

# BUCK MCGOVERN: I HAVE LIVED HISTORY

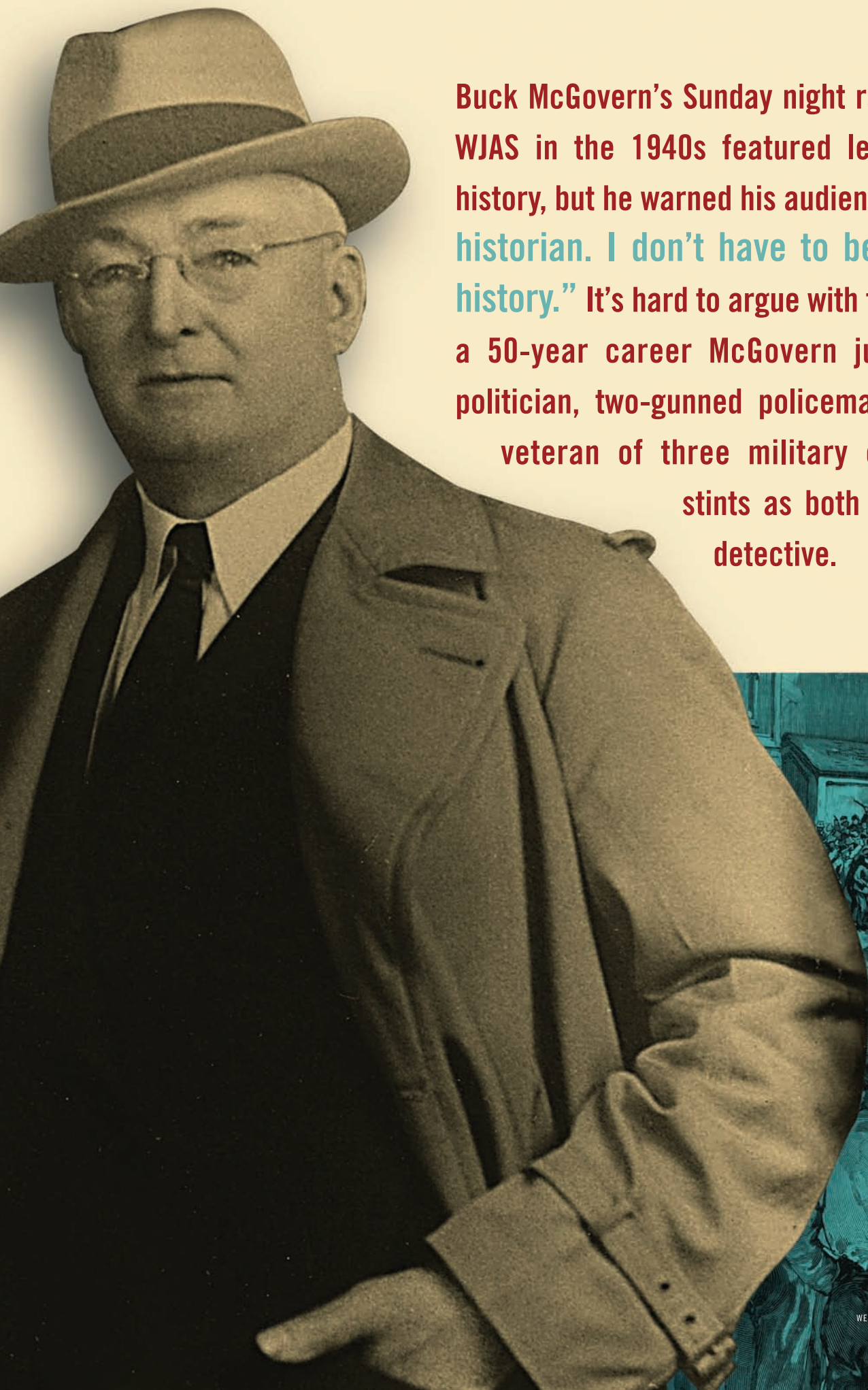
By Bette McDevitt

*March 6, 1906*  
**Pancho Villa, Rough  
Riders, and Homestead  
strikers all shaped the  
life of Buck McGovern.**

Collage images Library of Congress, except  
Buck McGovern, Archives Service Center,  
University of Pittsburgh







Buck McGovern's Sunday night radio program on WJAS in the 1940s featured lectures on local history, but he warned his audience, "I am not a historian. I don't have to be. I have *lived* history." It's hard to argue with that assertion. In a 50-year career McGovern juggled roles as politician, two-gunned policeman, Rough Rider, veteran of three military escapades, and stints as both city and private detective.





**M**cGovern was fortunate to have two good women in his life. One managed his home, his wife Leticia Rodgers, with whom he had five children (Roger, Charles, Mary, Betty, and Josephine), and one looked after his office, Rose Danahey. Rose recorded not only every speech Buck gave, but also every speech anyone else made in his favor. Five years after Leticia died, Buck swept Rose off to New York City where they married in St. Patrick's Cathedral. He was 86 years old.

"Plucky Bucky," as the political wags called him, was center stage in life—he would be the first to tell you about it—and he wasn't about to be tucked away in the ancestral closet, although some of his descendants might have wanted to do that very thing.

When Liz Hughes, one of seven siblings in a Pittsburgh family whose progressive politics is a shared gene, learned about the role of her Great-Uncle Charles "Buck" McGovern in the Homestead Strike, she longed for anonymity. "We've got to leave town!" she remembers telling her siblings.<sup>1</sup>

There was no mass exodus, however; only two live elsewhere. Ginny is a clinical social worker and activist in Washington, D.C., and Dick is an actor in New York. All seven, who only understood Buck McGovern's relationship to them as adults, have learned to

live with their legendary ancestor, some with grudging pride. Buck may have passed on another quality shared by the Hughes family: political acumen. Two have run for office, and most of the family is deep into organizing for political and social change.

McGovern's participation on behalf of the Carnegie Steel Company in the Homestead Strike and Lockout of 1892 came early in his life. His part is described in his August 30, 1962, *Pittsburgh Press* obituary, which notes that he was "in the troop that stamped out the Homestead Strike," a reference to the National Guard called in to reopen the plant.

"If there is any event in American labor history that people know, it's the Homestead Strike and battle," says Dr. Charles McColister, labor historian at Indiana University:

It's a dramatic story. When the Pinkertons came upriver on the morning of July 6, lookouts saw them and alerted the workers, who took action to defend their jobs and community.

They even fired a cannon at the barges but scored few hits. Words were exchanged, and a shot was fired. No one intended to kill anyone, but once blood was drawn, the strike escalated. Ten were killed, seven strikers and three Pinkertons.<sup>2</sup>

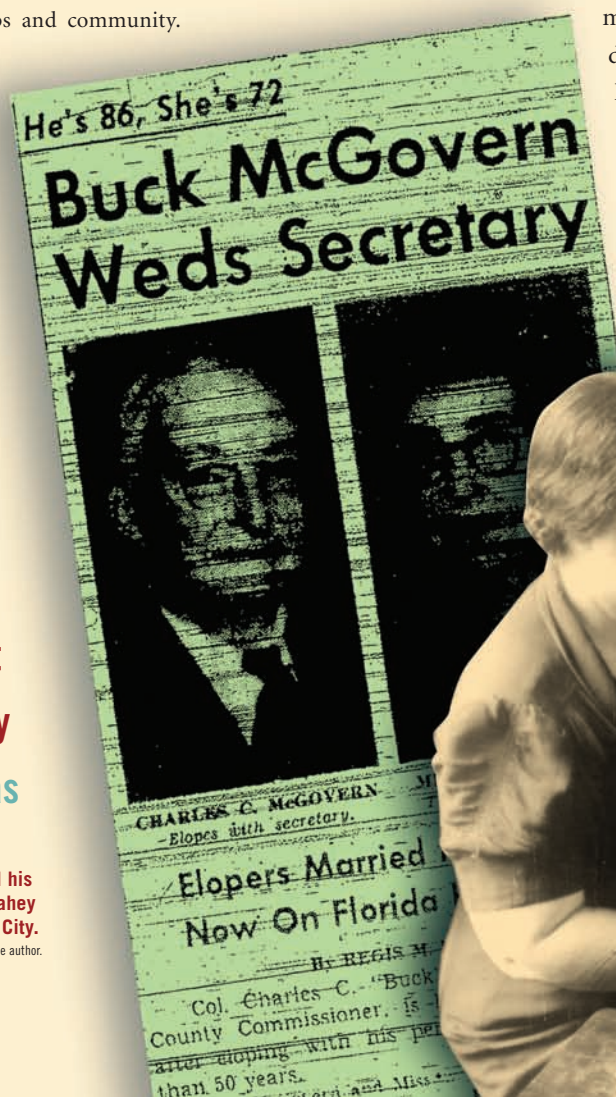
For the next few days, with striking displays of political cowardice, no one took action to end the dispute. Finally, Governor Robert Emory Pattison, under great pressure from Henry Clay Frick, whom Carnegie, vacationing in Scotland, left in charge, sent 8,500 National Guard troops, McGovern among them, to secure the plant and escort nonunion workers in to replace the workers who were locked out. This was not, however, the first adventure for the young McGovern. He was 16 when he joined the National Guard, in time to help out with the Johnstown flood relief effort in 1889.

He was born in 1873 in Pittsburgh's First Ward to Charles McGovern, the first detective in the City of Pittsburgh and Alice Gannon, daughter of an early merchant. His father died young, but Buck had many mentors among city officials.

**Rose recorded not only every speech Buck gave, but also every speech anyone else made in his favor. Five years after Leticia died, Buck swept Rose off to New York City where they married in St. Patrick's Cathedral. He was 86 years old.**

**McGovern married his secretary Rose Danahey in New York City.**

Courtesy of the author.



**Rose Danahey hard at work in McGovern's office.**

Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.





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The steel industry was just redesigning Pittsburgh. McClester describes the city in those days in *The Point of Pittsburgh*:

In 1800, barely 1,500 people lived in the little town at the forks of the Ohio, while ten times that number was spread across the county. A century later, 775,000 souls populated the county and over forty percent of them lived inside the city limits. If the City of Allegheny, annexed by Pittsburgh in 1907, is added, the combined city population exceeded 450,000 or 58% of the county's population, even without the inclusion of the mill towns stretched out along the three rivers.

The urban population was not restricted to Pittsburgh and Allegheny City. From 1870 on, the Monongahela Valley, which had until then remained mostly farm or woodland with few industries other than boat building and coal mining, began a fifty year period of explosive growth along the lower forty miles of the river valley.”<sup>3</sup>

With the growth, the well-known smog crept in:

The air laden with the coal smoke from tens of thousands of industrial furnaces and boilers, home heating and cooking stoves, sat in the river valleys dulling the regenerative power of the land, and lay heavy on the hearts and lungs of the inhabitants.

The rivers themselves were dark, murky, oil and sludge-filled, garbage-lit-

**In 1892, McGovern was among troops sent to quell striking workers at Carnegie Steel in Homestead.**

HC L&A, box 2, folder 11.

tered waterways cut off by railroad tracks and riverside factories from the drab industrial towns that sprang up upon what once were rich agricultural bottomlands. The dark and turgid waters became crowded highways where huge tows of barges laden with iron ore, coal, limestone, gravel, and sand asserted the right of way. Individual watercraft virtually disappeared amid the tows and barges. Where the sharp cry of the hawk and the trill of the songbird once filled the orchards and fields of the industrious farmer, the air now reverberated with the clash of metal, the blast of great, angry furnaces, the incessant rumble of machinery, the screech of steel wheels on steel rails.<sup>4</sup>



Library of Congress.

It was a gritty and turbulent city, yet filled with opportunity for young Buck. It seems, in his lifetime, that he was a person who did everything. After attending Duquesne University, McGovern had a brief but unsuccessful period in the hauling business. He then worked as a motorman on one of the first trolleys on the West End Line. At this time, he lived on the West Side, where his political career began as director of the old Riverside School on West Carson Street. To encourage physical fitness, he established the McGovern Athletic Club. Around this time, 1902, Rose Danahey came to work for him as his secretary. “His popularity grew by leaps



and bounds, resulting in his election to the office of alderman and police magistrate, which he held until 1910, in the old 34th Ward,” wrote Rose.<sup>5</sup> That area is now the 19th ward, encompassing Brookline, Mt. Washington, Duquesne Heights, and part of Beechview. McGovern purchased a property on Grandview Avenue, Duquesne Heights, which was the family home for the next 50 years.

About that same time, he acquired a farm in Moon Township, which served as a vacation spot for family and friends over the years. Dick Conti, now in his 90s living in Florida, has good memories of his “Uncle Charlie”:

Most of my summers in the early days were spent on the McGovern farm in Coraopolis Heights with his youngest son Roger. He and I spent most of those happy hours around the lower barns and their twelve beautiful horses. One Saturday afternoon Uncle Charlie drove down to the fields and “ordered” Roger and I to ride with him on a “mission” with the usual, typical explanation: “Get in.” Our drive ended south of Pittsburgh in a huge pristine area, which later on proved to be the beginning of South Park. Commissioner McGovern “suggested” that we play close by while he

met with a few men in a little woodshed overlooking a large and open field. This occasion was the planning stage of what to this day is known as the South Park Fairgrounds. As Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, he gave birth to this center of annual entertainment for the citizens of Allegheny County.<sup>6</sup>

Buck had more to say about the fair in an interview in the *Post-Gazette* in 1968: “They have made it a big business with a carnival, tight-rope workers, and all that baloney.”<sup>7</sup>

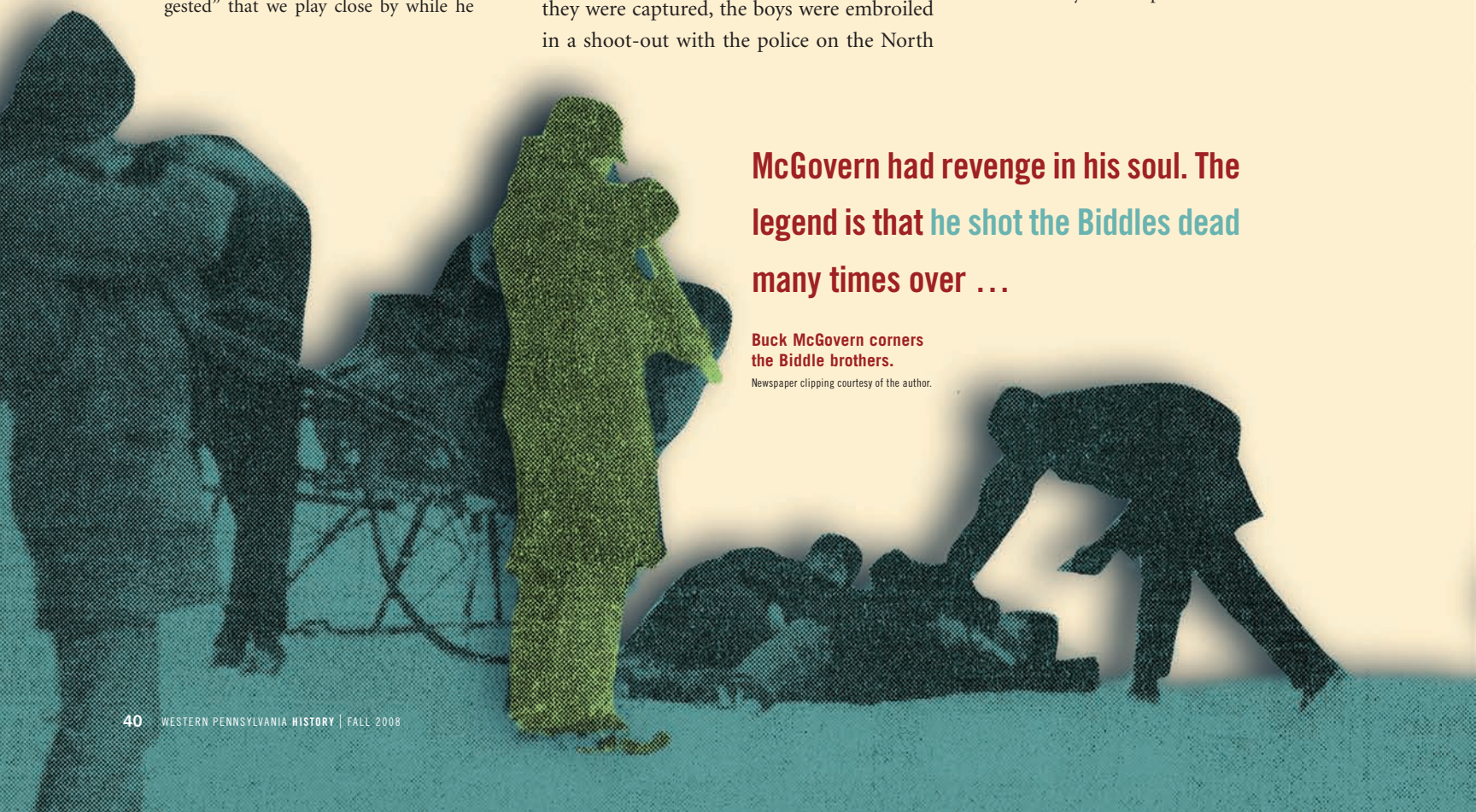
After his efforts at hauling and as a streetcar conductor, Buck worked in the city’s detective bureau under the tutelage of his father’s friend, Police Superintendent Roger O’Mara. Buck became an instant legend when he leapt off a trolley to capture a thief making off with \$8,000 worth of diamonds.

He increased his heroic stature with his role in capturing the Biddle boys in 1902, one of the most dramatic criminal cases in Pittsburgh history. Ed and Jack Biddle, who came to be known as the “Chloroform Gang,” were small-time offenders who wound up in the Allegheny County Jail charged with the murder of a grocer they had robbed. Before they were captured, the boys were embroiled in a shoot-out with the police on the North

Side of Pittsburgh where McGovern’s partner Pat Fitzgerald was killed.

Ed Biddle was a handsome fellow, and soon Pittsburgh women gathered outside the jail pleading for his freedom. His charisma was not lost on the jail warden’s wife either. Their story is told in the 1984 film, *Mrs. Soffel* starring Diane Keaton and Mel Gibson. Filmed in Pittsburgh, it recreates the city as it was at the turn of the last century. McCollester tells the story:

Katherine Soffel, the 35-year-old wife of the warden, mother of four children, who visited prisoners and read them the Bible, ... took an especially keen interest in the soul of Ed Biddle. She brought the brothers saws that they used to cut through the bars under her skirts while she was reading to them; and on the night of the escape, she provided guns they used to overpower the guards. It was believed she drugged her husband and signaled the Biddles from the warden’s quarters, visible from their cell. She used her keys to open the prison exit and fled with them. They crossed to Allegheny City and took the Perrysville trolley to the end of the line and began to walk. It was a bitter winter day with deep snow and Mrs. Sof-



**McGovern had revenge in his soul. The legend is that he shot the Biddles dead many times over ...**

**Buck McGovern corners the Biddle brothers.**

Newspaper clipping courtesy of the author.



fel was slowing the escape, so the brothers stole a horse and sleigh and headed north on the road to Butler where they were overtaken by Charles C. "Buck" McGovern and a posse on horseback.<sup>8</sup>

McGovern had revenge in his soul. The legend is that he shot the Biddles dead many times over, and the film depicts the killing in that way. Kate Soffel was shot, at her request, by Ed Biddle, but she survived. When the bodies and Mrs. Soffel were taken to the Butler County jail, Sheriff Hoon, exercising his territorial rights, told McGovern and his posse that they were not permitted inside. McGovern yelled, "Like hell we ain't, they're my prisoners."<sup>9</sup> The bodies were returned to Pittsburgh, and Mrs. Soffel served a term in the same jail where her husband had been warden.<sup>10</sup>

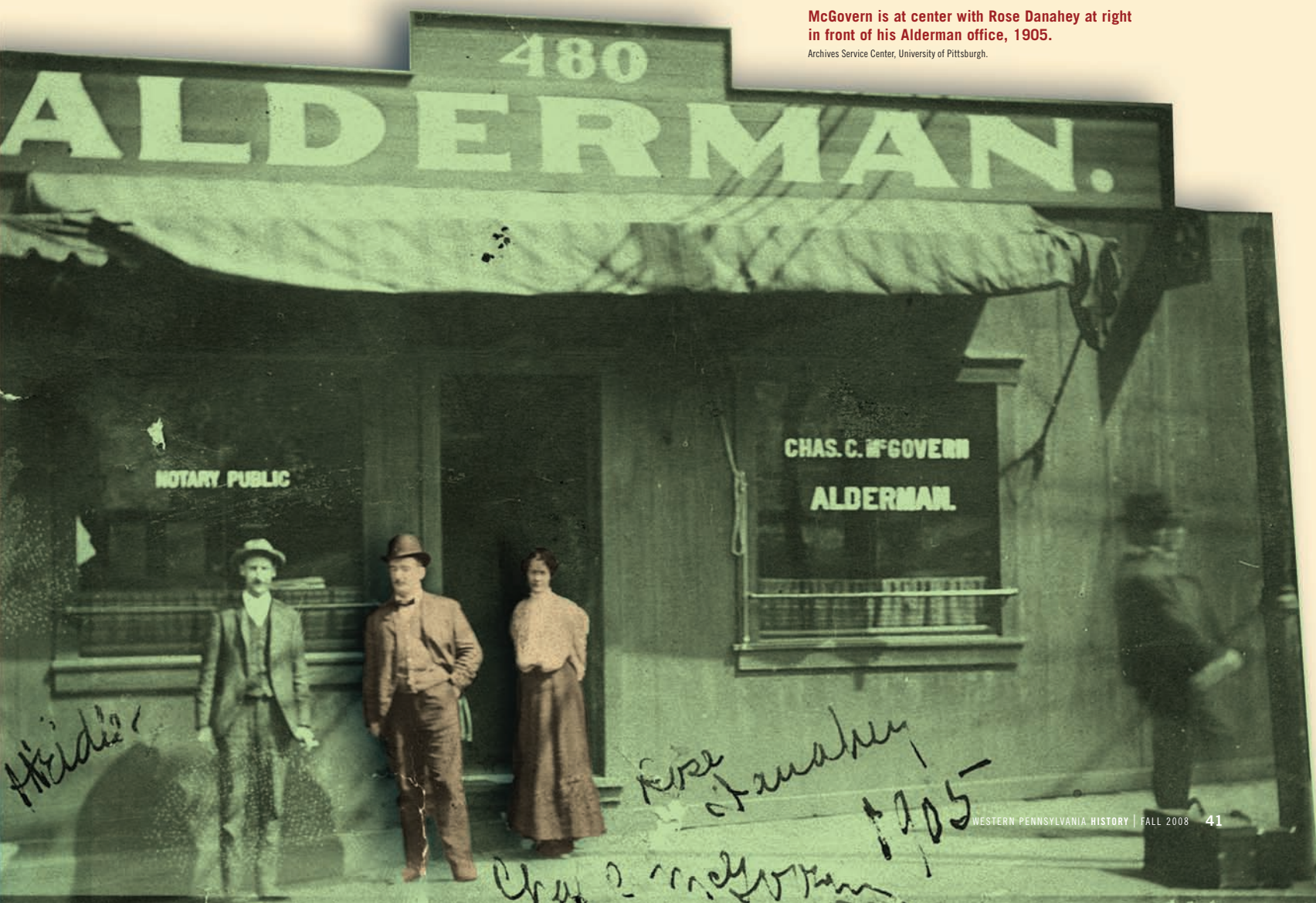
Around this time, the United States was flexing some imperial muscle over border

disputes with Mexico. McGovern was in and out of the military. He served in the 14th regiment during the Spanish American War in 1898, and came out as a sergeant and lifelong friend of Teddy Roosevelt. David Hughes remembers asking his great uncle if he really rode up the hill to San Juan with Roosevelt. "You bet I did!" McGovern replied. The friendship with Roosevelt led to a caper as his personal bodyguard in 1912 during Roosevelt's "Bull Moose" campaign for President.<sup>11</sup>

Ginny Hughes remembers seeing McGovern's Rough Rider uniform at his home encased in glass. "There were big boots, and a sword I think. As a child I thought it strange that he would have his uniform in a large glass case, just like in a museum."<sup>12</sup> The Hughes siblings can be critical of McGovern's gun-toting adventures, but they understand

he operated in a different time. "He was probably representative of military types of his day," says David Hughes, who ran for Pittsburgh City Council as an endorsed Democrat in 1985, "but our sense is that he had integrity and was more of a populist than a right wing ideologue."<sup>13</sup>

Chronology becomes hopeless here, since McGovern did so many things seemingly simultaneously. In 1911, he opened the McGovern Investigation Service at 339 Fifth Avenue in the Schmidt Building across from the former Warner Theater. Rose Danahey's handwritten notes set the stage for much of Buck's life, especially this office. "It was the Mecca for his civic and political activities, finally becoming the haunt of all the public spirited and politically ambitious, a spot known only as '339 Fifth Ave.' Here Captain



McGovern is at center with Rose Danahey at right in front of his Alderman office, 1905.

Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.



McGovern conducted the McGovern Investigation Service, serving Pittsburgh attorneys and their clients. His business grew to such proportions that it was represented by agents all over the larger cities of the United States, interrupted only by Captain McGovern's call to the First World War.<sup>14</sup>

Rose continued: "On return from service, McGovern again took up the cudgels in the interest of clean elections in Allegheny County, an interest he had acquired at an early age. Three-Thirty-Nine Fifth Avenue was a rendezvous destination for public-spirited citizens until the building was torn down and operations moved to the Magee Building on Fourth Avenue, maintained for many years as Buck's private office and 'stamping ground' for civil affairs and political rallies."<sup>15</sup>

Also, during this time, Buck was part of the American troops overseeing the Battle of Juarez, the opening conflict of the Mexican Revolution. He returned again to Mexico to serve with General "Black Jack" Pershing's troops in 1916 as Captain of the Pittsburgh Troop of the 1st Pennsylvania Cavalry, chasing (but not catching) the famed bandit, Pancho Villa.<sup>16</sup> The event was also known as the "Mexican Border disturbance."<sup>17</sup> No doubt, during this time, Rose Danahey held down the office, and Leticia McGovern managed family matters.

Buck became serious about politics, before, between, and after his military episodes, from which he emerged as a colonel, a term he relished. He later achieved the rank of brigadier general, U.S. Army, retired.

In 1922, after a short stint as chief of the Bureau of Detectives he became director of the Western Pennsylvania campaign of Gifford Pinchot for governor. From then on, it was a rapid climb for Buck: in 1923 he was named by then-Governor Pinchot as an agent of the State Department of Justice to investigate bank failures, followed by an appointment as the head of the State Board of Registration. While holding this position, he introduced voting machines and cleaned up padded registration rolls.

In 1926, McGovern entered county government when he was appointed to fill an unexpired term as county controller. He issued a report on the state of the county's

business with a preface that Rose Danahey found memorable enough to record:

The duties of a recorder in the performance of his public obligation does not mean merely taking care of routine matters, but where there are indications of laxity, inefficiency, or downright graft, not only move for its correction, but to bring such governmental evils to the attention of the individual, who in the last analysis, is the government itself—the taxpayer.<sup>18</sup>

He went on to lambaste every person in office. This report, according to Rose, was received with such enthusiasm that the demand for copies far exceeded the supply.

In November 1927, Buck was elected county commissioner. He served through 1935 on his own "Square Deal" ticket, with a wink and a nod to his fellow Republicans. "His two terms as commissioner, the second as chairman, produced an assortment of punched noses, feuds, vitriolic phrases, and

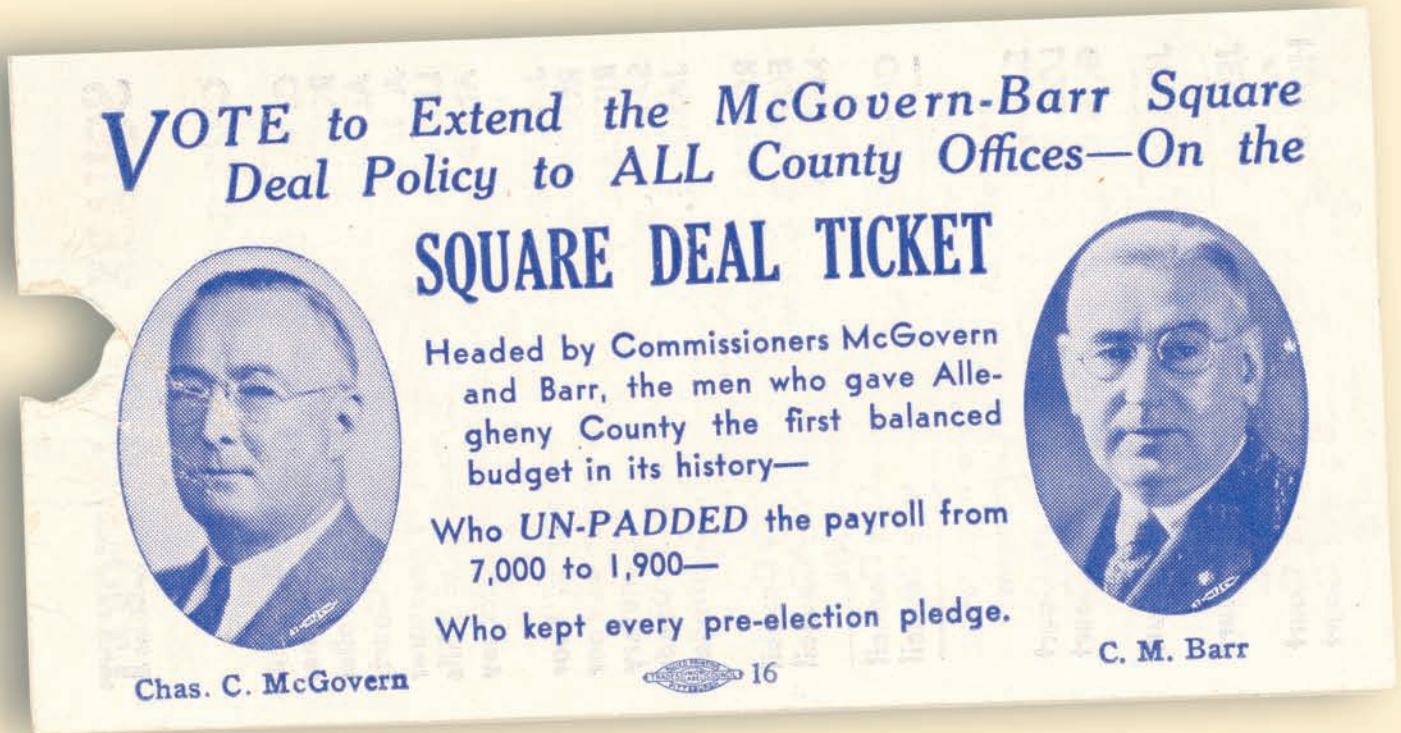
South Park and its  
fairgrounds, 1930s.  
HC L&A, Acct. 1998.0191.

**"They have made it a big  
business with a carnival,  
tight-rope workers, and all  
that baloney."**

**Buck McGovern**







McGovern ran on the "Square Deal" ticket in answer to Roosevelt's "New Deal" policies.

HC L&A, Charles McGovern Papers, mff 2294.

headlines," according to the obituary in the *Pittsburgh Press*.

His campaign ranged from more ham for sandwiches at the County Airport to eliminating his own bread and butter—the County government. Neither succeeded. Instead of the county and 124 separate local units, he favored combining them into a centralized county-wide government under city control. "The less men at its head, the better government—there are too many men to hide behind now," he often said.<sup>19</sup>

His reputation as one of the most colorful and outspoken politicians in Allegheny County

**"No matter how big you build it, it will be filled with payrollers falling over each other. The county departments will spread out in that building like molasses on a hot cake."**

### Buck McGovern

was earned with his sharp tongue. He once referred to visiting judges as "those tramp judges." He called the courthouse the "Steal Works" and payrollers "those political pigeons roosting in the courthouse."<sup>20</sup> The newspaper reporters must have fallen over each other to scribble down his quotes.

"With all the turmoil and strife, he reduced the county payroll from 7,000 workers to 1,900, and sliced expenses 10 million dollars in four years. He succeeded in obtaining a nine million dollar WPA program ... used to build the Homestead High-Level Bridge, Jerome Street (McKeesport), Glenwood, and Highland Park bridges, along with Banksville Road," according to the *Press*.<sup>21</sup>

During his years as county controller and county commissioner, Buck refused to use a county vehicle, and drove only his own car, which had over 150,000 miles on it. When it was suggested that the county office building be enlarged, McGovern objected: "No matter how big you build it, it will be filled with payrollers falling over each other. The county departments will spread out in that building like molasses on a hot cake."<sup>22</sup>

He told county department heads to "get your hands out of the basket," and "take your feet out of the political trough."<sup>23</sup> No one was spared; Buck criticized both political parties, and continued to run on his own Square Deal ticket, attracting both independent Democrat



McGovern secured funding for the Homestead High-Level Bridge.

HC L&A, MSP285.B009.F34.101.



and Republican voters. “He had a long political career that ended with his leading the reform Republican slate that was still able to eke out a victory in 1930 over both the Democrats,” says Charlie McColleston, “over Davy Lawrence himself and the old guard Republicans in the county commissioner’s race.”

McGovern was not above seeing that a needy Democrat, the father of the Hughes family, got a job in local government during the Depression. When Liz Hughes asked her father, a diehard Democrat, what he thought of Buck McGovern, he told her that he thought McGovern was “a pretty good guy.”

Liz replied, “Daddy, how could you take a job from a Republican?”

“Well,” answered Mr. Hughes, “I needed a job.”

Liz: “But how could you do that?”

“Well,” said Mr. Hughes, “I registered Republican.”<sup>24</sup>

Rose Danahey wrote about these years with wisdom and the benefit of reflection:

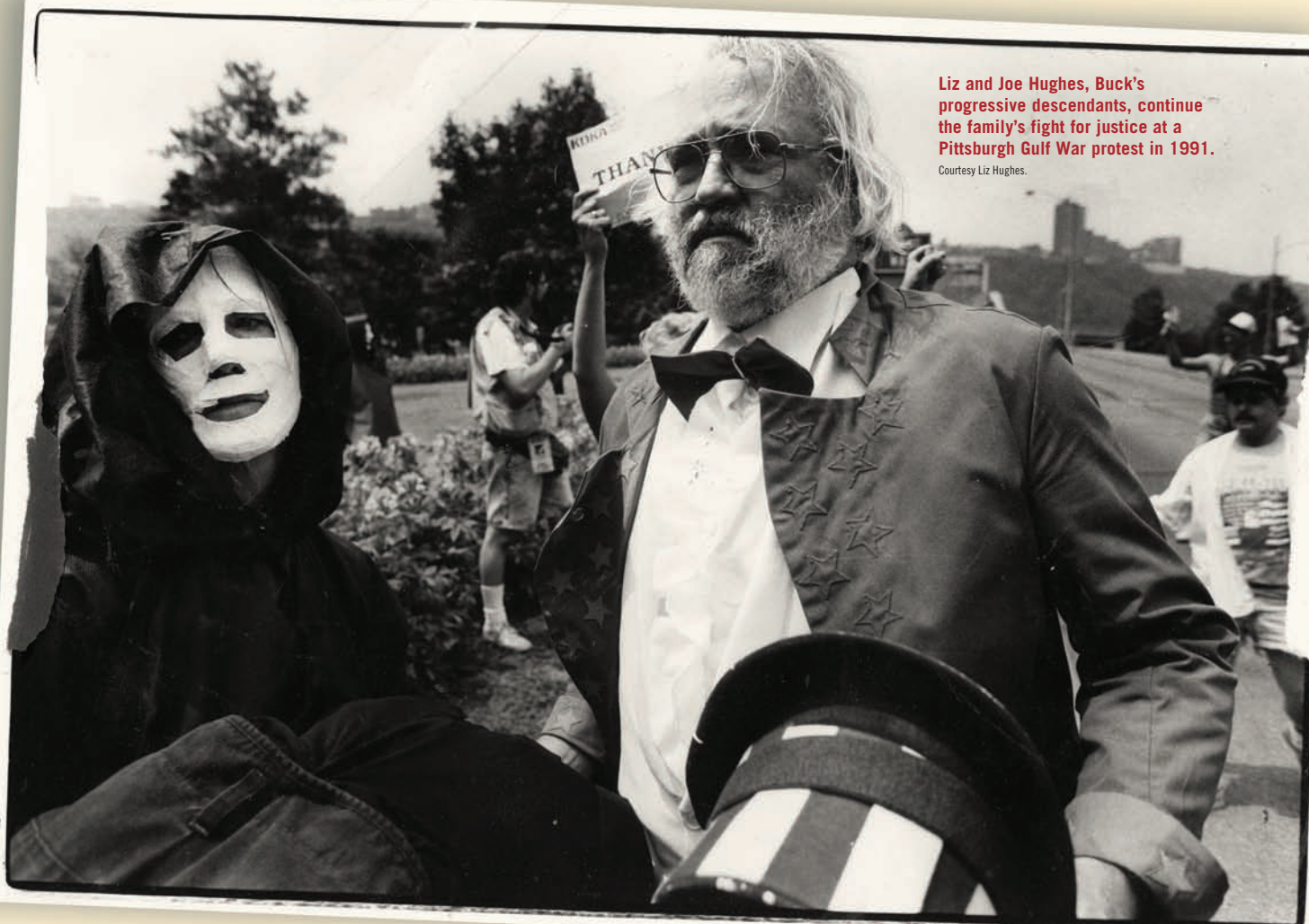
This election to office fell on the eve of one of this country’s greatest depressions, the political pendulum sweeping heavily back and forth, resulted in gains and then losses for Colonel McGovern. However his heritage having endowed him with a certain genius for recovery, each defeat of purpose caused him to work harder, and continued until November of 1935, when the ‘Grand Old Republican Party’ was swept out in Allegheny County following the greatest Democratic majority registered against any one political party in thirty years.<sup>25</sup>

Liz Hughes, who ran for Congress in 1980 on the Consumer Party ticket (allied with Barry

Commoner’s Citizens Party) was surprised to learn about Buck’s independent streak: “I didn’t realize how much we had in common,” she says. Liz has come to a certain peace with it. “It’s the Irish in him. What can you say? He thought he was fighting for justice, with the Rough Riders and all that. We’re peace and justice, and he was law and order; what we share is a passion for action to do the right thing.”<sup>26</sup>

After his 1935 political defeat Buck began the radio show on WJAS with a lot of help from Rose. “The talks were typed on a special typewriter, which had to be lugged to the studio. As changes and corrections took place up until the time the Colonel went on the air, sometimes handed to him page after page, while he was broadcasting, as nothing, but nothing, was ever accomplished the easy way by the Colonel.”<sup>27</sup> The typed pages of the

**Liz and Joe Hughes, Buck’s progressive descendants, continue the family’s fight for justice at a Pittsburgh Gulf War protest in 1991.**  
Courtesy Liz Hughes.





radio scripts, stored at the University of Pittsburgh Archives, display a very large text. That would account for the special typewriter, before the days of a teleprompter, so “the Colonel” could see what was typed.

Dick Conti has some memories of McGovern’s political life:

In his later years he became ill and homebound. I visited him at every opportunity and listened over and over to his military exploits during his exciting youth. On one of these visits I learned from his daughter Josephine that he and Dave Lawrence had been close personal friends for 40 some years, although publicly they were famous for their Democratic and Republican vicious attacks on each other. Dave Lawrence left his duties in Washington to fly round trip to be present for Uncle Charlie’s funeral in St. Paul’s Cathedral. I observed this because I was one of his pallbearers.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of her journal, Rose recorded a few of her own thoughts:

During my tenure as co-worker and private secretary to Colonel McGovern, I was in a position to observe his many interesting traits ... he was a perfectionist in all his dealing with John Q. Public.... His early entry into affairs concerning our city, county, and state resulted in contacts with life in the raw, endowing him with much tolerance and a lot of ‘horse sense.’ He was a letter writer of great magnitude. A tape recorder, such as [we] have today, would have been a boon in the retaining of some of his original phrases, which earned for him the title of “the stormy petrel,” but to his many friends and co-workers he was affectionately known as “Buck McGovern.”<sup>29</sup>

The last line as well belongs to Rose, who ends her reflections with a quote from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. “He was a man. Take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like, again.”<sup>30</sup> 🌻

**Bette McDevitt** is this magazine’s “Neighborhood Stories” columnist. *Buck McGovern* is her fourth feature article for *WPH*.

**In the March 6, 1956, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Colonel McGovern points to a changing downtown Pittsburgh from his back porch at 1022 Grandview Avenue.**

Archives Service Center,  
University of Pittsburgh.



- <sup>1</sup> Multiple interviews conducted between Liz Hughes and author, November 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview conducted between Charles McColleston and author, January 21, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Charles McColleston, *The Point of Pittsburgh, Production and Struggle at the Forks of the Ohio*. (Pittsburgh: Battle of Homestead Foundation, 2008), p. 210.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 209.
- <sup>5</sup> Rose D. McGovern's handwritten account of Buck McGovern's life, Hillman Library Archives, University of Pittsburgh.
- <sup>6</sup> Interview conducted between Richard Conti and author, February 1, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Jonathon William, August 20, 1968.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Point of Pittsburgh*, p. 227.
- <sup>9</sup> "Origins of the Allegheny County Police" from the Allegheny Police History.
- <sup>10</sup> Ed Blank, *Pittsburgh Press*, February 29, 1984.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview conducted between David Hughes and author, December 6, 2007.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview conducted between Ginny Hughes and author, January 29, 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview conducted between David Hughes and author, December 6, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> Handwritten note by Rose Danahey, Hillman Library Archives, University of Pittsburgh.
- <sup>15</sup> Rose D. McGovern's handwritten account of Buck McGovern's life, Hillman Library Archives, University of Pittsburgh.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with McGovern by Al Giola for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 9, 1960, "Salty (Buck) McGovern Shows Signs of Mellowing," p. 16.
- <sup>17</sup> *Colonel Charles C. McGovern, A Brief Biography*, written for a testimonial dinner for McGovern held in 1943, among his papers in the Heinz History Center Archives.
- <sup>18</sup> Rose D. McGovern's handwritten account of Buck McGovern's life, Hillman Library Archives, University of Pittsburgh.
- <sup>19</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, Obituary of Buck McGovern, August 30, 1962.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with McGovern by Al Giola for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 9, 1960, "Salty (Buck) McGovern Shows Signs of Mellowing," p. 16.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>22</sup> Al Giola, "Salty (Buck) McGovern Shows Signs of Mellowing," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 9, 1960, p. 16.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>24</sup> Interviews conducted between Liz Hughes and author, November 2007.
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- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*.