



LAYERS OF HISTORY

WHILE OTHER CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS STRUGGLE TO MAKE ENDS MEET, OFFICIALS AT THE SENATOR JOHN HEINZ HISTORY CENTER ARE CULTIVATING PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT TO CREATE AN ECONOMICALLY SUCCESSFUL MUSEUM THAT IS BECOMING A SIGNIFICANT CULTURAL FORCE. BY JEFFERY FRASER PHOTOGRAPHY BY RIC EVANS



Students from John F. Kennedy High School in Warren, Ohio, get a glimpse of bygone days as they tour the "Points in Time" exhibit at the Senator John Heinz History Center, above. The exhibit follows western Pennsylvania's history from the 1750s to modern times by portraying the lifestyles of the region's people, from Native Americans and pioneers to steelworkers and suburban families.

This 1952 toy push-button range is among the ingenious toys created by the Wolverine Manufacturing & Supply Co. that was on Pittsburgh's North Side. Wolverine started out as a tool-and-die company and later began making toys on the side, only to have the toy business take over.





Behind the **brick** facade of the former Chautauqua Lake Ice Co., a young George Washington shares space with a street-smart 14-year-old from Pittsburgh's North Side who hustled his way to the 1940 Marbles King crown. Guests at a wedding reception raise a toast against a panoramic view of the Allegheny River. And Strip District merchants gather to plot a bold course for their neighborhood's future.

Another museum stop for the John F. Kennedy High School students is the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, left, which is in the Smithsonian wing of the Heinz History Center. Here the Warren, Ohio, teenagers have the chance to see interactive exhibits, audio-visual programs and hundreds of artifacts that reveal the Pittsburgh region's role as a sports leader for more than a century.



Among the treasured artifacts in the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum is a Spalding fielder's glove, above, worn by the legendary Johannes Peter "Honus" Wagner. Considered one of the greatest shortstops of all time, Wagner was able to play every position except catcher during his career, which included 18 seasons with the Pittsburgh Pirates. He modified this glove by cutting out the palm and re-stitching the hole.

The Senator John Heinz History Center is not your grandfather's museum, and that fact alone goes a long way toward explaining why it has managed to thrive in challenging times for cultural institutions. The history center opened in 1996 on Smallman Street in Pittsburgh's broad-shouldered market district. In the past three years, attendance has jumped 48 percent, and earned income increased 56 percent. It raised \$27 million for a new wing. In December, its homegrown French and Indian War exhibit, "Clash of Empires," opened to favorable reviews at the Smithsonian Institution in the nation's capital.

The history center also went green in 2004, becoming one of the few museums in the nation to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, certification. The accomplishment is significant given curators' demand for constant and precise climate control and their vampire-like aversion to shafts of natural light that threaten fabrics, paintings and other artifacts hundreds of years old.

"They are operating at the top level of the museum field," says Harold Closter, director of the Smithsonian Institution's national affiliates program. "And for a regional museum, it's very tough to get there. Many are saddled with old buildings

and disparate collections. And when regions experience hard times, support for these museums tends to decline."

The Heinz History Center's rise has largely been the result of its commitment to reinventing itself and a corresponding groundswell of community support. In capital campaigns alone, it has raised more than \$63 million in the past 15 years. The Heinz Endowments has made significant contributions. Since 1992, the Endowments has awarded the history center more than 40 grants worth more than \$10.7 million, including funds for operating costs; the creation of a permanent exhibit about John Heinz; and the design and construction of its Smithsonian wing, which opened in 2004.

Efforts to build strategic partnerships and a broader audience also have contributed to the history center's achievements. The Smithsonian wing, for example, not only brought new exhibits and distinction but also added a multipurpose space with a catering kitchen and an outdoor patio that provided more revenue-generating opportunities. It's one of the reasons the history center has seen total earned income rise to more than \$1.4 million, about 20 percent of its \$7 million budget.

Another reason is attendance. The Heinz History Center

Andy Masich, president and chief executive officer of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, explains the background of the Heinz History Center to students from Colfax Elementary School in Pittsburgh. Masich, a recognized authority on the preservation and creative interpretation of history, has headed the operation of the 275,000-square-foot museum and its staff of 100 since 1998.



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reported having more than 130,000 visitors last year. The mean attendance of the nation’s museums is 34,000 visitors, according to the American Association of Museums. History center officials attribute its impressive numbers to the appeal of the exhibits in the Smithsonian wing, particularly the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, which is a permanent fixture.

Seeds of the history center’s ascent were planted as the 127-year-old Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, the region’s oldest cultural organization, prepared to move from its musty quarters in Pittsburgh’s Oakland neighborhood to the \$36.4 million renovated ice warehouse on Smallman.

In 1994, Teresa Heinz and her sons embraced the group’s decision to name the museum after her late husband, U.S. Sen. John Heinz, as a tribute to his commitment to the people of the region. “He was proud of his hometown, he believed in his hometown and he worked tirelessly on its behalf,” Teresa Heinz said. “He symbolized all that is best about Pittsburgh, and he challenged others to build on the past to create a better future. That is the opportunity this history center represents.”

Once settled in its new home two years later, the historical society, which operates the Heinz History Center, began to focus in earnest on making it an institution of profound influence on the region and its people.

To Andrew Masich, president and CEO of the historical society, few museums better achieve the effect he hopes the history center will have than the Black Museum of Scotland Yard. There, naïve recruits to England’s elite crime-fighting unit are shown the bloody clothing of murder victims, gruesome crime scene photographs and other morbid curiosities. Its purpose, in part, is to weed out those who don’t have the stomach for such horrors and arm those who do with knowledge of the depth of inhumanity they will someday face.

“To me,” says Masich, who has headed the history center since 1998, “that’s a museum that could change your life.”

To achieve the ambition of greater influence, the history center’s strategic plan, released in 1999, was a product of convening some 100 community leaders. That process, in turn, led to key partnerships. “We recognized after our 120 years in existence that we couldn’t do it all ourselves — that partnerships are the way to achieve our mission,” says Masich. “If our goal is to change people’s lives, we have to be able to reach them. Partners help us reach out.”

More than 164,000 western Pennsylvania schoolchildren have attended performances of history-related musicals created through a partnership between the history center and the Civic Light Opera. Another partnership teams the history center with public television station WQED to produce short documentaries on regional subjects, such as the crash of a B-25 bomber in the Monongahela River; the Donora smog that caused the deaths of at least 20 people in 1948; and the Dixmont State Hospital, a mental institution set on 400 acres of orchards, woods, manicured lawns and flower gardens.

But no partnership has delivered a bigger payoff than the history center’s affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, the world’s largest museum, keeper of the nation’s most treasured historical artifacts and a brand that is second to none. The deal was closed in 2000 after the history center demonstrated a level of professionalism, security, environmental control and public service high enough to satisfy Smithsonian officials. The partnership is among the oldest of the Smithsonian’s 152 affiliations with museums and cultural institutions in 39 states, the District of Columbia, Panama and Puerto Rico.

The first Smithsonian loan to the history center was what George Washington described as his most cherished possession:



a pistol given to him by British Major General Edward Braddock as he lay dying after leading his troops into an ambush along the banks of the Monongahela River in 1755. The Smithsonian relationship has blossomed ever since. Closter refers to the history center as a “flagship affiliate” and has granted it access to some prized possessions.

One of the Smithsonian’s most popular exhibits, “First Ladies: Political Role & Public Image,” opened at the history center last year, giving Pittsburghers a look at 150 White House artifacts from Dolly Madison’s delicate evening gown to Hillary Clinton’s black pantsuit. “That’s the highest level of exhibit we send out,” says Closter. “There are stringent requirements for handling, security and display. Not everyone gets that kind of exhibit.”

With its “Clash of Empires” exhibit, the history center demonstrated that its partnership with the Smithsonian is a two-way street. History center staff assembled more than 300 works of art, artifacts from as far away as Russia and Sweden,

Visitors to the Heinz History Center’s “Points in Time” exhibit, above left, can feel like they’re traveling back in time as they stroll through the partial reconstructions of three dwellings: a 1790 log house, a 1910 steelworker’s home and a 1950s suburban house.

The Heinz History Center, above, is anchored in Pittsburgh’s historic Strip District, which is known for its food markets and restaurants, unique shops, and lively nightclubs and bars.

Examining historical artifacts might not seem like the most romantic date, but it suits Paul Powell, 22, of Shaler, a northern Pittsburgh suburb, and Janine Kenaan, 22, of the city’s Morningside neighborhood. The couple, above, who have been dating for about 18 months, take time to look through fragments from a 19th century neighborhood in downtown Pittsburgh. The items are part of the Special Collections gallery in the Heinz History Center’s Smithsonian wing. The state-of-the-art open storage gallery includes workstations where visitors and researchers can study specific artifacts.

HISTORY ON HISTORY

The Senator John Heinz History Center’s roots go back to 1879, when a group called the Old Residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania was formed to preserve local history. The organization conducted early meetings in homes and churches, and its membership was originally limited to men who had lived in the region for at least 50 years. Within a few years, women and younger people were allowed to join the group, which provided members with opportunities to share memories, attend lectures and participate in country outings.

1884

The Old Residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania is renamed the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

1893

Space for the historical society’s archives is provided in the new Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh at Schenley Park.

1914

After several years of fundraising, the historical society has its own building constructed on Bigelow Boulevard in Pittsburgh’s Oakland neighborhood.

1996

The Senator John Heinz History Center opens in Pittsburgh’s Strip District as the historical society’s new home.

2004

The history center opens its Smithsonian wing, which enables it to better take advantage of its affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and makes it the largest history museum building in Pennsylvania.



“Senator John Heinz: A Western Pennsylvania Legacy” is a permanent exhibit on the first floor of the Heinz History Center, which was named in the senator’s honor. Visitors learn about his contributions to art and culture, the environment, economic development and society. The gallery includes Web and display kiosks that tell about John Heinz’s life and public service.

dioramas, video and life-size figures to tell the story of the French and Indian War, which gave George Washington his first taste of combat, set American colonists on a collision course with revolution and kindled a conflict throughout Europe that involved all of the major world powers.

The exhibition continues to earn the history center considerable exposure and acclaim. After opening in Pittsburgh in 2005, it traveled to the Canadian War Museum, where it drew 150,000 visitors in six months. In December, it opened at the Smithsonian’s Ripley Center and International Gallery in Washington, D.C., where the Washington Post described it as “a necessary corrective, clarifying a fuzzy patch in our collective memory, recalibrating our sense of how we got here and reminding us that American history didn’t begin in 1776.”

History center officials further developed the partnership by building a 75,000-square-foot wing to house Smithsonian exhibitions and the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum. The wing brought the history center’s square footage up to 275,000 — more than 10 times the mean square footage of 23,000 reported in the American Association of Museum’s 2006 financial survey of museums nationwide.

To one of its capital campaign gifts, the Endowments added the condition that the history center seek LEED certification for



A photo of John Heinz with his family on the campaign trail and a button promoting his re-election are among the archival material on display in the John Heinz exhibit at the Heinz History Center. The senator was killed in an airplane crash in 1991.

the Smithsonian wing and provided an additional \$200,000 to help with extraordinary costs related to that effort. The wing earned Silver LEED certification from the U.S. Green Building Alliance Council, but getting it up to green standards was a challenge, says Betty Arenth, history center senior vice president.

Day lighting, in particular, was a tough problem to solve. While it is popular with visitors and lowers energy costs, it is the bane of curators, who fear the damage natural light can inflict on sensitive historical objects. Strategies to solve the problem have included allowing daylight to pierce only areas where collections are not displayed and using motion-controlled sensors to brighten exhibit lights when visitors arrive and dim them when they leave.

The Smithsonian wing's multipurpose space, which seats 1,000 for lectures and 350 for dinner, is rented for events ranging from trade shows to wedding receptions. Two years after the wing's opening, the history center's income from facility rental and catering doubled to more than \$500,000 a year.

Factors behind the history center's ability to grow its audience base in a region that has experienced a decades-long population decline include its partnerships, the attention it pays to understanding its audience and its willingness to make history entertaining. Partnerships, focus groups, exit surveys and advisory councils are used to understand audience

interests, how they learn, what entertains them and other characteristics — information that, among other things, helps to identify target audiences and design programs to appeal to them.

Demographics showed, for example, that 75 percent of Heinz History Center visitors are from western Pennsylvania. More probing surveys revealed that more than half of that group wanted to see more about their ethnic heritage. The result was a special collections gallery, organized by ethnic group and neighborhood, that offers a glimpse of the region's diverse tapestry of people and cultures as reflected in objects such as costumes, toys, household appliances, musical instruments and a 1941 Cadillac hearse used by an African-American funeral home.

"All of our cultural institutions have to be smart about building audience and a lot more attention is being paid to how they become relevant to the community," says Janet Sarbaugh, senior program director of Arts & Culture at the Endowments. "The reason the Endowments has made such a significant investment in the history center is that it has, as a key part of its mission, a strong community connection. Community relevance is in its DNA."

The Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, a museum within the museum, evolved from the history center hearing from partners and patrons who were passionate about sports

and felt their teams and heroes deserved a greater presence. It's a blend of multimedia sound and vision and more traditional exhibits. And it's drawing more men to the history center than ever before, to where they witness major moments in sports, such as Steeler Franco Harris' "Immaculate Reception," and smaller stories that resonate with them: high school sports, industrial leagues, ethnic games and little-known champions, such as Douglas Opperman, whose 1940 Marbles King Championship crown, won at the New York World's Fair, is on display.

"Yeah, that's something," says Opperman, 82, who grew up on Pittsburgh's North Side. "My kids have all seen it. This thing about the crown — you have to understand, I was hustling since I was 6. I'd shoot craps when I had money. When I didn't have money, it was marbles."

He perfected a backspin that won him four consecutive city marbles championships and four new bicycles. "People would say, 'Those Opperman kids on Charles Street are as poor as us, and they all got new bikes.'" He did better as Marbles King champ — a \$300 check, which his father used to buy a 1936 Oldsmobile, the family's first car.

While paying tribute to the likes of George Washington and Lewis and Clark, the history center has made a point to remind visitors that history is also about people like them and the things they know: boxy brick suburban houses, an H.J. Heinz Co. ketchup ad, a job in a mill now closed, a bicycle like the ones they had as kids. Sometimes it's about the experiences of ordinary people during extraordinary times.

In "Soul Soldiers," the history center tells the stories of African-American men and women who served in the military during the Vietnam conflict while the struggle for civil rights was going on at home.

"The pattern for my community was that a lot of guys dropped out of high school and went into the military. My two older brothers did that," says Glenn Mahone, who grew up in an African-American neighborhood in Penn Hills.

Mahone went into the Army, too, but as an officer after graduating from Pennsylvania State University. He spent 10 months after high school washing pots in the kitchen of Kaufmann's downtown department store to earn enough money to pay for a year's tuition. ROTC enabled him to earn

a degree and a commission, but also a ticket to Vietnam as a second lieutenant Army engineer.

There, he says, "You see the fickle finger of fate every day." Such as when he decided to try his hand at the Law School Admission Test, which the Army offered in Vietnam for \$5. The day he left his base in Pleiku to take the test, the base was hit with the heaviest mortar barrage of his tour, and his platoon took casualties, including a fellow officer. Mahone passed his LSAT, survived the war without a scratch and, in 1973, became the first African-American attorney hired by Pittsburgh's Reed Smith, one of the nation's leading law firms.

Mahone's wife, Andrea, who taught preschool in Pittsburgh after moving from her native New York 33 years ago, says of the history center, "It's where I've gone to learn about my adopted home, who came here, how they came here and how they developed and evolved. They're great human stories."

For Becky Rodgers, executive director of Neighbors in the Strip, the history center is where she goes to work every day, climbing the stairs to the mezzanine offices the local community organization occupies free of charge. Masich helped to organize Neighbors in the Strip. Today, it is one of the most influential neighborhood groups in the city, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for improvements, such as cleanup and anti-crime campaigns. Next on its list is developing an aging, four-block-long produce terminal on Smallman Street into an international marketplace, not unlike Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Market.

Masich and history center officials are already in the thick of planning for Pittsburgh's 250th birthday next year. Community leaders see it as an opportunity to polish the region's image and renew its sense of pride around its tradition of innovation. This is, after all, where Lewis and Clark launched their phenomenal expedition westward; where aluminum was refined for the first time; and where the Salk polio vaccine was invented, as was the Ferris wheel, the Jeep and so on.

"It's a big claim to make that we are a change agent for the world," says Masich. "The history center has the evidence to prove it with exhibitions and publications, films and curriculum packets for school kids... It's not an idle boast. It's historical fact." *h*



This sculpture of forearms breaking shackles represents African Americans' liberation from bondage. During the Vietnam War, a Vietnamese woman gave the striking piece to Donald Harris, an Army vet who now lives in Pittsburgh. Harris and his fellow soldiers used the sculpture as a protective idol, touching it before leaving for battle or patrols.



Dora Harvey, above center foreground, reads about African Americans whose experiences serving in Vietnam are portrayed in the Heinz History Center's exhibit "Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era." To Harvey's immediate right is Sam Black, curator of the history center's African-American collection. Far right is Harvey's husband, Sandy. The Harveys, of Marshall Township, north of Pittsburgh, both work for Alcoa and visited the history center as part of a Black History Month celebration sponsored by the Pittsburgh Alcoa African Heritage Network Social Activity/Network Committee.