



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Progressive History of Pittsburgh

I never met Jennie Bradley Roessing, but I would like to have done so. Our paths could have crossed; she died in 1963, just as things were heating up for various causes. Jennie was a leading suffragist here in Allegheny County, and, imagine this, she drove a “Liberty Truck” to all 67 counties in the state to speak about women’s rights in 1915. The truck had a full size replica of the Liberty Bell on top, with the clapper tied down, to signify that freedom would not ring out until women had the vote.

But I know about Jennie because Anne Lynch, who has always loved history, wrote a small book titled, *On This Day in Pittsburgh’s Progressive History*. It is in the style of Howard Zinn’s concept of history, as Anne describes it, “free of rote memorization that makes history so dreaded in most schools, as opposed to delving deep into the backgrounds and understanding why things happen.” The book is formatted as a daily journal, telling the reader about a person born on a given day who had an impact or an event on that date that dealt with social justice.

I look at the history of protests, of actions, of people being ‘firsts’ or near firsts at something, such as the first woman graduate, first Black doctor, and events and people that have had impact greater than just on themselves and their communities. And there are journalists who have uncovered injustices, and that work became the basis of new policies



Women transporting the Liberty Bell for Suffrage through Washington, D.C., 1916.
LoC H261-6148.

such as Nellie Bly and her uncovering the treatment of women in mental health facilities. But I also like focusing on small acts of resistance, too—things that can show people today how one person can make a difference.

Anne began paying attention to history (especially Greek history and mythology) when she was very young. She didn’t question much until 6th grade. “My geography teacher made some demonstrably false statements, like all of Asia being above the Equator. At that moment, I realized that teachers could be mistaken. I didn’t immediately start doubting everything I was taught, but if something sounded outlandish, I started researching for myself.” An essential tool, she called it, that has served her well.

Mrs. Roessing, Suffrage Pioneer, Dies

She Drove Truck Over State in 1915 For Women’s Vote

Mrs. Jennie Bradley Roessing, a leader here in the crusade for women’s suffrage, died yesterday (May 15) at her home in the Ruskin Apartments, Oakland. She was a distinguished daughter of Pennsylvania in 1860. As president of the state Women’s Suffrage Association in 1913, Mrs. Roessing drove a truck carrying a replica of the Liberty Bell to county seats throughout the state. She used the bell, its clapper tied back, to illustrate

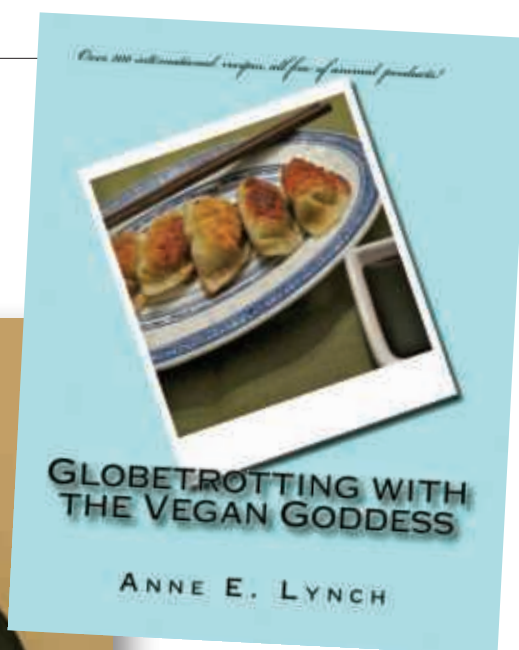
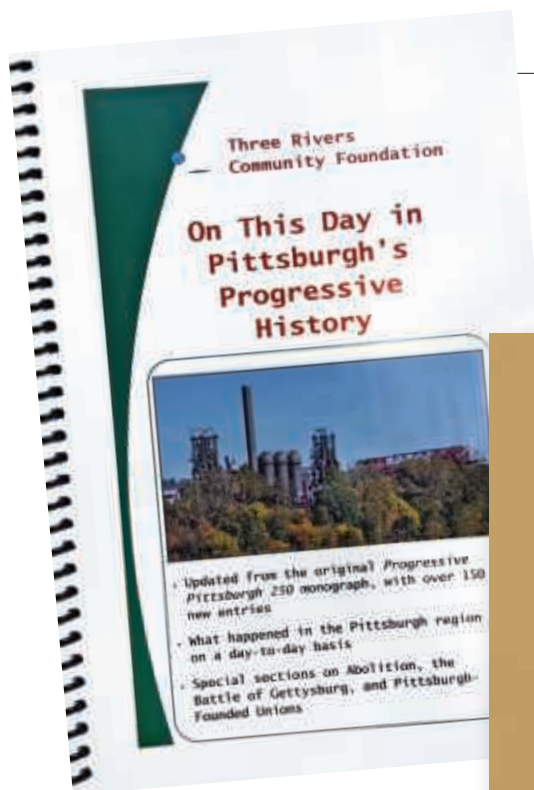


MRS. J. B. ROESSING
Fought for women’s suffrage.
Her speeches for women’s right to vote.

Death notice for Jennie Bradley Roessing, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 16, 1963.
newspapers.com

She came to Pittsburgh to study anthropology and history at Pitt, and has been here since. She has as much passion for cooking, as she does for history, having started in the kitchen with her mother when she was two, with Christmas cookies. Opening a vegan restaurant is always in the back of her mind, but her position as director of the Three Rivers Community Foundation, for the last two years, is also a consuming passion.

We talked a little about how history might be taught, to avoid the boredom and blank faces. Anne spoke about the limitations and obstacles faced by teachers. “What is taught in schools is really, at best, a brief skim of history. It’s hard to speculate, as there are so many guidelines, curricula, and state mandates that



Anne and her two books.
All photos courtesy of Anne Lynch.

teachers have to meet. I think if students were allowed to go deeper and research things that really fascinated them, history wouldn't have the stigma of being such a dry, boring subject. If I were a history teacher, I would try to encourage this independent study."

The recent attention paid to World War II in the media has brought history center stage, with films, music, and novels. I asked Anne if she thought the stories would live on, or will it be just one more war relegated to a series of dates and deaths.

We do have folks still alive who were around for it and they are increasingly making sure their stories are told. Journalists have always followed wars, but I feel that WWII was the first time that journalists truly embedded themselves with troops on a wide scale. And with

photography and videography becoming more and more available, I think the people back home got to "see" more of WWII than wars prior to it. But these recent wars—Vietnam, Iraq, Korea, or pick whichever country we've been at war with since—are important parts of modern history that very often don't get covered in high school classes.

Anne referred to her own high school history class, where Vietnam came at year's end. "We had roughly a week left of classes before summer, so our teacher gave us a list of topics and had us each choose one to research, then the last week we gave those presentations. While I appreciated the chance to really dive deep into a topic, there was no overarching context to put the individual topics into, and since we presented in no particular order,

important connections got lost in the jumble. The stories of the soldiers in those wars matter just as much—particularly Vietnam, which had the effect of making many more people question war than any conflict beforehand."

Anne has continued her narrative on Facebook, with a page called Progressive History of Pittsburgh, because, as she said, history is always coming to light, and being made anew. Anne welcomes suggestions from all. After all, it is a people's history. 🌟

To purchase copies of Anne's books, check Amazon.com or contact her at: alynch@threeriverscommunity.org. A \$10 donation is appreciated.

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