Marie Curie’s Visit to Pittsburgh and the Standard Chemical Company

Since its naming 250 years ago, Pittsburgh has been a destination for many visitors, some famous and some not so. For most we don’t have documentation about why they chose to come. Thanks to materials in our collections, we now know why Marie Curie traveled here in 1921.

When I came to Pittsburgh in 1995 and later started working at the Heinz History Center, I was surprised to find photographs in the collection of Madame Curie at an industrial site. It was puzzling, and it took several years for me to uncover the story.

As one of the scientists who discovered radium in 1898, Marie Curie’s research required larger amounts of the radioactive chemical element than were available in her adopted country, France. At this time, one gram of radium cost $100,000. This dilemma was reported by the American press, and women throughout the United States, including many prominent Pittsburgh women, donated funds to secure sufficient radium for her research. Madame Curie, a Nobel Prize winning scientist, came to the United States in May 1921, and President Harding presented her with a gift of radium at a White House reception. Afterwards she traveled to Pittsburgh.
this country. While in the city, she was conferred an honorary doctorate by the University of Pittsburgh in a May 26 ceremony at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall attended by a large contingent of Pittsburgh citizens.

In addition to the photograph, program, and invitation shown here, visitors to the Heinz History Center’s Special Collections Gallery can be awed by the spectacular stained glass window, designed by the Rudy Brothers, which was once installed in the Standard Chemical Company’s Oakland headquarters.

Thanks to Joel Lubenau, a health physicist, and Sally Harden, a descendant of the Standard Chemical Company founders, the pieces explaining her Pittsburgh visit fell into place. The Standard Chemical Company was founded by Joseph M. and James J. Flannery. The Flannerys were an interesting entrepreneurial family, having founded the Flannery Brothers Funeral Home, the Flannery Bolt Company, the American Vanadium Company, and finally the Standard Chemical Company. The chemical company, with a plant in Canonsburg, was at this time the world’s largest producer of radium and provided the supply that Curie received at the White House. Curie requested a visit to the company during her stay in

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For more information about radium’s production and medicinal uses in this region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries see Western Pennsylvania History magazine, volume 91, Number 1, Spring 2008, Radio X: Guaranteed Not to Contain Any Poisonous Drugs by Bonnie Stanford, John Benitez, Linda Allison, and Daniel Scofield.