Step inside Aliquippa's B.F. Jones Memorial Library; walk past the larger-than-life bronze statue of Mr. Jones in the foyer; turn left through the wrought iron screens; enter the reading room and slip into an original Windsor chair pulled up to an oak reading table; turn on a brass reading lamp, and it's time to settle in with a good book.

"Sometimes, young people who have moved to other communities come back and tell me, 'I thought all libraries would look like this!'" admits Mary Elizabeth Colombo, the library's director. The B.F. Jones Library has remained an anchor in this community that has been picking up the pieces and putting itself together since the closing of its steel mills in the 1980s. The long Italian Renaissance building of Indiana limestone, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is the gem of Aliquippa's Franklin Avenue. Elizabeth Horne, the daughter of B.F. Jones, founder of Jones and Laughlin Steel, donated the building in 1929 in honor of her father. It was not necessarily a case of unhealthy competition with Andrew Carnegie's libraries. The Aliquippa building is smaller in scale, and, more interestingly, Jones and Carnegie seem to have been friends, as revealed in small snippets still being uncovered.

Recently, when staff member Cindy Murphy opened a book, part of a collection kept in Colombo's office, she came upon history: "Here was the inscription," says Colombo. "To my friend, Benj. F. Jones, Esquire, with genuine respect and admiration, Andrew Carnegie, New York, May 18, 1894."

The book, Triumphant Democracy, was written by Carnegie, who admired Jones whose company had invented the process of cold rolling steel while he, Carnegie, was still a telegraph messenger boy. "Canny Carnegie made it his business to deliver all messages to Benjamin Franklin Jones," says Colombo, "who took a liking to him, and tipped 26 cents each time."

Leah Kennelly is a library regular. She brings her three children, Kevin, Sean, and Sophia, but she also came to story hour at this library as a child. Kennelly and her family moved back to the area after living eight years in Cincinnati. "It was the most difficult decision we ever made," she says. "But we wanted the children to grow up near their grandparents." Kennelly belongs to the "Friends of the Library," comes every week for story hour, and joined the adult book club, where they are reading J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books.

Ellen Hayduk, who volunteers in the toddler and adult departments, is a retired teacher and has been a patron for 40 years. "This library is so gorgeous!" she says. "I love to come here." She belongs to the Travel Club, which meets in the library and offers people a captive audience to hear about trips and look at photos.

Hayduk was around for the abrupt onset of flood waters on July 5, 2007, just after the restoration of the children's area on the ground floor had been completed. "The flood swept in... and, within an hour, deposited six inches of water on the floor. Every book on the bottom shelf was destroyed and all the play things in the toddler area." The staff carried on and held story hour upstairs while the cleanup continued. Visiting now, there are no signs of water damage.

"We repaired everything, and in some cases," says Colombo, "made it better."

The restoration of the children's area, now refurbished a second time, was part of a massive restoration of the entire building. In 1990 the library board commissioned a historic structures report, which told them exactly what they would need to do and how much it would cost to restore the building to its original condition.

"In 1996, we set out to raise $750,000, and the numbers came right from that report," Colombo notes. "People said 'You can't raise that much money here,' and we said, 'You know what, we're going to work at it.'" They began the renovation in 1998 and by 2004 had raised one million dollars. "We spent it all," says Colombo. "The million dollars made it possible to remove the 50 years of dirt and soot that came from making Aliquippa a steel town." It was especially noticeable on the decorative ceiling where, under the dirt, workers discovered hundreds of hand painted flowers. The restoration also allowed for refreshing the Della Robbia terra cotta medallions imbedded in the walls and cleaning and brightening the decorative frieze close to the ceiling in the children's section. This is a place where the architect's mantra, "always look up" is useful.
The library got more than just a pretty face. "We installed a new heating and air conditioning system, which the library had never had," Colombo says. "The air conditioning provides not only creature comfort but has a preservation aspect. We no longer throw away moldy books." Complete rewiring of the building made it safer, Colombo points out, and possible to have 30 computers plugged in at any one time: 20 for the public and the rest for staff.

In Pennsylvania, especially in its former industrial communities, local funding for public libraries has eroded as steel-related industries have closed, making libraries more dependent upon state funding, which has also declined in recent years. Fortunately, there are many generous foundations in Western Pennsylvania that contributed more than one-third of the money for the Aliquippa renovation. On the national level, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with national, state, and local partners, has installed more than 47,000 computers in nearly 11,000 public libraries. The selection of libraries by these foundations as the repository for their gifts affirms these institutions are more important than ever. Just ask that person rummaging in the stacks who comes upon the exact book desired or the youngster oblivious to his or her surroundings lost in a picture book.

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

1 Author interview with Mary Elizabeth Colombo, May 18, 2006.
2 The Bulletin Index, 9 April 1936. (The Bulletin Index was a regional newspaper published at the time.)
3 Author interview with Leah Kennelly, October 5, 2007.
4 Author interview with Ellen Hayduk, October 5, 2007.
5 Author interview, Colombo.
FEEDBACK

Pine Top's Boogie Woogie

I enjoyed reading your recent article on Pine Top Smith in the recent issue of the Heinz History Center magazine. I recognized the picture and appreciated the article last year in this magazine on the Hill District. It contained some pictures and stories that refreshed some of my memories.

In the 30's I lived above my dad's store at 1410 Wylie Avenue. My dad who started there with a modest cleaning and pressing establishment progressed into a loan business [Joe's Loan Office] by lending money to Gus Greenlee and Woogie Harris whenever they had a big hit on their numbers business. As a result my dad became a good friend of both Gus Greenlee and Mr. Harris as well as other proprietors and luminaries. (By the way, the Crawford Grill was across the street and not just a couple of doors away from the Rathskeller and the Cotton Club was located on Fullerton Street). [The Crawford Grill indeed first appears in the 1932 Pittsburgh City Directory at 1401 Wylie. The Cotton Club is in the 1936 directory at 1400 Wylie. –ed.]

Mr. Greenlee and Mr. Harris, both owned baseball teams in the Negro League, the Crawfords and the Homestead Grays respectively and they gave my dad tickets and I saw many games including seeing the famed Josh Gibson.

Teddy Horn also owned a night club up the street on Wylie Avenue and when his daughter, who lived in Detroit with his ex-wife, used to come to Pittsburgh to visit her father, I used to play with this skinny older girl named Lena. Imagine my surprise and shock when years later I saw this sexy looking singer who had become a celebrity. No one ever talked about her Pittsburgh roots.

Then there was Pat's Place, where in addition to playing the numbers you could buy cigarettes and sundries and Crampton's Drug Store. I wish that my parents were picture takers but we could not afford a camera. But I will look at their albums and see what I can find. Thanks for the memories!

Sincerely,

Leonard Weitzman

Corrections

In a photograph in the Fall 2007 Neighborhood Stories article “Allegheny Country Club’s Josie and Dick Arrigo,” Osman Awad was misidentified as Executive Chef John King. Other staff members in the photo include Donald Hollenbach, Patti Causey, and Nelia Roland.

The byline for L&A Treasures Fall 2007 article “Clara Louise Negley Flinn” should have read: By David R Grinnell, Chief Archivist and Lisa Alderfer, Archives Intern.