

HISTORIC SIGNS

By Jennifer Baron

Roberts Jewelers

Downtown, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Until recently, an icon of one of the region's first and most prominent jewelers could still be spotted hanging high above a busy downtown Pittsburgh street corner. Its red and silver neon hung at 429 Wood Street, representing a 70-year retail history for Roberts Jewelers on that spot. Roberts takes claim to being "the oldest jewelry family in America."¹

Run by four generations of Pittsburgh Roberts, spanning over a century, the business started inauspiciously in a converted log cabin in Market Square, an area that soon turned into downtown's "diamond district" and the city's nexus. Founded by John M. Roberts I, a native of Scotland, this first location opened in 1832. For a time, Roberts and his family resided above the store. According to Roberts' lore, a hand-painted wooden sign, which simply read "John M. Roberts," was so large that it blocked the view from the building's second-story windows.²

By 1925, the company had moved its operations to a new four-story property at 429 Wood Street. Designed by George Rowland, the building's formal elements suited the shop's upscale clientele: fluted doric columns, recessed windows, spandrels, and an ornate cornice.

Bill Roberts, great great-grandson to John M., ran the store with his cousin Joe

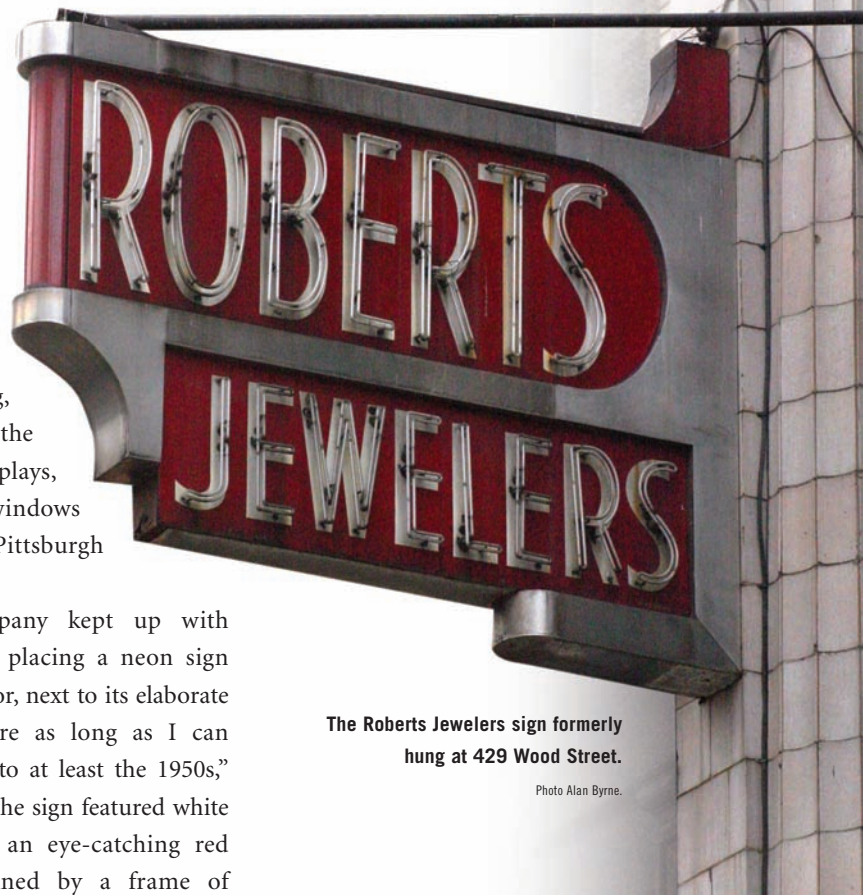
from 1955 until its closing in 1998. He describes the surprising lineage of signs that identified the neoclassical building: "We once had a sign near the top of our building in the shape of a rooster that was all lit up. It caught people's attention." The building's elegant façade still features brass plates that spell "ROBERTS" above an ornate theater-style marquee. Both forms of signage would have conveyed a strong visual statement to street-level pedestrians. "The marquee covered the entire entrance of our store and had our name on it," Roberts says.³ The marquee remains, although it is now obscured by a 7-Eleven banner.

Roberts Jewelers embraced technologies of the day, including some created by pioneering Pittsburgh companies. When Westinghouse developed the electric generator, the firm is rumored to have installed the city's first electric lights in Roberts' windows and building. Boasting, also, of some of the city's first glass displays, Roberts installed windows manufactured by Pittsburgh Plate Glass.⁴

Later, the company kept up with marketing trends by placing a neon sign outside the fourth floor, next to its elaborate cornice. "It was there as long as I can remember and dates to at least the 1950s," comments Roberts.⁵ The sign featured white lettering set against an eye-catching red backdrop, and outlined by a frame of

elegantly shaped steel. An uppercase typeface spelled out the family surname, punctuated with a double row of neon. Metal detailing highlighted the shop's stainless steel and silver inventory. The rounded, sculpted edges of the Art Deco styling included the same kind of smooth steel finish as seen on automobiles, elevators, skyscrapers, and airplanes built during the 1930s and '40s.

"During the 1950s and 1960s, it would be body to body on both sides of the street in the afternoon. Everyone was dressed up; it was also bustling after work," notes Roberts, who says that patrons rode the trolley and bus into town when they wanted to shop for jewelry.⁶



The Roberts Jewelers sign formerly hung at 429 Wood Street.

Photo Alan Byrne.

Bill Roberts, who today is a docent at the Frick Art & Historical Center, served some of the region's most well-to-do patrons, many of them industrialists and financiers, such as the second generations of Fricks and Mellons. In fact, when Helen Clay Frick, daughter of Henry Clay Frick, died in 1984, Roberts appraised the jewelry in her estate. The store housed a special diamond room, floors filled with fine china, crystal and silver, a repair shop, and offices.

Frank and Sedar's Department Store and more than 30 other jewelers (including Alvin's Jewelry Shoppe, see *WPH* magazine's Spring 2006 issue) shared a thriving commercial district with Roberts Jewelers. Bill Roberts paints a picture of these businesses lining downtown's streets, many alit by neon: "Ours was one of many neon signs in the area. We had Stauffer's restaurant on the corner of Forbes and Wood, and jewelry stores up and down the street. We also had the Casino burlesque house on Forbes, the movies on Sixth Avenue, Murphy's, and a big grocery store with a butcher. We had everything."⁷

With the corridor's redevelopment set to bring condos, the YMCA's relocation, and new restaurants and retail to Fifth and Forbes, Roberts envisions the corner's redevelopment: "We'll get people to live downtown, and it'll come back and be full circle."⁸ The stores most likely won't boast neon, but instead 21st-century technology: LED lighting.

Jennifer Baron is development news editor/features writer with Pop City Media (popcitymedia.com) and co-founder of The Pittsburgh Signs Project (Pittsburghsigns.org).



In 1964, Roberts Jewelers was part of Wood Street's thriving business district. Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, Archives

Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

¹ *The Story Behind the Names of Western Pennsylvania Counties*, reprinted from Roberts' advertising in the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* promotional booklet, ca. 1947.

² Ibid.

³ Bill Roberts, interview with the author, December 27, 2008.

⁴ *The Story Behind the Names*.

⁵ Bill Roberts interview.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.