Legacy

Above: Bancroft Farm prior to 1948.
Miller Collection, Meadowcroft Archives

A glimpse of 19th-century rural life
at Meadowcroft today. Lara Hershey

Opposite page: 1865 stone gate post, Meadowcroft.
Heather Mull
Since prehistoric times, people have adapted to the land and shaped their environment in order to survive and build a better life. The story of people on the land in Western Pennsylvania is explored at Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Museum of Rural Life.

**OF THE LAND**

Meadowcroft is the result of a vision shared by two brothers, Albert (1911-1999) and Delvin (1913-1996) Miller, who valued their heritage and wanted to understand the lives of the people who walked, cleared, plowed, and mined the ground that is ours today. The museum, which encompasses 276 acres in Washington County, is home to a collection of 19th-century rural vernacular buildings and material culture as well as the 16,000-year-old Meadowcroft Rockshelter.

The Miller family, relative newcomers to the New World, settled in Washington County in 1795 after emigrating from Donegal, Ireland.1 Bancroft Farm, as the home place became known, was improved over five generations and remained in the Miller family for 205 years. Albert and Delvin were the fifth generation: they came to live on the farm after losing their father to the great flu epidemic of 1918. Along with their younger brother Orrin and sister Margaret, they were raised at Bancroft.

It was at Bancroft that Albert developed a love of farming and the outdoors while Delvin learned his remarkable skills of horsemanship. As boys, they worked the farm and spent thousands of hours training and exercising the Standardbred harness racing horses raised by their grandfather and uncle. When their grandfather died in 1929, the farm housed 135 horses.

Delvin pursued a career of training, driving, and breeding harness racing horses. He entered his first professional race at Burgettstown, Pennsylvania, in 1929 at age 15. Years later, with the onset of World War II, Delvin proudly served his country and applied his horsemanship to the war effort as a 1st Sergeant for the Army’s 475th Quartermaster Remount Troop in the China-Burma-India Theater. Younger brother Orrin lost his life in this war, serving aboard an Air Force bomber that was shot down in 1944 over Budapest.2 After the war, Delvin’s career accelerated. By 1962, he’d founded...
Meadows Racetrack in Meadow Lands, Pennsylvania, and went on to become the sport's "Goodwill Ambassador," promoting harness racing around the world.

Albert was a student of history and nature. In his spare time, he indulged his passion for learning by reading. Even while exercising his grandfather's horses, he had a book in his hands. Albert graduated from Kiski Preparatory School in 1932, but because of the Depression was unable to go on to college. He eventually assumed management of the farm, keeping the operation productive during the war and even raising an International Champion Dorset ram in 1946. (It is not known why Albert was not drafted; perhaps he was deferred to manage the farm.) The farm prospered, and Albert continued to develop and improve the land and livestock by employing progressive agricultural practices for which he received numerous conservation awards.

From his study of history and the land, Albert developed an interest in the native people who preceded his Western Pennsylvania roots. "As a teenaged boy it was work the soil that allowed. I was thrilled st arrowhead.... My the story behind the lie interested in the iy one relief from the wark was watching for that thrill of discovery led Albert to continue his exploration:

On the southern end of our farm was a cliff.... In the back of my mind was the persistent thought, "The Indians must have used this rock shelter." I hesitated to make even a "test hole," thinking I should someday have a professional do some probing. However on Nov. 12, 1955, when I walked up through that site I saw that a groundhog had made a new hole. I then went home for a screen and a long-handled shovel. I proceeded to dig a hole about 15" across down through where the groundhog had already disturbed. As I dug, I screened. About 12" down I realized I was coming up with burnt bone and flint, which I knew was Indian. At about 30" I found a complete Indian-made flint knife. This material I put into a plastic bag, then proceeded to put all the soil back as it was.... I never told another person knowing that if word got out, pick and shovel "pot hunters" would quickly destroy the archaeological value of this rock shelter. An archaeological site is like reading a book written long ago. Pot hunters looking for something of monetary value would proceed to destroy these unread pages.

In 1973, Albert's desire to have professional archaeologists investigate his site became a reality, and over the past 33 years the Meadowcroft Rockshelter has been the object of intense multidisciplinary study. This examining is part of a scientific quest that began over a century ago to answer the even older questions of "Who were the first Americans?" and "Where did they come from?"
croft Rockshelter, with its evidence of a prehistoric human presence in Western Pennsylvania, became part of the quest thanks to this erudite farmer. It was his discovery and prudent stewardship of the site that made it accessible for scientific study.

During the 18 years between the initial discovery and the professional excavation of the Rockshelter, Albert was busy with another project: reclaiming a portion of the farm that had been heavily altered by a coal mining operation. In the early years of the 20th century, his grandfather had sold part of his property to the Jefferson Coal and Coke Company, which began a deep mine to remove the coal. Just prior to World War II, the remaining coal was quickly removed through strip mining, drastically changing the landscape. The Miller brothers purchased the land in order to bring it back within the Bancroft farm boundary. The reclamation effort required experimenting with many types of trees to learn which would survive in the spoiled ground. When all was said and done, the patient process of restoring the landscape was underway, and the roots of more than 300,000 young saplings took hold to stabilize the new terrain.

As this new growth took hold, the Millers redeveloped the strip-mined site as “Camp Meadowcroft,” a place where scout and church youth groups could camp and learn about history and the natural environment. A concern for preserving their heritage prompted the Millers to begin collecting examples of rural architecture that were threatened by progress and neglect. The first of many historic structures moved to the recovering land was the Pine Bank Covered Bridge brought from neighboring Greene County. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation planned to replace the nearly century-old bridge, so in 1962 the brother’s request to dismantle and relocate it was granted, and an outdoor museum was born.

In the following years, the fledgling museum known as “Meadowcroft Village” took shape with the addition of other buildings. A barn slated for demolition on state game lands was adapted to house a collection of country store materials. From their own farm the brothers decided to move the log house constructed by their great-great-grandfather c. 1800, as well as the c. 1835 one-room
schoolhouse that they had both attended until its last day of class in 1921.

By 1969, Meadowcroft Village and its collection of 19th-century artifacts reached a level that suggested it should be open for public visitation. The non-profit Meadowcroft Foundation was established to administer the operation and take ownership of a 198-acre parcel carved out of Bancroft Farm to surround the village. Albert made a trip that year to Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, one of the nation's leading outdoor museums, to gather ideas and seek technical advice.

Meadowcroft Village continued to grow through the nationwide museum boom spurred by the bicentennial, but when the Miller brothers approached the age of 80, they were concerned for its future success in an increasingly competitive environment. In 1993, they invited the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania to consider a merger of the two organizations. That invitation led to a seven-year partnership and eventually to a merger in May 2000. Now, as one of the museums of the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Museum of Rural Life continues to preserve and share the heritage of rural Western Pennsylvania.

Most of Bancroft Farm remains intact with the exception of 275 acres designated for Meadowcroft and the land the mining company built employee housing on. It is no longer held by the Millers but is privately owned. The second house, built on the property in 1840, is still there and used for hired help. Several barns also remain at Bancroft.

Today's visitor to Meadowcroft has the opportunity to explore 16,000 years of our region's history. Before the architects of the great Egyptian pyramids were born, before the first Roman emperor ruled, before the first stone was laid by the Incas at Machu Picchu, the first Americans took shelter at Meadowcroft. The layer-by-layer evidence of the site documents thousands of years of use beginning with remains of campfires built to warm weary travelers and remnants of the food they ate there. Standing at the site today and looking at the creek flowing below, the view is of a valley largely unchanged since the time it was first encountered. Visitors can put themselves in the place of these ancient families who gathered fruit from the pawpaw trees, picked blackberries, and collected shellfish from the water. This new National Historic Landmark provides a fascinating look at the lives of these prehistoric people and remains an important scientific resource for understanding how and when the first people entered the New World.
A visit to the museum also includes experiencing vignettes of 19th-century rural life in Meadowcroft Village. The buildings preserved and relocated by the Millers still serve as a stage to relate the story of Western Pennsylvania's rural past. The quiet, wooded surroundings assist the imagination in hearing a horse-drawn wagon rumble through the covered bridge only to be interrupted by the bell at the one-room school beckoning students of all ages to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and read from McGuffey's Readers. A glowing, red-hot iron taking shape under the blacksmith's hammer is enough to arouse the childlike curiosity of every visitor. Those who like to roll up their sleeves can play 19th-century children's games, try spinning wool, or take a turn at stirring the kettle of simmering apple butter. Everyone will enjoy browsing the shelves of the country store collection or walking among the horse-drawn vehicles.

The story of Meadowcroft continues to develop with plans for increasing accessibility, upgrading visitor services, and providing better protection and interpretation of the Rockshelter site. The centerpiece of these improvements will be a roof over the Rockshelter excavation. Protecting the site from damaging elements in order to preserve it for future study is imperative, but this rugged location presents a challenging building site. It requires that the roof be anchored to, yet blended with, the rock cliff face. The building must also provide a visitor-friendly environment suitable for groups ranging from a bus full of fourth grade students to carloads of weekend travelers.

The Meadowcroft landscape has supported those who have come here for 16 millennia. For the small bands of prehistoric travelers bold enough to press into the unknown wilderness, for the Scots-Irish immigrants who opened the land for farming, and for the coal miners who reaped a harvest below it, this land is the common bond. If you listen, there is a fascinating story of history here, and Meadowcroft is the perfect place to tell it.

David Scofield, director of Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Museum of Rural Life, has been with the History Center since 1993.