

## HISTORIC SIGNS

By Jennifer Lynne Baron

### Alvin's Jewelry Shoppe

The neon sign announcing Alvin's Jewelry Shoppe combines a clock, a snappy palette, asymmetric lines, and bold uppercase type that suggests the services within. It has graced 302 Forbes Avenue in Pittsburgh for a half-century, and founder Alvin Isadore Lippard, if he were alive, would only be surprised that the clock has stopped working.

Lippard's career began when his father, Latvian immigrant Abe Lippard, falsified the birth date on his driver's license application.<sup>1</sup> This was done to hasten his only son's foray into the family business — Lippard's Army Navy Store — located along the Hill District's thriving Wylie Avenue. At age 15, Alvin delivered storage trunks, the type used by immigrants traveling by ship to the U.S., from the running board of a Willys-Knight automobile.<sup>2</sup>

Lippard received undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Pittsburgh, but felt he could not support his family with a law career during the Depression. In 1932, the self-taught watchmaker and coin collector opened Alvin's Jewelry Shoppe at 330 Forbes Avenue (then Diamond Street) in a 15-by-15-foot lobby space of the Newsreel Theater. For 17 years, Alvin's diminutive storefront shared electricity, restrooms, and closets with the movie house.<sup>3</sup>

Settled within "The Diamond District," named not for jewelry stores but because it extended eastward from the Diamond

Market and the old diamond or town square, Alvin's was part of the bustling atmosphere, animated lights, and thriving businesses that made Forbes Avenue a counterpart to New York City's 42nd Street. Lippard sustained his business for over 50 years, supported two ill sisters, and put four children through college. His neighbors included Frank and Seder Department Store, Jaffe's Casino, and The Wheel Cafe.

Lippard shared his new profession with as many as 20 additional Pittsburgh jewelers, including Steven's, Roberts, S.H. deRoy, Paramount's, and Herbert's. When Herbert's went out of business in 1950, Lippard purchased its modern neon sign, which coincided with Alvin's relocation to a larger shop at 302 Forbes. Lippard's son Thomas, who worked at Alvin's on Saturdays and during summers, recalls his father boasting he ran 11 departments, including watch, clock, electric razor and lighter repair, cuff links and tie bars for men, and costume jewelry for women.<sup>4</sup>

Lippard had a playful sense of humor: On his shop's facade, next to the acronym "PAN" that announced his affiliation with the Pennsylvania Association



Alvin's in 1972. Collection of Thomas Lippard

of Numismatists, he painted the letters "MSC", which according to Lippard legend, meant *Mishgawain Sour Climb*.<sup>5</sup> He displayed numerous curios inside his shop, including a framed quotation hand-titled "My Damn Watch!" Still on view today, and believed authored by Lippard, the words provide a succinct meditation on timepieces:

"I wonder if any of us realize, as we display and sell watches daily, the wonders



Alvin's Jewelry Shoppe, 302 Forbes Avenue. Jennifer Baron



of this magnificent piece of mechanism — this very unusual piece of life that gives service to all of us.... Of all the mechanical devices I have come in contact [with] in my lifetime, I cannot think of any other people have come to assume must give them accurate and constant service. Certainly it is not expected of the automobile, the refrigerator, the oil burner, or radio — nor of any other device that we handle daily.”

While nearby Roberts Jewelers catered to the upper-class “carriage trade,” Alvin’s grew with the support of blue-collar patrons, many referred by neighboring proprietors.

city. You would walk the streets at noon or midnight and it would be body to body.”<sup>6</sup> Neon from the Warner Theatre, George Aiken’s, Dutch Henry’s Restaurant, McCrory’s, Cinerama, and Leonard’s Barber Shop would have lined the streets, joining with the Shoppe clock’s glow.

Alvin’s sign, converted from Herbert’s more than a half-century ago, still hovers over Forbes between Smithfield and Wood streets, protected under a grandfather clause. (Present legislation deems overhanging signs suspended by chains hazardous.) It embodies a classic neon amalgamation of illumination,



**Alvin Lippard in his shop,**  
**April 1938.** Collection of Thomas Lippard



**Lippard's Army Navy Store, 615-617 Wylie Avenue, 1909.** Collection of Thomas Lippard

Bill Roberts, great-grandson of Roberts founder, recalls Lippard’s meticulous attention to detail as he tested every repaired watch on his shop’s “watch board” for a one-week monitoring period before returning the timepiece to his customer. Roberts, who worked at his family’s business from 1955-1998, remembers Pittsburgh at the start of his 43-year career as “a jumping

advertising, and design that, though weathered, continues to impress sign enthusiasts today with its bright color scheme and contrasting, angled shapes.

Sandwiched today between Gabriel Shoe Repair and Cardamone’s Salon (formerly Leonard’s Barber Shop), Alvin’s is owned and operated by a stepson of an original employee, whom Alvin took under his wing.

Though the clock’s hands remain still, “Mr. Alvin,” as he was known up and down Diamond Street, remains in lights today thanks to the distinct glow of neon.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Thomas Lippard, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, January 2, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Roberts, from a conversation with the author. Roberts Jewelers opened downtown in 1832 on Market Street, and in 1928, moved to the corner of Forbes Avenue and Wood Street. The neon Roberts sign, still visible at this intersection today, dates to the late 1930s.

<sup>7</sup> Obituary of Alvin Lippard, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2004.