



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

The School for the Deaf Started with One Child

Kathleen W. Buechel in her book, *A Gift of Belief, Philanthropy and the Forging of Pittsburgh*, points out that the term philanthropy summons images of titans of industry bestowing gifts upon the less fortunate, but, as she illustrates, the term also embraces the stories of individuals providing resources for the public good. It was philanthropy, in this fullest sense of the term, that brought the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (WPSD) into being.

In 1868, a young boy, Henry Bell, showed up at the Third United Presbyterian Church on



Henry Bell, the school's first student, 1869.

All photos courtesy of Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf except where noted.

Franklin Street in Pittsburgh for the Mission Sabbath School. Henry was bright and active, and he was deaf. No one knew how to communicate with him. The pastor, Reverend John Genmill Brown, took this as a challenge and reached out to William Drum, a deaf graduate of the Pennsylvania Institution, a school for the deaf in Philadelphia, to work with Henry. This would be a turning point in both Henry and Reverend Brown's life.

Rev. Brown saw that Drum, using the manual alphabet (using finger positions to shape letters) and sign language, made progress with Henry. Eight more deaf children joined the class. Brown received a grant of \$800 from the Board of Education to use a classroom in a public school on Short Street to educate deaf children. This classroom became the first day school for deaf children in the United States, according to Harry Lang's book, *A Pictorial History of the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf*.

As more parents learned of the school, the number of students increased to more than 25. Children who came from a distance needed a residence and meals so with funds provided by the city of Pittsburgh, the school moved to larger and more accessible locations—first on Short Street, then on Grant Street, then Wylie Avenue, and Turtle Creek. In these locations, the children had accommodations with a live-in supervisor as well as a classroom. But the crowded, unheated buildings were far from comfortable; a visitor from the school for the deaf in Illinois said Pittsburgh's school was "in pitiable condition and assured the teachers that



A classroom in the new School for the Deaf.



Women participating in a sewing class.

the school was doomed to failure and disappointment," according to Lang. The Turtle Creek location was a former hotel, owned by Rev. Brown's father.

In 1870, James Kelly, of Wilkins Township, offered to give 10 acres of land adjoining the Pennsylvania Railroad station in Edgewood to build a school and housing for deaf children. He called for others to join in the effort, and pledges soon topped \$1,500 more than the requested amount.

However, an obstacle in their path, literally, was the Pennsylvania Railroad, which had a right of way through the proposed acreage and refused to vacate the land. A 12-year legal struggle ensued with the railroad, ending in 1882 when the railroad purchased the disputed acreage, and the school used the funds to purchase 16 more acres of land in addition to the acreage donated by Mr. Kelly. The Pittsburgh community would finally have



Teacher Theresa Rolshouse supervising children tending to a garden plot, 1943–44 school year.
Colorized.

its residential school for 120 deaf students in Edgewood, providing vocational education and academics.

Construction began the following year on a four-story building to house living quarters, classrooms, workshops for training students in a vocation, a dining room, and offices. There was an ongoing discussion in the educational community about teaching articulation (sometimes called oralism or speaking) versus sign language. The present-day consensus is to use any and all methods that work with the deaf or hard of hearing child.

Wealthy men such as George Westinghouse, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Clay Frick became supporters of the school. In addition, many working people contributed to the school, some through their churches and social groups. There were also grants from the Pennsylvania General Assembly, the city, and the school boards. The state gave the school \$60,000 dependent on the Board of Trustees matching the amount. The trustees, along with others, met the obligation and raised an additional \$19,000 from the public. At the first commencement in the new building, according to Lang's book:


a reporter wrote "Philanthropy could have no better reward for its noble

work." The reporter described the new Elizabethan building; "that towers in grandeur amid the hills which surround it and is fanned by the pure country breezes which waft around its walls. There were speech reading and speaking demonstrations, poems read in signs by the children, geography, arithmetic and language exercises, and a recitation on 'Choices of Trades' in which one of the little fellows declared that he would be President of the United States and 'fill all the offices with his cousins and his aunts.'"

In 1885, Rev. Brown, whose meeting with young Henry Bell began the movement for education for the deaf child, became the principal of the school.

In December 1899, 15 years after it was built, a fire of unknown origin traveling up through the elevator shafts and the dust chute destroyed the building that had "towered in grandeur." No lives were lost, and the school

resumed classes on a modified schedule in the remaining buildings. A new building, designed by the distinguished deaf architect Olaf Hanson, opened in 1901.

In keeping pace with educational changes in the field of deaf education, WPSD would later build a state-of-the-art television studio and Learning Center. Its Math, Science, and Technology Center is one of the finest in the area. Today approximately 200 deaf and hard of hearing students, from age 3 through 12th grade, both residential and commuters, receive a high-quality and tuition-free education. They hold their own when they move on to higher education or enter a profession or trade. As Harry Lang wrote, students "have excelled in a wide range of careers and have proved that 'deaf people can do anything except hear.'" 

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The school moved to its current location in Edgewood, east of Pittsburgh, in 1884, postcard c. 1940.
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