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# The Allegheny City Society

## REPORTER DISPATCH

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The Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

Summer, 2007

### Harry Thaw – The Notorious Playboy of Old Allegheny

by Doug Lucas

Harry Kendall Thaw was born in Allegheny City on February 12, 1871, a son of coal and railroad baron William Thaw. As a child, he exhibited paranoid behavior and was given to outbursts of violence. As a result, he attended a string of private school, constantly getting into trouble, and never doing well in his studies. But his influential father got him admitted to the University of Pittsburgh to study law. He later transferred to Harvard, where he gambled, drank, attended cockfights and romanced many young ladies. After chasing a cab driver with a shotgun he was expelled.

Harry then turned to drugs and divided his time between Allegheny and New York City, where he attended Broadway musicals to “study the chorus girls”. Noted architect Stanford White shared the same interests and they soon became rivals for the affection of a particularly beautiful chorus girl – Evelyn Nesbitt.

Born in Tarentum, Pennsylvania, Evelyn experienced a life of near poverty when her father died leaving a pile of debts. By the time she was in her teens, Evelyn’s beauty enabled her to find work as an artist’s model. In 1901, with her mother’s encouragement, she moved to New York City to further her career – at age 16 she



was the sole support of her family. Charles Dana Gibson found in her classic features the model for his famous “Gibson Girl”. Evelyn’s small-town up

bringing could not have prepared her for life in the big city and a fateful meeting with Stanford White.

White was a highly respected architect with the prominent firm of McKim, Mead and White, who designed many important structures in Manhattan as well as the summer homes of the wealthy. But perhaps their most famous commission was Madison Square Garden. It was said that Evelyn modeled for the nude figure of Diana that stood atop the dome. White maintained a number of “love nests” around New York, including one in Madison Square Garden that featured a red velvet swing. It was here that after posing for a number of provocative photographs, he drugged her champagne and took her virginity.

Thaw became obsessed with Evelyn – plying her with expensive gifts until, at her mother’s prompting, she agreed to marry him. A sexual sadist, who fancied both men and women, he proved to be a cruel and temperamental bully with a penchant

for delivering brutal whippings to the objects of his desire. But his overwhelming obsession was Evelyn’s relationship with White. The knowledge that White had deflowered Evelyn haunted Thaw, leading to a deadly confrontation at a theatrical production in Madison Square Garden on the eve of June 25, 1906. Both men were in attendance when Thaw, high on alcohol and drugs, fired three shots into White’s face in front of a large audience of stunned onlookers. The subsequent trials made international headlines.

There were two trials, the first of which ended with a deadlocked jury. At the second trial Harry’s mother offered Evelyn one million dollars and a divorce if she would testify in his behalf, which she did. She got the divorce but no money. The verdict was guilty by reason of insanity and Harry was committed to an asylum.

Mrs. Thaw, who was known in upper-crust Allegheny society for her glittering soirees, sold the mansion on North Lincoln Avenue and moved to the East End, living out her life as a recluse. There have been



numerous reports of the ghost of Mrs. Thaw standing on the recessed center porch of the old mansion.

By 1915, Harry was a free man and resumed his libertine ways. He sexually assaulted and severely horsewhipped a teen-aged boy, an act for which he spent seven years in an asylum. Upon his release, he moved to a farm in Virginia and joined the fire department, marching in parades in his uniform. He later moved to Florida and, in 1947 at the age of 76, died of a heart attack. Evelyn received \$10,000 – less than 1% of his estate.

After the divorce, Evelyn became a vaudeville performer, silent film actress and a café manager while raising her son Russell Thaw. Although Harry denied paternity, he did send money on a regular basis. Evelyn's life was marred by a number of suicide attempts, drug addiction and alcoholism. But she overcame those problems and went on to teach classes in ceramics. In 1955 she became a technical advisor for the biographical movie *The Girl on the Red Velvet Swing*. The 1981 movie *Ragtime*, starring James Cagney, incorporated the story into the script.

Evelyn died in a nursing home in Santa Monica, California in 1967 at the age of 82. Far from being ashamed of her past, she enjoyed the fame and notoriety. With her passing, a sordid chapter in the history of Old Allegheny came to an end.

Footnote: If you come to the Allegheny West "Spirits of Old Allegheny" Halloween tour this October, you can visit the Thaw Mansion where your tour guide will recount the tragic story of Evelyn and the Thaws. For more information visit their web site: [alleghenywest.org](http://alleghenywest.org).

## ACS Sponsors Book Signing

On May 17, 2007, the Allegheny City Society sponsored a book signing at the Teutonia Mannerchor. Prof. Michael Shaughnessy from Washington and Jefferson College presented *German Pittsburgh*, a book published by Arcadia Press Publishing Co. that explores the multifaceted cultural history of the German-speaking communities in Allegheny City and Pittsburgh.

Copies of this book can be obtained through our web site at [www.alleghenycity.org](http://www.alleghenycity.org) for \$20 plus \$2.50 shipping and handling. If you do not have access to a computer, send your check to P.O. Box 100255, Pittsburgh, 15233. (Don't forget to include your address.)

## Annual Meeting a Great Success

The annual meeting of the ACS was held at the Riverview Presbyterian Church in Observatory Hill on April 25<sup>th</sup>. The coveted President's Award was presented to Michael Shealey and Tim Zinn, members of the Allegheny West Local Historical Review Committee, for their detailed research into the history of the Allegheny Stables located on West North Avenue. This research was conducted as part of the process for having this building designated as an historic structure by the City of Pittsburgh. Following their acceptance of the award, Mike and Tim gave a slide presentation of their findings.



**Emilia Boehm, Tiffani Emig, and Michael Shealey, our new Board members**



**Marcella Miller, with Board Members John Makar and Tom Orhman enjoying the Annual Meeting and the Dinner that followed.**

### **Date to Remember:**

Saturday, July 28, 2007 – Time: 11AM – 4PM. Place: East Commons. **Celebration in the Park** – Giant Puppets commemorating "Women of Allegheny"

## ACS is Creating a Pictorial Memory of the “Lost City”

Board members of the ACS, under the direction of Ruth McCartan and John Canning, are in the process of assembling a new book, which will be published by the Arcadia Press Publishing Co., entitled *Allegheny City 1840 –1907*. The society has discussed this project for several years and, with the Centennial of the Annexation fast approaching, this was the ideal time to complete the project.



**Mike Shealey scans images**

Making use of the Society’s archives, collections from members, the Carnegie Library, and the Senator John Heinz History Center, the team has been spending their Saturdays pouring through many books, newspapers, pictures and postcards to illuminate the illustrious history of our late city. This book will be ready for sale in December, 2007.



**Lois Yoedt shares family photos with John Canning**



**John Makar and John Canning discussing the merits of an image for inclusion in our book**

## Upcoming Tour of Allegheny City

The ACS is planning an all-day bus tour, with lunch included, of the various neighborhoods that were part of Allegheny City. To be held this Fall, this will be the same tour that David McMunn produced for the attendees of the National Trust for Historic Preservation Conference, held in Pittsburgh last November. More information will be forthcoming when plans are finalized.

## A Day to Remember

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1907, the City of Allegheny ceased to exist, being annexed by its sister city, Pittsburgh. To commemorate this event, the Allegheny City Society will sponsor a dinner on the evening of December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007 and a reenactment of Miss Allegheny being escorted across the Allegheny River by Pa Pitt at noon on December 7<sup>th</sup>.

The dinner will be held at the Grand Hall at the Priory in Deutschtown (aka East Allegheny) and will include an entertaining program recognizing the importance of the annexation.

Volunteers are needed to assist the Board. Please email Mike Coleman at [mcoleman@alleghenyrd.com](mailto:mcoleman@alleghenyrd.com).

Plans are still underway and will be finalized in the next few months. Look for more information in our Fall newsletter.



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