of the park near the train tracks, there is a nice mound where we used to sled ride. We knew all the families that were there. That park was 100 percent used when we were young."

Patricia Rooney's husband, Dan, grew up in the same neighborhood, and both attended St. Peter's Church and grade school. "When we were first married, Dan coached the St. Peter's grade school football team. They practiced





Fountain today.  
Photo by Bette McDevitt.



Patricia Rooney.  
Pittsburgh Steelers.

in the evening in a little spot near Gus and Yiayia's ice ball stand. He did that for 14 years, and Mike Hayden was his quarterback one year. Dan said he chose him for that position because he was smart." General Mike Hayden later became director of both the CIA and the National Security Agency.

After upkeep of the park languished, a master plan for its entire restoration was created in 2002 by Marion Pressley, a landscape architect from Boston. Still, it would be almost two more decades before the fountain would be completed.

"So we worked on our master plan," said Patricia Rooney, "starting on Cedar Avenue across from the Giant Eagle. It was a lot of work getting permits from the city, hiring contractors, and fund-raising. We got up to the corner, where we wanted to rebuild the fountain that used to be there, and we learned that when you mention 'fountain' to prospective donors, you get no response. I asked some donors why that happened, and they said it's because fountains break and need repaired, so we learned to say 'park' or 'Conservancy' instead of 'fountain' when we asked for money." The Conservancy took care of that by raising enough funds to account for future maintenance and repair.

In 2017, the Allegheny Commons Initiative neighborhood group and the North


Side Leadership Conference joined with the non-profit Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, which oversaw fundraising, project design, and construction of the fountain restoration. Over the past 20 years, the Conservancy spearheaded capital improvements for Pittsburgh's four major parks, as well as projects in neighborhood parks.

Patricia Rooney worked with both the Allegheny Commons Initiative and the Parks Conservancy: "It was a wonderful learning experience, finding out about excavations, permits, approvals. We had to go before the Historic Review Commission, and that was a bit intimidating. At these early park meetings and throughout the whole process we were led by Tom Barbush, another North Side Resident. Tom's dedication and skills allowed us to keep moving forward."

And they had to ask for money, lots of it. The estimated cost of the fountain was \$2.5 million. "I asked corporations and foundations for money, people my husband and I knew, as did all of us working on this." Erin Tobin, a staff person from the Conservancy, interjected a story that Patricia Rooney was probably too modest to tell. "At home Steelers games, there is a 50/50 raffle that benefits local charities and Mrs. Rooney was able to have the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy become the charity of choice for one of these raffles. We at the Parks

Conservancy had no idea she had done this until she emailed me one day to let me know. "We just got \$55,000!" she said. We were thrilled and so grateful for her securing even more funding for the project."

When it came to the construction of the fountain, there was no written information from the past; no specs, so to speak. The old fountain had been destroyed in the 1960s, a victim of urban renewal that swept through the North Side. The group had to rely on old photos to replicate the design. On the new one, four ornamental beds of shrubs, herbaceous perennials, and bulbs hug the fountain's stone rim, just like the old one but better because environmental concerns were taken into consideration.

Patricia Rooney's family heard much about "the fountain" over 20 years. When they go by the corner, they are apt to say "Oh look, Mom's fountain is on!" "I hope," said Patricia Rooney, "it brings people a lot of joy." It would seem so. 

**Bette McDevitt** is a freelance writer and a longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.