East Allegheny, (now part of the North Side), sometimes known as Deutschtown, is one of Pittsburgh's many little pockets, reaching from a few blocks above Allegheny General Hospital south to the Ninth Street Bridge. The western edge borders on Allegheny Commons and ends at East Street, with the concrete maze of Interstate 279.

This small, spirited neighborhood cares very much about restoration, and the renaissance of a building within its midst, a building born as blacksmith shop over 100 years ago, illustrates the best of what can happen when individuals and institutions cooperate.

Yet, the building revealed its history only slowly and with coaxing.

Jen Saffron, Bob Baumbach, and their sons, Leo and Eli, often passed the empty building with the “for sale” sign at the northeast corner of Middle and Suismon streets, a few blocks from where they live. The history of the building—even its function—was unknown, but they wanted to invest in their neighborhood and this looked like a starting place. The tall windows and clean lines called out to them: “It clearly needed some love,” recalls Jen.

This couple had exactly the skills needed to bring the structure to life. Bob is an architect who formerly worked for Landmark Design Associates. “What I do for a living is look at old buildings and tear down that which was not, and make it what it was again.”

Jen is a teacher of photography at the University of Pittsburgh and understands the value of research and archiving. They
share an interest in neighborhood restoration and preservation, and live in a house they are restoring.

"When we went through with the realtor and our boys," said Bob, "and saw the space and the natural light and that nothing had been messed with too much inside; it got us excited about having a modern work space inside an old building. It wasn't the most attractive space with the painted walls and partitions, but the sunlight... We knew that it would still be here after we did some things."

Before they bought it, they knew only that the building was owned by heirs of a chocolate factory, which operated there starting in the 1940s. "The candy folks had bricked up the building," says Bob, "and essentially turned their backs on the outside world. They were a wholesale business, and this was not a retail outlet."

Jen explains, "We kept our intentions rather quiet, but one day, before the closing date, we were sitting on the church steps with our boys, across the street from the building, just looking at it. One of the neighbors asked what we were doing. We told him of our plans and the word was out on the street."

Nick Kyraizi, neighborhood preservationist and Barbara Burns, a collector of memorabilia, came up with a clipping from the North Hills Record, dated August 26, 1978, showing a vintage photo of a building as a blacksmith shop with a prominent sign: "John Schmittdel Horseshoer."

"That gave us a new direction," says Bob. With the name of John Schmittdel, he was able to go to the Allegheny City/Pittsburgh directories, and determine the building was probably built around 1866, and remained as a blacksmith shop until the 1920s.

This photo illustrates the importance of archiving. "People take it for granted that you can keep on reproducing photos," says Jen. "But in reality, people die, people move on, people throw stuff out. The reality is that photos do not live on. They don't know where the negatives are, or the negatives are not attached to the photograph."

Jen comes from a large Italian family, mindful of their ancestry. "At my family reunion, everybody brings photographs, not
Flynn's family gathers in front of the shop's restored doors. The blacksmith was Flynn's great grandfather. Sally Flynn's family: niece Kathy Podlesak, Sally Flynn, sister Lou Barton, great-niece Laura Podlesak, niece Linda Schu, Chris Gladish, and great-niece Callie Gladish.

Copies, real ones, and puts them in a pile... And then the old people sit by the table, and people bring them coffee and alcohol, and then the elders say 'this guy did this, this guy did that.' Then someone else turns over the photo, and writes 'This person is so-and-so, as identified by so-and-so.' ...all those old people, they are not going to live forever, and when they die, how are you gonna know?"

Jen learned a lot from the Schmittdiel photo: "Because the plate is so large, look at the detail. You can see the buttons on the man's vest... This photographer used a view camera, which weighs 50 pounds and would have required an enormous amount of setup work. The photographer had to do a lot of manipulation to make sure that the camera was going to record the image... he may have only wanted to shoot two or three to come up with what he thought might be the right exposure. He would be taking his head in and out of the hood behind the camera."

After seeing the photo, Bob researched old maps, informing him about the neighborhood in the 19th century. After contacting the Pittsburgh History and Landmark Association, Bob and Jen got a historical overview of the bustling business and supporting trades that had surrounded the blacksmith shop. Three related businesses were within a block of the shop: Gresbin & Sons Livery Stable at 25 Middle Street, Hack & Schwebel feed dealers on East Street, and Heinsel Carriage Factory. "You could think of the blacksmith as the mechanic of his day, since horses were the main mode of transportation," says Bob.

Jen adds, "We had, at that time, an integrated economy that met the needs of the people in the area... Part of this is that people walked everywhere. Zoning has really affected changes on this. It is unusual anymore that buildings like that have not been converted to residential... This project is as much about restoring the local economy as it is a building."

Allegheny City, as it was called before annexation by Pittsburgh in 1907, was the third largest municipality in the state, with a population of 150,000, primarily German immigrants, followed by Croats. A thriving business district stretched from Federal Street south to the river, and east along East Ohio Street to the Chestnut Street Bridge, now the 16th Street Bridge.

Two names accompanied the photo when it ran in the '70s, Grace Flynn and Alice Broerman, granddaughters of John Schmittdiel. Through a shot-in-the-dark phone call to the only Flynn in the area, Bob and Jen met up with Sally, of Bellevue, the
great-granddaughter of Sophia and John Schmittdiel, and Linda Schu, of the North Hills, the great-great-granddaughter. The Flynn family had the original photograph of the building printed in the North Hill Record, but, until the phone call—and this really makes the efforts worth it—did not know the location of the blacksmith shop.

Expressing his appreciation to the family of John and Sophia, Bob told them that they were one of the missing links in the story of the building. "You are famous, in my part of the world," he told them. "For so long, now, I've been living in the world of John Schmittdiel."

The next piece of information about the blacksmith shop came with similar serendipity through Dave Heckler, owner of Comfort Supply, a heating and air conditioning company. Bob says, "Dave told me that his father, Frank Heckler, who collected old invoices, might have one from the blacksmith shop. And he did! ...an invoice executed by Sophia Schmittdiel, dated January 1, 1884. It shows the purchase of 217 shoes and other accessories for $71.68 by Eberhart & Ober Brewing Company from October 3, 1883, to January 1, 1884. That building survives today as Penn Brewery. Bob wondered why the invoice was signed by Sophia, rather than John.

Sally Flynn had part of the answer: "My great grandfather had been murdered. His body was found in the river. That's all we know." Since Sally's family history has taken such an interesting turn, she's begun searching the Carnegie Library to find out more about John Schmittdiel's murder.

With the assurance that the building had historical significance, Jen and Bob applied for a Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive, which gives a 20 percent tax credit upon certified completion of the renovation.

As part of the restoration, Tom Romito of Primo Construction took down each brick of the arch above the carriage doors and repaired it. Two sets of majestic carriage doors with transom windows, which had been bricked over, were uncovered, dry rotted but intact, one set on Middle Street and one on Suismon. Using the original as models, Chuck Stein of Allied Millwork made new doors, and recreated gracious eight-feet-tall windows in Spanish cedar.

Some things had to be replaced. The Morris stove used to heat the building, "a clunk of cast iron with a gas pipe connected to it," as Bob described it, gave way to a heat pump hidden on the sloped roof behind a parapet wall. An instant water heater made by Rudd in 1908 was replaced with a new wall-hung version known as a tankless.

"We want to keep the space as simple and flexible as possible. We've defined all the walls there will be, and we will finish the concrete floor and leave the brick walls exposed," Bob says. He has done most of the renovations himself.

One day, as Bob was leaving, an older man stopped to chat. "It turned out to be the best day I ever had at the shop," says Bob. The man, in his 80s, remembered seeing the horses shoed when he was a child. "I remember the blacksmith in there, with his apron. He was a big-armed son of a gun," the man recalled. "He would shoe those horses and sometimes he would hit them in the wrong place, and those horses would kick him."

The future of the building is full of possibility. "The goal all along has been to offer as much flexibility as possible," says Bob. "If we don't use it ourselves, then we want someone to rent it, perhaps an artisan, a graphic designer, someone like ... a blacksmith." Until then, he's still looking for that man who appeared one day, with his vivid memories. He'd like to hear more about the days of clanging horseshoes.

Bette McDevitt previously wrote "Love Letters from a Chauffeur," "The Thomas Merton Center: Changing Lives One at a Time" and "Showstoppers" for this magazine.