

HOUSES, HOT DOGS, AND 'HOODS: PLACE BRANDING AND THE  
RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN RICK SEBAK'S PITTSBURGH DOCUMENTARIES

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green  
State University in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2012

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## ABSTRACT

Ellen Berry, Advisor

This project investigates the implementation of place branding theory via documentary filmmaking focused closely on the local characteristics of a place/region. Employing a close reading of WQED filmmaker Rick Sebak's *Pittsburgh History Series* focused upon recurrent themes about aspects of Pittsburgh's unique identity framed in relation to rhetorical approach and documentary techniques, while also noting aspects left out of Sebak's films, this dissertation demonstrates the progressive potential of publicly funded documentary filmmaking to enable the residents of a given place to rebrand their identity and foster revitalization, independent of the expectations of city planners or corporate sponsors, and without sacrificing the diversity of experiences that give that place its unique character. As a whole, Sebak's body of work constructs a particular narrative of Western Pennsylvania's identity that revamps some of the preexisting notions about that identity. As a project of self-definition and self-understanding, the *Pittsburgh History Series* provides the local populace with some agency in recreating its image, rather than being branded from the outside. The success of this place branding approach to documentary filmmaking for Sebak and Western Pennsylvania suggests that other cities and regions could use it as a model to take greater control of their identities and cultivate renewal.

On the whole, this dissertation views Sebak's films as a series of reconstructions. While place branding aims to reconstruct a place's identity, the process of documentary filmmaking involves a specific reconstruction of reality in order to communicate certain

ideas about that reality. In other words, through his films Sebak constructs or reconstructs aspects of Pittsburgh identity and feeds them back to the residents of that area. Particular aspects of this unique identity frequently emerge in his films. These recurring characteristics that he stresses include neighborhoods that retain a sense of closeness and community as well as ties to their history, a uniquely dedicated workforce that can innovate without abandoning the working-class values of the past, and a rich cultural life that is competitive with that of larger cities in terms of quality yet also more modest and accessible than that found elsewhere. This redefinition of Western Pennsylvania's identity seeks a way forward without attempting to completely discard all aspects of the region's existing identity. This celebration of the region's positive attributes—and consequent downplaying of its more divisive and unpleasant elements and episodes—encourages pride among the local population while also enhancing its appeal to outsiders who might consider relocating themselves and/or their businesses to the area.

In memory of John and Johanna Marafka

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family for their unending support not only in my educational pursuits but in my life in general. I simply would not have made it to this point without them. I'd particularly like to thank my parents, Jim and Pam, my siblings, Kelly and Michael, and my grandparents Ruth and Gene. We should all be so fortunate as to have family like them. I wish my grandparents John and Johanna Marafka had lived to witness this and many other milestones in my life. I'd like to think that they would be pleased. My gratitude also goes out to my godparents Tom and Diane Hahn for their belief in me over the years. My extended family has so many members that I could not possible thank them all here individually, and I would hate to cause offense by acknowledging certain individuals and neglecting to mention others. Such is the complicated inner politics of a large family. Please know that I am grateful for the positive impact you have had upon my life. The nonhuman members of my family, namely my cats Jack, Sting, and Maggie May, have also played a significant role in my success by providing much quiet (and sometimes not-so-quiet) companionship and affection through some otherwise difficult and lonely times. If there is truly such a thing as karma, their actions have surely earned them a better rebirth.

I am indebted to my dissertation chair, Ellen Berry, for her ongoing enthusiasm, encouragement, and support throughout this process. I honestly believe that I would not have completed this project otherwise. The other members of my dissertation committee, Cynthia Baron, Scott Magelssen, and Ellen Gorsevski, also deserve a great deal of thanks for their support and contributions to my work. They have helped me to strengthen my ideas and to recognize potential that I would not have otherwise seen in myself. I'd also like to thank Clayton Rosati for assisting me in the formulation of my dissertation topic

during the embryonic stage of this project. In addition to these extraordinary educators, there have been a number of others who have nurtured my intellectual abilities along the way, stretching back to the beginning of my formal education. In particular, I'd like to thank my master's thesis chair Cary Frith and my undergraduate advisor Randy Jesick for their encouragement and help in furthering my talents and abilities.

My friends also deserve tremendous thanks for all that they have done for me over the years. I would particularly like to thank April Manalang for being my greatest cheerleader during these past four years of graduate school. I cannot possibly express my gratitude for your friendship and all that it entails. You have been and continue to be one of the finest friends anyone could ever have. I was fortunate to be part of such a welcoming and supportive community at Bowling Green State University, and my time there would have been far less enjoyable without the friends I made there, particularly Sudipto "Deep" Sanyal, John "J.R." Rawlins, and Christian Remse. Thank you, guys, for your friendship and all the great times. I would also be remiss if I failed to thank some of the wonderful friends who I had to leave back in Pennsylvania when I moved to Bowling Green. Matt and Caylan Neil: In a world where friends come and go easily over the years, you are truly irreplaceable. Your friendship has been too long, too extensive, and too significant to do it justice here. Mike Dahlheimer: Thank you for being a great friend and bandmate. Whether you know it or not, you have helped me through some very difficult times, and I appreciate having your friendship all these years. Kristin and Neal Brown: I feel incredibly fortunate to have the two of you as both family and friends and to have been able to share so many wonderful times with you (or perhaps I should say "yinz" since this is about Pittsburgh after all).

At the risk of being labeled a leftist, I'd like to thank the various government agencies responsible for securing the funding—and the taxpayers who provided those funds—for the tuition scholarships, grants, stipends, and student loans that made my university education possible. Without their financial assistance, higher education would have been out of reach for this son of a Western Pennsylvania factory worker, and undoubtedly for many others like me. I hope that I am one day able to return your investment in me, and not just because I dread the notion of defaulting on my student loans.

Finally, I would like to thank the man himself—Rick Sebak. In addition to giving me something to write about, your films provided me with a great deal of comfort and relief from homesickness during my years in Ohio. Thank you for reminding me why I love Western Pennsylvania.



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## INTRODUCTION

At a time when cities, regions and nations are increasingly competing for human and environmental resources, it becomes ever more crucial for these places to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Former industrial centers have particularly felt this need as they have experienced the economic decline that accompanies the loss of manufacturing. While many cities in the so-called Rust Belt continue to flounder, Pittsburgh has significantly rebounded in recent decades. This economic turnaround has involved a number of complex factors and a great deal of strategic planning, but it has also involved changing the prevailing national image of the city as a once great steel behemoth in decline. One component of such rebranding efforts is strategic communication. An often overlooked player in this is WQED television writer, producer and director Rick Sebak.

Sebak has become a somewhat unexpected success for Pittsburgh's WQED public television station since joining the station in the fall of 1987. Beginning in 1988, he has made a series of what he calls "scrapbook documentaries" about Western Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> His films are partly defined by his characteristic use of old films and photographs, home movies, postcards, and a variety of memorabilia. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* TV Editor Rob Owen describes Sebak as a "less obnoxious Michael Moore by way of Andy Rooney" with an "upbeat, occasionally wide-eyed, style."<sup>2</sup> He adds, "He's the feature documentary maker you can count on to shine a light on normal, everyday people, and in the process reveal they're anything but average."<sup>3</sup> Sebak's appeal is often described in terms of his ability to make the everyday seem unusual. *New York Daily News* TV critic David Bianculli writes:

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<sup>1</sup> "Meet Rick Sebak," WQED Pittsburgh. <http://www.wqed.org/tv/pghist/sebakbiog.shtml> [accessed March 14, 2011].

<sup>2</sup> Rob Owen, "Rick Sebak goes to the dogs on PBS," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 27, 1999. <http://www.post-gazette.com/tv/19990627owen.asp> [accessed March 14, 2011].

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Even though he writes, produces and narrates his own documentaries for PBS, Rick Sebak is not a film maker. He's a brainwasher. He's a brainwasher because you can't watch one of his effervescent films without having a very strong urge to follow in his footsteps and experience firsthand the places he presents so compellingly. After his "Pennsylvania Diners and Other Roadside Restaurants," I wanted to run out and sample the architecture, cuisine and atmosphere of a few of those quirky places and did. During his recent "An Ice Cream Show," I took careful notes, so I could take the family on a pilgrimage to nearby emporiums he made seem so wonderful.<sup>4</sup>

While his WQED documentaries initially began as a purely local venture, they soon took hold beyond Western Pennsylvania. In 1990 he adapted his local special about Mister Rogers for the national PBS program *Our Neighbor Fred Rogers*.<sup>5</sup> His 1988 program *Kennywood Memories*, about a Pittsburgh amusement park designated as a National Historic Landmark the previous year, became an early success, having been shown in more than one hundred markets via PBS.<sup>6</sup> While his earliest programs were initially produced for a local audience, he got the opportunity to make national documentaries for PBS when his 1993 statewide special *Pennsylvania Diners and Other Roadside Restaurants* earned surprisingly solid ratings on PBS stations nationwide despite a lack of sizeable promotion.<sup>7</sup> Since then, he has produced eleven national documentaries for PBS, including *An Ice Cream Show*, *Shore Things*, *A Hot Dog Program*, *A Program About Unusual Buildings & Other Roadside Stuff*, and *A Cemetery Special*. His work on the WQED *Pittsburgh History Series* has continued, with a current total of 23 documentaries and a spin-off weekly WQED show, *It's Pittsburgh & a Lot of Other Stuff*, which aired its first thirteen-episode season between November 2010 and October 2011. In November

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<sup>4</sup> David Bianculli, "Standing Ovation for 'Shore Things,'" *New York Daily News*, July 30, 1996. <http://articles.nydailynews.com/keyword/ocean-city/featured/5> [accessed March 14, 2011].

<sup>5</sup> "Meet Rick Sebak," WQED Pittsburgh. <http://www.wqed.org/tv/pghist/sebakbiog.shtml> [accessed March 14, 2011].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Pittsburgh History Series: Rick Sebak," WQED Pittsburgh. <http://www.wqed.org/tv/pghist/sebak.shtml> [accessed March 14, 2011].

2011 his work went international when the British pay-television version of PBS broadcast *A Hot Dog Program* during its inaugural weekend.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the growth of the volume of his work, Sebak's success can be seen through his increasing public prominence. He has won 10 regional Emmy Awards, and he received Primetime Emmy nominations as both writer and producer for his program *Fred Rogers: America's Favorite Neighbor*.<sup>9</sup> In 2012 the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a resolution honoring Sebak's twenty-fifth anniversary at WQED.<sup>10</sup> In that same year, the iPhone and iPad app Yinztagram, a Pittsburgh-themed version of the Instagram photo-sharing program, included an image of Sebak as one of the ten icons that can be added to into its users' photographs.<sup>11</sup> Of greater consequence than such honors is the measurable impact his work has had beyond the escalation of his local celebrity status.

Sebak's style of documentary has been a financial success for public television stations nationwide, making it a valuable commodity at a time when PBS has faced funding cuts and even Congressional threats to eliminate funding entirely.<sup>12</sup> PBS funding has even become a high-profile controversy with former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney's vow to defund it during

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<sup>8</sup> "Rick Sebak & WQED Pittsburgh Go Global With Premiere of *A Hot Dog Program* on PBS UK," WQED Pittsburgh. press release, November 1, 2011, <http://www.wqed.org/pressroom/files/sebakgoesuknationalshows.pdf> [accessed October 5, 2012].

<sup>9</sup> Maria Sciullo, "Person of Interest: Rick Sebak, Documentarian of Pittsburgh," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 24, 2012. <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/ae/tv-radio/person-of-interest-rick-sebak-documentarian-of-pittsburgh-641748/> [accessed October 5, 2012].

<sup>10</sup> Pennsylvania General Assembly, House, *A Resolution Honoring Rick Sebak for His 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary at WQED*, H.R. 708 (2012), <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/CFDOCS/Legis/PN/Public/btCheck.cfm?txtType=PDF&sessYr=2011&sessInd=0&billBody=H&billTyp=R&billNbr=0708&pn=3450> [accessed October 5, 2012].

<sup>11</sup> Mackenzie Carpenter, "Trending: Yinztagram, a New iPhone and iPad App, Shows Pittsburgh Pride," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 26, 2012. <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/life/lifestyle/trending-yinztagram-a-new-iphone-and-ipad-app-shows-pittsburgh-pride-650562/> [accessed October 5, 2012].

<sup>12</sup> "PBS Statement on Elimination of Funding for Public Broadcasting," Public Broadcasting Service. February 19, 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/about/news/archive/2011/pbs-statement-elimination-funding-public-broadcasting/> [accessed March 14, 2011].

his first debate with President Barack Obama during the 2012 presidential campaign.<sup>13</sup> WQED credits Sebak's films with helping the station to remain financially solvent.<sup>14</sup> As of March 2006, public television stations nationwide have sold or given away as pledge gifts 313,227 tapes and DVDs of Sebak's documentaries.<sup>15</sup> The success of his programs led to imitators—often using the same titles as Sebak—at other PBS stations nationwide, including stations in California, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and New York. For instance, Philadelphia's WHYY earned nearly one million dollars in pledges from the 1993 and 1994 documentaries *Things That Aren't There Anymore* (also the title of a 1990 Sebak documentary) and *More Things That Aren't There Anymore* within their first year of release.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to keeping public television afloat at a time when it faces decreasing public funding and increasing competition from other television outlets, the work of Rick Sebak occupies a unique space where internal and external populations meet. His films help to define a sense of self for the residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania while simultaneously redefining the image of the area for the rest of the nation. This interaction of the internal and external is vital to any successful place branding endeavor. As such, it should come as no surprise that Sebak's films function as place branding tools.

This study investigates the implementation of place branding theory via documentary filmmaking focused closely on the local characteristics of a place/region. By examining Sebak's *Pittsburgh History Series* films through the lens of rhetorical criticism, I demonstrate the progressive potential of publicly funded documentary filmmaking to enable the residents of a

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<sup>13</sup> "PBS Statement Regarding October 3 Presidential Debate," Public Broadcasting Service. October 4, 2012. <http://www.pbs.org/about/news/archive/2012/statement-presidential-debate/> [accessed October 5, 2012].

<sup>14</sup> Mark Roth, "WQED: Financial Picture Getting Brighter for Public Television Pioneer," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 19, 2006. <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06078/672921.stm> [accessed March 14, 2011].

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Behrens, "Happy History: At Pledge Time, Is That All There Is?," *Current*, October 3, 1994. <http://www.current.org/hi/hi418.html> [accessed December 13, 2011].

given place to rebrand their identity and foster revitalization, independent of the expectations of city planners or corporate sponsors, and without sacrificing the diversity of experiences that give that place its unique character. As a whole, Sebak's body of work constructs a particular narrative of Western Pennsylvania's identity that revamps some of the preexisting notions about that identity. As a project of self-definition and self-understanding, the *Pittsburgh History Series* provides the local populace with some agency in recreating its image, rather than being branded from the outside. The success of this place branding approach to documentary filmmaking for Sebak and Western Pennsylvania suggests that other cities and regions could use it as a model to take greater control of their identities and cultivate renewal.

On the whole, this dissertation views Sebak's films as a series of reconstructions. While place branding aims to reconstruct a place's identity, the process of documentary filmmaking involves a specific reconstruction of reality in order to communicate certain ideas about that reality. In other words, through his films Sebak constructs or reconstructs aspects of Pittsburgh identity and feeds them back to the residents of that area. Particular aspects of this unique identity frequently emerge in his films. These recurring characteristics that he stresses include neighborhoods that retain a sense of closeness and community as well as ties to their history, a uniquely dedicated workforce that can innovate without abandoning the working-class values of the past, and a rich cultural life that is competitive with that of larger cities in terms of quality yet also more modest and accessible than that found elsewhere. This redefinition of Western Pennsylvania's identity seeks a way forward without attempting to completely discard all aspects of the region's existing identity. This celebration of the region's positive attributes—and consequent downplaying of its more divisive and unpleasant elements and episodes—encourages

pride among the local population while also enhancing its appeal to outsiders who might consider relocating themselves and/or their businesses to the area.

This study adds much to the discourse on Sebak, documentary film, and place branding theory. Sebak's work, which has not yet been the focus of academic study, presents an emerging direction for documentary film in terms of its hybridization of visual and verbal modes as well as its approach to politically charged subjects. He confronts these issues without the overt social advocacy of political muckraking films, yet at the same time his goal of rebranding regional identity differentiates him from most folkloristic documentarians. Likewise, his films provide new avenues from which to consider place branding theory not only because they demonstrate attempts at internal branding aimed at gaining the support of the resident population but also because they help to understand the role of feature films, documentaries, and television programs in the promotion of a place's brand.

### Place Branding as a Theoretical Framework

The concept of place branding, as delineated by Simon Anholt in 2002<sup>17</sup>, is relatively new and has often been misunderstood. It includes nation branding as well as the branding of regions and cities. Anholt arrived at the term place branding from his earlier work with nation branding, a term he first used in 1996 to explain his observation that “the reputations of countries are rather like the brand images of companies and products, and equally important.”<sup>18</sup> References to the similar concept of place marketing appeared somewhat earlier in the work of Kotler,

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<sup>17</sup> Simon Anholt, “Nation Brands: The Value of ‘Provenance’ in Branding.” In *Destination Branding: Creating the Unique Destination Proposition*, ed. Nigel Morgan, Annette Pritchard and Roger Pride. (Waltham, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2002), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi.



Haider, and Rein<sup>19</sup>, Gold and Ward<sup>20</sup>, and others. As Houghton and Stevens explain, “City branding is an old art, but a new science. For centuries, city leaders have recognized the need to project a unique and powerful image to the rest of the world. Yet it is only in the past few decades that city branding has begun to be recognized as a distinct discipline.”<sup>21</sup>

Two divergent strains exist in the place branding literature. Marketing science experts like Kotler, Haider, and Rein have based their views upon experience with commercial product marketing. This viewpoint suggests that the concepts that apply to commercial products, corporations, and customers also hold true for place products, public corporations, and place users.<sup>22</sup> Other theorists, coming from the perspective of place management, maintain that unlike the branding of traditional products, place branding requires a much more holistic, ongoing approach—one involving the coordination of all interested parties over the long term rather than a marketing department putting together a catchy slogan and attractive logos—to public relations in order to change a place’s image. Sicco van Gelder writes, “The development and implementation of a city brand is a strategic endeavor that requires the partners to commit their efforts and resources towards changing people’s minds about their city through a progression of activities that will take years to complete and even longer before they fully bear fruit.”<sup>23</sup> Anholt explains that this difference from traditional product branding arises from the fact that place brands are not owned by one entity, as in the case of commercial brands, that can exercise

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<sup>19</sup> Philip Kotler, Donald H. Haider, and Irving Rein, *Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry, and Tourism to Cities, States, and Nations*. (New York: Free Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> John R. Gold and Stephen V. Ward (eds), *Place Promotion: The Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions*. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> John P. Houghton and Andrew Stevens, “City Branding and Stakeholder Engagement.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 52.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Kotler, Donald H. Haider, and Irving Rein, *Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry, and Tourism to Cities, States, and Nations*. (New York: Free Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Sicco van Gelder, “City Brand Partnerships.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 38.

control over the “product” and the ways in which that product is communicated to the world.<sup>24</sup>

Altering the image of a place involves more than traditional tourism promotional techniques or the changing of a logo or slogan.

In 2007 Anholt began to replace place branding with the term competitive identity because he believes “it has more to do with national identity and the politics and economics of competitiveness than with branding as it is usually understood.”<sup>25</sup> Brand management works at social, economic, and cultural levels to strengthen, nuance or correct public perceptions about a place. Anholt further clarifies the concept of place branding by explaining that the form of place branding that encourages progress and prosperity needs to explain the complexity of the people and landscapes in a place, rather than taking the form of some manner of marketing discipline that reduces them to simplistic stereotypes.

The project at hand takes a cultural studies approach but also relies upon major texts from the place branding field. This literature helps to explain how a place acquires an image, the importance of the resident population in determining that image, and how that image affects the behavior of outsiders. Anholt’s work in particular informs much of this study. Of particular note is his point that people’s perceptions of a place are formed by the things done in that place and the way they are done; the things made in that place and the way they are made; the way others talk about that place; and the way that place talks about itself.<sup>26</sup>

Anholt also argues that improving the reputation of a place involves substance, strategy, and frequent symbolic actions.<sup>27</sup> If even one of these elements is missing, a place will fail to

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<sup>24</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 30.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 13.

improve its reputation and will instead end up with anonymity, incoherence, spin, propaganda, or failure to appear serious in its efforts.<sup>28</sup> Strategy involves knowing the identity of a place, where it wants to get to, and how it wants to get there. According to Anholt, substance involves the execution of that strategy in terms of economic, legal, political, social, cultural, and educational activity. In his scheme, symbolic actions are where substance and strategy meet. They are examples of substance that are particularly memorable, thus allowing them to be both part of the story and a means of telling the story.

Place branding theorists recognize resident involvement in city branding as a foundational element of any branding endeavor. Insch points out that “in the race to build a brand that is admired by tourists and other short-term visitors, residents are overlooked, despite their role as loyal supporters and ambassadors of the city brand.”<sup>29</sup> She adds that when businesses consider relocating to a city, the presence of a diverse, skilled and satisfied population is critical. Traditional “hard” factors, such as human resources, infrastructure, transportation, education, and training opportunities, are insufficient without resident satisfaction and perceived quality of life.<sup>30</sup>

Middleton provides insight into the relationship between city branding and the attraction of inward investment. He explains that brand impressions are a significant factor when national and global organizations choose the locations for their operations. In order to make a favorable impression, brands must create a distinctive appeal that “comes from an understanding of how core values, attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics have developed into special skills, resources, and competencies of the city, and how these fit with emerging trends in economic,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 15-17.

<sup>29</sup> Andrea Insch, “Branding the City as an Attractive Place to Live.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

environmental, social, and technological developments.”<sup>31</sup> This appeal will only have value if it is then followed by the execution of a strategic plan that is consistently communicated to the appropriate audiences. In order for external communications to succeed, the internal communication strategy must first involve key internal stakeholders.

One concept that permeates any discussion of the internal dynamics of place branding is that of community. Community, in the traditional local, place-bound sense, has been in flux as a result of the uncertainty and mobility that characterize contemporary American life. Lash and Urry write that the local community “involves sets of social relations which are multiplex (neighbours who are workmates, who are leisure-time companions, etc.), where ‘everyone knows everyone else’ and where these sets are organized into a locally structured and delimited system. Such community supports faster bonds of trust, friendship and reciprocity within that local civil society, even if this is a ‘mutuality of the oppressed.’”<sup>32</sup> They argue that the working class population has decreased while the white-collar and pink-collar professions have increased as a result of a decline in primary and secondary industry and an increased focus on the service sector.<sup>33</sup> This results in the deterioration of traditional forms of community, as the working class must relocate to find employment while the upper class engages in global capitalism. Bauman describes this moment as one of “liquid modernity,” where temporary and fluid structures replace the collapsing stable forms of community.<sup>34</sup> He contends that in current uncertain and unstable times, the notion of community provides comfort and security. It is also the notion of a paradise lost that we hope to regain.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Alan C. Middleton, “City Branding and Inward Investment.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 25.

<sup>32</sup> Scott Lash and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 91.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 74.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3.

While Bauman and many other social theorists suggest that late capitalism has led to cultural homogeneity and a lack of community, the case can be made that different regions of a country can differ dramatically in their ideas of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and culture. Even individual regions can be difficult to pigeonhole in terms of identity. Allen, Massey, and Cochrane point out that:

“regions” (more generally, “places”) only take shape in particular contexts and from specific perspectives. There will always be multiple, coexisting, characterizations of particular spaces/places. The different social groups within a place may have different, even opposed and contested, readings of its character. Wider discourses—political, cultural, or economic—may yield yet other identities. There is, we would argue in general terms, no “essential place” which exists in real authenticity waiting to be discovered by the researcher.<sup>36</sup>

Place managers must clearly understand these conflicting yet coexisting identities in order to successfully distill them to a useable brand. Anholt cautions against confusing this distillation with simplification, which he argues “has a tendency to reduce its appeal, since so much of the ultimate appeal of a country is its richness and complexity.”<sup>37</sup> Rather than washing out the complexity of a place, the key is to find the common thread that runs throughout the different components of the brand.

While the literature on place, country and city branding has exploded in size in recent decades, there remain numerous gaps, some of which this study will attempt to address. One such area involves the internal aspects of branding a place. In other words, how does one garner support from populace for the brand and invite them “live” it?<sup>38</sup> Sebak’s documentaries provide an interesting avenue into this realm because, in the case of the *Pittsburgh History Series*, they are primarily produced for a local audience, rather than a national or international audience, as

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<sup>36</sup> John Allen, Doreen Massey, and Allan Cochrane, *Rethinking the Region*. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 34.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 40.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Anholt, Foreword to the Special Issue on Place Branding, *Journal of Brand Management* 9, no. 4-5 (2002): 230.

well as the fact that they are not produced by city managers, but rather by a public television station. Since it receives only a portion of its funding from government sources<sup>39</sup>, public television does not function merely as a communications tool for a government agenda. Another understudied area involves the role of feature films, documentaries, and television programs in promoting a place's brand. This includes how they originate and how they are managed by those who oversee a place's image. In the case of Sebak's work, questions arise about how his work relates to the larger project of redefinition happening in the Pittsburgh region as it attempts to overcome the stigma of being a Rust Belt region. While it is not within the scope of this project to delve into regional branding projects beyond Sebak's films, it is possible here to look at his work as a piece of this larger puzzle.

#### Film Studies, Folklore, and the Politics of Documentary

While the body of work on place branding theory helps to direct the discussion of Sebak's potential goals and how he achieves them in terms of broad ideas, it is also useful to consider his work within the context of some film studies literature, particularly that pertaining to documentary filmmaking. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine his documentaries from a film studies approach, such literature does help to discuss and contextualize aspects such as formal strategies used in his films, forms of address, purpose, and his place within the documentary tradition. While many viewers often think of documentaries as the recording of unmediated actuality, this is at best the case for the material used to produce a documentary. The organization of such material and even the manner in which it is shot involve

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<sup>39</sup> "PBS Statement Regarding October 3 Presidential Debate," Public Broadcasting Service. October 4, 2012. <http://www.pbs.org/about/news/archive/2012/statement-presidential-debate/> [accessed October 5, 2012].

many choices on the part of directors, producers, editors, camera operators, etc. As Andrew Britton explains:

In the first place, truly great documentaries are analytical, in the sense that they present the corner of reality with which they deal not as a truth there to be observed, but as a social and historical reality which can only be understood in the context of the forces and actions that produced it. Secondly, they are engaged, in a sense that they lay no claim to objectivity, but actively present a case through their structure and organisation of point of view.<sup>40</sup>

In order to examine the manner in which the filmmaker manipulates reality, it is useful to first consider Richard Barsam's view that documentaries exist as a subgroup (alongside factual films, ethnographic films, films of exploration, propaganda films, cinéma vérité, and direct cinema) within the realm of nonfiction films, categorized by their use of actuality footage.<sup>41</sup> He distinguishes it from these other forms of nonfiction film by what he argues is the more specific role of the filmmaker as an author who determines the interpretation of the material in such films.

John Corner further categorizes such films in terms of technological factors, sociological dimensions, and aesthetic concerns.<sup>42</sup> Technological factors play a role in the sense that such developments have been crucial to changes in style and approach to nonfiction films. Sociological dimensions are key because documentaries locate themselves in historical moments and are influenced by the cultural codes of those moments. Corner helps to further clarify aesthetic concerns with his four modes of visual language and three modes of verbal language in the documentary form.<sup>43</sup> The mode of reactive observationalism, or "fly on the wall" approach, gives the appearance of involving the least mediation on behalf of the director, whereas proactive

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<sup>40</sup> Andrew Britton, "The Invisible Eye," *Sight and Sound*, February 1992: 29.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Barsam, *The Nonfiction Film*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>42</sup> John Corner, *Documentary and the Mass Media*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), xiii-xx.

<sup>43</sup> John Corner, *The Art of Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary*. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 27-30.

observationalism involves greater directorial intervention in terms of what is recorded. The illustrative mode, used frequently in current-affairs documentaries, uses footage to illustrate the spoken discourse. On the other hand, the associative mode seeks to make second-order meanings by using images for symbolic and metaphorical purposes. The verbal modes are somewhat more readily classified. The mode of overheard exchange involves speech that is apparently overhead, unedited and natural. Testimony uses the speech from interviews. The expository, or “classic,” mode of documentary speech uses voiceover or direct camera address of a narrator. Rather than being limited to particular visual and verbal modes, Sebak’s “scrapbook” format is a hybrid that uses a combination of them.

One can gain further understanding of Sebak’s work by also considering it through the perspective of documentary advocacy. Paula Rabinowitz explains that the key terms to understanding this are representation and realism.<sup>44</sup> One of the major representative functions political documentaries have served is to point out problems within society with the hope of solving them. This representative function largely defines the type of directly partisan social issue documentaries—like *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Food, Inc.*, and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*—that have experienced a recent renaissance. However, as Bill Nichols points out, “All documentaries have a voice of their own, but not all documentary voices address social and political issues directly.”<sup>45</sup> This is certainly the case of Sebak’s documentaries, which do not explicitly concern themselves with social problems.

While Sebak’s films may not appear to be overtly political because they do not advocate political causes or positions on their surface level, they still contain a political element in terms of their invitations toward civic pride and celebration of local businesses and institutions. On this

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<sup>44</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. (New York: Verso, 1994), 11.

<sup>45</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 214.



level, his documentaries embody the representative function described by Rabinowitz as self-definition and self-understanding.<sup>46</sup> Describing how groups use documentaries for this function, she writes, “It represents itself to itself—an act of identity—as it represents its positions to a wider community—an act of recruitment.”<sup>47</sup> Rather than trying to draw attention to and solve social problems, this representative function focuses on the need of people to assert their identity rather than having it imposed upon them from the outside. This function is far more indicative of Sebak’s work, which serves as a means of rebranding the identity of Western Pennsylvania and its people. While one might not label his films as radical, they nevertheless serve a somewhat subtle political function, whether intended or unintended. Though Sebak is not a muckraker, his work becomes political in the sense that it aims to redefine Western Pennsylvania and its constituent people, institutions, and activities.

Regardless of which type of representative function they serve, social documentaries have been a means of creating publics, according to Jonathan Kahana. He writes, “One reason for the invention of American social documentary was the imputed failure of democratic institutions, including both state and nonstate agencies of government. By promising to restore directness and transparency to these agencies, documentarians established a parallel between the immediacy of the visual (and, later, audio-visual) apparatus of cinema and the democratic processes. In this respect, it could be argued that American documentary constitutes a kind of late public sphere, an aesthetic and ideological response to the obsolescence of an earlier model of the public sphere, as it encounters the mass publics of the twentieth century.”<sup>48</sup> He suggests

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<sup>46</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. (New York: Verso, 1994), 11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 34.

that documentary uses the tools of cultural mass production that are often blamed for the decline of the public sphere.

Documentary's "late public sphere" has evolved, Kahana argues, from one based upon trust of the state to represent the interests of an expansive public during the New Deal era to one founded in suspicion the New Left of the 1960s and finally to one that in recent decades has been characterized by "what Jürgen Habermas calls the New Obscurity, one way of describing the condition of diminished expectations otherwise known as postmodernity."<sup>49</sup> Kahana contends that it is in this most recent period of social documentary resurgence, beginning in the late 1980s, that such films have been increasingly characterized by reflexive filmmaking rooted in postmodern skepticism. He explains:

The art and analysis of so-called postmodern documentary have tended to privilege gestures of skepticism about the idea of a documentary tradition and about the concepts of referentiality and truth upon which every previous step in this tradition is said to depend. The postmodern critical maxims about communication—that transparency is an ideological effect; that nothing is real besides the material of representation—have not quashed entirely the documentary impulse, but they have encouraged among many filmmakers sensitive to "theory," a retreat into the parochial interiority of the self and the work, in pursuit of a less incorrect (rather than more true) image.<sup>50</sup>

Like many documentaries of the contemporary moment, Sebak's films exhibit this reflexivity. This will be discussed further in the next chapter, which deals with the stylistic conventions of Sebak's work, but presently it is important to further foreground the social documentary context in which his work exists.

Sebak's handling of what are potentially politically charged subjects should also be considered within the context of public television's approach to political documentaries. B. J. Bullert contends that various gatekeepers within the public television system make "judgments

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 345.

about who does and does not have the privilege to speak on the contested issues of the day,”<sup>51</sup> and they do not always welcome alternative perspectives, particularly when they come from independent producers. He explains, “Even if independent producers had journalistic credentials inside the public television world . . . PBS programmers regarded them with suspicion when they took on hot topics. They perceived them as likely advocates for particular points of view, despite the soundness and evidence of facts.”<sup>52</sup> While Sebak as a producer at WQED might not face the same level of scrutiny as a wholly independent producer, it is not unthinkable that this pressure to avoid the appearance of political advocacy influences his work on some level.

Additionally, the desire of stations to remain in the good graces of their viewers and subscribers impacts programming. Bullert claims that PBS programmers make decisions in part based on a sense of accountability to affiliate stations. He says, “While the programmers were also obligated to realize public television’s mandate to provide a forum for voices outside the mainstream, they made their decisions to accept or reject the programs with the knowledge that some stations and audiences did not want to hear what the film makers had to say or did not want to hear it in the form it was presented. They felt a responsibility to the stations who paid their bills.”<sup>53</sup> He argues that these factors cause public television programming to remain restrained and less willing to take chances with contentious issues and alternative perspectives. He writes, “But as we have seen, the financial and organizational structure of public television, along with its rigid conventions of journalism, work to keep the programming cautious. So long as the system is vulnerable to the withdrawal of federal funding, and dependent on a mix of private

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<sup>51</sup> B.J. Bullert, *Public Television: Politics and the Battle Over Documentary Film*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 186.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 189.

funds from corporations, foundations, and private donors, public television's promise as a vital forum in our democracy will remain unrealized."<sup>54</sup>

The somewhat safe approach of Sebak's films will become clearer in subsequent chapters, but detailed investigation into the role of funding on the specifics of his work will have to wait for future studies. Indeed, Anholt points out that the funding of image work, particularly in the context of public/private initiatives, has been understudied.<sup>55</sup> Sebak's films present an ideal case, as they are financed by a variety of public and private funding sources. The present study, however, focuses primarily on messages that are inherent in the films rather than attempting to tease out the motives of underwriters and station programmers and their influence upon Sebak's work.

Rather than serving as political muckraking films, Sebak's documentaries take a more folkloristic approach to the subject of place. One must be careful not to dismiss the folkloristic approach's lack of muckraking for naiveté, as the purpose of such films differs. Sharon R.

Sherman argues:

Folklore film usually does not ask directly how we fight for tenants' rights, change big business, create a union, overthrow a dictatorship, or champion any one of many causes. Rather, folklore films ask viewers to look at their own lives and find resemblances to what is seen in the filmic record. How do their rites of passage, material culture, foodways, and ethnicity function for them and correlate with that depicted on film or video? Folklore film authenticates the folk practices and events that people perform, and viewers search to find themselves mirrored or shattered by the images. How do our traditions compare with those on the screen? Thus, folklore films and videos offer an interpretive window for comprehending ourselves.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> B.J. Bullert, *Public Television: Politics and the Battle Over Documentary Film*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 191.

<sup>55</sup> Simon Anholt, Foreward to the Special Issue on Place Branding, *Journal of Brand Management* 9, no. 4-5 (2002): 231.

<sup>56</sup> Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 260.

According to Sherman, “The folklore film covers a wide range of traditional behavior, from rituals, ceremonies, folk art and material culture to games, sayings, and songs and to the lore of various peoples bonded by ethnicity, age, gender, family, occupation, recreation, religion, and region.”<sup>57</sup> Unlike ethnodocumentary filmmakers, folkloristic filmmakers need not focus on “primitive” cultures instead of their own “industrialized” cultures. Sherman contends, “The most successful folkloristic filmmakers have, in fact, examined traditions in their own locales.”<sup>58</sup>

With his success on PBS, Sebak has popularized a folkloristic approach to place that has its antecedents in the work of filmmakers, like Les Blank, who emphasize community and region. Like Blank, who values the rural over the urban and the past over the contemporary in his depiction of rural Cajun life, Sebak often gives precedence to romanticized notions of a simpler past. However, just as Blank has strayed from such a formula, Sebak has brought just as much of the urban and contemporary into his films as the rural and past. Both men also share a frequent focus on foodways. In films like *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers* (1980) and *Yum, Yum, Yum!* (1990), Blank demonstrates the ways in which food and culture provide sources of identity for people. In their work on foodways, Harris, Lyon, and McLaughlin explain that “everything about eating—including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, and who’s at the table—is a form of communication rich with meaning. Our attitudes, practices, and rituals around food are a window onto our most basic beliefs about our world and ourselves.”<sup>59</sup> These aspects tied to food play a significant role in the definition of place and identity in the films of Blank and Sebak.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Patricia, Harris, David Lyon, and Sue McLaughlin, *The Meaning of Food*. (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2005), VIII.

Another tactic employed by Blank and other folkloric filmmakers that has made its way into Sebak's work is the use of an "everyman" as a cultural representative. Sherman explains that this method, which initially developed out of the ethnographic work of Robert J. Flaherty in *Nanook of the North* (1922), has progressed over time due to changes in style and technique and been taken "a step further by documenting these people as both cultural representatives and unique personalities."<sup>60</sup> Sebak's use of so-called ordinary people as the primary sources of cultural knowledge and memory leads to a democratization of information in his films. While he features local experts in some cases, the emphasis is generally not on the positions of authority held by individuals. Instead, the repetition of ideas and themes from the many "everyman" cultural representatives in his films provides authority.

While Sebak's folkloristic approach to place mirrors that of Blank in many ways, it differs greatly in its goal to rebrand that place. Throughout the course of his career Blank has shifted in terms of subject matter and geography. He has focused on subjects in many regions throughout the United States, such as East Texas bluesmen (1969's *The Blues Accordin' to Lightnin' Hopkins* and 1971's *A Well Spent Life*), New Orleans music and Mardi Gras culture (1978's *Always For Pleasure*), Appalachian fiddlers (1983's *Sprout Wings and Fly*). He has gone international with films about American tourists in Europe (1991's *Innocents Abroad*) and Chinese tea (2007's *All in This Tea*). He has also covered a variety of subjects that are not bounded by place, such as the culture of Polka music (1984's *In Heaven There Is No Beer?*) and the lives of women with space between their teeth (1987's *Gap-Toothed Women*). Since he has not developed a large body of work focused solely on one distinct place or region, as Sebak has done with Western Pennsylvania, Blank's films do not serve as a concerted rebranding effort. While the specific subject matter of Sebak's documentaries is diverse, the films in the *Pittsburgh*

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 8.

*History Series* coalesce in such a way that in their totality they become a regional branding campaign. As explained earlier, successful place branding cannot be accomplished in a one-shot manner. Rather, it requires a repeated, organized effort that unfolds over time. Having laid out the theoretical underpinnings of this project, at this point it is useful to further clarify the scope of the present study.

### Methodology and Limitations

Using a rhetorical criticism approach modeled after the work of Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, the present study examines the ways in which Sebak's documentaries invite certain responses, rather than arguing that his films are attempting to make particular claims in some sort of propagandistic sense. This method of textual analysis involves "searching the texts not for what they 'mean,' but for the ways in which they induce the action of meaning-making in a willing spectator."<sup>61</sup> Such an approach provides a richer assessment of such films because "the meaning-making of the spectator may be a conscious, discursive process on occasion, but it may also be a largely emotional response or a mode of formal, aesthetic pleasure."<sup>62</sup> While there is something to be said for the intentions of Sebak, the focus here is more on how his films create an implied author and audience, as well as the response that audiences might have if accepting or resisting the films.

This subject has the potential to expand into a variety of areas that, while interesting, would be far too expansive for this study. For instance, it would be worthwhile to investigate parallels in documentaries from other cities or regions in order to strengthen the case made here about the role played by Sebak's documentaries. The success of Sebak's films has spawned

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), xv.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

copycats at other local PBS affiliates, including Georgia PTV's *Lost Atlanta*, Maryland PTV's *Gone But Not Forgotten*, KCTS's *Northwest Memories*, KTCA's *Lost Twin Cities*, and KEET's *The Way It Was* in Eureka, California. While delving into these imitators in the manner of the present study has the potential to uncover new insights, it would be too cumbersome to add here.

Also, interviewing Sebak and members of his staff, such as his editor Kevin Conrad (the only person who has worked on all of Sebak's major productions at WQED), would provide a greater sense of the creative and editing choices that shaped the films as well as the intentions and ideological underpinnings that influence these documentaries. Since the present study concentrates on the meanings encouraged by the films, a discussion of the true intentions of the filmmaker—which do not necessarily influence the meanings made by the audience—would only serve to confuse and perhaps dilute the purpose of this study. As Nichols writes, “Such background stories do not exhaust our curiosity, however, and we need to take statements of intention with a grain of salt since the effect of a work on others, and its interpretation, may be quite different from the intentions of its maker.”<sup>63</sup> In support of this perspective, Benson and Anderson say, “A viewer's experience of the film takes place as a result of, but usually without any particular knowledge of the real world of the subject, the actual intentions of the filmmaker, or any of the various technical and administrative processes of production and distribution.”<sup>64</sup> Likewise, investigation into the branding and place management of the Greater Pittsburgh Region would potentially benefit from interviews with city officials who could illuminate the nature of the planning and decision-making process involved in branding the region. But again,

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<sup>63</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 95.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 5.



the intentions of change agents are not the focus here, as they not necessarily translate into intended reactions or behaviors.

Moreover, for the parameters of this project it is necessary to exclude a discussion of parallels between Sebak's films and other forms of media and art in Pittsburgh. If taken to its extreme, this could potentially blur the focus of this study. Finally, it is necessary to exclude Sebak's national programs from this study, since they include more than just stories about Pittsburgh. While he always includes some segments about Pittsburgh, these documentaries have a much broader scope than those in the *Pittsburgh History Series*. Consequently, they differ somewhat in purpose with regard to Western Pennsylvania. As such, the present study will be limited to Sebak's twenty-three documentaries produced for WQED's *Pittsburgh History Series* as well as episodes of his weekly WQED show *It's Pittsburgh & a Lot of Other Stuff*, which began airing in November 2010. Having laid out what this project will avoid, it is necessary to explain its overall direction.

### Dissertation Structure

The first chapter of this study delves into the particular stylistic conventions of Sebak's work, the kind of celebrations vs. politics in which he engages, and a close reading of his *Remaking Cities* program as an entrée into an analysis of the work that will define him in the documentary film career to follow. The second chapter will be the first of several to explore his films in terms of themes that appear throughout his work. That chapter and the two that follow will include a close reading of these themes framed in relation to rhetorical approach and particular types of documentary techniques.

The second chapter in particular tackles the notion that Pittsburgh differs from other cities because it is made up of many small, distinct, close-knit neighborhoods that retain strong

ties to the racial and ethnic heritage of the immigrants who initially settled them in previous centuries, rather than being a large, jumbled conglomeration of faceless neighborhoods with ever-shifting populations. The reemphasis of this idea throughout his films reassures local inhabitants that they belong to unique communities despite the fact that they live in a city. It also positions Pittsburgh as an attractive location to outsiders who long for such a sense of belonging.

The third chapter addresses the recurring thread of the unusually strong work ethic of Pittsburgh residents. Throughout his films, Sebak reinforces the notion that the people of Pittsburgh have a long history of working hard and taking great pride in their work. Rather than expecting money for nothing or working just to collect a check, the residents of this region are, in Sebak's view, people who do not shy away from hard labor and who stand behind the products of that labor because they put something of themselves in it. Sebak positions Pittsburgh as a place that was once highly responsible for the development and progress of the United States during the Industrial Revolution and that it has the potential to once again lead the way through developments happening there in areas like technology and medicine.

The fourth chapter examines how Sebak tries to undo perceptions of Pittsburgh as a cultural backwater. His films frequently discuss the region as a center for food, education, recreation, and the arts. Through such topics, Sebak reminds local residents—or perhaps in some cases makes them initially aware—of the fact that Pittsburgh has a great deal to offer in terms of culture, despite the fact that it lacks the reputation of much larger cities. He also reveals to outsiders that Pittsburgh has as much to offer as its more cosmopolitan counterparts.

The final chapter further examines the potential for place branding theory and documentaries to foster revitalization without sacrificing the unique qualities of places. It will delve into place branding theory more directly than the previous chapters. Rather than looking at

branding as a means of selling a place, this discussion will focus on its usefulness in efforts to preserve a place's distinctive character. Additionally, this section will look at some of Sebak's imitators in the documentary field. The fact that Sebak's homegrown style of filmmaking has spawned copycats in many other cities throughout the country points to possibilities for progressive urban and regional renewal. Whereas the previous chapters discuss the methods that have been successful for Sebak and Western Pennsylvania, this chapter suggests a way forward for other cities and regions hoping to achieve a renaissance.

Given the large number of films Sebak has produced, the limitations of space—and perhaps attention span—necessitate a discussion according to recurring themes rather than an in-depth investigation into each film. While there are three larger themes—around which these chapters are centered—that are characteristic of the *Pittsburgh History Series*, there are a number of other reoccurring tropes and characteristics that define Sebak's filmmaking style and differentiate his documentaries from many of those on public television. As such, it is useful to summarize these items in the first chapter before delving into them further in subsequent chapters.

## CHAPTER I. FOUNDATIONS OF SEBAK'S STYLE

Like many filmmakers, Sebak has a style that defines his work. In order to better understand the in-depth readings of his films in subsequent chapters, it is useful to first have a grasp upon those stylistic conventions and their antecedents, in both the work of others and in Sebak's own earlier work. This chapter will discuss the reflexivity, humorous and lighthearted tone, balance of celebrations and politics, and narrative structure that characterize his films. It will also consider the roots of these conventions in the tradition of journey documentaries and in an early Sebak WQED piece, *Remaking Cities*.

### Reality vs. Fiction

At the heart of any film that attempts to document reality is the distinction between "actual reality" and the construction of reality by filmmakers. Rabinowitz describes this tension between reality and construction as such: "Documentaries construct not only a vision of truth and identity but an appropriate way of seeing that vision. The sequences of images and words lays out a narrative that produces meanings already understood within conventionalized forms and genres . . . . The documentary text, then, is deeply invested in narrative forms of difference. Who looks at whom? This question is at the heart of image, word, and sound within documentary rhetoric."<sup>65</sup> The term "reality fictions," used by filmmaker Frederick Wiseman to describe documentaries, offers a simple means of conceptualizing this. Benson and Anderson write, "The term was used by Wiseman as early as 1974 and at one level is a fairly obvious way of referring to the same problem John Grierson pointed to when he said that documentary film was about 'the creative treatment of actuality.' One works from social actuality but necessarily imposes form

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<sup>65</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. (New York: Verso, 1994), 12.

upon that actuality, turning it into what may be implied by the terms *art* or *fiction*.”<sup>66</sup> This distinction provides a useful lens with which to dissect Sebak’s documentaries, as his filmmaking style strike a somewhat unique balance between the appearance of unadulterated reality and directorial construction.

At first glance, Sebak’s films might appear to be largely direct representations of reality, as they are dominated by on-site shooting and person-on-the-street interviews and sound bites. However, as Benson and Anderson explain, “At every step in the process of production and distribution, the filmmaker, no matter how independent, is making choices that constrain the form of the work and its reception and interpretation by the public.”<sup>67</sup> They add, “Even when audiences understand that film is selective, they seldom understand fully how it constructs an interpretation, a difficulty that cannot be resolved by appeals to “objectivity,” as if that would relieve the filmmaker of the responsibility of constructing meaning.”<sup>68</sup> Though audiences tend to expect documentaries to be more truthful or objective than the average fictional Hollywood blockbuster, Sebak often draws attention to the fact that his films are constructions rather than complete representations of reality. Rather than opt for conventions that might appear more reality-based, such as the “fly on the wall” approach of the direct cinema movement, Sebak makes reflexivity part of his trademark. For instance, in the tease that opens each of his films, he explains that he will not be able to cover every aspect of the topic at hand. He also frequently adds that he hopes to make future films to address things that are left out, though his only “sequel” thus far has been *Stuff That’s Gone* as a follow-up to *Things That Aren’t There Anymore*.

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

Sebak's tendency toward reflexivity is grounded in the tradition of journey documentaries. According to Stella Bruzzi, these films "are illustrative of the growing tendency to offer a critique within the films themselves of the issues surrounding documentary representation, issues that direct cinema, with its unflinching faith in observation, naively took for granted."<sup>69</sup> She adds, "This reflexivity has further advanced the practice and theory of observational documentary. Journey films are structured around encounters and meetings—often accidental or unplanned, they are about not necessarily knowing where they will end up."<sup>70</sup> Such characteristics come from the direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* traditions. Bruzzi writes, "Many journey documentaries borrow from [direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*]: the close attention to detail and personality of direct cinema and the focus upon the moment of encounter with the filmmaker of *cinéma vérité*."<sup>71</sup> Sebak's films, with their concentration on encounters with people and the frequent forefronting of the filmmaking process, owe much to these influences.

One manner in which Sebak brings the filmmaking process to the fore is through such techniques as incorporating shots that did not happen as planned and using voiceovers to explain how certain sequences came about. One such example occurs in *North Side Story* as he follows Mary Wohleber, a resident of the Troy Hill neighborhood, to a scenic overlook. The camera shakes while trying to follow Wohleber as she runs through alleys to reach the overlook. Sebak begins his voiceover in this shot by saying, "Mary said we had to see the view. We told her we were running short on time, so she started running." With these two sentences, Sebak makes it clear that his filming schedule can at times determine whether or not certain aspects of a story are covered. When introducing this segment as a bonus feature on the *It's the Neighborhoods*

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<sup>69</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 99.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

DVD, he describes it as “perhaps the most-remembered sequence in any of our shows,” yet this segment nearly never happened because of time constraints.

Whereas viewers are trained to believe that the camera does not lie, Sebak sometimes points out that even the camera distorts reality. In a segment of *Pennsylvania Diners and Other Roadside Restaurants* where he visits the West Shore Diner in Lemoyne, Pennsylvania, Sebak points out via a voiceover that the interior of the diner is smaller than it appears because “the wide angle lens on our camera distorts these tiny diners.” This demonstrates that even in instances in which the director has no intention of influencing the “reality” that is presented to the viewer, the mechanics of the camera itself can alter the scene that is depicted.

Sebak adds another layer of reflexivity through additional introductions added to segments on DVDs of his films. For example, the DVD release of *The Strip Show* includes an introduction filmed in Pittsburgh’s Strip District specifically for that release in 2004, eight years after the documentary itself was filmed in the same locale. Unlike in his documentaries, Sebak appears on camera for this added introduction, an act that makes his role as mediator of the “reality” he films much more apparent to the viewer. He warns the viewer that some of the prices, places, and people may have changed since the original filming. However, he adds, “But I think the show still gives you some idea of the spirit of this place. That hasn’t changed.”

Sometimes he also includes outtakes and extended sequences as bonus features on DVDs. For instance, the DVD release of *It’s the Neighborhoods* includes an extended sequence of interviews filmed during the Bloomfield neighborhood’s Little Italy Days celebration that is prefaced by a brief description of part of Sebak’s editing process. The sequence begins with a voiceover from Sebak in which he first introduces himself and then says, “When I’m working with Kevin Conrad, the editor, putting a show like *It’s the Neighborhoods* together, one of the

first things we make in the editing room is what we call a string-out of voices. It's all the sound bites we like from all the interviews that have been done for any one story. We build sort of a rough assembly that's usually way too long, but we thought it would be fun to share some string-outs on this DVD. So while our finished story about Bloomfield's Little Italy Days is about six minutes long, this early version, just local folks talking, is almost twice that." His statement that this version is "just local folks talking" draws attention to the fact that his finished films include something more than just unmediated reality. However, it also simultaneously obscures his editorial hand by focusing on the act of filming people talking and not pointing out that his choices of who to interview and what sound bites to include affects the narrative of the film.

Sebak's films combine both staged and non-staged video clips. He often introduces interviewees with staged sequences of them performing some action related to their purpose in the film. For instance, in *Underground Pittsburgh*, he introduces a sequence about Marshall Elevator's company archives by showing CEO Rob Jamison walking down into the basement where the archives are located. While the finished film may lead the viewer to believe that Jamison was simply followed down to the basement by the camera, the DVD of this film contains a bonus feature in which Sebak shows many of the failed takes that occurred because of a faulty basement light before completing a usable take. Sebak humorously comments, "Rob was not having a great time at all this, but he did get his exercise that day."

On the other hand, the Marshall Elevator story in that film includes a sequence where two employees are shown fixing a belt and pulley system on an old elevator. In the aforementioned bonus feature Sebak points out that this repair sequence was not planned. While this unplanned, chance occurrence that made its way into the completed film may not point out by itself the fact that it was not staged, sometimes the inclusion of mistakes in completed films draws attention to



the fact that certain segments are not staged. One such example occurs when he visits the Bowmanstown Diner in *Pennsylvania Diners and Other Roadside Restaurants*. During one shot the camera follows owner Rich Wenner as he carries a tray of food from the kitchen to the dining area; however, the camera accidentally crashes into the door frame while following him through the doorway. The waitress who was holding the swinging door open is then seen saying with a laugh, “Oh, sorry, this door is heavy.” Sebak himself is then heard briefly chuckling in a voiceover as he transitions into the next story. Indeed, this inclusion of brief chuckling in his narration, a device used frequently by Sebak, demonstrates the importance of lighthearted humor to his documentaries.

### Humor and Lightheartedness

One of the trademarks of Sebak’s work is his playful approach to his subject matter. Rather than adopting the staid, public-affairs-style approach common to PBS documentaries, he takes a more whimsical approach to his subject matter. Though he celebrates his subjects and treats them with respect, he remains lighthearted. This becomes apparent before even watching his films. With titles that are sometimes almost childlike in their simplicity (e.g., *Stuff That’s Gone*, *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh*) or whimsical in their defiance of conventions (e.g., *It’s the Neighborhoods & the Suburbs & the Small Cities & Towns & All the Surrounding Hills & Valleys that Really Make Pittsburgh*, usually shortened to *It’s the Neighborhoods*), Sebak sets a spirited, non-serious tone for his documentaries. He describes his attitude toward titles as such: “I place great value on titles and think they’re really important. I also know I have a fondness for

generic titles that use the indefinite article so that no one can accuse me of trying to make the definitive documentary on any subject.”<sup>72</sup>

His playfulness also extends to his use of language in narrating his films. He displays a great penchant for using alliteration. This can be seen particularly well in *Pittsburgh A to Z*. The film begins with the a flashing red background with “WARNING” in white capital letters and accompanied by the sound of an alarm as Sebak says, “I want to warn you, the following Pittsburgh program contains a lot of alliteration. Verbally vigilant viewers victimized by such potentially poetic devices may decide to dismiss this documentary. Wise ones will watch and welcome the whimsical words.” Later in the introduction he adds, “We had no rules about what to include: people, places, peculiar pieces of our past, anything. Although, the double use of a letter gave it an added attraction.” While his use of language demonstrates a lighthearted approach to filmmaking, this characteristic of Sebak’s style shows itself in other ways.

Sebak’s choice of music accentuates the carefree tone of his films. He mostly uses jaunty, generic instrumental pieces in a style similar to television sitcoms like *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. While such a decision is likely influenced in part by budgetary concerns, stylistically it gives his films a spirited, timeless quality. Music mostly appears at the beginning and end of his documentaries as well as when he transitions between segments. He frequently chooses an individual piece as a sort of theme music for each film, using it as a musical bed underneath the entirety of the introductions and conclusions. The theme sometimes reappears as a transition between segments. Additionally, music serves functions more specifically related to the mood of individual moments. For instance, he occasionally uses pieces to underscore moments of drama, such as old footage of steelworkers accompanied by

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<sup>72</sup> Barbara M. Neill, “Riding with Rick: We Shall See What Sebak Shall See,” *Laurel Mountain Post*, September/October 2008, 5.

triumphant orchestral music. At other times, music functions as a manner of placing viewers in a particular time period being discussed, such as when he uses fife and drum music while discussing military events during the American colonial period or Doo-wop music in segments about the 1950s.

Humor provides an essential ingredient in Sebak's films, a fact that he even acknowledges guides his editing process. During the introduction to a bonus extended sequence about a race in the Regent Square neighborhood included on the DVD release of *It's the Neighborhoods*, he says, "In the editing room we have to decide which sound bites are best, which ones work well with the pictures we have, which ones tell the story, and which ones are funniest." This one brief statement points out that not only does humor play a factor in editing decisions but also that such choices are limited by the visuals he managed to capture and the story he intends to tell. Rather than being merely a document of a story as it plays out in reality—a quality that viewers are sometimes inclined to attribute to the documentary medium—his films are at least on some level guided by a story that he intends to tell.

Humor sometimes finds its way into Sebak's documentaries at the expense of the people he films. However, rather than coming off as mean-spirited exploitation, his treatment of his subjects appears to be playful teasing and a celebration of quirky characters that can be found in everyday places. Such scenes also demonstrate a relationship between the presentation of "reality" as it is filmed and a story as it is constructed by the director's editing choices. One such example can be seen in a portion of *North Side Story* where Sebak takes a behind-the-scenes tour of the National Aviary with Jim Bonner, Curator of Birds. In this segment Sebak slowly sets Bonner up as someone who has perhaps become a bit eccentric from spending too much time on the job.

The sequence starts off in a fairly innocuous manner, with Bonner showing Sebak a variety of exotic birds in an off-exhibit breeding facility. It becomes apparent that Bonner is immersed in his career as he provides some factoids about the birds and even makes a corny joke about a certain species being “pretty flighty.” The sequence culminates with a shot of Bonner making various sounds and calls directed at a group of birds in a large, floor-to-ceiling enclosure. He appears to be either unaware of or oblivious to the fact that he is being watched. This is further enhanced by the fact that the camera begins the shot by watching him through the bars as it pans around the corner of the enclosure and maintains a distance once rounding the corner, giving the impression that the camera operator is sneaking up on him. During all of this, Sebak is heard in a voiceover saying, “You know, it’s great that Jim knows all these species, but we had to wonder—maybe he’s been spending too much time up here.” While the conventions of documentary filmmaking may give viewers the initial impression that they are viewing unfiltered reality, closer examination reveals that editing choices can introduce or enhance humorous elements.

Another such example can be seen in a segment of *Great Old Amusement Parks* about Lakemont Park in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Sebak presents a sequence filmed during the 1999 reopening of the park’s famous (and world’s oldest) Leap-the-Dips rollercoaster in which he quickly alternates back and forth between footage of passengers riding the rollercoaster and interviews with park patrons discussing their impressions of the ride. One such interview includes a two-shot of an older married couple, beginning with the husband’s comment that “the dips don’t go down like the new ones do, but it’s nice.” The wife then cuts him off with her comment, “But you know, I always say, ‘Bigger doesn’t mean better.’” It then immediately cuts to a close-up shot of the husband’s face as he breaks eye contact with Sebak, who is off-camera,

and quickly darts his eyes downward. The editing presented here implies that the husband feels some insecurity or embarrassment pertaining to the obvious sexual innuendo present in his wife's comment. One cannot be sure if the exchange was truly this awkward in reality or if Sebak's editing choices introduced or enhanced this element. Ultimately, the viewer has no way of determining to what extent this brief exchange was naturally humorous in the moment it was filmed, as opposed to having humor injected through Sebak's editing choices.

Sometimes Sebak generates humor by juxtaposing conflicting statements or memories from his interviewees. An instance of this can be seen in a segment of *Kennywood Memories* about park patrons picnicking at Kennywood. Discussing her memories of the past, one woman says, "We would have these big bushels filled with goodies, including wine, homemade wine, covered. Nobody touched it. No one touched it. You could leave everything on the table. There was no problem." Sebak immediately follows this with a sound bite from a man who says, "In those days, you didn't have that much money, so you'd go around to the different groves and see where people had picnic baskets, grab a sandwich and so on. And that way you could stay the rest of the day and wait for the dance to come on." Neither of these reminiscences would be particularly amusing inherently, but Sebak adds humor to the film by placing them in quick succession to each other. Regardless of the extent to which Sebak constructs humor in his films, he clearly encourages it and employs it as a vital characteristic of his filmmaking style. His lighthearted, humorous tone lends itself to what is a generally celebratory approach to his subject matter.

## Celebration

Sebak's films have often been described as lacking the negativity and cynicism found in many documentaries, particularly those with political aims. Rather than playing upon fears, Sebak has said that he thinks of his "shows as celebrations, not investigations or diatribes."<sup>73</sup> He adds, "I like to point out things that I think are often ignored or taken for granted, and I've learned to enjoy especially showing things that are still here."<sup>74</sup> Despite this celebratory approach, he is quick to dismiss evaluations of his work as being nostalgic. He contends, "Sometimes people will say my shows are 'nostalgic,' and that gets to me. I don't think of myself as a nostalgic sort of guy. I like to point out things, often small family-owned businesses that were or *are* surviving in a franchised, big-boxed, chain-stored, homogenized world. And I like to celebrate their success. I'm so glad that people seem to enjoy this sort of thing. I think there should be more celebratory television."<sup>75</sup>

Obviously, such a purposefully celebratory approach can be criticized for overlooking the negativity that has existed or currently exists. As *Current* writer Steve Behrens notes, Sebak is well aware of important, unpleasant subjects that he leaves out of his films: "Sebak considered what to include and what to exclude when he planned the original 'Things That.' When you think of things that *aren't in* Pittsburgh anymore, he says, the first thing you think about is steel mills. But even though he didn't realize he was making a pledge show, he had already decided to stick to happy memories. The steel story remains on WQED's list of big unfunded future projects."<sup>76</sup> Certainly, one could view such omissions in a cynical light, contending that pledge

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<sup>73</sup> Barbara M. Neill, "Riding with Rick: We Shall See What Sebak Shall See," *Laurel Mountain Post*, September/October 2008, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Steve Behrens, "Happy History: At Pledge Time, Is That All There Is?," *Current*, October 3, 1994. <http://www.current.org/hi/hi418.html> [accessed December 13, 2011].

drive dollars depend upon pleasant stories. A similarly constructed *Lost Twin Cities* program that aired during a March 1994 pledge drive on KTCA in Minneapolis/St. Paul garnered the second-highest viewership for the station's locally produced programming.<sup>77</sup> The program with the highest ratings, *The Dakota Conflict*, which documents a war between settlers and Native Americans that culminated in the largest mass hanging in American history, was not run during a pledge drive. In reference to the *Lost Twin Cities* pledge drive, *KTCA* Vice President Gerald Richman said, "I've never enjoyed a pledge drive more. There was a smiling face behind every ringing phone."<sup>78</sup> Richman's comments suggest that the past procures more pledge dollars when it's pleasant.

However, one could argue that it is this avoidance of the adverse that enables Sebak to succeed in rebranding the region. While they may not be aware of each instance of the unpleasant that is missing from the films, the residents of Pittsburgh, and many Rust-Belt cities like it, have long been fighting against unfavorable impressions of their home. Although they may not present the full picture of every subject they cover, these films arguably need not do so—and perhaps ought to avoid doing so—if they are aspiring toward getting locals and outsiders to think differently about Pittsburgh. The analysis of Sebak's films in following chapters will take into consideration some negative memories that are left out and discuss how the balance he strikes between inclusion and omission fails to represent certain populations, potentially points to certain perspectives that he wishes to impart, and ultimately helps his films to succeed as tools for rebranding Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

### Narration and Narrative

While all of the aforementioned characteristics of Sebak's films distinguish his work from that of many other public television documentarians, perhaps the most noticeable defining element of his films is his narration. As previously discussed, his narration is playful in its use of language, but it is also lively in terms of Sebak's vocal delivery. His pleasant, jovial voice combines the jolliness of Santa Claus with the sense of awe and wonder displayed by a child. His narrative persona is more relaxed and informal than the stereotypical public affairs style of public television documentaries. He sounds almost conversational, even chuckling now and then when narrating some of the more humorous moments of his films. Indeed, Sebak's style of delivery is so characteristic of his work that it is perhaps the most key element that copycat documentarians at other public television stations fail to reproduce.

In addition to his method of delivery, Sebak's narration is distinguished by the point of view he employs. He generally avoids directly placing himself in his films as an individual, both in terms of eschewing the first-person singular perspective in his narration and not appearing on camera. However, there are some notable exceptions to this. For instance, he narrates *Things that Aren't There Anymore* in this style, connecting his own childhood memories to the subjects he covers. In a segment of *North Side Story* about the former Boggs & Buhl department store, he interviews his mother—whom he introduces as such—because she used to work at there. Most recently, he frequently appears on camera in episodes of his weekly television program *It's Pittsburgh & a Lot of Other Stuff*.

While Sebak may tend to distance himself as an individual from the stories he tells, he does frequently enter his films in a somewhat more impersonal manner. He narrates almost entirely from a first-person plural point of view. This method proves useful when considering his



documentaries as part of a place branding project. Rather than bringing himself to the forefront in the manner of a filmmaker like Michael Moore, Sebak keeps the focus elsewhere. This serves several purposes. First, it helps to keep the discussion off Sebak himself and on the subjects of his films. At worst, critics may talk about issues concerning his filmmaking style, as opposed to Moore, who by making himself such a visible personality, often becomes just as much the focus of his critics' ire as the subjects he covers. Sebak's method also succeeds because it contributes to a sense of inclusion, a theme that appears throughout his work. Instead of talking about "I, the documentarian," he tells stories on behalf of "we, the audience" or "we, the people of Western Pennsylvania." It encourages locals to view the stories he tells and think of their own experiences with these subjects or to hear the claims he makes and nod in agreement because they are part of the "we" that is making the claims in the first place. As Sherman suggests, "The notion of 'us' and 'them' disappears" within the folkloristic film tradition.<sup>79</sup> Sebak's overall approach to narration blurs the lines between personal and impersonal and attempts to remove some of the boundaries between filmmaker and audience.

Sebak's presence within his films characteristically places it within the tradition of journey documentaries. Bruzzi contends that while such films "are concerned with the inherently unpredictable meeting or encounter, they are very obviously guided by the presence of their respective authors."<sup>80</sup> She adds that such films depart from the influence of direct cinema in terms of their narrative structure. She writes, "Direct cinema was founded upon an uncomfortable paradox, that whilst the films were putatively concerned with the unpredictable action not dictated by the filmmakers, they also desired and sought ways of imposing closure on their ostensibly undetermined action. Nichols and others have thereby drawn parallels between

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<sup>79</sup> Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 260.

<sup>80</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 99.

direct cinema documentaries and the classical Hollywood style, intimating that both modes of filmmaking emphasize transparency (the disguise of the cinematic apparatus); it could be added that both modes also demonstrate a desire for certainty or the desire for narrative closure.”<sup>81</sup>

Bruzzi argues that such films rely upon “subjects with an in-built ‘crisis structure’ (a series of events that are predestined to follow a logical, closed path) or the imposition of a clear ending” onto them.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, journey films “challenge these notions of certainty, predictability and transparency.”<sup>83</sup>

Sebak’s films embody this eschewal of a “crisis structure.” His films lack the dramatic narrative buildup that characterizes the work of PBS stalwart Ken Burns. Even Sebak’s films that display some of pretense of travelogues (*The Pennsylvania Road Show* and *Pennsylvania Diners and Other Roadside Restaurants*) have no sequence to their journeys. Both films create a sense of a journey by introducing their component segments with shots of Sebak’s hand pointing to locations on a map of Pennsylvania. However, it becomes readily apparent that Sebak jumps from one area of the state to another, making for journeys whose sequence are either highly improbably or terribly inefficient. In the introduction to *The Pennsylvania Road Show* he even acknowledges this. He says, “We’re not in any hurry. We’re not following any logical route. We’re just driving around the state, seeing some of what there is to see.” All of Sebak’s films exemplify a structure that Bruzzi attributes to the documentaries *Shoah* and *London*. She writes, “What is intriguing about *Shoah* and *London* is that, like the sequential but not necessarily developmental travelogue, they do not have a hard and fast logic imposed on them: both possess narratives that are only superficially closed by their concluding images and words; both are more

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

preoccupied with charting moments of encounter and examining the act of journeying than of reaching a fixed destination.”<sup>84</sup>

Sebak’s journeys are instead structured around what Edward Branigan refers to as a “focused chain,” which he describes as “a series of cause and effects with a continuing center. For example, the continuing adventures of a character, the events surrounding an object or place, or the elaboration of a theme.”<sup>85</sup> These differ from categories like the “heap” or the “unfocused chain,” which do not have this center, but at the same time they lack the emphasis on a sequence of events that characterizes a simple narrative, which possesses “a reversibility in that the ending situation can be traced back to the beginning.”<sup>86</sup> In Sebak’s case, his films are focused chains that concentrate on shared themes. Even a film like *The Strip Show*, which attempts to impose a loose time structure upon its segments, possesses no true progression of events. The film begins with stories that take place in the early-morning hours, such as activity at the Produce Terminal Building and several breakfast eateries, and it concludes during the late night with segments about various nightclubs and eating at Primanti Brothers restaurant after leaving the bars. The intervening events have no logical progression, and the “morning” and “night” beginning and ending points serve merely as a means of bookending an otherwise disparate group of events.

Regardless of their subject matter, Sebak’s films have taken on essentially the same basic format. He begins each film with a brief opening segment in which he strings together a variety of clips and sound bites related to the stories he will tell in the course of the film. In terms of narration, he attempts to briefly explain the unifying theme of the documentary and how some of the stories he will cover relate to it. The body of each film includes number of segments, usually no more than ten minutes in length, about a variety of subjects, all of which are tied together by

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>85</sup> Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 20.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

the film's overall theme (e.g., things made in Pittsburgh, things not in Pittsburgh anymore, houses in Pittsburgh, things underground in Pittsburgh, particular Pittsburgh neighborhoods). Each film concludes with a final brief segment similar in style to the introductory segment, except that in this case he is quickly touching upon the stories he already told throughout the course of the film.

Even without his name attached to them, Sebak's films would be instantly recognizable as his. They stand out from the stereotypical public-affairs-style documentaries often seen on public television. His films contain an element of reflexivity that informs the viewer that they are a particular treatment of reality, resulting from directorial and editing choices, rather than unmitigated representations of reality. The films also have a playful, lighthearted, and humorous approach to their subjects. This approach lends itself to the overall celebratory tone of Sebak's films, which tend to focus on more pleasant subjects and avoid many of the negative aspects. His films are perhaps most visibly defined by his narrative persona, which is relaxed, conversational, and inclusive. The themes and characteristics discussed briefly in the preceding pages will be delved into further in subsequent chapters. They can, however, be seen in their embryonic stages in a piece Sebak produced for WQED that predates his documentaries.

### *Remaking Cities*

Many of Sebak's filmmaking approaches and themes appear in a program titled *Remaking Cities* that he produced for WQED in March 1988. This broadcast discussed issues raised by the international Remaking Cities Conference, chaired by England's Prince Charles, held that month in Pittsburgh. The conference involved a gathering of urban planners whose missions were to resurrect Pittsburgh after the collapse of the steel industry in the 1980s and to

use the lessons learned from that in order to rehabilitate cities throughout the world. Presented more as a public-affairs-style program than a documentary, it includes interviews with advocates on various stakes in the issues of urban planning and the role of the manufacturing industry, as well as highlights from the conference itself, before concluding with the Prince Charles keynote address in its entirety. While Sebak's program in one respect aimed to merely document this process, it—and his documentaries that have followed—has also intentionally or unintentionally become an agent in this process. With many cities struggling with their images, economies, and civic pride after the collapse of industry, Sebak and Pittsburgh provide a model of a successful campaign to rehabilitate the image of an area.

Perhaps due to the subject matter at the heart of the program, it contains some more overtly political statements. Unlike in his subsequent documentaries, Sebak touches upon the polarizing issue of the decline of the steel industry in Western Pennsylvania. Some of the people he interviews are wary of pining for the days of the steel industry boom and are more inclined to look for another solution moving forward. For example, Conference Chairman David Lewis says, "We have to remember that forty years ago, this city was both a symbol and a fact of perhaps the worst industrial environment, not only in this country, but in the world, probably the most unlivable city." While Lewis, through his sound bites, and Sebak, through a voiceover listing a series of facts about Pittsburgh's recent improvements, point out that the city is on the rebound, Sebak is quick to stress that this burgeoning renaissance has not reached the many small towns radiating from the city center up along the Monongahela Valley.

He uses this fact to lead into a series of interviews with various stakeholders in one such town, Duquesne. Interestingly, the interviews are organized in such a way that each interviewee's assessment of the situation seems more radical than the one before it. Duquesne

Mayor Ray Terza rather matter-of-factly explains, “We recognized the tax base depreciating. We recognized loss of revenues due to parking, for example. That went away. So some 80-some thousand dollars we would have taken in on parking went to nothing.” Mel Achtzehn, a former steelworker and then current owner of an auto parts store, laments, “We don’t have that spark anymore. We’ve got clean air again, but we don’t have any work.” In his role as Duquesne Business Advisory Council Project Coordinator, Achtzehn was involved with home and business improvement efforts aimed at attracting businesses back to that town. He adds, “We’ve got to get them back. We’ve got to get our future back here.”

Some activists that Sebak interviewed warned of even more dire consequences. Bob Ericson, project director of the Steel Valley Authority, a grassroots group aimed at keeping the steel and heavy industry in the area, says, “The only reason Pittsburgh exists is because of the steel and related industries, and if those go, ultimately what you’re going to see is Pittsburgh disappearing. It will simply revert to what it was before the Industrial Revolution, which is an insignificant little river port of about, at that time about, thirty-five thousand people.” Ericson’s position as a more radical voice is further enhanced by Sebak’s choice to begin this sound bite with a shot of a poster above Ericson’s desk that has the phrases “Don’t Mourn—Organize” and “Proud Steelworker—Proud Citizen” at the top and bottom, respectively. At the center of the poster is the image of a grimy steelworker holding a steel bar emblazoned with the word “organize.”

After this more extremist viewpoint, Sebak takes the vitriol back down several notches through a voiceover suggesting that regardless of the individual viewpoints, the Remaking Cities Conference “agrees that something must be done to preserve the Mon Valley. There’s too much history and too much potential here, in the thousands of acres of abandoned mill property, in

wasted manpower and natural settings.” Touching upon the theme of the city’s diverse ethnic character, one that would loom large in his future documentaries, he adds, “And there is character here. The city’s diverse ethnic spirit survives, even as the rusting carcasses of the mills fall apart.”

This attitude is then further amplified by some of the more measured voices heard earlier in the documentary. Dr. Franklin Toker, professor of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh—and an interviewee in several of Sebak’s subsequent documentaries—says, “I certainly see it as a work-dominated city. And for the late twentieth century United States, that’s a pretty good value.” Lewis adds, “As we stand on the threshold of the twenty-first century, we realize that the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution has really run its course.” At this point Lewis’ interview continues over a series of images of boarded-up properties with “For Rent/Sale/Lease” signs and abandoned steel mills: “And so we felt that there was a great deal that the world could learn from the example of Pittsburgh. We could learn about the challenge that Pittsburgh faces, the economic challenge, the need to change our economic base radically so that the city can survive.”

Sebak sums up this initial portion of the program with a stand up in which he says, “Pittsburghers love it when their city is a leader in any field. And if Pittsburghers can show the world how a city can revitalize itself, remake itself, they’ll be proud to do it. With a strong ethnic heritage, immigrants from Eastern Europe, blacks from the southern states, Pittsburghers like this town, and they’ll work hard to put it in shape. There’s plenty of determination.” He then transitions into the next segment, a profile of local businessman George DeBolt, by saying that DeBolt exemplifies these aforementioned qualities. Like Blank’s use of Marc Savoy to explain characteristics of Cajun life in films like *Spend It All* (1971), *J’ai Été Au Bal/I Went to the Dance*

(1989), and *Marc and Ann* (1991), Sebak uses DeBolt as a biographical “everyman” who represents a larger group.

Sebak sets up the DeBolt segment by inviting the viewer to feel a sense of devastation and long odds present in the Monongahela Valley. It begins with Sebak’s voiceover describing DeBolt’s hometown of Homestead while showing clips of abandoned steel mills and drab houses, all with an underlying music bed of the mournful opening to Bruce Springsteen’s “The River.”<sup>87</sup> With exasperation in his voice, DeBolt tells Sebak of the struggle he and others like him have faced to keep hopes of revitalization alive in Homestead and other communities along the Monongahela Valley: “I’ve talked to people who will come into the Mon Valley and ask them, ‘What can we do with the Mon Valley?’ And people will say, ‘Blow it up. Bulldoze it . . . . Leave it.’ I’ve had people tell me that.”

Sebak uses the case of DeBolt as a living embodiment of many of the qualities of Pittsburgh and its residents that he would later focus upon in his films. DeBolt is presented as a native of the area who believes in his home and its people so much that he is determined to do something to save them. DeBolt tells Sebak, “There was a saying back in the Sixties when I was going to school, ‘If not us, who?’ And if the DeBolt family was not going to make the commitment to this valley, where they had been for so long, then who would?” This then leads to an appeal toward feelings of pride in local heritage, with nineteenth century images of the DeBolt family business, a voiceover from DeBolt explaining that he is a third-generation resident of the area, and a harmonica-based music bed that harkens back to that long-ago age. DeBolt further explains that his family business is the oldest in Homestead and was the second-oldest until the steel mills closed. Such an approach invites viewers, many of whom presumably faced

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<sup>87</sup> This choice of songs, while appropriate for enhancing the mood Sebak aims to achieve, is uncharacteristic of his later work, which almost exclusively relies upon stock music rather than recognizable—and considerably more costly—popular tunes.



similar struggles and felt the same sort of loyalty to the area, to see themselves in DeBolt, not only in his struggles but also in his determination to make a difference.

Sebak further lends credence to this grassroots approach to revitalization with a subsequent scene in which DeBolt drives him around Homestead in one of his company's busses to demonstrate some of the improvements to the town's business district. In an accompanying voiceover Sebak says, "Not only has George kept the family business intact, he has been a driving force in revitalizing the surrounding town. As an active member of numerous taskforces, George DeBolt has proven that citizen involvement can affect changes for the better. His participation in the Homestead Economic Revitalization Committee revived the town's business district." During the tour, DeBolt points out physical enhancements to the area, such as upgraded building facades, as well as formerly empty buildings that have been occupied by new businesses.

Despite all of these concrete, demonstrable improvements, Sebak suggests that even more paramount to revitalization efforts is the need to galvanize public spirit and support. By means of voiceover narration, Sebak says that "George believes that the biggest change must be made in the way that people perceive this place." He follows that up with DeBolt saying, "The people have looked at the Mon Valley a certain way for one hundred years. The Mon Valley was where steel was made, period. We need to get people to look at the valley with fresh eyes, with a clean perspective, if you will, and consider the Mon Valley as a place for other enterprises besides making steel." The attitude articulated here reflects that of the place branding literature, and I would argue, serves as the guiding principle behind the documentaries that would follow. Sebak's subsequent projects became his own way of encouraging people to think differently about Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania.

Sebak acknowledges that such an endeavor seems unattainable to many. With shots of abandoned mills, broken windows, and a stone monument to steelworkers as a church bell tolls, Sebak continues his narration: “Such optimism as George’s is hard to imagine when all around Homestead are bitter reminders of steelmaking and its downfall. From the balcony of the building that is both his office and his home, George DeBolt sees a constant reminder of what was.” DeBolt wistfully adds, “I miss the feel of it. There’s something very solitary about working here at night by yourself with the noises of the mill. You know, it’s just like you and the mill.” However, DeBolt quickly shifts gears toward hopefulness, saying, “Some people would look at the empty mills, the rusting sheds and see it as a problem. I see it as an opportunity. So, along this stretch of the Monongahela Valley you have a thousand acres of opportunity for development.”

Sebak persists with this optimism, and again focuses upon the theme of the local work ethic, in a voiceover accompanying a scene of DeBolt eating at a local restaurant with other civic leaders: “But the greatest hope for this area is its people. Though many young families have moved away, George DeBolt has faith in those who remain.” DeBolt adds, “They really do care. And they’re hardworking. And they do have a commitment to try to make things better. Now we need some help.” Sebak ties up this segment, which could perhaps stand on its own as a human-interest feature story on a public affairs program, with the comment, “George DeBolt is symbol and shining example of how one man can make a difference. He is what Prince Charles advocates when he calls for involvement by the citizenry. Though the Homestead titan of transportation and the future king of England are worlds apart, they share a firm commitment to rebuilding industrial towns.” DeBolt also draws parallels between himself and Prince Charles. He says, “The prince and I are the same age. I remember as a little boy reading about him and

saying, ‘Oh, he’s the same age as I am. We’d probably get along very well.’ I think he really cares about people. I think he is committed to making a difference in the urban environment and making a difference as to how people live, in what conditions they live. I like living here. But you know, this family’s been here for a long time, and we expect to be here for just as long.” Accompanying these concluding comments from Sebak and DeBolt are a music bed that enhances the optimistic mood and images of a smiling Prince Charles mingling with smiling laborers and a scene of Charles and DeBolt together at the Remaking Cities Conference.

Sebak transitions into the next segment with a stand up where he says, “George DeBolt not only had the privilege of touring his hometown with the Prince of Wales, but he was also citizen advisor to the team of experts who came to study the Mon Valley. They donated their work as a public service. This team called itself a RUDAT: a regional/urban design assistance team. They were asked to come up with ideas, exciting as well as practical, to attract prosperity back to the valley.” He then follows with a segment focused upon the RUDAT’s activities as they studied Pittsburgh for a week in late February 1988. They are seen touring local sites (in a DeBolt bus), meeting with land developers in a closed-door session, and meeting with the local citizens at a public meeting, an act that Sebak points out as an unusual gesture on the part of the RUDAT. Sebak includes citizen comments, which display a mixture of anger, frustration, hopelessness and sadness. Finally, the RUDAT is shown completing their report, some details of which Sebak discusses through narration and interviews, and delivering the report to Prince Charles and local leaders.

Nearing the end of this penultimate segment—the final segment is Prince Charles’ keynote address—Sebak provides a brief prescription for the future of the city, and perhaps unknowingly his future documentaries: “The romantic image of the steel age still holds many in

its grip. But in reality, the “Smoky City” was not paradise. The Mon Valley must honor the past but look to the future.” “The RUDAT doesn’t have to answer its critics. It doesn’t have to figure out how to finance these plans. That could keep local politicians busy for a while. And no one promises that these plans will be carried out. They may seem unrealistic to some—plastic pipe dreams. But if some of these plans seem outrageous, Pittsburghers need to remember how innovative Mayor Lawrence may have seemed once when he proposed putting a park where railroads and warehouses once stood at the Point. Big ideas can inspire action.”

Though *Remaking Cities* differs from Sebak’s later work in terms of its direct attention to the unpleasant results of the downfall of the area’s steel industry and its inclusion of some of the more ardent local advocates for a return to heavy industry, it features many of the characteristics that would appear in his documentaries. While much more playful in tone, his films use a variation of the news/public-affairs programming format seen in *Remaking Cities*. Such a format presents a mediated view of actuality, as evidenced through the many filming and editing choices involved in constructing these films. For instance, while Sebak often uses voiceovers to present first-level information, he also uses them to add his own personal commentary. Like the documentaries that followed it, *Remaking Cities* focuses upon themes of the city’s strong ethnic and racial heritage, the importance of local neighborhoods, and the strong work ethic of local residents and the potential that provides for the area’s future.

## CHAPTER II. A CITY OF NEIGHBORHOODS

Part of the challenge faced by Sebak, and any person or group interested in changing unfavorable perceptions about a place, is to attract public attention toward something in which the public has no apparent interest. If outsiders think of Pittsburgh as a barren, cultureless, fallen steel town, they must somehow be invited to see a reemerging city thriving with unique cultural flavor. Local residents who are too immersed in their daily lives to think of Pittsburgh as being unique have to be drawn out of their complacency. Simon Anholt describes this initial hurdle to any place branding/competitive identity project: “Almost any word or gesture can become significant if it is delivered by an important person in a moment of crisis, and this is an important distinction to make when we are speaking of competitive identity, because the task in hand is usually quite different: the challenge in competitive identity is often to attract the attention of an indifferent public, to create a sense of momentousness when in fact most people are convinced that nothing of interest is going on.”<sup>88</sup> He adds that “this challenge is unquestionably the same one which gives rise to the discipline of marketing in the first place: it’s the art or science of thrusting something into people’s attention when people don’t believe that it deserves to be there.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, Sebak’s task is to make the everyday appear significant.

Throughout his films, Sebak approaches this task in part by attempting to reveal that there is value to be found in the everyday experience and that Pittsburgh cannot be reduced to one generic image. He finds complexity and uniqueness in the city’s neighborhoods. He encourages the idea that they differ from those in other cities because they are small, distinct, close-knit communities that retain strong ties to the ethnic, racial, and religious traditions of the immigrants who first settled them, rather than being large, impersonal places with ever-shifting

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<sup>88</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

populations. This brands Pittsburgh as a place where people can experience individuality and a sense of community at the same time. Local residents are reminded of the uniqueness of their neighborhoods despite being part of a city. This also potentially appeals to outsiders who may find their present locations too impersonal and disconnected.

Demonstrating that a place and its people are far more complex than they are given credit for, even by themselves, lies at the heart of place branding. Anholt points out that “people may rebel against the brand image imposed on them by external opinion as a result of their membership of a certain group . . . . This is the tyranny of public opinion, the coarsening effect of the simple shorthand we all use in order to sum up complex groups of people. Trying to understand and, if possible, to have some influence over these shorthands is the real justification for the existence of the discipline: competitive identity is, as I have often said, legitimate self-defence [sic] against the tyranny of ignorance.”<sup>90</sup> Documentary films by their nature straddle this boundary between simplistic and complex. Nichols explains, “[D]ocumentary films usually contain a tension between the specific and the general, between historically unique moments and generalizations. Without generalizing, documentaries would be little more than records of specific events and experiences. Were they nothing but generalizations, documentaries would be little more than abstract treatises. It is the combination of the two, the individual shots and scenes that locate us in a particular time and place and the organization of these elements into a larger whole, that gives the documentary tradition its power and fascination.”<sup>91</sup>

Through his films, Sebak combats that natural urge to define Pittsburgh and its people as one easily summarizable block. Even when discussing particular sections of Pittsburgh, he takes care to avoid reducing them to broad generalizations. For instance, in the introduction to *North*

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<sup>90</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 27.

<sup>91</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 101.

*Side Story* he points out, “Sometimes people think of it [the North Side] as one big neighborhood, but actually it includes about twenty different neighborhoods.” Immediately following the introduction, he further points out to viewers that what is presently the North Side was actually its own municipality, Allegheny City, from 1788 until it was annexed by Pittsburgh in 1907. The implication potentially taken by viewers armed with such information is that a neighborhood that was once its own prosperous, highly populated city (the third largest in Pennsylvania in 1891, as Sebak indicates) is certain to be greatly varied in its makeup.

While the importance of neighborhoods appears in many of Sebak’s films, this theme is most prominent in several, such as *Houses Around Here*, *The Strip Show*, *North Side Story*, *South Side*, *Something about Oakland*, and *It’s the Neighborhoods*, that use the concept of the neighborhood as their focus. Rather than expecting the audience to accept his explicitly stated claims about the qualities of Pittsburgh’s neighborhoods, Sebak frequently uses interviews with residents to do so for him. Since these assertions are made by seemingly average locals, rather than Sebak as the narrator, the audience is invited to agree with him more so than they would if they relied on his word alone. One such example appears in the conclusion to *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* as a woman tells him, “Out of all the places that I’ve lived, and I’m not just saying this for your benefit, this is the most wonderful place I’ve ever lived.” Such a comment holds great importance because not only does it illustrate Sebak’s claims about the greatness of Pittsburgh, it also addresses his role as a creator of the film’s narrative. By mentioning that her comments are sincere rather than being made to serve the purposes of the film, she simultaneously points out the constructed nature of the documentary while seemingly trying to exonerate Sebak of any suspicions that his function is anything more than just presenting reality as it exists.

Indeed, Sebak is sometimes able to make claims while relying upon the statements of his subjects. One such example can be seen in the introduction to a bonus feature segment of the *It's the Neighborhoods* DVD about the Troy Hill neighborhood. He leads into the segment, which originally appeared in *North Side Story*, with an added voiceover in which he states, "As so many Pittsburghers have told us, it's the people who make a neighborhood." Such a statement allows Sebak to present the notion that Pittsburgh can be largely defined by the unique character of its residents, an idea that appears in many of his films, without having to make such a claim for himself. Instead, he appears to be merely reporting what an overwhelming number of his interviewees have told him. To be fair, interviewees in a number of his films do in fact comment on the importance of the local residents in defining the region; however, Sebak invites the audience to agree with such statements by continually including these comments in his work. One prime example comes in the conclusion to *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* as "Out of all the places that I've lived, and I'm not just saying this for your benefit, this is the most wonderful place I've ever lived." The introduction to that same film includes another comment that drives home the point that the local inhabitants are crucial to the character of the area while also allowing Sebak to appear that he is merely reflecting the views of a vast majority, rather than cherry-picking sound bites to support his agenda. Rebecca Flora, executive director of the Green Building Alliance, tells Sebak, "I think what makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh is its neighborhoods and its people. I know you hear that all of the time, but it's true."

### Ethnicity and Race as Sources of Community

As a city that can trace its roots to the American colonial period and Native American settlements that preceded European inhabitants, Pittsburgh has been home to a variety of ethnic



and racial populations over the course of several centuries. Ethnic and racial heritage continues to play various roles in the present-day activities of the city's neighborhoods, and Sebak encourages his audience to view ethnic ties as a source of pride and belonging. While the desire for a sense of belonging is hardly a new concern, it has become particularly important in light of the instability of the present age as a result of the breakdown of the traditional place-bound community. As noted in the introductory chapter, the search for stable forms of community provides a sense of security in an otherwise uncertain world. However, Bauman contends that the search for community is a fleeting goal that is always out of reach. He writes, "In short, 'community' stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us—but which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess. Raymond Williams, the thoughtful analyst of our shared condition, observed caustically that the remarkable thing about community is that 'it always has been'. We may add: or that it is always in the future. 'Community' is nowadays another name for paradise lost—but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there."<sup>92</sup> As Benedict Anderson points out, communities can take a variety of shapes based upon the manner in which they are envisioned. He writes, "In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."<sup>93</sup> These "imagined communities" exist because of a shared mental concept of their affinity rather than face-to-face interaction.

Like Bauman, Sebak frequently points to the past as a source for community. However, rather than viewing it as an unattainable objective that exists only in the past or future, Sebak

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<sup>92</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 3.

<sup>93</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

encourages his audience to view it as something that exists here and now in Western Pennsylvania. From the perspective of competitive identity, such a method is clever, as it presents the region as being able to offer something that other places often cannot offer. It says to local viewers, “You’re one of us. You belong here.” And it tells outsiders, “If you want to be someplace where you can belong, come to Western Pennsylvania.” It is the same promise held out by *Cheers*: going to a place where everybody knows your name. As technology and economic woes further isolate people, it is not difficult to imagine why such a promise would appeal to many.

Neighborhoods become a clear selling point, as Sebak invites his audience to believe that Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania are unique in terms of their neighborhoods. For example, in attempting to answer the titular question of *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* he initially places some focus on how the city’s geography has affected its settlement. Carnegie Mellon history professor Joel Tarr tells him, “The hills and valleys and the development of the neighborhoods in these locations give them a special kind of identity. That’s why, what do we have, eighty-five or ninety identifiable neighborhoods within the city of Pittsburgh? We’re always finding, you know, these special little places, and many of them have names and a character of their own.” Tarr is immediately followed by a clip from an African American woman working in a bakery (she appears in a later segment about Jenny Lee Bakery) who says, “Pittsburgh’s full of neighborhoods. You don’t get that everywhere.” Indeed, Pittsburgh can objectively claim a greater density of distinct neighborhoods per capita than cities of comparable size as well as some of the nation’s largest cities. For instance, Pittsburgh’s 305,704 people<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “State & County QuickFacts: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,” United States Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/4261000.html> [accessed July 23, 2012].

reside in ninety distinct neighborhoods<sup>95</sup> compared to Cleveland's 396,815 residents<sup>96</sup> in thirty-six neighborhoods<sup>97</sup>, Detroit's 713,777 residents<sup>98</sup> in one hundred and six neighborhoods<sup>99</sup>, New York City's estimated 8.2 million residents<sup>100</sup> in three hundred and thirty-seven neighborhoods<sup>101</sup>, Los Angeles' nearly 3.8 million residents<sup>102</sup> in one hundred and fourteen neighborhoods<sup>103</sup>, and Chicago's roughly 2.7 million residents<sup>104</sup> in a proportionately small two hundred neighborhoods<sup>105</sup>

Sebak invites his audience to this promise of belonging in several ways, but one of his core methods is through the use of the region's rich ethnic and racial heritage. That heritage is the paradise lost in the past to which Bauman refers. However, Sebak encourages viewers to believe that it still exists in some form. So while large portions of Sebak's films feature locals waxing nostalgic about the ethnic flavor of the city's past, they also include ample evidence of ethnic and racial character that still unites residents.

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<sup>95</sup> "City of Pittsburgh Maps," City of Pittsburgh. <http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/cp/maps/pittsburgh.html> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>96</sup> "State & Country QuickFacts: Cleveland, Ohio," United States Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/39/3916000.html> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>97</sup> "NeighborhoodLink: Neighborhood Tour," Cleveland State University. <http://www.nhlink.net/neighborhoodtourney/nt.php> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>98</sup> "State & County QuickFacts: Detroit, Michigan," United States Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>99</sup> "Historic Detroit Neighborhoods," Cityscape Detroit. [http://www.cityscapedetroit.org/Detroit\\_neighborhoods.html](http://www.cityscapedetroit.org/Detroit_neighborhoods.html) [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>100</sup> "Population: Current Population Estimates," New York City Department of City Planning. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/popcur.shtml> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>101</sup> "New York: A City of Neighborhoods," New York City Department of City Planning. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/neighbor/neighbor.shtml> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>102</sup> "State & County QuickFacts: Los Angeles, California," United States Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0644000.html> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>103</sup> "Mapping L.A. Neighborhoods," *Los Angeles Times*. <http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>104</sup> "State & County QuickFacts: Chicago, Illinois," United States Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/17/1714000.html> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>105</sup> "City of Chicago Neighborhoods," City of Chicago. [http://www.cityofchicago.org/dam/city/depts/doit/general/GIS/Chicago\\_Maps/Citywide\\_Maps/City\\_Neighborhoods\\_poster.pdf](http://www.cityofchicago.org/dam/city/depts/doit/general/GIS/Chicago_Maps/Citywide_Maps/City_Neighborhoods_poster.pdf) [accessed July 23, 2012].

### Pros and Pitfalls of Ethnic/Racial Pride and Celebration

Throughout the course of the *Pittsburgh History Series*, residents display a sense of pride about the places they live. Rarely are locals seen complaining about the city; even matters like traffic are downplayed through humor. For example, *Underground Pittsburgh* treats Pittsburgh's tunnels, which are notorious sites for traffic bottlenecks, as nuisances about which locals can have a sense of humor. Rather than voicing complaints about city life, residents repeatedly remark about their love of the region with great enthusiasm. Sebak uses these interview segments to support his contentions about local pride, such as his claim in *North Side Story* that "fierce pride in your neighborhood is common all over the North Side." This pride in one's neighborhood is often evidenced through interviewees who wear their longtime residency as a badge of honor. For instance, a sequence of *It's the Neighborhoods* pertaining to the Bloomfield neighborhood features interview segments with a group of four elderly women who have lived there for many decades. One of them brags, "I was born and raised here, and I'm 79 years old. That's how long I'm here in Bloomfield." After a brief pause, the woman seated to her left trumps her somewhat humorously as she nods her head and proudly declares, "I've lived here 80 years." Sebak follows that with a sound bite from a middle-aged woman who says, "But it was to me a wonderful thing growing up in Bloomfield. The Italian stores, the ethnic background, it was always something—I didn't leave. I'm still here on Taylor Street in Bloomfield."

Sebak encourages his audience to believe that this pride is not just a phenomenon seen in older generations, who perhaps had more modest expectations of mobility and who have had more time for nostalgia to creep into their views than younger generations. In his films, he demonstrates that young people also have a love for Pittsburgh. He opens *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* with a shot of a child—filmed outside of Heinz Field before a Steelers

game—who with a beaming smile and excited hand gestures enthusiastically tells him, “What makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh is the people in Pittsburgh. They make it better. They make it, like, the place to live, I mean. It’s where you want to be. It’s where the action is.” Even the somewhat elusive young adult demographic—which Pittsburgh has struggled to maintain as better job opportunities began luring them elsewhere during the region’s economic decline that began in the early 1980s—is seeing a resurgence in its dedication to Pittsburgh. One illustration of this comes in a montage of sound bites discussing the stability of the local populations during the introduction to *It’s the Neighborhoods*. Sebak includes a piece in which a young African American woman says, “Once you grow up here, sometimes you just can’t leave.” As Joel Tarr says in the conclusion of *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?*, “People have stayed here, and kids have come back.”

Sebak’s optimism about the rebounding of the region’s youth population is not without factual basis. While Pittsburgh lost many young adults over several decades, beginning with the demise of the steel industry in the 1980s, this “greying” of the population has seen recent changes, including some reversal of the “brain drain” that continues to afflict many Rust Belt cities like Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Detroit. For instance, the city’s median age dropped from 35.5 to 33.2 between 2000 and 2010, and during that same period, the city’s number of elderly residents dropped by 23.4 percent, resulting in older adults now making up 13.8 percent of the population rather than 16.4 percent.<sup>106</sup> By comparison, the median age of Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Minneapolis rose during that same period.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Gary Rotstein, “Census Finds Pittsburgh is Growing Younger,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 19, 2011. <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/neighborhoods-city/census-finds-pittsburgh-is-growing-younger-298320/> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

While Pittsburgh ranked fifteenth out of fifty-one large U.S. metro areas in terms of their annual net migration of people between twenty-five and thirty-four from 2008 to 2010—coming behind cities mostly in the Southwest, Northwest, and Southeast—it fared better than most of those cities in terms of improvement in that 2008-2010 period over the 2005-2007 period—ranking seventh, behind major cities Los Angeles, New York, New Orleans, Washington, Miami, and Boston.<sup>108</sup> Also, In 2012 *Forbes* named Pittsburgh one of the “10 American Comeback Cities” because of the seven-county Pittsburgh area’s ability to stem decades of outward migration and to maintain a strong economy during the recent recession.<sup>109</sup> At the time of that report, Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald attributed such successes to economic diversification that kept unemployment below the national average and drew young adults to the area.<sup>110</sup> While these recent developments support Sebak’s contentions about the return of young adults, it is worth noting that conditions were not necessarily quite as promising during the time that some of these documentaries were produced. Films like *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* (2006) and *It’s the Neighborhoods* (2004) demonstrate some vibrancy in the region’s young adult population anecdotally, but the figures to support such a phenomenon on a larger scale have only become available from 2011 onward. So while Sebak was not exactly constructing reality from scratch, he may have been engaging in a bit of wishful thinking at the time.

Due to the fact that many Pittsburgh neighborhoods have strong ethnic backgrounds, this sense of pride in one’s home often becomes inextricably tied to pride in one’s ethnic heritage. The lead segment of *It’s the Neighborhoods*, which chronicles the Little Italy Days festivities in

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<sup>108</sup> “Metro Migration,” *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2011. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/nation/migration-to-metros/> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>109</sup> Jon Bruner, “Ten American Comeback Cities,” *Forbes*, March 5, 2012. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jonbruner/2012/03/05/ten-american-comeback-cities-map/> [accessed July 23, 2012].

<sup>110</sup> Jon Smydo, “Forbes Names ‘Burgh a Survivor,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 5, 2012. <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/neighborhoods-city/forbes-names-burgh-a-survivor-221027/> [accessed July 23, 2012].

the Bloomfield neighborhood, exemplifies this. From the outset, the neighborhood's Italian heritage is clear, with shots of Italian flags on telephone poles; a storefront sidewalk sign with a large image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (alluding to Italians' Roman Catholic ties); an elderly couple wearing green, white, and red hats while sitting on a building's front stoop; and various storefronts whose names conjure up thoughts of Italy, such as Donatelli's Italian Food Center (complete with a green, white, and red storefront awning and a large Italian flag planted in the sidewalk in front of the store), Tessaro's restaurant, and Groceria Italiana. All of this is shown before any mention is made of Italy via interviews or narration.

Italy is finally mentioned verbally with a sound bite from a local woman who says, "It's a neighborhood very rich in Italian tradition." Accompanying this is a shot of a large permanent sign placed near the edge of the neighborhood inscribed with the words "Pittsburgh's Little Italy" (as well as "Bloomfield Business Association") and images of the Italian flag and various fruits and vegetables. Immediately following this is a sound bite from an interviewee named Joe who makes it clear, albeit jokingly, that challenges to the Italian image of the neighborhood are not welcome. He says, "We have two beautiful churches here, St. Joseph, which originally was a German church—actually the Germans settled here before the Italians. Don't tell 'em I said that."

As the segment unfolds, it becomes clear that Sebak is filming the neighborhood during Little Italy Days, held in late September to celebrate the neighborhood's Italian heritage. Though Bloomfield has a separate Columbus Day parade, the calendric proximity of the two holidays ensures that a celebration of Christopher Columbus plays a role in the Little Italy Days festivities. Consequently, while the segment excellently illustrates how pride in and a connection to the neighborhood's Italian heritage fosters a shared sense of community, it also becomes a site

for a markedly Eurocentric spin on history. Even when a couple of interviewees comment enthusiastically about the inclusion of other ethnic backgrounds in the festivities as a sign of what they perceive to be a celebration of cultural diversity, the result seems somewhat less than convincing. A man named Tony says, “It was just great. We had everybody in that parade. Everybody. The Irish. We even let the Irish in, you know what I mean?” As his sound bite ends, the shot switches to a scene from the parade of a man dressed as the stereotypical image of Saint Patrick—complete with a green chasuble and other liturgical vestments—flanked by two men carrying the American and Irish flags. Also describing the parade, Joe remarks, “I mean, it was amazing. It was two hours of a parade. It was just one after another and dancing girls. We even had people—not Jamaican—like Hawaiian dancers, and they would—oh my God.” During this sound bite, Sebak shows a group of female Polynesian dancers performing in the parade before switching back to Joe, who does his own imitation of the dancing. Even this inclusion of non-European culture in the festivities seems a bit token. The focus is clearly more on Italian heritage and a view of American history that privileges a celebration of Columbus.

A number of interviewees exhibit a great pride in the accomplishments (or what they perceive to be the accomplishments) of Columbus. The Columbus connection to this celebration is evidenced in a montage that mixes shots of the Little Italy Days parade with sound bites from spectators, beginning with one woman who says, “There’s no other better place to watch a Columbus Day parade than in Bloomfield.” Another shot shows a parade float representing one of Columbus’s ships. Interestingly, the ship appears to have only two Italian flags on it yet at least nineteen visible U.S. flags. Beyond the fact that neither the present nation of Italy nor the United States of America existed at the time of Columbus, this disparity in flags presents a rather telling reinterpretation of history. Though this is a celebration of Italian heritage, it is in some



ways just as much, if not more, a celebration of American triumph and conquest. Immediately following the shot of the ship is a shot of an older female interviewee named Rosemarie who proclaims, “Christopher Columbus discovered America. He’s our man so to speak.” This is followed by a shot of three older men holding a large parade banner with the text “Spigno Saturnia Society Salutes the Greatest Navigator Columbus” and a shot of the organization’s float, which features a sign with Columbus’s image and the words “We Remember Columbus.” Accompanying these shots are several interviewee sound bites, including one in which Tony says, “We celebrate Columbus Day every day.”

While they may “remember Columbus,” they appear to have forgotten some of the things that Columbus did. The attitudes and images in this segment gloss over an entire history of the displacement and mistreatment of Native Americans in the Western Hemisphere. Given the fact that Western Pennsylvania has a rich Native American heritage, it would seem remiss to leave this matter unmentioned, particularly given that at least some of the local residents, as evidenced by those seen in this segment, seem to be unaware of the implications of what they are celebrating. Sebak presumably opts to avoid a lengthy diatribe about atrocities committed against Native Americans in order to not interfere with the pacing and tone of the story. Nevertheless, this provides an instance in which narratives of American triumphalism and progress go unchecked and the voices of marginalized populations remain unheard. However, it is not entirely surprising, given Sebak’s tendency toward “happy history” and celebratory television. Indeed, out of all the ethnic or racial groups featured (or not featured) in his films, Sebak arguably does the greatest disservice to Native Americans. He does a surprisingly good job of incorporating the stories and voices of black, Asian, Middle Eastern, and other non-European groups. On the other hand, Native Americans are mostly absent. Even when they are mentioned,

they are still in a sense absent. For example the three *Pittsburgh History Series* segments in which they receive the most attention focus specifically on archaeological remnants of past Native American settlements in the region.

The first of these appears in 1999's *Things that Are Still Here*, during which Sebak visits Meadowcroft Rockshelter, an archaeological site near Avella, Pennsylvania, that contains evidence of human settlement of the area over the last sixteen thousand to nineteen thousand years, making it potentially the oldest site of human habitation in North America.<sup>111</sup> Obviously such a site holds great historical importance, but the story Sebak tells about it focuses on its importance as a valuable historical and archaeological resource rather than its place in Native American culture. In his narration, he says, "The work done here has provided amazing amounts of information in many branches of science." He later adds, "The Meadowcroft Rockshelter is one of those amazing places that you might not expect to find in your own backyard. Because of things that were still here, this old campsite's become an important stop in the human history of our continent." Ultimately, it becomes a curiosity, and the character and voice of the Native Americans who populated this area are lost in the mix.

The second of these appears in *Pittsburgh A to Z*, which uses each letter of the alphabet to delve into some facet of the region's culture. Letters A and B both pertain to Native Americans. In the former, Sebak follows around a group of amateur archaeologists from the Allegheny Chapter of the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology as they explore a farmer's fields in search of prehistoric Native American artifacts. The choice to follow amateurs rather than professionals has the effect of demystifying history and archaeology for the viewer. Sebak points out that these archaeologists have unrelated day jobs, such as the group's leader, Ken Fisher, who is a

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<sup>111</sup> "Meadowcroft Rockshelter," National Park Service.  
<http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=1113831918&ResourceType=Site> [accessed May 4, 2012].

steamfitter. Even the farmer who owns the fields engages in amateur archaeology. Viewers who do not care for their own jobs are likely to feel some resonance with Fisher's comment, "I get a thrill every time I find something. It sure beats work. If I could do this for a living I would." It encourages a sort of populist approach to the study of history that is being practiced by Sebak himself in his films. By watching these archaeologists in their search for prehistoric relics, Sebak encourages the audience to view Western Pennsylvania history as more momentous than it might have once thought. One can easily imagine viewers relating to the statement of one of the archaeologists who says, "When I was a kid growing up here, I really knew nothing about the Native Americans in our area, and it's been a shock to learn that there's that much prehistory all around us." Sebak enhances this sense of surprise with another archaeologist's comment, "I thought that if you were an archaeologist, you had to go to Egypt or Greece or somewhere like that. I didn't realize it was in my own backyard." Viewers who might have once thought of Western Pennsylvania as having much less of a role in world history or as being less exotic than places like Egypt or Greece are invited to regard the area as having its own share of prehistory.

Though this is a useful device in terms of reimagining Western Pennsylvania's image as something more than just a place that was once known for steel and coal, it has the unintended consequence of exoticizing Native American culture, just as it is so easy to exoticize ancient Egyptian and Greek culture because of their relative temporal distance from our present culture. Suddenly the artifacts become detached from the fact that they once belonged to living people whose descendants continue to inhabit parts of this country. While the archaeologists take the matter seriously and attempt to excavate in a scientific manner, viewing amateurs traipsing around a farmer's fields in their spare time arguably reduces Native American history to a fun

hobby. One wonders what Sebak and the amateur archaeologists would think if roles were reversed and their ancestors' relics were being sought out by a group of Native Americans.

The “letter B” portion of *Pittsburgh A to Z* continues with this Native American theme—though somewhat more tangentially—focusing on General Edward Braddock, a British commander who, along with much of his force, was killed in present-day Fayette County during the French and Indian War—and who is the namesake of several towns and streets in Southwest Pennsylvania. Sebak, along with Westmoreland County Historical Society Executive Director Jim Steely and professional archaeologist Christine Davis, visits a wooded area in Westmoreland County that was once part of the Braddock Road, a military road constructed by Braddock and his troops from Northern Virginia to Southwest Pennsylvania. Davis points out that the road was built roughly along the route of Nemaquin's Path, a prehistoric Native American trail, and that a Native American town had once existed along the path in this area.

Sebak is careful to point out that Braddock “has left an odd, good and bad, historic legacy.” Early in the segment, Steeley explains that he has difficulty understanding why Braddock has been deemed a hero, since his military campaign in Western Pennsylvania was essentially a failure. However, later he says “I think in a sense you might be able to term him a hero. He was part of a process of taming this area, of claiming it.” Such a statement is problematic in two senses. First, regardless of Steeley's intent behind such a comment, it is difficult to not have it conjure up old narratives of Native Americans as being wild savages in need of domestication. Beyond any potential racial narratives is another troubling narrative: that of progress. It is not entirely unfathomable to suspect that the Native Americans who inhabited the area for centuries prior to the arrival of the British and French did not view it as one in need of taming in the first place. Nevertheless, the story told by Sebak, Steeley, and Davis is one in

which Braddock and the Native Americans are a step in the grand narrative of American and Western progress. In fact, Steele even faults Braddock for being slow to change. He says, “Braddock is a good example, I think, of an arrogance, of a disregard for the realities, the new realities—in fact, his biography states that he was incapable of adjusting to new situations.” At the end of the segment, Davis suggests that the “letter C” portion of the documentary could stand for “contact.” She explains that she is referring to “the contact between Native Americans who lived here for over ten thousand years and the European groups who touched their lives right on this very spot and in downtown Pittsburgh.” Such a statement once again invokes racial narratives through the use of the paternalistic phrase “touched their lives,” which makes this confluence of cultures sound much more benevolent than it actually was. Moreover, it echoes the narrative of progress by suggesting that Europeans came to the area and helped to make it something greater than what it was already. Viewing this within the scope of a rebranding project, it is easy to see how this is one of many pieces in a campaign to encourage local revitalization. Not only does it reinforce the previous segment’s image of Western Pennsylvania as a place with momentous history, which serves to elevate civic pride; it also naturalizes the narrative of progress. Braddock’s campaign is part of Pittsburgh’s trajectory toward growth and advancement, a course that Sebak urges his audience to believe is continuing to the present day and will persist into the future.

The third segment in question appears in 2009’s *Right Beside the River*. The lead segment of this film focuses on the Grave Creek Mound, located near the Ohio River in Moundsville, West Virginia. Built by the Adena culture roughly two thousand years ago, it is one of the largest burial mounds in North America and also the site of one of the earliest archaeological digs—occurring in 1838—in the United States. While Sebak and his principal

interviewee, curator Scott Speedy, treat the subject with respect, it becomes clear through their interview that the site has not always been afforded such care. Speedy explains to Sebak that back when the site was excavated in 1838, a chamber was built in the center of the mound that allowed visitors to enter the mound and view skeletons that were on display. He also shows Sebak a photograph taken around the time of the Civil War that shows a saloon that was built on top of the mound. While Native American sites were little more than curiosities to gawk at in previous centuries, Sebak treats them with greater reverence. However, the voice of the Native American culture still appears to be missing in his films.

Despite the fact that Native Americans left behind “things that are still here,” the populations will likely have to wait for the production of *People that Aren’t There Anymore* before they get a direct voice. One could make the case that white archaeologists and historians are the simply best (or only) available stand-ins for Native American voices in these segments because none of those populations continue to inhabit the region. Even if one accepts such a supposition, it points to the underlying tragedy in all of this: the fact that Native Americans only have a voice in this region as part of the archaeological record because they have been pushed out of Pennsylvania, and not just in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sebak makes a passing mention of a much more recent displacement of Native Americans in the opening minutes his first film, 1988’s *The Mon, the Al, and the O*, which discusses the three rivers that define Pittsburgh and the activities that occur on and around them. Two minutes into the film, Sebak discusses the origins of the Allegheny River in the mountains of North Central Pennsylvania and its flow north into New York state and then south into the Allegheny Reservoir—a large man-made lake created by the construction of Kinzua Dam—in Northwest Pennsylvania. While showing shots of the placid winter wilderness surrounding Kinzua Dam,

Sebak simply says, “Amid much controversy, mostly about the relocation of Native Americans of the Seneca Nation, Kinzua was built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1960s as a flood control project, a way to prevent disasters like the St. Patrick’s Day flood of 1936 when the Allegheny, overflowing with rain and spring runoff, nearly destroyed the city of Pittsburgh.”

“Much controversy,” indeed. Seneca concerns become something of an afterthought in a sentence (and segment) primarily about the taming of nature in order to protect the inhabitants of Pittsburgh. What Sebak fails to tell viewers is that ten thousand acres of the Allegheny Reservation, land granted by President Washington in the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua, was legally condemned in order to construct the dam, forcing the relocation of six hundred Seneca to the Allegany Reservation near Salamanca, New York.<sup>112</sup> Though some of the tribe’s graves were moved to New York, others were flooded, and homes were burned in order to prevent the Seneca from returning. Though sympathetic to their plight, President Kennedy denied a 1961 Seneca request to stop construction.<sup>113</sup> Kennedy’s concerns about the immediate need for flood control were indeed warranted, as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates that the dam, which cost one hundred and eight million dollars, more than paid for itself by preventing two hundred and forty-seven million dollars in flood damages in the wake of June 1972 flooding resulting from

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<sup>112</sup> Jerry Zremski, “Senecas Seek Kinzua Dam Hydropower,” *Buffalo News*, November 20, 2010. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city/article269151.ece> [accessed May 4, 2012]; Joy Ann Bilharz, *The Allegany Senecas and Kinzua Dam: Forced Relocation through Two Generations*. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 51-61; More than six hundred non-Native-American residents living in the small Pennsylvania villages of Corydon and Kinzua as well as the hamlet of Onoville, New York, were also forced to relocate due to construction of Kinzua Dam. Hoover, William E. (2005). *Kinzua: From Cornplanter to the Corps*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse. p. 10.

<sup>113</sup> John F. Kennedy, Letter to the President of the Seneca Nation of Indians Concerning the Kinzua Dam on the Allegheny River. 11 August 1961. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8279#axzz1txjgypE7> [accessed May 4, 2012].

Tropical Storm Agnes.<sup>114</sup> It also estimates a total savings in excess of one billion dollars since the dam's 1965 completion.<sup>115</sup>

While a debate over who was right or wrong in this matter is not necessarily the province of this film, some discussion of how the displacement affected the Seneca. Kinzua Dam still remains on the minds of the Seneca. WGWE, the Seneca Nation's owned-and-operated radio station, has played Johnny Cash's recording of "As Long as the Grass Shall Grow," a song written by Peter La Farge about the construction of Kinzua Dam, every Friday at noon since playing it as the first song when the station signed on in February 2010.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, in August 2011 the Seneca Nation received a preliminary permit for the Seneca Hydroelectric Project at the dam, with the hope of receiving the license by 2015 to operate the power plant.<sup>117</sup> FirstEnergy of Toledo, Ohio, has been generating profits from the electricity, an estimated thirteen million dollars per year in 2010, for forty years without compensating the Seneca, despite using Seneca Nation land and water.<sup>118</sup>

An event charged with such negative emotions would perhaps weight down the film and not be in keeping with Sebak's otherwise lighthearted tone. However, one might suspect that some account of what life was like in the area before construction of the dam would have potentially been appropriate. When viewing a later segment of *The Mon, the Al, and the O* in which Sebak features the reminiscences of Captain Frederick Way, Jr. of Sewickley, who piloted riverboats on the Ohio River in the 1920s and 1930s, one might wonder why a similarly aged

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<sup>114</sup> "Kinzua Dam & Allegheny Reservoir," U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Pittsburgh District. <http://www.lrp.usace.army.mil/rec/lakes/kinzuala.htm> [accessed May 4, 2012].

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Jerry Zremski, "Senecas Seek Kinzua Dam Hydropower," *Buffalo News*, November 30, 2010. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city/article269151.ece> [accessed May 4, 2012].

<sup>117</sup> "Seneca Nation Receives Initial Kinzua Hydro Permit," *The Salamanca Press*, August 11, 2011. [http://www.salamancapress.com/blogs/article\\_361e6fdc-c431-11e0-945d-001cc4c03286.html](http://www.salamancapress.com/blogs/article_361e6fdc-c431-11e0-945d-001cc4c03286.html) [accessed May 4, 2012].

<sup>118</sup> Jerry Zremski, "Senecas Seek Kinzua Dam Hydropower," *Buffalo News*, November 30, 2010. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city/article269151.ece> [accessed May 4, 2012].



member of the Seneca Nation was not interviewed about Native American activities on the Allegheny during the same time period. Essentially, the only things one learns about Native Americans from *The Mon, the Al, and the O* is that they named the rivers that give the film its name, and they were forced to move so that the Allegheny could be dammed to protect Pittsburgh from flooding. While time in this film and several others is devoted to activities undertaken largely by whites along the rivers in the last several centuries, no attempt is made to discuss the activities of Native Americans in recent memory.

While Native Americans have been largely neglected by Sebak's films, African Americans have had a much larger voice in representing the history and culture of Pittsburgh. In some cases, however, Sebak avoids placing great emphasis on segregation and other painful parts of Pittsburgh's past. For instance, a segment of *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* focuses upon the WEMCO Club, a social club that has existed in the Homewood neighborhood since it was founded in 1919 by African American workers at the Westinghouse Electric Manufacturing Company. Early in the segment, Sebak does explain the club's genesis from an era of segregation via a pair of interview clips from members (all of whom are African American) of the club. One man explains, "Well, it used to be that years ago blacks that worked for Westinghouse, they had nowhere to go." This is followed by a female club member who adds, "Black people or African Americans could not go to the Polish American or Italian American clubs or whatever." Immediately after this, the focus shifts from the issue of segregation to something far more benevolent. Sebak transitions back to the previously mentioned male club member, who says, "George Westinghouse donated and built the first club, so the blacks could have a social club like the white folks." With just a few brief sentences, the story transforms in a matter of seconds from that of the history of racism to that of the generosity of an illustrious

American entrepreneur—never mind his “separate but equal” solution. Sebak does not dwell on this subject either, though the contributions of Pittsburgh’s business tycoons is a theme that appears elsewhere in his work, and is one which will be tackled in the next chapter.

Instead, the majority of the segment is about camaraderie and the club’s contributions to the community. Indeed, if one knows some basic details about Homewood’s history and present state—details not covered by Sebak—the segment can be viewed as somewhat of an image rebranding effort for the neighborhood. As of the 2000 U.S. Census, Homewood’s population was 98.3 percent African American and only 0.6 percent White.<sup>119</sup> However, such a disparity was not always the case. Early in its history, Homewood was home to wealthy white elites, including Andrew Carnegie and George Westinghouse.<sup>120</sup> It later saw an influx of white upper-middle-class families (largely of Northern European descent) in the 1890s and upper-middle-class African American and working-class Irish, Italian, and German families in the 1910s. The latter of these changes caused earlier settlers to leave for the suburbs. Large numbers of the remaining white residents left in the 1950s as a result of a large influx of African Americans who were forced to relocate when the city took over land in the Lower Hill District in order to build the Civic Arena. This resulted in Homewood being 70 percent African American by 1960. Homewood began losing some of its more affluent African American residents to other neighbors as a result of the rioting and looting in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the Fair Housing Act provision of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which allowed them to live in any neighborhood of their choice.<sup>121</sup> In recent decades Homewood has

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<sup>119</sup> City of Pittsburgh, Department of City Planning, *Census: Pittsburgh – A Comparative Digest of Census Data for Pittsburgh’s Neighborhoods* (Pittsburgh, 2006).

[http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/cp/assets/census/2000\\_census\\_pgh\\_jan06.pdf](http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/cp/assets/census/2000_census_pgh_jan06.pdf) [accessed May 8, 2012].

<sup>120</sup> Allegheny County Department of Human Services, *Homewood: A Community Profile* (Pittsburgh, 2009), 4. [http://www.alleghenycounty.us/uploadedFiles/DHS/About\\_DHS/Report\\_and\\_Evaluation/Homewood-Childrens-Village-Profile.pdf](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/uploadedFiles/DHS/About_DHS/Report_and_Evaluation/Homewood-Childrens-Village-Profile.pdf) [accessed May 8, 2012].

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

seen significant increases in poverty and crime compared to Pittsburgh as a whole. Due to higher homicide rates, Homewood West and Homewood South are ranked among the five most dangerous Pittsburgh neighborhoods.<sup>122</sup> From a place branding perspective, it should come as little surprise that Sebak avoids mentioning these characteristics. Can-Seng Ooi explains, “The first parameter [of city branding] is that the city brand will always present only positive aspects of the place. A city brand selectively frames the metropolis and draws people’s attention to positive images of the urban milieu. There are many aspects of the city that are ignored because these aspects are not considered attractive or interesting by the branding authorities, for example, smog, organized crime and ghettos.”<sup>123</sup>

Rather than giving attention to these aforementioned problems, Sebak focuses on the positive attributes of the WEMCO Club and by association, the entire neighborhood of Homewood. Several interviewees emphasize the safety of the club. One member holds up his membership card and explains to Sebak, “In order to be a member and get in the club we have a membership card with your picture on it, and you’ve got to swipe your card. We know who’s coming in. We have a screening committee.” Sebak then cuts to another club member, who says, “What I like about it is the camaraderie that you find, the safeness of it.” During this comment, the shot switches to one of a large computer screen on the wall near the door that shows a profile of a member who just swiped her card in order to enter the club. The camera then pans down and to the right to show her entering the door. The man who explained the membership card system is later heard in a voice saying, “The police don’t even know we’re here because there’s no trouble.” The friendly, harmless nature of the club and its members is established in a less explicit fashion, as well. Most of the members shown appear to be at least middle aged. One

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>123</sup> Can-Seng Ooi, “Paradoxes of City Branding and Societal Changes.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 56.

member even jokes, “Everyone calls it the old folks home.” They largely appear to be laughing, responsibly drinking, and otherwise socializing.

In addition to underscoring the security of the club, the members also note its contributions to the wellbeing of the community. One member says, “We give a lot of things back to the community, such as we donate financially to the YMCA, the YWCA. We do things for the young children in the Homewood area.” Another member adds, “That’s why we’re proud to say that we’re a part of the neighborhood. Because we do more than just sit here and drink.” Ultimately, this all builds to the conclusion that the WEMCO Club is a place that offers a sense of belonging. One of the final comments comes from a woman who says, “If you’re a Pittsburghese person, yinz all know that we’re all family here.” While this entire segment could have easily focused on the problems that have afflicted Homewood, it instead becomes one that supports Sebak’s overall messages about Pittsburgh’s neighborhoods and even potentially helps to rehabilitate the image of this particular neighborhood.

Sebak also looks to the past to demonstrate a longstanding African American heritage that has engendered sites of community in Pittsburgh. In *Things that Aren’t There Anymore* he devotes a segment to Pittsburgh’s nightclub scene of yesteryear. Much of this segment focuses on clubs that were located in the once-vibrant Hill District neighborhood. As previously mentioned, the area was devastated by the construction the Civic Arena—sometimes euphemistically referred to as an “urban renewal” project—and since then its fate has mirrored that of Homewood, though Sebak does not dwell on this fact. One of Sebak’s primary interviewees for this segment is Frank Bolden, a reporter who once covered much of the local nightlife for *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Bolden says, “It’s the only avenue in the country that begins with a church, St. John’s A.M.E. Zion Church out at Herron and Wylie, and ends up at the

jail downtown. Everything was on Wylie Avenue. Someday someone's going to do a history on Wylie Avenue. There's no other avenue in America like it." WQED took Bolden's advice and a year later produced an Emmy Award-winning documentary *Wylie Avenue Days*.<sup>124</sup> That film, though actually considered part of the *Pittsburgh History Series*, was not produced by Sebak, but rather by African American producer Chris Moore, who is also co-producer and host of WQED's Emmy-winning *Black Horizons*, the longest-running minority affairs program on public television. This segment, and to a greater extent *Wylie Avenue Days*, reveals a radiant history of African American musical and entrepreneurial culture and community.

Other groups are also shown by Sebak to have a communal bond tied to heritage. In *Happy Holidays in Pittsburgh* he devotes segments to holiday celebrations that unite members the local Latin American and Chinese communities. Both communities are interested in sharing their culture not only with their younger generations but also with people from outside their culture. In the former segment, Sebak visits the Fiesta de Navidad sponsored by Pittsburgh's Latin American Cultural Union (LACU). Here the traditions of various Latin American countries are represented to show the diversity of Latin American culture. A key function of this event is to pass on traditions to younger generations. LACU's social coordinator, Juana Roman, explains, "We have the mothers prepare those costumes and teach their children, you know, how those are being made and that type of stuff. We have grandmothers that are behind the scenes and all that kind of thing, trying to unite the family and represent their culture." Another goal is to extend this culture beyond the Latin American community. One woman explains, "We want the [Pittsburgh] community to know who we are, express our culture by food, dancing, and music, and different types of activities." Sebak encourages the audience to view the diversity of Latin

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<sup>124</sup> "Meet Chris Moore," WQED Pittsburgh. <http://www.wqed.org/tv/bh/about-the-show.php> [accessed May 8, 2012].

American culture displayed here as a true reflection of the depth that exists in Pittsburgh, rather than an Epcot-like façade. Roman illustrates this viewpoint: “That’s the beauty of it in Pittsburgh because you see a variety of people from different Latin American countries that you even do not have access when you are down in Latin America, you know, to meet everybody.” Such a statement from a Peruvian woman stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical image of Pittsburgh. It helps Sebak to suggest that Pittsburgh is not just an old steel town populated by white European Americans. Instead, it is, according to Sebak, a city that possesses such a vibrant Latin American community that one could get a greater sense of the culture by living in Pittsburgh than in an actual Latin American country.

One of the key points put forth in the Chinese New Year celebration story is that it is an important opportunity to pass on Chinese culture to younger generations. The Organization of Chinese Americans Pittsburgh chapter’s Vice President of Cultural Affairs, Chia-Pih Shaw, tells him, “You actually try to maintain your own culture and try to teach—these kids are born in this country—so we try to maintain the heritage, the culture so they understand their background because this is a really really big celebration for Chinese community.” Like the Latin American community in Pittsburgh, the Chinese wish to spread their culture among outsiders and to impart it to their children, who have grown up in the midst of American culture.

Whether new or old, gone or still here, cultural elements related to the ethnic and racial heritage of Pittsburgh’s inhabitants are employed by Sebak to demonstrate a sense of communal pride and spirit that he suggests is unique to Pittsburgh. In some cases, these groups are tied to the physical boundaries of neighborhoods, while others create more of an imagined community unbounded by space. He frequently avoids the harsher, more painful realities faced by certain

ethnic and racial communities in favor of stories that inspire pride and hope for the future of these groups and Pittsburgh's neighborhoods.

### Religion and Community

Community and ethnicity are tied closely together with religion in Sebak's films. Just as many of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods can trace their lineage to specific ethnic groups that settled these areas, so too are numerous religious groups tied to communities, often through the same ethnic heritage. While discussion of religious organizations finds its way into a number of Sebak's films, he gives the greatest focus to it in *Holy Pittsburgh!* and *Happy Holidays in Pittsburgh*. In addition to demonstrating forms of community related to religious beliefs, these films allow Sebak to present a great deal of the region's ethnic diversity, as religious worship and celebration often provides one of the more visible and visually stimulating windows into a community's ethnic traditions.

The introduction to *Holy Pittsburgh!* explicitly states this connection between religion, ethnicity, and tradition. Sebak says, "Many of [Pittsburgh's houses of worship] are centers for preserving old customs and delicious traditions. These houses of worship and the wonders inside them reflect Pittsburgh's strong immigrant spirit, from its founding pioneers to its newest congregations. We're going to look at many holy buildings and at many people who care very deeply about these places in our city." The images that accompany this narration—shots of Ukrainian pysanky eggs, elderly parishioners making pirohi at St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church, an African American man singing in a gospel choir at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the exterior of the Rodef Shalom synagogue, and a man sitting behind the Guru Granth at the Pittsburgh Sikh Gurdwara—further encourage this image of

Pittsburgh as a home to many religious and ethnic traditions. That final line of narration emphasizes that the story of religious practice in Pittsburgh is more than just one about buildings; it is also about people who have invested themselves in their communities. Additionally, by referring to Pittsburgh as “our city” he invites viewers to see themselves as belonging to the city, whether they are the locals, who are his primary audience, or outsiders who have taken an interest in Pittsburgh. With the opening lines of the first segment following the introduction he again points to vast immigrant communities as the source of Pittsburgh’s religious communities. He says, “Most of the old churches in and around town were built by congregations that came to Southwestern Pennsylvania as immigrants, people from many other parts of the world.” Sebak invites his audience to believe that these churches, temples, and synagogues are more than just buildings; they are the roots of communities.

Sebak uses religious organizations to demonstrate a tangible sense of neighborhood. Rather than just being a social activity that people engage in for a few hours per week, religious practice is presented as something that pervades a neighborhood’s sense of character and identity down to its very core. In a segment of *It’s the Neighborhoods* focusing on the Polish Hill neighborhood, Sebak concentrates largely on the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church. Though acknowledging that the neighborhood is somewhat more mixed in background than it once was, the church’s pastor, Father Joseph Swierczynski, states, “I love the people because they’re honest, simple, church-loving people. That’s what I like about this neighborhood the best. That their church means a lot to them.” He further amplifies the importance of religion by tying it in with another theme explored in greater depth in the next chapter, that of labor. Discussing how the residents funded the construction of such a large, magnificent church, Swierczynski says, “They built it with pennies and quarters. They would work in the mill eight



hours and come here and work here at the church to get it built. Our people take pride in the church. Nothing is too good for God's house." Even though the neighborhood may not be as predominantly Polish and Catholic as it once was, Swierczynski and his predecessor, Father Raymond Kulwicki, explain that ethnicity and religion still have great importance to the people of this neighborhood. Though retired from active duty as a priest, Kulwicki says that he performs the mass every Sunday in Polish "for the people who still want to be able to have that connection, ethnic connection." Swierczynski adds, "For holidays we had people that moved out of here, they all come back for Christmas, they all come back for Easter, or something going on. They all come back to their home church to be with their families." Kulwicki concludes, "The neighbors love it because, again, that's continuing to be the mucilage that keeps them tied in with their parish because they remember this parish as a Polish ethnic parish."

The same sort of dedication to the spiritual life of the community as evidenced in Swierczynski's statements about the parishioners who built his church can also be seen in a portion of *Holy Pittsburgh!* about St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church. In this segment, the church's pastor, Monsignor Michael Poloway, tells Sebak, "Our people were not rich. They came to this country poor. They hardly had any money. What they were able to scrape together, they denied themselves certain things as far as, like, for their own living. They wouldn't purchase any furniture for themselves because they wanted to give for the church, to build a church first and then worry about their own households." Such a message contributes to Sebak's continued characterization of Pittsburghers as working class laborers of modest means who put the needs of their community above their own individual necessities.

In his examination of Pittsburgh's religious communities, Sebak alludes to the fact that such groups sometimes unite people for purposes separate from religious worship, thereby

creating other forms of community. For example, in a segment about Old St. Patrick's Church in the Strip District, he talks briefly about Father James R. Cox, a pastor from the parish who became famous during the Great Depression for his pro-labor activism. However, as is characteristic of Sebak's filmmaking, he avoids saying much about highly charged political issues like labor. Much of his discussion of Cox focuses on other significant aspects of his life, such as his claims to have been the first priest to perform mass on an airplane and to have had his eyesight healed by waters at Lourdes, France, as well as his notoriety for broadcasting mass over the radio. Ultimately, Sebak includes just two sentences about Cox's connection to the labor movement. He says, "Father Cox was most famous, however, for his work with the unemployed during the Great Depression. He helped out-of-work men build a slapdash city called Shantytown along Liberty Avenue."

Such a description makes Cox's involvement appear to be nothing more than assisting the poor, hardly an unusual activity for a Roman Catholic priest. However, his participation was not so innocuous and far more political than one might glean from Sebak's assessment. In January 1932, Cox led what was up to that time the largest demonstration of protestors in Washington, D.C.<sup>125</sup> This group of twenty-five thousand unemployed Pennsylvanians, known as "Cox's Army," marched on the capital to fight for their "God-given right to work" and to urge Congress to ease the plight of the unemployed by creating a public works program and increasing the inheritance tax to 70 percent.<sup>126</sup> Gifford Pinchot, the Republican governor of Pennsylvania, even backed Cox in the hopes of gaining his support to become the party's presidential nominee. Surprisingly, this large caravan of protestors had their travel expenses furnished by President Hoover's own treasury secretary—and Pennsylvania's wealthiest citizen at the time—Andrew

<sup>125</sup> "Cox's Army," *Time*, January 18, 1932, 12. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost [accessed May 16, 2012].

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.; Ruth Ann Dailey, "The Mystery of Andrew Mellon's Motive," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 26, 2012. <http://old.post-gazette.com/pg/12086/1219483-152-0.stm> [accessed May 16, 2012].

Mellon.<sup>127</sup> Mellon's decision to have his Gulf Oil gas stations dispense gasoline to the protestors for free and to provide train fare for several hundred others who could not be fit into the motorcade, in addition to being a highly uncharacteristically populist move for such a staunch capitalist, ultimately led Hoover to remove him from his treasury post.

Cox's activism did not end with the march. Later that month, he became the first presidential candidate put forth by the newly formed Jobless Party, though finally bailing out and lending his support to Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>128</sup> Cox's work continued after the election, with his membership on the Pennsylvania Commission for the Unemployed and his appointment by Roosevelt in the mid-1930s to the National Recovery Administration's Pennsylvania recovery board.<sup>129</sup> Needless to say, Sebak's rather cursory glance at Cox's participation in the labor movement gives little sense of the scope of his work and manages to avoid the most polarizing aspects of the highly political subject of labor.

Other non-religious involvement by Pittsburgh's religious communities sometimes gets more coverage from Sebak. In another one of the film's segments, Sebak discusses the involvement of local Bethel A.M.E. congregations in the abolition and civil rights movements. The congregation located in the Hill District, thought to be the oldest black congregation in the city, is described by Sebak as "a center for activities during the civil rights movement;" however, he mostly devotes the segment to this church's related congregation in Monongahela, Pennsylvania, which he takes even greater care to position as a longtime source of community.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> "Jobless Party Will Run Cox for President," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 18, 1932. [http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1129&dat=19320118&id=f\\_8MAAAAIBAJ&sjid=YmkDAAAIBAJ&pg=6469,2018128](http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1129&dat=19320118&id=f_8MAAAAIBAJ&sjid=YmkDAAAIBAJ&pg=6469,2018128) [accessed May 16, 2012].

<sup>129</sup> "James R. Cox Papers 1923-1950," University of Pittsburgh Archives Service Center. <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/images/pittsburgh/cox.html> [accessed May 16, 2012].

He says, “As the first black church in the Mon Valley, Bethel A.M.E. is fiercely proud of its past and its distinguished building, surely one of the oldest in the area built by a black congregation.”

One of the sources of pride that he points to is the church’s participation in the Underground Railroad. He explains, “Bethel A.M.E., like many churches, black and white, in Southwestern Pennsylvania, has many stories about its involvement in fighting slavery by working with the so-called Underground Railroad.” Sebak brings a bit more depth to this statement with some interview footage of congregant Charlotte Brown, who tells him a story of her ancestors ferrying adult slaves across the Monongahela River by night. Though the abolition and civil rights movements and their relationship to religious communities receive more attention from Sebak than the labor movement, this coverage is still mostly limited to the triumphant aspects of these struggles. Such a celebratory spirit is in keeping with the tone of Sebak’s work and perhaps to be expected in a film about religious experience. Nevertheless, the overall thrust of Sebak’s treatment of religion lies in how houses of worship, with their histories rooted in various racial and ethnic groups, have fostered communities throughout the region. Bethel A.M.E. is certainly no exception in Sebak’s estimation. He includes some footage from the church’s Choir Day, an event in which the church invites other churches, choirs, and gospel groups to join together in song. This event, which also helps to raise funds, serves as a means to spread a sense of community beyond the walls of the church. Sebak concludes his examination of Bethel A.M.E. Church: “This church has stood for over one hundred and fifty years. It’s really a symbol of the faith and the perseverance of its members because a church’s survival depends on the people who use it.” Such an assessment could just as easily be applied to any of the other religious institutions he visits, as the overwhelming valuation suggested in his work is that

Pittsburgh's churches are ultimately about people who have managed to hold on to traditions that matter to them and forge a sense of community despite adversity.

Sebak does not shy away from discussing some of the adversities faced by local houses of worship. The hardships faced by local religious communities often mirror those affecting the region as a whole. While visiting St. Michael the Archangel Church in *Holy Pittsburgh!*, he talks to an elderly parishioner, Elmer "Tuggles" Beringer, who tells him that the closing of the steel mills was not the only setback that threatened the church's survival. He says, "I think the church has been affected more so because the young aren't here anymore to keep it coming in like it used to be. See, everybody around here when I was a kid had six or seven kids. Up on the one street I lived on there was [sic] fifty-four boys and only six girls, and that street was only half a block long." In this film, Sebak discusses several other churches that have faced destruction due to great losses in the size of their congregations from the efflux of residents from the area. Some have been successful in their fights to stay alive while others have failed, but all of them, Sebak suggests, are alike in their fierce dedication to keep their communities alive.

While many of Pittsburgh's religious communities were founded many years ago by immigrants, Sebak points out that some were established by much more recent arrivals to the area. The final two segments of *Holy Pittsburgh!* examine a pair of religious institutions—the Pittsburgh Sikh Gurdwara and the Sri Venkateswara Temple—created largely by Indian immigrants who came to the region in the latter decades of the twentieth century. He invites his audience to view Pittsburgh as a cosmopolitan city by pointing out that the Sri Venkateswara Temple was the first authentic Hindu structure in America. By noting that it was in the Pittsburgh area—rather than New York, Los Angeles, or some other larger metropolitan area—that such a structure was built, he helps to further the notions of Pittsburgh's diversity and the

ability of immigrant populations to thrive in this area. He adds, “This immigrant community, like so many who’ve come to Pittsburgh, established this temple to preserve traditions and to pass their faith on to their children.” He supports this with interview footage of Raj Sri Gopal, one of the temple’s original members, who suggests that “it is quite possible to imagine that you are waking up in India” when visiting the temple because of the traditional clothing worn by worshippers and the various languages and dialects spoken there. She adds, “You can be a good Hindu without even going to the temple. But then we were thinking of the next generation. There is a vacuum to children born here. And then we had to take the responsibility of giving this grand inheritance to them.”

Such statements point to the strong desire to keep traditions alive for generations who have spent their entire lives in this diasporal community. This message is further enhanced by the accompanying scenes of a group of children leading worship songs in the temple and an infant nursing on a bottle during worship. Children are also used to illustrate a similar idea about the Pittsburgh Sikh Gurdwara, as he points out both visually and verbally that many children sing and otherwise participate in worship. Here he also demonstrates community through the shared meal, called langar, which follows worship. Such a meal, free and open to Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, is intended to allow people to eat and commune as equals, regardless of religion, caste, race, gender, age, or socioeconomic status.

In a segment about Ramadan celebrations in *Happy Holidays in Pittsburgh*, Sebak demonstrates that sometimes faith creates community that crosses ethnic and racial lines. He begins this story at the home of a local Muslim family, where he documents their traditions involved with the daily breaking of the fast (iftar) observed during this holy month. The mother, Helen Ahmed, points out that because her husband is Pakistani her family’s traditions are

particular to that culture. She explains, “The thing about Islam is that it’s very diverse. You have Muslims from all cultures, so each culture is going to have their particular dishes that they really enjoy.” This connection between food and ethnicity is exploited frequently by Sebak throughout the *Pittsburgh History Series* in order to demonstrate the cultural diversity of the region.

After viewing how the holiday is celebrated on a micro level, Sebak then visits the Muslim Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh to see how the iftar plays out on a more communal level. Yet more ethnic foods are served here, as Muslims from six or seven local mosques gather together for this iftar. The final portion of this story takes place at the University of Pittsburgh, where all of these Muslim communities again gather together to mark the end of Ramadan with the celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr. Here Walter Shaahid, president of the Islamic Council of Greater Pittsburgh and himself an African American, commends the diversity present at the celebration. He explains, “It’s a beautiful occasion because you get a chance to see different dress, racial groups, cultures. It’s very diverse. So it’s a good time for us.” Sebak’s presentation of the range of ethnic and racial cultures tied to Islam in this film is rather commendable, considering that it was filmed only a year after the September 11 attacks. The scope that he displays provides a measured contrast to the hasty criticisms and generalizations levied at Muslims in the wake of that event.

Sebak imparts the crux of his views about the importance of religious worship to community and the identity of Pittsburgh with his concluding statements in *Holy Pittsburgh!*. He says, “Domes, steeples, bells, and all the holy places. People look to them not only for worship but also for comfort, for guidance, and for a sense of community and history. And when the bells of Immaculate Heart of Mary on Polish Hill ring out on a spring Sunday morning, it’s obvious. In the late twentieth century, a lot of people in Pittsburgh still go to church. From the oldest

congregations to the newest, all over the Pittsburgh area, these holy buildings offer space for sharing and passing on love and holiness.” He suggests that whether new or old, religious groups provide sources of community and support that are crucial to the fabric of Pittsburgh.

### New Blood, Business, and Other Sources of Community

Sebak’s films suggest that the sense of neighborhood need not evolve solely from the time-honored traditions of populations that have remained rooted in the area over the course of decades. This spirit can also arise from the infusion of new residents in Pittsburgh neighborhoods. For instance, in *South Side* he tackles the question of whether or not the influx of young people in recent decades has ruined the character of what was once largely a neighborhood of families who worked in the steel mills that occupied the banks of the Monongahela River. Frank Ziaukas, who grew up in the South Side and later returned there to retire, told Sebak, “I like it. Some of the old-timers complain because the new people, the outsiders come in and they’re a little trashy and maybe a little rowdy once in a while. But that’s sort of a mixed blessing. If this new element didn’t come in and bring some life back to South Side, when the mills closed, South Side would have been dead. What’s nice now is there’s still enough of the old and enough of the new to give it life.” Sebak also revels in this mixture of new and old cultures. While working on *South Side* in 1998, he told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, “I also love the whole contrast of the Goth kids and the grandmas in babushkas who still walk to the store up on Carson Street. Just in doing the little bit of research I did for the proposal, I’m excited about the places I’ve never been.”<sup>130</sup> Such a statement should not come as a surprise, as Sebak’s films frequently involve the blending of the old and the new.

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<sup>130</sup> Barbara Vancheri. “Next for WQED Producer Rick Sebak is a Walk on the South Side,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 26, 1998. <http://old.post-gazette.com/magazine/19980326bbbarb5.asp> [accessed May 17, 2012].



Community-building is not strictly the province of individuals, whether they are longtime residents or recent arrivals. Sebak suggests that even business can foster a sense of community. One such example can be seen upon his visit to Enrico's Tazza Doro coffee shop in *It's the Neighborhoods*. Much of the segment contains clips of customers, employees, and the owner discussing how the shop has changed the character of the Highland Park neighborhood since it opened in 1999. An unnamed female customer touts the business as "the gathering place for Highland Park" while a male customer explains, "You see all your neighbors from the neighborhood in here, and you get to know them. All different walks of life, and it's just a nice, comfortable place." They also describe ways in which the shop has changed their lives, great and small. One man expresses that he has become so used to the coffee there that he no longer likes to drink it at home, and another explains how he has attracted customers to his painting business by frequenting the shop. Sebak concludes the segment with a series of brief testimonials that reinforce the connection between the business and the community, starting with a voiceover in which owner Amy Enrico says, "I think our product is community. Our product is connection, human connection." She is followed by an employee who calls it a "home away from home" and a customer who says that it "changed the whole complexion of the neighborhood" and "made it a much warmer and more intimate place."

Another local business fostering a sense of community is profiled in *North Side Story*. Sebak explains that although Doug's Market opened in the Mexican War Streets neighborhood on the North Side during the mid-1990s, the building it occupies has been home to similar markets for more than a century. He portrays the store, like many of the subjects in his films, as one that succeeds in the present while holding on to the best aspects of the past. While touring the store, owner Doug Nimmo explains to Sebak that he's "an old-fashioned butcher" who stocks

various cuts of meat that one does not usually find in most grocery stores and who makes several varieties of his own fresh sausage in the store. However, the importance of the market to the community has to do with more than just the quality of the products it offers. In a voiceover Sebak says, “This kind of shop becomes more than just a meat market or convenience store. Doug and all his employees live nearby, and the place is really a kind of neighborhood magnet.” He later adds that “Doug Nimmo has brought new life to this [corner market], hoping to make his neighborhood an even better place to live.” Doug’s Market is not the sole example of pride in one’s work and one’s neighborhood becoming inextricably linked.

Sebak uses Groceria Merante in *Something about Oakland* as another case of a local business being tied up in neighborhood pride. This small Italian corner market located in Oakland for more than two decades is owned and operated by three sisters, and Sebak employs this familiar connection as a way to position this store as the type of small businesses that still pervade Pittsburgh, giving it a unique, earthy character not seen in other cities. Their uncle Sal—an Italian immigrant who also briefly appears in the Little Italy Days parade featured in *It’s the Neighborhoods*—describes the store in his thick Italian accent as “an old-fashioned papa mama store.” He adds, “Let’s put it this way—old fashioned—you’re dealing with the owner.” Furthermore, he locates it as a place that offers the kinds of quality products, such as imported Italian specialties and his own homemade Italian sausage that he has been making for 47 years, which one might not find in larger, corporatized stores. Such themes about local Pittsburgh businesses abound throughout Sebak’s work and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Ultimately, all of this works together to create a place that in Sebak’s estimation is a center for the neighborhood. The people that pass in and out of this market are not just faceless

customers; they are neighbors who know each other by name and have generated longstanding friendships with one another. Filomena Merante explains, “I guess it’s an Italian thing to really know your customers.” She later adds, “There are many people that have come and left Oakland, we get them all the time. ‘Do you remember me? I was here. . . ’ or ‘Remember me? I went to school here several years ago.’ And the funny part is we do remember them.” The unique nature of this store is encapsulated in a comment from one customer, Chris Fennimore—whose face is instantly recognizable to WQED viewers as the host of the program *QED Cooks* (and also happens to be the station’s director of programming)<sup>131</sup>—who says, “The nice thing about this place is that it’s big enough to have a lot of the different specialties but small enough to have that real neighborhood flavor and character.”

Lest the audience think that Fennimore was a plant specifically for the purpose of the film, Sebak includes comments from several other customers. One elderly man tells him in a strong Italian accent, “I’ve known these people since 1957. Fifty-seven to two thousand, see how many years?” An old Italian-American couple later adds, “We need this. This store I like. Yes.” Julie Merante explains the impact of their store as such: “My father always said, ‘You know, there was never anything on this corner. We made this corner happen.’” This story concludes with Gina Merante’s comment, “I love this corner. And I love all the people in Oakland.” The goal of a segment like this is to invite the audience to believe that Pittsburgh is filled with small businesses like this that have a deep pride in and close bond with their neighborhoods. Such an image presents Pittsburgh as a unique and pleasant place to live.

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<sup>131</sup> “Meet Chris Fennimore,” WQED Pittsburgh. <http://www.wqed.org/tv/cooks/chris.php> [accessed May 18, 2012].

### Homes and the Significance of the Mundane

Part of what makes this sense of local pride relatable is its focus on the everyday. Locals might not be inclined to think of Pittsburgh as significant, but whether they are right or wrong about this is not of great importance for the purposes of rebranding the region. Inviting the audience to view even the mundane as noteworthy can be just as effective as pointing out the momentous in terms of inspiring local pride. This focus on the ordinary and routine—in the form of people, activities, foods, buildings, etc.—serves as a key technique in Sebak's documentaries. Houses in particular are used as an entrée into neighborhood pride. While he does visit some unique and notable houses, such as the Frank Lloyd Wright creation Kentuck Knob (the "K" in *Pittsburgh A to Z*) and Henry Clay Frick's mansion, Clayton (the final stop in *Houses Around Here*), many of the homes would not seem particularly significant at first glance. He devotes a section of *Houses Around Here* to a common style of Pittsburgh architecture known as a "Hully house," named after the Pittsburgh architect who designed these houses in the 1920's. He introduces that segment with the comment, "Of course, not all houses are so unusual. If you look carefully, you may find that your ordinary little house is fascinating too." Despite the fact that hundreds of these houses, which themselves do not appear particularly unusual, exist in the area, he manages to give them some significance.

In many of his films, Sebak suggests that people have a great deal of pride in their homes, despite their inherent lack of importance. He claims in *It's the Neighborhoods*, "People develop a sense of affection for the houses around them." One method he uses to demonstrate this is to film neighborhood house tours, such as the ones featured in *It's the Neighborhoods* and *Happy Holidays in Pittsburgh*. The former of these, which takes place in Lawrenceville, holds particular interest because the homeowners it features are mostly young urban professionals living in this

once blue-collar neighborhood that has become increasingly hip and gentrified in recent years.<sup>132</sup> Most of the homes have been renovated and restored to a level of elegance that they likely had not experienced since the Victorian era. At one point in his narration, Sebak says, “It’s obviously a lot of work to get ready for the public parading through your house. Why would you do it?” The question is answered by resident Francine Gemperle, who says, “For me personally, I hear a lot of people in other neighborhoods say, ‘Oh, Lawrenceville, it’s horrible down there.’ And they’ve never been here, and they don’t realize how beautiful it is here. So part of me really wants to put that out there and let people know that this is a really nice place.”

Sebak concludes the segment with a montage of sound bites that impart the passion locals feel for this neighborhood. He begins with Kitty Julian, a member of the Lawrenceville Hospitality House Tour committee, who says, “I like to joke that Lawrenceville isn’t a neighborhood; it’s really a cult.” Darien Lewandowski, who with her husband Jason bought a home in the neighborhood in 2002, adds, “We absolutely love it, yeah. It’s a great community to live in.” Gemperle concludes, “We have a lot of empty housing stock in this neighborhood, lots of gorgeous old houses that are empty. Come and be our neighbors. We’d love to have them.” The kind of enthusiasm that the residents of Lawrenceville want to inspire in others about their neighborhood ultimately becomes a stand-in for the fervor that Sebak wishes to encourage among his viewers for the entire region. He uses their enthusiasm to sell his own zeal. As Anholt suggests, and Sebak demonstrates, such changes in perception about a place are often accomplished by making the mundane appear momentous. The very fact that a film like *Houses Around Here*—one with a bland title about a seemingly commonplace topic—could receive the

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<sup>132</sup> Diana Nelson Jones, “Destination: Lawrenceville,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 26, 2012. <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/neighborhoods-city/destination-lawrenceville-610096/> [accessed May 18, 2012].

necessary funding to be produced by a public television station, shows the potential for the ordinary to spread excitement.

### Community Support and Security

As previously mentioned, part of the attraction of community lies in its function as protection from the world's danger and instability. Unless one is a hermit or a complete misanthrope, decisions about where to live are certain to be motivated in part by that place's ability to provide a network of security and stability. This can be as basic as choosing a location with low crime rates and a strong police force, but it also pertains to far more complex matters like being able to create strong bonds with friends and neighbors in order to weather life's storms. While Sebak uses subjects like ethnicity, religion, and business as sites of social interactions that foster a sense of community, he also suggests strong communal ties throughout the neighborhoods of Western Pennsylvania by exploring these somewhat more micro-level concerns. He encourages his audience to believe that this is an ideal place to live because it is an area in which neighbors look out for one another.

One such example can be found in a segment of *It's the Neighborhoods* pertaining to a community consisting of a series of row houses in New Kensington, Pennsylvania, called Aluminum City Terrace. Sebak emphasizes the sense of community through scenes of neighbors interacting and children playing, as well as commentary from residents. One interview tells Sebak, "The buildings help the way they are. There's a closeness. They're apart, but they're close. There's a community here." The stability of the neighborhood is underscored by a montage of comments from residents about how they have lived in the community for decades. One man tells Sebak about how his parents moved in when he was just a few months old in

1943. A woman says, “I was born right here in the Terrace, in number sixty, about five houses down from the one I’m in right now.” Even younger generations display such longtime ties to the neighborhood. A younger man explains that his “grandmother lived here until the day she died.” A teenage girl says, “I’ve lived here probably fifteen out of my sixteen years.”

Closeness is further accentuated through explanation that the neighborhood is a co-op in which the residents pay a monthly membership fee that covers their share of the utilities, taxes, upkeep, and other collective bills of the community. Even the governance of the community is within the hands of the residents, as some of them serve on a board of directors that meets monthly to discuss the business of the association, such as problems and potential improvements to the neighborhood. Sebak suggests that the neighborhood is quite popular as well. He says, “The low cost of living here means that there’s always been a long list of people waiting to get into this unexpectedly charming neighborhood.”

The fortunes of this in-demand neighborhood are also in the hands of its residents in a more immediate way. One woman explains, “We live in a great row where we have a lot of friends and neighbors that, you know, come to our aid at a moment’s notice.” The woman who earlier explained that she was born in the Terrace, recounts the story of how her neighbors assisted her when her father had a heart attack in the middle of the night. “My next-door neighbors, they heard me the night that my father had a heart attack. They heard me jump down the steps. I didn’t even get to their house, they were already out the back door. I saw Mr. Kotowski coming out the front door, not the back door, to help. It was four o’clock in the morning. That was pretty good.” One woman tells Sebak, “We love it here. It’s a real sense of community, of belonging.”

Aluminum City Terrace is not unique among Pittsburgh communities in this attentiveness to the needs of one's neighbors. Regent Square residents display a similar sort of dedication to their neighbors and neighborhood. A resident named Sean tells Sebak, "It's not just the sidewalks. It's the people sitting out. It's the people being in your business. It's the people calling me when I'm in Florida saying, 'Hey, your upstairs window is open. Do you want me to go in because it might rain?'" Regent Square, where Sebak has lived since 1988<sup>133</sup>—though he does not mention so in his films—is such a wonderful neighborhood, in the eyes of Sebak's interviewees, that leaving it would be nothing short of foolish. Sean explains, "The great warning from the wise people who've lived here a lot longer than us is 'never move.'" Sebak includes such statements to inspire his audience to believe that Pittsburgh's neighborhoods offer a unique, intangible community spirit that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Such an idea can be seen in another statement from Sean: "There is something left in this neighborhood that isn't left, that I can't find anywhere else."

Sebak tries to set Pittsburgh apart from other cities by suggesting that the bonds formed with one's neighbors there are akin to familial ties. Interviewees reinforce this conflation of family and neighbor. For instance, he ends the introduction to *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* with a sound bite from a man who says, "I've never seen a place like Pittsburgh, where family is so extended and it's so much a part of the culture of the region. Everywhere you go, family matters." In a world where people sometimes never even speak to their neighbors, Pittsburgh appeals to those seeking a sense of security and intimacy with their neighbors.

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<sup>133</sup> Stephanie Rex, "Q&A: Rick Sebak of WQED," *Forest Hills-Regent Square Patch*, <http://foresthills-regentsquare.patch.com/articles/qa-rick-sebak-of-wqed> [accessed May 7, 2012].



One such example of neighbors functioning as a sort of extended family can be seen in the segment of *It's the Neighborhoods* about the “Hi Neighbor Club” in Collier Township. The club was founded in January 1958 by a group of young women who moved to the suburbs and missed the connections that often result from living in close proximity to one’s neighbors in the city. They did not want to play cards, raise money, or have any particular agenda for getting together; rather, they just wanted to enjoy one another’s company. Since then they have been meeting once a month—taking turns hosting the get-togethers at their houses and sometimes going to the theater or vacationing together—and their families have bonded together into a sort of extended family. Sebak encourages this viewpoint by including a number of sound bites from the women, such as one who says, “She had five kids. I had five kids. The people down the street had four. They had six. Everybody was mother and father to them.” One of the second generation of members adds, “I remember when we were little, you know, we were in Mrs. Godfrey’s yard, and my brother put his hands on his hips and said, ‘You’re not my mother.’ And she said, ‘Yes, I am.’ He stomped back home then.”

More than just a source of family, the group provided its members with a social outlet at a time when women had fewer such opportunities. One member explains, “When we were younger, as far as the women goes, it was our only outlet.” Another woman tells the story of how she was not able to join until after her husband died. She says, “I live next door, and I didn’t get to join right away because my husband didn’t allow me to join. But when he passed away, all the women came, and one of them whispered in my ear, ‘Can you join now?’ And I did. And I’ve been here ever since.” Such statements serve as powerful reminders of some of the unique challenges faced by women.

The founders have also begun accepting younger members, frequently their own daughters or daughters-in-law, as they have gotten older. One of these second-generation members, who had grown up in the neighborhood as a child, tearfully tells Sebak the story of how she moved back to the neighborhood as an adult to be with her father after her mother died, and the club members “honored” her with a letter asking her to join. She says, “It was truthfully an honor for me because my mother—I’m sorry—my mother just loved this club. And these are all my mothers.” Throughout the segment, the women emphasize that they take care of each other like family. One member provides an illustrative anecdote: “Mary Godfrey, for instance, when I first came here, she took everybody’s blood pressure. And it’s like, ‘My gosh, what’s going on here?’ You know? And it’s just kind of like taking care of each other.” Another woman later comments, “And you really know that if you ever need anyone, there’s always someone there to help.” The segment concludes with one member’s remark: “We’re just one humongous family. It’s fantastic. I wish everybody could have a neighborhood like ours.” Such a statement is a powerful choice to conclude with; as it is likely to resonate with viewers who also wish they lived in such a close-knit neighborhood. Such a sentiment reaches out to non-local viewers and invites them to look to Pittsburgh as a place where their dreams of neighborhood closeness can come true.

### Conclusion

Though it might seem an alluring option to some, becoming completely isolated within the faceless mass of humanity found in a city presents a frightening prospect to many. After all, humans are by their nature social creatures. Any campaign that wishes to rehabilitate the image of a place must bear such a need in mind. A featureless, impersonal city or region is unlikely to

impart positive feelings to outsiders and is liable to contribute to a sense of dissatisfaction among the local residents. Moreover, in order to compete with all of the other cities and regions vying for residents—and their money and labor—a place must make itself appear noteworthy in order to garner attention. Sebak captures all of this in one stroke because part of the significance he attributes to Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania is the distinctiveness, stability, and personability of its people and neighborhoods. He suggests that not only are these great neighborhoods; they are ones that anyone can belong. As Rebecca Flora tells him in the conclusion to *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?*, “So it’s really just the collection of amenities and the people and the fact that you can be part of it. It’s very accessible.”

Such a project does not come without costs. When one strives to promote a place, one will inevitably avoid some of those aspects that are unpleasant. While the avoidance of these aspects proves beneficial to the creation of a narrative that bolsters a place’s competitive identity, it also results in an image that is not entirely accurate and that threatens to privilege certain viewpoints over others. This leads to a significant problem for Sebak, as the region’s history has its share of painful episodes involving ethnic and racial conflict. A major pitfall of trying to reflect the more agreeable and triumphant moments in the area’s story is that it leads to a lack of representation of certain ethnic and racial groups. In Sebak’s films, Native Americans suffer the greatest at the hands of a largely Eurocentric account that celebrates conquest to some degree while neglecting their voices and treating them largely as relics of a bygone era rather than a group that had a real, living presence in Western Pennsylvania up into the second half of the twentieth century. African Americans, though far better represented, are, like other groups, limited to happy stories. The problems that afflict some of the traditionally black neighborhoods,

such as Homewood and the Hill District, are left unmentioned even when discussing stories that take place in those areas.

These narratives place progress at the forefront. Those things (or people) that stand in the way of this evolution fall by the wayside. Bill Nichols explains that this oneness of purpose is necessary to the construction of a national—or in this case regional—identity as well as a sense of community. He says, “‘Community’ invokes feelings of common purpose and mutual respect, of reciprocal relationships closer to family ties than contractual obligations. Shared values and beliefs are vital to a sense of community, whereas contractual relationships can be carried out despite differences of value and belief. A sense of community seems like an ‘organic’ quality that binds people together when they share a tradition, culture, or common goal. As such it may seem far removed from issues of ideology, where competing beliefs struggle to win our hearts and minds.”<sup>134</sup>

However, as he also points out, “the most insidious forms of ideology may be precisely the ones that make community seem natural, or organic.”<sup>135</sup> The types of relationships that people enter into with one another vary in different places and different times, and such ideologies set aside certain values in favor of others. Nichols says, “The sense of community always comes at the price of alternative values and beliefs deemed deviant, subversive, or illegal. The politics of documentary film production address the ways in which this work helps give tangible expression to the values and beliefs that build, or contest, specific forms of social belonging, or community, at a given time and place.”<sup>136</sup> Sebak’s films build certain ideas about

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<sup>134</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 215.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 216.

community, sometimes at the expense of minority voices or issues that do not directly affect the mainstream.

Ultimately, Sebak attempts to sell his audience somewhat of a paradox. He encourages viewers to see Pittsburgh as a place headed on the upswing toward growth and revitalization, while at the same time offering them security, stability, and a sense of belonging in a place that continues to be deeply rooted in a rich and varied ethnic, racial, and religious past. As will become clearer in the coming chapters, this seeming contradiction—that the new and old, avant-garde and conservative, the cultured and unsophisticated—can (and should) coexist largely defines Sebak's vision of Western Pennsylvania. This contradiction becomes further apparent in the next chapter, which discusses Sebak's positioning of Pittsburgh as a once and future economic leader due to its role in the advancement of industry, technology, and medicine. He invites the audience to view Pittsburgh's labor force as one that has and continues to succeed and excel because of its strong work ethic and its fierce pride in its handiwork. He situates Pittsburgh as a place that can simultaneously play a key role in society's progress while still maintaining traditional values about work.

Sebak finds himself in an opportune moment to rebrand Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. With the status of the traditional local, place-bound notion of community in question—as seen in the work of Lash and Urry, Bauman, and Anderson—Sebak is able to step into that void and proffer a vision of community that is in one sense local and yet in another imagined around bonds of ethnicity, race, religion, etc. As such, he is able to position the region as a place that continues to move forward while maintaining stability in a sea of uncertainty. These many sources of community also provide a unique window for representation and belonging. Where some theorists like Bauman characterize the contemporary moment as one of

cultural homogeneity and a lack of community, others like Allen, Massey, and Cochrane suggest that regions cannot be reduced down to a single “authentic” identity. Just as Anholt cautions against this oversimplification of place, Sebak attempts to define an identity for Western Pennsylvania that incorporates many facets of life in the region. This wider sense of identity holds out the potential for greater, more accurate representation—and consequently more opportunities for belonging—but one must also be cautious to avoid believing that the identity he presents is a truly accurate representation of reality. Despite the on-site shooting and person-on-the-street interviews and sound bites that dominate Sebak’s films, they are careful constructions on his part, and even the individuals he chooses to include come to the table with their own definitions of the region’s identity. Sebak’s reflexive style serves as a continual reminder that the identity he presents is an assemblage of particular ideas and stories he wishes to highlight. Nevertheless, it is a creation that allows residents of Western Pennsylvania to have agency in the branding of their identity and representing their diversity without having to satisfy government bureaucrats or corporate sponsors in order to foster revitalization.

### CHAPTER III. WORKFORCE OF THE PAST AND FUTURE

One of the core goals of efforts to rebrand Pittsburgh and other Rust Belt cities is the stimulation of economic growth. This means that messages pertaining to business and industry will inevitably loom large in such projects, and these messages, compared to those about community or culture, become increasingly focused toward an audience of outside business interests. A city that wants to attract commerce needs to provide reasons why businesses should locate there. Obviously, such decisions will be influenced by certain tangible, logistical considerations, such as the quality of local infrastructure and proximity to necessary resources and raw materials. However, such material factors alone do not necessarily set one city or region apart from another. Less tangible elements, such as the quality of the workforce, remain crucial. Sebak sets his attention on these more unquantifiable concerns.

This chapter attends to the recurring theme in Sebak's films of Western Pennsylvania as home to a workforce with an extraordinarily strong work ethic. He continually encourages the message that the people of this region have a lengthy history of hard work and great pride in their work. Workers in this area are, in Sebak's estimation, people who insist upon earning every dollar that passes through their hands and who believe in the products and services they produce because they feel a personal connection with and devotion to the work that they do. They are also people who possess great ingenuity and creativity. Sebak nurtures an image of Pittsburgh as a place that has always innovated, from its prominent role in the Industrial Revolution to its contemporary involvement in the medical and technological fields. When seen in the context of a larger place branding strategy, it becomes easy to understand why Sebak and others with a similar agenda would want to highlight such characteristics. Infrastructure and resources alone are useless without an inventive and dedicated workforce.

It is important to keep in mind that the local audience remains a target for Sebak's message. While locals are not necessarily expected to directly bring business to the area, they indirectly do so by embodying this message. Once again, it is a case of "living the brand." In this sense, the goal of Sebak's films is to spread enthusiasm among the region's residents, to inspire them to believe that they are part of this rich history of local labor. Moreover, these documentaries function as a means to encourage locals with a creative and entrepreneurial spirit to take a chance on their visions because the people of Pittsburgh possess the potential to make those dreams come to life.

The primary tropes used consistently throughout Sebak's discussion of business and industry throughout the *Pittsburgh History Series* are encapsulated in the introduction to 2003's *Things We've Made*. In it he describes Pittsburgh as a city that was once a thriving major player in the nation's industrial development; he reminds viewers that although the city's industrial character has changed, this rich labor history still exists today; he positions Pittsburgh as a place that has been able to adapt and become a leader in contemporary technologies; and he boasts of locals' pride in their work. As usual, he does this through a back-and-forth montage of interviewee sound bites and footage of labor in action accompanied by his own narration. He begins, "You know, Pittsburgh has a busy and brilliant history of manufacturing all sorts of goods. Most famously, of course, we were the steel city, where giant mills churned out tons and tons of the metal that changed the world. We've also been renowned historically as a center of glassmaking, boatbuilding, food processing, and a wide variety of industries that helped make the modern world." This then switches to an interviewee in a machine shop who says, "The whole Industrial Revolution is coming out of here basically." He follows with an exterior of a dilapidated, abandoned factory surrounded by overgrown grass that was filmed at distance from



outside of the rusty chain-link fence and padlocked gates that surround it. This is accompanied by more narration: “We don’t manufacture as much as we once did, but we haven’t given up. This is rather noteworthy and in keeping with his overall tone because the negativity pointed out in the loss of manufacturing lasts for only half a sentence. Even the accompanying visuals make this rapid change, with the shot of the factory giving way to a scene of steel being made today by the end of the sentence.

Sebak’s optimism is stressed by a subsequent sound bite in which U.S. Steel employee Lou Jack says, “When I tell people that I work for U.S. Steel, they say, ‘Oh, is U.S. Steel still here in Pittsburgh?’” This statement underscores the branding challenge that exists among locals, as it points out that even those who live in the area have perhaps bought into the Rust Belt image of Pittsburgh and are unaware that the old industries still remain. He tries to counteract that problem in his succeeding narration: “We still create some of the things that made us great. We found new ways of making valuable products from some of our most trusty materials.” He then moves on to emphasizing that Pittsburgh has successfully made the transition from industries of the past to those of the present, beginning with a statement from an employee at McKesson Automation: “It’s a little bit more high-tech, but you’re still *making* something.” Sebak adds, “We’ve made a name for ourselves in robotics and other types of manufacturing with higher technologies.” He follows that with a sound bite from Chuck Gregory, president of Sony Technology Center-Pittsburgh: “We have a long heritage of doing business and manufacturing products in Southwestern Pennsylvania.” This statement stresses the continuity of the region’s industrial legacy. Just as Sebak encourages the audience to see the endurance of tradition in his discussion of neighborhoods, here too he points to an unbroken chain of industrial heritage.

This introductory segment wraps up with several statements that encourage the audience to see locals as having great pride in their work. It begins with Sebak's statement, "Many of us take great pride in the things we've made." This is supported by a sound bite in which PPG Vice President Jeff Gilbert says, "It comes from our grandparents and parents and great-grandparents that came over here and decided they were gonna make a life here. And part of that making a life was doing a job and doing it as best you could." Gilbert's statement ties pride and work ethic back into notions of heritage and tradition, as well as promoting the American mythology of immigrants finding a better life here through hard work. The film's introduction ends with a woman building televisions at Sony Technology Center-Pittsburgh who says, "Whatever you make, it has a little bit of *you* in it. Do you know what I mean?" Her comment accentuates the personal investment that locals put into their work.

One conspicuous aspect of Sebak's narration in this segment, and indeed this entire film, is his use of the first-person plural pronoun "we." While he does not frequently talk about himself directly in his films, Sebak does narrate a number of his documentaries in this collective fashion. By doing this, he speaks on behalf of Pittsburghers. It also suggests his investment in the narrative and message that he is putting out there in his work, which in turn drives forward the fact that his films are constructions, regardless of whatever pretensions toward or expectations of reality exist on the part of Sebak and his audience, respectively. Beyond speaking by proxy for the residents of Western Pennsylvania, Sebak also invites those same people to feel a sense of unity and inclusion. It is particularly noteworthy that he chose to do this in a film like *Things We've Made*, as it encourages locals to feel as though they are a part of the heritage and promise for the future of which he speaks so proudly. It relates back to the need for community and the importance of getting the local populace to "live the brand," as mentioned previously.

The brief introduction to *Things We've Made* provides Sebak's overarching narrative of business in Western Pennsylvania. In it he points to the region as a place with a rich history of labor that has adapted to changing times in order to remain a leader. He also describes it as an area where workers display great pride in and dedication to their jobs. In the rest of this chapter I will delve deeper into the nuances of how he constructs and supports that narrative in order to encourage his audience to believe in the promise of Western Pennsylvanian business and industry.

### Western Pennsylvania Work Ethic

As is the case with most institutions and phenomena considered in Sebak's films, he chooses to explore these subjects by focusing on the people involved in them rather than looking at them from a more macro level. Undoubtedly, this makes them more relatable and allows Sebak to add that element of individual quirkiness that is characteristic of his work. In the case of business, this approach arguably makes this topic an easier sell to viewers across the socioeconomic spectrum. He would face a much tougher task of encouraging pride in business among the working class by talking about faceless corporations or multimillionaire manufacturing magnates than by focusing on the hard work of the lowly laborer. Consequently, one of the key components of his discussion of business and industry is the work ethic of the local labor force. While it can be difficult to quantify such an attribute, he continually reinforces the notion that people in this region work harder than those elsewhere.

Though this message appears in many of his films, it is particularly prominent in *Things We've Made*. A segment of that film focusing on the manufacture of big screen televisions at Sony Technology Center-Pittsburgh, located in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania, includes several

sound bites from workers about the region's workforce. One woman working in the plant tells Sebak, "Western Pennsylvania is known for good workers, manufacturing people." Chuck Gregory later adds, "We were born with a heritage of actually working swing shifts, working in a manufacturing environment. And that's actually what made this region so significant for Sony—the manufacturing culture that was born out of steel and other products in this region." Lest the viewer think that these locals exhibit a bias toward the area, their comments supported by those from two employees who are not natives to the region. The first of these men says, "The big difference I noticed from Southern California to here was really the work ethic of the people." The second tells Sebak, "Growing up, you know, from Chicago, I love everything about that city, but I love this place as well." This series of sound bites invites the viewer to believe that the Western Pennsylvania work ethic is so significantly strong that both locals and non-natives recognize it.

In that same segment, Sebak includes a montage of comments from employees that invites viewers to think of Pittsburgh's workforce as unique for its pride in the products it makes. One woman comments, "Everybody puts a little bit of *them* into each set." A man adds, "When it leaves here, we really want to be proud that we're putting out a product that we feel we've done our 100 percent best." An employee named Lisa comments, "When you go to a Best Buy and you see people looking at TVs, you want to say, 'I made that.'" One woman who comments about working her way up in the company from manufacturing staff also says, "When I buy a new television, I'm extremely picky, and now *I* own a Sony." Ron Gallagher, a panel-melting specialist who helps manufacture television glass for Sony, says, "When people look at a TV, they see a piece of shiny glass. But to us, it's a lot more than that. It's a lot of hard work." The company's environmental-safety coordinator Rich Walker says, "It's just, it's quality. People

like to stay in the area. They want to stay in the area. If they do a good job, companies are gonna stay in the area.” An employee named Barb says, “It’s what we take pride in. It’s ours.” Many other business stories throughout the *Pittsburgh History Series* include comments similar to the ones seen in this montage. Employees often remark about their personal investment in the work that they do and the goods they produce, inviting viewers to see this region’s workers as model employees.

This pride in one’s work can also be seen in many stories of multi-generational commitment to businesses. In addition to some of the larger companies that Sebak visits throughout the *Pittsburgh History Series*, he also profiles many family-owned-and-operated businesses. These types of businesses set Pittsburgh apart, Sebak suggests, because they provide a level of quality and service that is unmatched by larger, faceless corporations. One illustrative example can be found in a segment of 2006’s *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* that focuses on two local retail bakeries. Bernie Baker, who bought Jenny Lee Bakery from his father, explains his family’s long ties to the baking: “My family started in the baking business in 1875. My great-grandfather started a little bakery in West End. He had seven sons. Eventually, all seven were in the baking business, and they called it 7 Baker Brothers. Time progressed. They got trucks and stuff. In 1938, my dad and a couple of his uncles and a cousin started Jenny Lee Bakery.” His son, Scott Baker, credits much of the company’s success not only to its traditions but to its employees. He says, “That’s one of the main things that makes Jenny Lee Bakery is our people. We have the traditions that my grandfather started, but these people have been around long enough to believe in those traditions.” One young woman, shown frosting cakes, exemplifies the dedication of the employees. She says, “It’s like, this is what I want to do. I mean, I love it. I love food and making stuff look nice.” Not only do the proprietors and

employees feel a strong dedication to the business, the customers also feel a personal connection. One woman shopping in the bakery with her three young sons tells Sebak, “We drive 25 miles to come down here.” She later adds, “And this is where our parents came down. We grew up here, so we’re probably all related somehow.” Sebak encourages the viewer to see such small, local businesses as unique to Pittsburgh. Scott Baker says, “Pittsburgh is one of the few towns that are left that still have a lot of retail bakeries.”

Similar ideas and messages emerge as Sebak moves on to Bethel Bakery in Bethel Park, Pennsylvania. He begins that story with a montage of sound bites from various customers who all speak about their longtime loyalty to this business. One woman says, “I’ve been coming here many, many, many years.” She later adds, “I mean, I pass at least five other bakeries, you know? But I still come here.” Another woman comments, “I’ve been coming here all my life. I was born and raised in Bethel Park.” Even non-natives of the area display such dedication. One man says, “Well, I moved to this town probably about twenty years ago. The first time I ever come in here, I swear that I would come in here again, and every chance I get, I’ll be right here.” Once again, the quality of the product is stressed. An elderly gentleman tells Sebak, “It’s in their product. Eat a sweet roll somewhere else and eat a sweet roll here and see the difference.” The multi-generational commitment is once again stressed. Morris and Anna Walsh, who started the business in 1955, are shown hard at work in the bakery despite the fact that their son John and his wife Chris have taken over the business. Morris comments, “I like to say that a business—when the second generation takes over, it usually never stays status quo. It either goes down or takes off to a new level. And John’s taken it to a new level.”

Chris remarks about the personal connection that they feel with their customers. She says, “I’m always amazed at what goes on out in our store, and sometimes the camaraderie of the

people—we have some really fabulous customers.” Anna later adds, “My greatest pleasure is just getting to know my customers, and I like the bantering with them, just the hominess of that.”

Anna’s youngest daughter, Christine, who manages the bakery’s wedding department, comments, “When you have a family-owned bakery, it’s the personality behind it. It’s the warmth. It’s, you know—when you look forward to seeing those customers that you know all the time, just as well as they look forward to seeing you.” John points out one characteristic that he believes sets his business apart from other operations. He says, “We’re a manufacturer, and we’re also a retailer in one operation, which gives us a lot of challenges and opportunities for failure, but it’s what makes retail bakeries special.”

Sebak speaks with a number of cheerful employees who also comment on the bakery’s uniqueness and quality. One man says, “We have the things that are made that big stores really try to make, but they can’t.” Another man, shown making donuts in a large fryer, comments, “We have really excellent cakes. I like the cakes. I can’t eat a grocery-store cake anymore.” One customer adds that the quality is instantly recognizable. She says, “I have a huge family and a huge baby shower, and I was in charge of the cake. So it was a slam dunk. I bought the cake from Bethel Bakery, brought it to Del’s in Bloomfield for the shower, and a lady from Monroeville took one look at it and said, ‘This has got to be from Bethel Bakery.’ She knew it from the decorating.” Ultimately, the owners, the employees, and the customers are all connected by their pride in and dedication to this business. One employee concludes, “The bakery, I think, is very important, and the people that live in Bethel and, you know, work here, we take pride in it.” A customer comments, “It’s the cake. It’s the icing. It’s the tradition.” John Walsh adds, “It’s a part of what you grew up with and part of familiarity and just part of being home.” Almost any of the many local small businesses that appear in nearly every Sebak film can be substituted into

the stories told about these two bakeries. His segments about T&T Hardware in *South Side*, J.H. Shoop and Sons in *Things that Are Still Here*, Pennsylvania Macaroni Company in *The Strip Show*, and a whole host of others mimic those about these bakeries in terms of their message. While the specific details of the companies change, the overall narrative is one of businesses that succeed over multiple generations because they maintain traditions as well as produce high quality products and deliver personalized service that cannot be matched by their larger competitors. The employees take great pride in their work as though their own names were stamped on every product, and the customers reciprocate such care with their devotion and loyalty to these local businesses.

#### Celebration of Business and Industry

At a time when much of the public economic discourse is dominated by messages of economic disparity, class warfare, and anti-corporation sentiment, selling the importance of business to an audience presents difficulties. While Sebak's films are not outright puffery for corporatism, they do frequently present favorable impressions of businesses. He achieves this primarily by featuring comments from seemingly average workers who hold their employers in high esteem and by avoiding the darker chapters of Pittsburgh's business history. Often, interviewees recall memories pertaining to their work with nostalgic fondness.

One of the foremost examples of such behavior can be found in a very lengthy (roughly eleven of the film's sixty total minutes) segment of 1990's *Things that Aren't There Anymore* centered on the Isaly's chain of family-owned dairies and restaurants. Best known today for its creation of the Klondike bar and the popularization of chipped ham, the company was once a prominent fixture in Pittsburgh, boasting many retail locations in Western Pennsylvania.



Transitioning from a segment about old movie theaters, Sebak explains, “In those innocent days, there were movie houses in every neighborhood and always an Isaly’s store nearby. An Isaly’s was a kind of proto-convenience store—a combination restaurant, small grocery, and ice cream parlor—brought to Pittsburgh from Ohio in the early ’30s by Henry Isaly.” He later adds, “Now, there are still about ten Isaly’s stores around the Pittsburgh area, and they may have some similarities to the old shops, but during its heyday, Isaly’s included nearly one hundred stores in the Pittsburgh area.”

This segment is loaded with nostalgic reminiscences from former employees who describe Isaly’s as a source of belonging and family. Lou Mitchell, a woman who began working at Isaly’s when she was sixteen years old, explains to Sebak that employees felt such a dedication to the business that they were willing to go the extra mile. She says, “There were many of us who worked in the stores, you went in and you worked on your day off without pay. It didn’t make any difference. You always covered your fellow workers, you know. If it was a very busy day and you happened to be out shopping and you walked in the store to get a coke and they were busy, you dropped your purse and went behind the counter and you worked.” Another former employee, Jack McGeary (no relation), reinforces this image: “Working for Isaly’s, it was like working in a family. I mean, you felt you were part of the family.” The film suggests that this sense of family was the key to the business’s success and that when the Isaly family sold the business in 1972, the spark went out of it. Former employee Margie DeArmit explains, “It’s a shame that it ever got out of family because once people considered it a business, it was no longer good. It was only good when it was family, when it was fun.” On its surface, DeArmit’s statement might appear to be a small incursion of non-celebratory critique; however, within this context it functions as celebration of a specific model of business, namely

the type of close-knit, family-owned business that Isaly's once was. Sebak frequently champions this style of business, setting it up as a key trait of the region's business identity. By tying the decline of Isaly's in this region to a shift away from such business methods, as well as demonstrating that the few remaining Isaly's stores still operate based upon the older model, he suggests that businesses in the region thrive when they retain this sense of closeness among employers, employees, and customers that he attributes to Western Pennsylvania businesses.

Sebak suggests that Isaly's meant so much to its employees that many of them find various ways of clinging onto their connections to it. Mitchell and DeArmit are shown working in Mitchell's Deli, a former Isaly's store that they own and operate in the style of the old Isaly's.<sup>137</sup> Mitchell explains, "We still even use Isaly bags and chipped ham. We sell the exact same products. We go about things in the same way that was tried and true for many years." Sebak supports this visually by showing Mitchell operating the 1951 model electric chipper that is still used in the deli—which has remained virtually the same in appearance since its heyday—and via narration he adds, "And though the name isn't outside anymore, you know what's inside." Bob Pierce, a former employee who, as Sebak mentions, "met his wife over the counter," shows off a small life-size Isaly's he has recreated in his basement using vintage Isaly's products, display materials, equipment, glassware, and dishes. McGeary shows Sebak a miniature Isaly's store, complete with food and equipment, which he carved to scale and painted by hand. Even McGeary's wife displays great fondness for the business. She tells Sebak, "And then, you know what Isaly's really means—'I shall always love you.' I don't know if they know that, but that's what it says. 'I shall always love you.'" Sebak concludes the Isaly's story by tying

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<sup>137</sup> Mitchell's Deli closed in 2002 amid some controversy. See: Susan Jacobs, "Community Is the Loser in Closing of Mitchell's Deli in Etna," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 20, 2002. <http://old.post-gazette.com/neighbor/north/20020320etna0320p2.asp> [accessed June 6, 2012] and Brandon Keat, "Closing Time for Deli," *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, April 26, 2002. <http://triblive.com/home/1729031-85/north-dearmit-karam-mitchell-deli-etna-residents-borough-lease-building> [accessed June 6, 2012].

it into his own life. He says, “Jack McGearry used to manage that big old Isaly’s Country Garden that I could walk to when I was a kid.” This personal injection into the story, fairly uncommon in Sebak’s work, coupled with the fact that he later revisited Isaly’s in his national PBS program *Sandwiches that You Will Like* and in an episode of his WQED show *It’s Pittsburgh & a Lot of Other Stuff*, suggests a great deal of affinity for the business on Sebak’s part.

Celebrating business, already a difficult task in our current climate of economic struggle, becomes even more complex when one considers Pittsburgh’s history as the base of operations for several of the infamous nineteenth century “robber barons,” such as Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, Andrew W. Mellon, and Charles M. Schwab. In a region that reveres its working-class heritage, it seems almost foolish to venerate the legacies of men renowned for making vast fortunes at the expense of their workers. Yet at the same time, the names of these men are plastered on all sorts of institutions and buildings that continue to benefit the inhabitants of the region. The average local does not necessarily think of greedy, anti-labor capitalists when checking out books at one of the many local Carnegie libraries, attending Carnegie-Mellon University, strolling through the University of Pittsburgh’s Frick Fine Arts Building, enjoying leisure time in Frick and Mellon Parks, or even living in the suburb of Carnegie, Pennsylvania. This presents a conundrum for a filmmaker like Sebak. The things that bear these men’s names are not necessarily malevolent; nonetheless, they are inevitably tied in some way to tycoons who acquired their fortunes through questionable behavior. One is left to wonder whether or not Sebak can in good faith sing the praises of beneficial institutions without having to apologize for their namesakes at every turn. Regardless of one’s answer to that query, Sebak’s approach remains clear. He largely chooses to sidestep the unfavorable legacies of these figures who loom large in Pittsburgh’s past and present.

Perhaps the most famous and omnipresent of these men is Andrew Carnegie. His story is forever complicated by the fact that he amassed his great fortune on the backs of his workers yet donated the majority of it to philanthropic causes later in his life. Sebak focuses mostly on the latter. The most direct look he takes at Carnegie's poor reputation among laborers can be seen in a segment of 1999's *Things that Are Still Here* in which he visits the Carnegie Library in Braddock, Pennsylvania (a town named after the British general mentioned in the preceding chapter). The first Carnegie Library in America, this building was named a National Historic Landmark in March 2012.<sup>138</sup> The segment centers mainly on the library's role as the focal point of the community and its remarkable recovery in recent decades after originally being slated for demolition in the late 1970's. Sebak begins the story with a montage of sound bites about the library's importance from employees, board members, volunteers, and young patrons of the library. Bob Messner, a member of the Braddock's Field Historical Society (which owns the library), tells Sebak, "There are many librarians who come to this regarding this as Mecca." Library Executive Director Mary Becker remarks, "This is what started me reading was being able to come to the library." Library volunteer John Hempel comments, "My father taught himself to read here." Library board member Evelyn Benzo adds, "I just feel it's a part of me because I live here in Braddock." Local independent filmmaker Tony Buba<sup>139</sup> stresses the centrality of the library to the community's future: "For Braddock to have any type of

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<sup>138</sup> Bill Zlatos, "Carnegie's 1<sup>st</sup> Library Granted Landmark Status," *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, March 7, 2012. <http://triblive.com/home/1031976-85/pittsburgh-allegheeny-history-library-carnegie-braddock-county-historic-landmarks-national> [accessed June 5, 2012].

<sup>139</sup> Buba, a resident of Braddock, has made more than twenty films, mostly documentaries (both short- and long-form), focusing largely on Braddock's industrial decline, the steel industry, and post-industrial working-class life. Unlike Sebak, his films are more overtly political in nature; however, he does share Sebak's penchant for the use of humor in his work. In this Carnegie Library segment of *Things that Are Still Here*, Sebak includes a very brief snippet from Buba's 1983 film *Voices from a Steeltown* in which Buba talks to Dave Solomon, the librarian who founded the Braddock's Field Historical Society and saved the Braddock Carnegie Library. For more information on Buba and to view a few of his films, visit his Web site at <http://braddockfilms.com>.

revitalization, it's going to center around this building." Ray Henderson<sup>140</sup>, another board member, explains the library's importance for children: "Kids can come now. They don't have to worry about having a safe place to go." A young girl tells Sebak, "I like coming here because I like to learn, and I like to have fun." This introductory montage concludes with Hempel's comment, "It's really a full-tilt community center."

As the segment progresses, Sebak tells the story of the librarian who worked tirelessly to save the library from destruction, and he tours the building's other facilities, such as a multipurpose room, a gym, and a music hall. During this tour, he views the former bathhouse in the building's basement, originally constructed for Carnegie's employees at a time when indoor plumbing was uncommon. This leads to Sebak's most direct confrontation of Carnegie's tarnished legacy. A shot of the dilapidated subterranean entrance once used by those laborers is accompanied by Sebak's narration: "When this tunnel was open, overworked, underpaid millworkers could enter here to use the Carnegie Club facilities, but some men would have nothing to do with Andrew Carnegie, whom they considered ruthless." Messner then explains the reason for its genesis: "This was one of the first attempts ever to try to do something to deter a union from coming in by treating your employees better, or being perceived as treating them better." Library board member William Mistick, who played at the library as a child, comments, "It was a fun place for kids. That's why my dad didn't object to me coming here at all. *He* just wouldn't come." Becker adds, "People have memories, and they heard their parents talk about Mr. Carnegie." After this interjection, Mistick continues, "Mom would say, 'Where you going, Billy?' I'd say, 'I'm going up to the Carnegie Club.' Dad would say, 'Spfee [Mistick imitates spitting] on that Andrew Carnegie, that son of a . . ." Sebak then interrupts with a comment from

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<sup>140</sup> Henderson teamed up with Buba to make the film *Struggles in Steel: A Story of African-American Steelworkers* in 1996 after noticing that a local television program about a mill closing in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, did not feature any black workers despite their enormous contribution to the Western Pennsylvania labor force.

Buba: “It’s an older generation that sort of has that relationship with Carnegie.” He then returns to Mistick’s reminiscence, already in progress: “‘Son of a *bogancha*,’ he would say. ‘Son of a shoe.’” As Mistick laughs, Sebak then transitions into the remainder of the segment.

Even though Sebak touches upon Carnegie’s controversial nature in this segment, he still avoids any great detail as to how he achieved such a reputation. Mistick’s lighthearted childhood recollections coupled with Becker and Buba’s comments give the impression that such ill will toward Carnegie was a relic of a different generation and effectively undermine any inclination the audience might have to level harsh criticism at him. And if Mistick does not feel the need to dwell on Carnegie’s treatment of his father and his father’s coworkers, then why should we, the audience, do any differently?

While Carnegie—the man, as opposed to the many things bearing his name—is mentioned in several of Sebak’s other films, he comes up only briefly and mostly in an innocuous manner. For instance, in a segment of 2000’s *Something about Oakland*, Sebak mentions that when he established the Carnegie Technical Schools, later to become Carnegie Mellon University, “Carnegie wanted working Pittsburghers to have the opportunity to improve themselves.” Such a statement encourages the audience to view Carnegie as something of a populist who had the interests of the working class at heart. However, it conflicts with the image of Carnegie that one gleans from his treatment of some of his employees.

Another example can be found in a short segment of *North Side Story* dealing with the Allegheny branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh that touches upon Carnegie’s personal fondness for that area, formerly Allegheny City. Having moved with his family to Allegheny City from Scotland when he was a boy—and later lived in the city’s famed “Millionaire’s Row” among other wealthy industrialists—Carnegie chose this as the location for the first public

library he commissioned in America. Sebak explains that “in many ways it’s the model for all Carnegie libraries around the world.” Head librarian Connie Galbreath shows him a portrait of Carnegie hanging in the library and practically swoons as she explains a quotation to its side: “That’s a quote from Andrew Carnegie. ‘Allegheny was my first love.’ That’s the library as well as the city.” Sebak then expounds upon this via narration: “Well, Andrew Carnegie was once a boy here in Allegheny, and he wanted books to read. The volumes he found at the library of one Colonel James Anderson are still here at this library.” Senior reference librarian Steve Pietzak then shows this collection to Sebak, who explains that Anderson allowed Carnegie and his friends to use the books free of charge. He further adds that “Carnegie was so grateful to Anderson that he had a monument built to him in 1904” that now stands across from the library’s front door.

Sebak then briefly visits a boy, Jonathan Kulevich, who lives in the house that Anderson once occupied in the nearby neighborhood of Manchester. Kulevich tells Sebak, “All that I really know is that he came here in the 1800s when he was a working boy, and he read private books of Colonel James Anderson.” This single sentence uttered by Kulevich appears to add nothing new to what has already been said, but Sebak’s following narration makes Kulevich’s incorporation into the film apparent. He says, “From Andrew Carnegie to Jonathan Kulevich, reading books and learning history and studying have all been parts of growing up on the North Side.” By drawing this parallel between Carnegie and Kulevich, Sebak invites the audience to think of Carnegie as someone who was once an innocent young boy with a yearning to learn. Sebak crafts this entire segment in such a way that the viewer is encouraged to see Carnegie as a man who felt so indebted to Anderson and Allegheny City that he tried to repay them with a monument and a library, respectively. The Carnegie seen here is an eager young boy who later became a great

philanthropist, rather than a filthy rich capitalist who mistreated his workers. He is not the only industrialist who comes through the *Pittsburgh History Series* relatively unscathed, and perhaps somewhat rehabilitated.

Carnegie's occasional business partner Henry Clay Frick also manages to avoid the ire of Sebak's camera. As the founder of H.C. Frick & Company coke manufacturing company, chairman of Carnegie Steel Company, and philanthropist who willed the land and \$2 million (\$26.8 million today) trust fund that led to the development of Frick Park (Pittsburgh's largest)<sup>141</sup>, Frick left an indelible mark on the region. However, despite the fact that his name continues to adorn many buildings and institutions throughout Pittsburgh, much of his legacy is not the sort of thing to be celebrated. Known during his time as "the most hated man in America," he is perhaps most infamous for his role in the 1892 Homestead Strike.

When members of the Amalgamated Association of Steel and Iron Workers attempted to negotiate a pay increase in response to the steel industry's swelling profits, Frick instead offered them a 22 percent wage decrease and eventually locked them out of the steel plant when no agreement was reached.<sup>142</sup> Workers were kept from the plant by a high fence topped with barbed wire, sniper towers with searchlights, and high-pressure water cannons, some of which could spray boiling-hot liquid.<sup>143</sup> When the workers went on strike and shut down the factory, Frick hired the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to invade by river in order to clear the way for strikebreakers. This led to a bloody confrontation that resulted in the deaths of three Pinkertons and nine workers, as well as Pennsylvania Governor Robert E. Pattison's eventual use of the state militia to break the strike and ultimately the union itself. Frick is also tied to the notorious

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<sup>141</sup> "Frick Park: History," Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. <http://www.pittsburghparks.org/history> [accessed June 4, 2012].

<sup>142</sup> Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States. Vol. 2: From the Founding of the A.F. of L. to the Emergence of American Imperialism*. (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 207-209.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.



Johnstown Flood of 1889. The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, of which he was a charter member, failed to properly repair the earthen dam (then the world's largest) at the base of the club's private lake. When the dam gave way after high snowmelt and heavy rains, Johnstown flooded, killing 2,209 people and putting Frick's chief competitor, Cambria Iron and Steel, out of commission for a year and a half.<sup>144</sup> Despite subsequent lawsuits filed by survivors, Frick and the rest of the club's members went unpunished for the role their negligence played in the disaster.<sup>145</sup>

These two unpleasant chapters in Western Pennsylvania history and Frick's considerable role in them go unmentioned by Sebak. The few times that Frick is brought up throughout the course of the *Pittsburgh History Series*, he is mostly discussed in passing. For instance, in *Downtown Pittsburgh*, Sebak tours the Frick Building downtown and views the shower and toilet that Frick had installed in his office. Sebak also briefly mentions Frick in *Holy Pittsburgh!* when he tells the story about how Frick bought St Peter's Episcopal Church and its site downtown but donated the building back to the congregation, who moved it brick by brick to a new site in the Oakland section of the city. The most substantial reference to Frick appears in the final segment of *Houses Around Here*, in which Sebak tours Frick's twenty-three-room mansion, Clayton. Naturally, in a film about houses, Sebak mostly confines himself to Frick's domestic life rather than his reputation as a ruthless robber baron of the Gilded Age.

In this segment, Sebak barely hints at Frick's infamy, introducing him as "one of the richest and most controversial figures in Pittsburgh history" but failing to elaborate on the source of that controversy. Instead, Frick becomes something of a benign character, even worthy of

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<sup>144</sup> Edwin Hutcheson, "History of the Johnstown Flood," Johnstown Flood Museum. <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/history.html> [accessed June 4, 2012].

<sup>145</sup> Edwin Hutcheson, "The South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club and the South Fork Dam," Johnstown Flood Museum. <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/clubanddam.html> [accessed June 4, 2012].

sympathy, as one of the docents at the mansion (which has been a museum since 1990) points out that Frick never got over the 1891 death of his daughter Martha at age five. Sebak later reinforces this with his narration that “every room seems to have a reminder of how much Henry Clay Frick loved his daughter Martha, whom he called ‘Rosebud.’” He adds, “Martha’s image is even printed on Frick’s personal checks, one of which is on display in the library and sitting room.” While viewers are invited to consider the emotional toll that losing a child took on Frick, they are not even given the opportunity to ponder what effect the deaths of hundreds of children in the Johnstown Flood may or may not have had on him. Mostly, this segment plays out like a nineteenth century version of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* or *MTV Cribs*, as the audience is left to marvel at opulence of the Frick home and its furnishings.

Not all of Pittsburgh’s nineteenth century tycoons had such a poor reputation during their lifetimes, and these men receive much greater, sometimes more-detailed coverage in Sebak’s films. Henry John Heinz—born in 1844 in Birmingham, Pennsylvania, now Pittsburgh’s South Side—is best known for the founding his food manufacturing company, the H. J. Heinz Company. Sebak covers him, his company, and some of his company’s many products in several documentaries, most notably in *North Side Story* and *Things We’ve Made*. In the former, Sebak positions Heinz as an innovator in both his methods of production and his treatment of his employees. Sebak goes to Pittsburgh’s North Side to visit the Heinz factory that was, as he explains, “the first large-scale food-processing factory in the world.” Discussing Heinz’s labor relations, Sebak says, “The founder felt it was good policy to treat his workers well, and he employed thousands here, more than half of them women, who, if they handled food, received a weekly manicure and other benefits unheard of at the time.” Plant supervisor Dave Sterritt, a thirty-three-year Heinz veteran, speaks with great pride about his family’s connection to the

company and its founder: “There’ve been five generations in my family working here at Heinz. My great-grandfather worked right here with H. J.—the original H. J.” Sebak once again touches upon the theme of multi-generational ties to a business when he talks to Ron Werner, an industrial chef in the ketchup processing unit of the factory. Sebak says, “Ron Werner has worked for Heinz for almost thirty years. He’s part of another family of Heinz employees. His father worked here for forty-six years.” Werner touches upon employee pride and dedication when he says, “It’s our number-one product. You try to make it good to keep it number one.” Concluding the segment with upbeat marching band music and shots of countless ketchup packets moving along conveyor belts, Sebak says, “It’s no exaggeration to say that from this plant, H. J. Heinz and his company changed the way the world eats in the twentieth century.” While Heinz is portrayed in a manner commensurate with his reputation among workers, he is not discussed nearly as much as one other distinguished businessman in Western Pennsylvania history.

Perhaps the most celebrated of all entrepreneurs in Sebak’s work is George Westinghouse. Unlike the other industrialists associated with Pittsburgh’s history, Westinghouse is known not only as a successful industrialist—founded sixty companies, including two Fortune 500 companies, and left a one-million-dollar (roughly one billion dollars today) estate upon his death—but also as a prolific inventor—he patented more than 361 inventions.<sup>146</sup> He also chose to forgo active public relations spinning practiced by his more infamous contemporaries, seldom giving interviews and only rarely agreeing to be photographed.<sup>147</sup> Unlike many of his peers, Westinghouse did not need to, as he is noted for kind treatment of his workers. He built the town of Wilmerding with an array of services for the employees of Westinghouse Air Brake Company

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<sup>146</sup> William S. Dietrich II, *Eminent Pittsburghers: Profiles of the City’s Founding Industrialists*. (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2011), 68.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

and was the first of his contemporaries to shorten the workweek from six to five and a half days.<sup>148</sup> In Pittsburgh's Schenley Park there even stands a memorial to Westinghouse, dedicated in 1930 and financed by small contributions from nearly fifty-five thousand Westinghouse employees around the world.<sup>149</sup> One might also recall in the previous chapter how he is fondly remembered for founding the WEMCO Club to provide his African American employees with a social club. All of these facets of Westinghouse's legacy characterize the image portrayed by Sebak.

In 1996's *The Strip Show*, Sebak visits an old, unassuming factory building that has housed a robotics company called RedZone since 1991 but that was originally designed by Westinghouse in 1870 to house his first air brake manufacturing operation. RedZone co-founder Todd Simonds explains how he first discovered the building's historic origins: "One cold, rainy, winter night, I got a knock on the door from a man who turns out to be a Westinghouse historian, and he said, 'Young man, do you know where you are?'" In addition to this bit of history, Sebak uses this story to also point out Westinghouse's treatment of his employees. He says, "In 1871, Westinghouse Air Brake became the first company in America to give workers half of Saturday off. So you might say the weekend was born in this building." Much of the segment focuses on the work done by RedZone, which manufactures robots that function in hazardous areas, such as battlefields and nuclear waste pits. Sebak closes by bringing up one last connection between RedZone and Westinghouse. Simonds says, "Westinghouse, in one form or another, is our largest customer. First of all, Westinghouse operates about half of the federal government's nuclear weapons facilities. So, yeah, it's a closed loop." While the nuclear age cannot be blamed on George Westinghouse, who died in 1914, the corporation bearing his name plays a major role

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>149</sup> "Schenley: Park Features," Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. <http://www.pittsburghparks.org/park-features-3> [accessed June 14, 2012].

in this controversial field as the largest supplier of nuclear fuel and services in the United States and the second largest in the world.<sup>150</sup> Not surprisingly, Sebak chooses to avoid delving any further into the issue of nuclear weapons in this segment. Instead he uses a sound bite from Bud Mracna, the architect who helped RedZone refit the building for its purposes, to transition into a story about the Enrico Biscotti Company.

Sebak covers George Westinghouse favorably in several other films, notably as the “W” in *Pittsburgh A to Z* (“Westinghouse in Wilmerding”) and in 2008’s *Invented, Engineered & Pioneered in Pittsburgh*. In the latter of these, Westinghouse historian Ed Reis tells Sebak about many of Westinghouse’s achievements and talents, including a rather progressive one. Reis explains:

I always thought it was interesting that George Westinghouse could see the potential in ideas—the idea, for example, of using air to stop a train. But he also had the knack of seeing potential in people. So he surrounded himself with good engineers. So, engineers like, you know, Benjamin Lamme, and Oliver Shallenberger, and, you know, William Stanley. And I shouldn’t forget, sometimes women. He had—Westinghouse Electric Company in 1893 hired Bertha Lamme. Today, she’s known as America’s first woman electrical engineer. She started at the Garrison Alley Works, the current site of the Pittsburgh Convention Center, later transferred to the East Pittsburgh Works of Westinghouse Electric in East Pittsburgh, PA, when it was opened. And she had a very long career.

In addition to discussing Westinghouse’s ground-breaking work with air brakes, alternating current, and other innovations, Sebak points to Westinghouse’s interest in producing early industrial films in 1904 as a sign of his pioneering spirit. He says “We can’t mention all of Westinghouse’s many innovations. But even his interest in having early motion pictures made of his employees shows how open he was to new ideas and new technology.”

Unlike the RedZone story in *The Strip Show*, this story delves somewhat deeper into Westinghouse’s involvement in the nuclear field. Reis explains:

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<sup>150</sup> “Careers in the Nuclear Industry,” Westinghouse Electric Company.  
[http://www.westinghousenuclear.com/careers/nuclear\\_careers.shtm](http://www.westinghousenuclear.com/careers/nuclear_careers.shtm) [accessed June 14, 2012].

If one goes back in history, it's very easy to see that George Westinghouse and the Westinghouse companies under his direction became very interested in what today would be called research and development. So, you know, he always spent a lot of money and had a lot of effort in trying new ideas. And obviously in the late 1930s, they also looked into the area of atomic power, as it was called at the time, later to be called nuclear power. The Atom Smasher, as the building was originally and today is referred to on Ardmore Boulevard here in Pittsburgh, again was 1937, was the very first atom smasher, if you would, in the country. And that early involvement in the nuclear business led them also to be involved locally here with the Shippingport Power Plant, with America's first nuclear power plant, if you would, as part of the "Atoms for Peace" program. And they went on, you know, over the years to become very much involved in nuclear power.

Sebak elaborates on these comments by explaining some of the genesis behind the Shippingport Atomic Power Station (SAPS) and showing a brief clip of President Dwight Eisenhower's address dedicating the power plant in 1958. Sebak does not probe further into the details of "Atoms for Peace" program, which some have criticized as more of a public relations move to distract from controversial nuclear tests and the United States' growing nuclear monopoly as well as an attempt to make sure that other countries interested in nuclear power would get it from the United States instead of the Soviet Union.<sup>151</sup>

Sebak does visit the former site of the power plant, decommissioned in 1982, and talks with several employees who once worked there and now work for FirstEnergy, the company that owns the site and the newer, larger Beaver Valley Nuclear Generating Station that sits beside it. You may also recall FirstEnergy from the previous chapter as the company that runs a hydroelectric plant at Kinzua Dam. All of these interviewees talk about SAPS with great pride and with some wistfulness about its end. As he begins a tour of the old site with electrical engineer Richie Hecht, Sebak notes that Hecht "seemed a bit sad." Engineer Neil Morrison tells Sebak, "We were family, and then we kind of dissolved. And we got scattered out amongst a

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<sup>151</sup> See John J. Krige, "Atoms for Peace, Scientific Internationalism, and Scientific Intelligence." In *Global Knowledge Power: Science and Technology in International Affairs*. *Osiris* 21, eds. John Krige and Kai-Henrik Barth, 161-181. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *The Nuclear Jihadist: The True Story of the Man Who Sold the World's Most Dangerous Secrets . . . And How We Could Have Stopped Him*. (New York: Twelve, 2007).

number of different power plants.” Maureen Brightwell, a senior clerk who, along with her mother, also worked there, adds, “It was never the same as the old SAPS.”

Later Sebak visits Westinghouse headquarters in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, where he talks with several employees, including principal engineer Eric Greenwald, who smilingly tells him, “There have been some lean years. We haven’t built a new nuclear plant in the United States since the 1980s. But, keeping our fingers crossed, that’s gonna change here very, very soon.” Westinghouse employee Howard Bruschi then explains designs for a new generation of nuclear power plant called AP1000. He says, “We’re not gonna stop here, we’re gonna keep moving.” Sebak follows this with his own narration: “Of course. Innovative companies have to do what they do best and keep moving.” Needless to say, given the potential dangers of nuclear energy, such enthusiasm for the subject, particularly when it goes unquestioned by Sebak, is concerning. Nevertheless, it is not out of character for him either. Questioning the safety of nuclear power undermines the message of Western Pennsylvania as a place of innovation. Beyond the fact that they have much more positive reputations for labor relations historically, entrepreneurs like Westinghouse and Heinz are remembered more fondly (and frequently) by Sebak because their stories serve as shining examples of a great spirit of invention and innovation that is central to his narrative about business and labor in Western Pennsylvania.

### A City of Innovation

As has already been mentioned, Sebak positions Pittsburgh as a place where people work hard and businesses maintain ties to the ways of yesteryear. However, this old-time working-class image that in some ways makes Pittsburgh an attractive location for business is also the image that has stymied its progress. For the region to truly rebranding and revitalize itself, it has

to appear forward-thinking as well. Sebak encourages this image in his films, presenting Pittsburgh as a place where people have innovated since its earliest days, when British military engineers designed the then-state-of-the-art Fort Pitt. In fact, he predicates one of his films—*Invented, Engineered & Pioneered in Pittsburgh*—entirely upon this notion. In it he discusses some of Pittsburgh’s nineteenth century technological pioneers, such as John A. Roebling, a German immigrant who founded and laid out the Western Pennsylvania town of Saxonburg, where he designed and produced the wire rope that he would use to revolutionize the design of suspension bridges, including several in Pittsburgh and his most famous, the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. Sebak also tells the story of George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr., who in Pittsburgh in 1893 invented and built the original Ferris Wheel for the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

While Sebak celebrates the innovations of the past that emanated from Pittsburgh in order demonstrate the depth of the city’s technological legacy, such stories alone would not make a convincing case for establishing it as a place with the potential to be a present-day leader. To accomplish this, Sebak discusses spheres in which Western Pennsylvania currently blazes trails. Perhaps foremost among these is the medical field. In the introduction to *Something about Oakland* he says that “by the end of the twentieth century, Oakland became a medical Mecca, with some of the best hospitals anywhere.” He immediately follows this with an interview snippet from a man who jokes, “If you’re ever gonna have a heart attack, that’s the place to have it.” It comes as little surprise that Sebak, or anyone else intent upon rehabilitating Pittsburgh’s image, would point to its strong presence in the medical industry. Headquartered in Oakland, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center is a ten-billion-dollar global nonprofit health system with more than twenty hospitals, four hundred outpatient sites, and a nearly 1.6 million-member



health insurance division.<sup>152</sup> With more than fifty-five thousand employees, it is also Western Pennsylvania's largest employer and the second-largest in the state.<sup>153</sup> UPMC—along with the Buhl Foundation, National City Bank the Henry L. Hillman Foundation, and WQED members—also happens to be one of the financial supporters of the film.

Sebak devotes an entire segment of *Something about Oakland* to the UPMC and the medical advances happening there. Even here he begins by pointing to the historical foundations for Pittsburgh's medical prowess, explaining that "the world's attention was first focused here in the 1950s when Dr. Jonas Salk and his research team created the first vaccine against polio" and that "media attention was high again in the 1980s when Pittsburgh became the world's center for organ transplants." He adds, "Dr. Thomas Starzl, the innovative transplant surgeon, helped build a new international reputation for these hospitals. They are some of the very best in several fields, including transplantation." Sebak spends the initial part of the segment talking to Starzl in various locations around Oakland, including his office, his house, and most surprisingly, a donut shop that he professes to hang around "as much as possible. Starzl goes somewhat further than Sebak in his endorsement of UPMC: "Well, I think their reputation now is provision of first-class care across the spectrum." In addition to having Starzl position UPMC as a source of world-class health care, Sebak also uses him to illustrate the dedication of medical professionals to Pittsburgh. Much of Starzl's comments are about how much he loves living in Oakland, and as Sebak shows him walking his dog around the neighborhood to the donut shop, he appears to be amiable and approachable, attributes that are appealing to anyone who needs medical care at some point.

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<sup>152</sup> "UPMC Facts & Stats," University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.  
<http://www.upmc.com/about/facts/Pages/default.aspx> [accessed June 13, 2012].

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

Sebak spends much of the remainder of the segment talking to some of those people, particularly a group of people staying with Family House, an organization founded in 1983 that provides comfortable and affordable living arrangements for patients and families who travel to Pittsburgh for sometimes lengthy stays to receive specialized treatment. Rather than sleeping in hospital waiting rooms or incurring great expenses associated with hotel rooms and eating out, the residents of Family House live in a more relaxed, home-like environment where they can prepare their own meals in a communal kitchen. Sebak explains that “Oakland’s Family Houses have been the models for such places around the world.” He talks to several people staying at Family House, from children to senior citizens, all of whom rave about the benefits it affords. Nancy Shacklock, who came to Pittsburgh for a kidney transplant, tells him, “It’s a nice place to be. It’s like home. And the rates are a lot cheaper than, like, if you were to be in a motel.” Rochelle Thompson, a young girl who came from Missouri with her sister Jessica because their father was ill, adds, “We didn’t think it was gonna be this nice.” Al Loosemore, who stayed in Family House for months while his wife recovered from a liver transplant, explains to Sebak, “I’ve made an awful lot of friends here—people from all over the country and all over the world, really.” The beneficial social interaction this place provides is further reflected in Shacklock’s comment: “Yeah, there’s a lot of wonderful people here, and they all have problems.” She later adds, “You just kind of talk about your problems, and it eases things a little bit.” Thompson echoes this sense of support: “It’s really nice because you all become like family, and you just bond.” Much like the interview with Starzl, the Family House portion of the segment gives viewers a sense that patients receive a person level of care that goes beyond merely treating illnesses. It also emphasizes that the care is of such quality that it draws people from great distances.

Sebak also discusses medical innovations happening in Pittsburgh that are not a part of direct health care. In *Invented, Engineered & Pioneered in Pittsburgh*, he visits the University of Pittsburgh Center for Vaccine Research, where scientists tell Sebak they are continuing in the footsteps of Jonas Salk as they work on vaccines for things such as HIV, Dengue virus, and Avian Influenza. He also goes to the McGowan Institute for Tissue Regeneration, where scientists and engineers are trying to find new ways to regenerate bodily tissues. There he talks to Dr. Stephen Badylak, who received media attention for helping an Ohio man to grow back his fingertip. Badylak tells Sebak, “The history of scientific discovery—the Salk vaccine for polio. I mean, there’s tremendous history here of changing the way medicine has been practiced. And this is just the next thing in a line.” Institute director Alan Russell adds, “You know, when you’re doing something every day, and you’re very passionate about what you’re doing, you tend to not have time to get caught up in whether you’re part of a tradition or not. Maybe in 25 years’ time I’ll look back and say we were part of a tradition, but not right now. We want to make the next traditions.” Modesty or not, such stories again help to establish a sense that Western Pennsylvania possesses a continuing legacy of medical innovation.

In addition to the health care industry, Sebak focuses a lot of his discussion of Pittsburgh’s contemporary innovation on the development of robotic technology. For instance, in *Things We’ve Made*, he visits McKesson Automation, which designs and manufactures robots that are used in the health care field, such as those used to fill patient prescriptions in hospitals. Rich Lunak, the company’s president, explains McKesson’s origins: “Well, it actually originated in a class project at Carnegie Mellon University. And our founder, Sean McDonald, actually was in a class on entrepreneurship and had to write a paper on a new business idea. And he was an automation engineer with me at Westinghouse Electric Company and got partnered with the

director of pharmacy at Allegheny General Hospital. And what's their idea? To automate a hospital pharmacy." Sebak uses this segment as an opportunity to suggest that Western Pennsylvania has unique characteristics that make it an ideal place for high-tech businesses to succeed. Lunak tells him, "You know, I like to think that there's something special about Pittsburgh. Certainly the blue-collar work ethic. And also, we just have a great academic base. We've been able to attract the best employees, you know, in our industry, and I think that's a great competitive advantage." Al Bowers, McKesson's engineering manager, further supports this. He says, "I think that the mix of high-tech and kind of low-tech that you find in Western Pennsylvania makes it a unique environment for developing a moving product." He later adds, "I think because we're crossing boundaries between electrical and mechanical and computers, it's difficult to find that mix of skills in other places."

That mix of high- and low-tech mentioned by Bowers characterizes a lot of Sebak's characterization of Western Pennsylvania's present-day business successes. He invites the audience to view the area as one where new and old technologies thrive side by side. In *What Makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh?* he demonstrates this dichotomy with a story about the David L. Lawrence Convention Center followed by one about Natrona Bottling Company. The convention center, the world's largest "green" (environmentally responsible and sustainable) building and first "green" convention center, is held up as a model for using new technologies to create buildings that are healthier for the environment and the people who use them. From there he transitions into a piece about Natrona Bottling Company, which has been producing Red Ribbon Soda and other beverages since 1904. Here Sebak watches as they produce soda on a comparatively small scale using older equipment and processing methods than most large beverage manufacturers. Company President and CEO Paul Bowser chalks up much of his

company's success to being able to fill a niche that larger manufacturers cannot. He explains, "Things we make, the average bottler doesn't want to make. It's not big enough or fast enough for 'em." He also suggests that the quality of his beverages is superior because of these old-time, small-scale methods. "Everything we make is just a little bit different than the other fellow. We actually use pure cane sugar in our products. Everybody uses this high-fructose corn sugar, which is just about half the price of cane sugar. But it's cheaper, so that's the reason they use it." He later adds that his company carbonates soda by using carbon dioxide from dry ice rather than carbon dioxide gas out of large tankers. Employee Mary Jane Zdila says, "It does wonders for the flavor." Bowser adds that superiority of his product commands a premium: "There's nothing cheap about our products. We're in the Mercedes class, not the Chevys. Chevys, you go to the other fellow that has it on sale. For what you can buy a case of some of this stuff on sale for, you're lucky if you can go out with two bottles of ours. But there's that class of people that want ours, and they like the product." Much like his discussion of neighborhoods, Sebak places Western Pennsylvania's business uniqueness in its ability to maintain the old alongside the new, rather than failing to innovate and step into the present and future or completely abandon the past.

### Sebak's Handling of the Steel Industry

When talking about Pittsburgh as a leader and innovator, it is nearly impossible to avoid its role in the steel industry. Sebak rarely fails to highlight the region's importance to this field. In fact, one of his lengthiest bits of uninterrupted narration, nearly two minutes in length—uncharacteristic for Sebak, who generally uses narration to transition or reinforce a point rather

than expound on a subject at length—describes Pittsburgh’s place in steel history. In this segment, found in *Invented, Engineered & Pioneered in Pittsburgh*, Sebak says:

You could say that spirit of genius, that ingenuity that helped characterize the Pittsburgh region was made principally of steel. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people from all over the world came here because Pittsburgh, the Iron City, had become the Steel City. In the 1870s, there were new ways of mass-producing steel, and Andrew Carnegie first brought the Bessemer process to Pittsburgh. His Edgar Thompson Works, often called E.T., produced steel rails starting in 1875, and for a hundred years or so, steel mills around Pittsburgh transformed this city into the greatest industrial center on earth. Those three rivers that had made this such a strategic military location provided mills and factories with ideal ways to get raw materials in and to ship finished products out. Pittsburgh steel was transformed into skyscrapers, bridges, automobiles. Some say the Allied victory in World War II was forged here, steel for tanks and battleships, helmets, weapons. And engineers designed and oversaw production, making sure that the complicated processes all worked together efficiently and effectively. Now, the era of big steel ended in the 1980s, but we still make steel, at E.T. in Braddock and in the rest of the Mon Valley works of U.S. Steel, among other places, but the prominence of this one industry in our region is gone. Still, it changed everything here, and smart people moved here because of our industriousness and willingness to consider new ideas.

This lengthy narration, besides making Pittsburgh sound like the center of the Western world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is notable because it underscores the idea that Pittsburgh is home to hard workers and clever innovators. Just as important is the fact that it quickly glosses over the demise of the steel industry in this region. While he points out that steel no longer occupies such an important place in the area, he qualifies that statement by noting that steel is still produced here and that, more importantly, it was a game-changer here. This avoidance of the steel industry’s collapse is common to the entire *Pittsburgh History Series*. This should come as little surprise given that such an emotionally charged subject would not fit the lighthearted tone of Sebak’s work. Moreover, any serious attempt to place blame for steel’s demise and to discuss the proper extent of its role in the region’s future would likely be far too divisive for a series of films that seeks to create a sense of unity.

Indeed, even Sebak's most in-depth discussion of the industry's collapse, tries to avoid acrimony. In 1998's *South Side* he talks to Ed Stankowski, Jr., who he describes as a South Side native who teaches at the University of Pittsburgh but started working in the mills when he finished high school in the late 1970s.<sup>154</sup> During this segment, Sebak visually alternates between old black-and-white footage of the steel mills and contemporary footage of Stankowski walking around the ruins of the Jones and Laughlin Steel works, which by 1998 had almost entirely been demolished and in 2004 became home to SouthSide Works, a complex of structures used for retail, offices, entertainment, and residences. Stankowski provides a rather measured evaluation of the steel industry.

For instance, he attempts to strike a balance between the romantic mythology of the steelworker and the realities of such work. He explains, "I was a laborer, South Side general labor, sometimes known as South Side general abuse. We were the bottom end of the spectrum. You know, the scenes you see when they promote the Steelers on *Monday Night Football*—the dramatic steelworker with the sparks flying and the molten iron. I think there were five guys who did that. The rest of us had shovels, and our boots caught on fire every other day." He adds, "As the years go by, I remember it much more fondly than I did when I was actually in it. Because when I was in it, frankly, I hated it. We said, 'Half the time it's hot, half the time it's cold, and the other half is just miserable.'" Sebak continues this balanced view with his narration: "Much of the work in the mills was difficult and dangerous, but the pay was often good, and working in the mill was a simple fact of life."

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<sup>154</sup> Stankowski, who as of 2012 is an associate professor in La Roche College's English Department, has written extensively about labor, including a 2005 book, *Memory of Steel*, and the 2002's *No Wind for Their Sails: The Betrayal of America's Urban Youth*, a book about organized labor and Western Pennsylvania schools that he co-authored with University of Pittsburgh professor William B. Thomas.

Even with such an evenhanded approach, Stankowski and Sebak sentimentalize the subject somewhat. Stankowski says, “When I worked here, I took a lot of comfort from the fact that I could look out from where I was working and there was my folks’ house. And I could see my father or my mother in the front yard, sweeping. I could look across the hillside and see where I played ball. I could look farther down and say, ‘There’s where I went to school.’ This place was really as much a part of the community as the churches, the bars, your friends’ houses.” Sebak adds, “The mill was huge. So big, in fact, that its ever going away was inconceivable. It was then an essential part of Pittsburgh’s identity.” More than just a part of the city’s identity, Stankowski even ties it to the masculinity of the local laborers. “Part of the romance of the time—the Pittsburgh Steelers winning their third and fourth Super Bowls in ’78 and ’79—really fed into it. Well, for God’s sake, they were named after *us*. There was a good bit of the tough-guy, macho, chest-beating thing, and I think, to a great extent, it was earned. And I think that made it all the more difficult when it ended.”

Given that the loss of the steel industry delivered such a blow to the city’s economy and identity, and the manhood of many workers, it comes as little surprise that it is also a delicate subject for many people in the area. Consequently, Sebak concludes this segment with a brief and rather neutral assessment of the industry’s demise. He explains, “There seem to be no simple answers about how or why the huge steel industry on the South Side came to an end.” He follows this narration with Stankowski’s explanation: “I think a lot of folks blame the unions. I think it’s a knee-jerk reaction based a lot in jealousy. Because it’s no secret that union labor made good wages. But I think what a lot of people don’t realize is that the companies were as much to blame as the unions were—by not reinvesting in the plants, by investing in foreign plants and foreign steel. You can blame the company, you can blame the union, you’ll be right twice.” Sebak



further softens the blow with one final sound bite—accompanied visually by more old footage of steel workers and triumphant instrumental music—from Stankowski: “Being part of history, to be part of something that no longer is, it’s something I take pride in. And I think it gives me kind of an interesting place in South Side’s history and in Pittsburgh’s history. Not just me—thousands of other guys like me.” Being proud of a legacy distracts from bitterness likely still felt by many locals.

Even with such a dispassionate evaluation of this subject, Sebak takes further steps to ensure that any ill feelings possibly conjured up by this segment are quickly alleviated. He immediately follows it with a segment about Walter Long Manufacturing’s small steel fabrication plant that still operates on the South Side. It suggests that while steel may not be what it once was in Pittsburgh, it has not died out completely. In addition to this notion, the story also contains several of Sebak’s other feel-good tropes—a family business that has lasted multiple generations, the use of time-honored methods, and the success of the underdog despite long odds. The second of these can be seen as company owner Dave Long and Sebak view workers using a steel bending machine known as a pyramid roll, which Long’s company uses nearly every day despite the fact that it was bought used by his grandfather in 1918 as World War I surplus.

Long is also positioned as an underdog who has stayed alive with such comments as, “Just within the last twenty years, a lot of the people have gone, like J&L, Eichlay, Levinson. They’re all gone, but we’ve survived.” Long later adds, “We’re never too busy for the little guy because I look at it—*we’re* really little guys too, you know. Nobody’s too big that you can’t help out anybody.” With this segment and one that follows, featuring another multigenerational family business, Sebak encourages the viewer to think about the promise that still exists in

Pittsburgh and to forget that only three minutes earlier he was discussing—somewhat neutrally—the painful memories of things that aren’t there anymore. Not only do such stories serve to divert attention from the less pleasant parts of life in the region, they also emphasize a view that ordinary individuals have the ability to shape the direction of this area at least as much as seemingly larger, more powerful forces that are out of most people’s control.

### Conclusion

One of the key objectives of a place branding project such as the *Pittsburgh History Series* is to spur on economic growth. This has important consequences for how these films address particular segments of the audience. Outside economic interests are provided with reasons to relocate to this region. They are encouraged to view this area as a home to a top-notch workforce that prides itself on the quality of its products, talented and innovative minds that lead the way in many fields, and businesses that are committed to this region, as evidenced through multitudes of multigenerational entrepreneurs. The messages are in many ways the same for those in the local audience, but the immediate goal is not necessarily the same. Rather than drawing businesses into the region directly, these messages encourage locals to embody such ideas and “live the brand” in order to demonstrate that they are grounded in reality, rather than being mere pieces of propaganda from Sebak. This creates a necessary foundation for the success of the brand beyond the local populace. As Sicco van Gelder writes, “The way the population of the city behaves and communicates is key to demonstrating the city brand in action. The interactions with ordinary citizens can have a strong influence on the credibility of the city brand. If the locals do not believe in the brand then why should an outsider?”<sup>155</sup> In addition to building

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<sup>155</sup> Sicco van Gelder, “City Brand Partnerships.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 38.

the integrity of the brand beyond the local citizenry, these messages serve as a method of encouraging internal growth by inspiring residents to think of themselves as part of the region's creative and industrious business heritage.

While such pride-filled messages may serve a practical function, they frequently misrepresent the reality of Pittsburgh's entrepreneurial legacy. Given that Sebak's goals are predicated on presenting Pittsburgh's potencies, it comes as no surprise that he eschews the darker side of the region's industrial history. Such a narrative could just as easily focus on infamously unscrupulous capitalists and the controversial decline of Pittsburgh's most historically prominent industry, steelmaking, as it could on local work ethic and ingenuity. However, Sebak opts for the latter and mostly glosses over the former through a combination of outright avoidance and a more benign presentation of these subjects that attempts to dodge hostility among various facets of the audience in favor of generating unity and harmony. Much like the way he covers the region's ethnic and racial traditions and communities, Sebak sets his focus on aspects that invite celebration rather than bitterness, shame, and blaming. Successful city branding relies on the selective memory. As Ooi explains, "[A]ppropriate traditions and history are often roped into branding the society while more negative aspects of the past are ignored. For instance, the historical Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square are sites that have come to characterize Beijing. They are constantly featured in branding and city promotional materials. Despite making great strides in political openness in China, the 1989 demonstrations and subsequent massacre at Tiananmen Square are ignored in branding Beijing."<sup>156</sup> While the discussion of business and labor is crucial to rebranding the region, Sebak prefers to stick to subjects that present less opportunity for discord. The next chapter looks at some of those

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<sup>156</sup> Can-Seng Ooi, "Paradoxes of City Branding and Societal Changes." In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 56.

topics—such as food, education, and the arts—all centered on encouraging the audience to view Pittsburgh as a cultural leader that can compete with some of the more well-known cultural centers.

## CHAPTER IV. A DEPTH OF CULTURE

A city like Pittsburgh that wants to rehabilitate its image must concern itself with changing perceptions of the local population as well as outsiders, who may have no inherent interest in the city. As discussed in the previous chapters, this can be done by focusing on such things as its business reputation and the quality of its neighborhoods. Sebak presents Western Pennsylvania as a region that has the creative and labor skills necessary to be a successful innovator in business. He also describes it as an area where neighborhoods display a tangible sense of community. While both of these have a crucial impact on perceptions about the quality of life in this region, other activities feed into such views about life in this area. A variety of these, referred to here as cultural activities, play a large role in the narrative Sebak presents about Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. This chapter focuses on how he tries to shift existing beliefs about Pittsburgh as a cultural backwater. By presenting this area as a competitor in the realms of food, education, the arts, and recreation, he reminds residents that the region has much to offer in terms of culture even though it does not have the reputation of larger cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles. He also makes outsiders, and perhaps some locals, aware of its many cultural offerings.

Culture plays an important part in branding a city. The use of cultural resources to increase a place's competitiveness has become particularly significant to those coping with the loss of industry. Peter Hall writes, "Culture is now seen as the magic substitute for all the lost factories and warehouses, and as a device that will create a new urban image, making the city more attractive to mobile capital and mobile professional workers."<sup>157</sup> Ron Griffiths adds, "In the current era of globalization, manufacturing decline and place marketing, many cities have turned to culture as a favoured means of gaining competitive advantage. Across Europe, North

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<sup>157</sup> Peter Hall, "Creative Cities and Economic Development," *Urban Studies* 37, no. 4 (2000): 640.

America and elsewhere, cities have embarked on strategies to mobilize their cultural resources to help capture mobile investment, attract high spending visitors, strengthen regional identity, and foster local support for regeneration programmes.”<sup>158</sup>

Ashworth and Tunbridge suggest a model for cities to combat urban decay and the negative images that accompany it through the use of their unique heritage and culture. Called the “tourist-historic city,” this part of a city forms as the city’s commercial, tourist, and conserved historic zones interact and consequently shift and expand.<sup>159</sup> This zone is conceived of as an extra dimension to a multifunctional central area rather than as an area that serves its own distinct function. Ashworth and Tunbridge make the important distinction that the sometimes diffuse nature of historic, tourist, and commercial zones in North American cities, as compared to Western European cities, can lead to more of a regional tourist-historic city.<sup>160</sup> Ultimately, this model provides an opportunity for a city like Pittsburgh to combine its existing strengths and the repurposing of abandoned and disused resources to spur on economic revitalization and image rehabilitation. Ashworth and Tunbridge argue:

The tourist-historic city offers the possibility of obtaining a new economic stimulus in the inner areas of cities by using existing urban structures and services, and even turns to advantage the relict features abandoned in the economic collapse of other industries. It offers the chance of generating a new set of amenity values again based principally in the inner city, and upon the essentially urban features of a dense and varied physical form and a varied intermixed set of functions. Finally, it involves focusing attention upon the history, beauty, and entertainment qualities of the city. The promotion of these attributes to visitors can also provide a new source of identity and civic pride among residents, city managers and entrepreneurs.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Ron Griffiths, “City/Culture Discourses: Evidence from the Competition to Select the European Capital of Culture 2008,” *European Planning Studies* 14, no. 4 (2006): 415-416.

<sup>159</sup> G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge, *The Tourist-Historic City: Retrospect and Prospect of Managing the Heritage City*. (New York: Pergamon, 2000), 86.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

While a mid-sized city like Pittsburgh may lack the quantity of cultural resources to compete directly with larger cities, theorists suggest that such direct competition might not be advisable in the first place. Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen argue that attempts to imitate the cultural brands of others, rather than playing up local historical and cultural offerings, often result in expensive branding failures.<sup>162</sup> This occurs in part because the imitator exists within a different context and does not have the advantage of being the first to do it. They further contend that place distinctiveness, a key component of successful city branding, is generated only through “interactive layering and active enrollments over time, something that is difficult to produce all at once.”<sup>163</sup> Consequently, attempts to drastically shift a city’s brand from its present reality in order to mimic a competitor will lack the foundation to be an authentic alternative.

Even when a city has the requisite elements to be a viable imitator, the results potentially dilute a city’s distinctiveness. Can-Seng Ooi highlights this paradoxical challenge of vying for distinction among competitors while at the same time trying to become more alike. He writes, “A city brand presents a picture and packages the place. The brand package accentuates the uniqueness of the city, so as to stand out in the competition. The city branding process is also an ongoing one. Over time a city changes and the city brand updated. Paradoxically then, as cities develop, they also become more alike, particularly when authorities learn from other cities on attracting investors and tourists.”<sup>164</sup> He adds that as they begin to use similar ranking criteria to guide policy, “many cities become equally special” and are “also then branded similarly.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Harvey Molotch, William Freudenburg, and Krista E. Paulsen, “History Repeats Itself, But How? City Character, Urban Tradition, and the Accomplishment of Place,” *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 6 (2000), 818.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Can-Seng Ooi, “Paradoxes of City Branding and Societal Changes.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 57-58.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 58.

The lesson to be learned here is that branding should be guided by the internal realities of a place, rather than the desire to replicate the formulas of successful competitors. Middleton addresses this axiom in his list of seven “ingredients for great city branding.”<sup>166</sup> The factors include the need to “embody a clear, distinctive, ambitious yet realistic brand position and persona” and to “base the brand positioning on the population’s values, attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics.”<sup>167</sup> For a city like Pittsburgh to successfully brand itself in terms of its cultural offerings, it must act with a self-awareness of its own unique attributes instead of attempting to position itself as something that it is not.

While a comparatively small city like Pittsburgh does find itself at somewhat of a disadvantage compared to the aforementioned larger metropolitan areas, competitive identity theory provides a means to succeed despite such weaknesses. Some of what Anholt proposes about the ability of developing nations to find a successful slot among global superpowers can serve as an analogy for Pittsburgh and its place among larger urban centers. He suggests that “many of the values and assets which so many developing countries are in the process of discarding because they seem irrelevant to the struggle for modernization and growth, are precisely those values and assets which the ‘first world’ is finally beginning to value most: their respect for and closeness to traditional culture and values; their respect for and closeness to nature; strong family and societal cohesion; a real sense of the poetic in daily life; a respect for culture and learning.”<sup>168</sup> Many of these assets form the basis of Sebak’s narrative for Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. Rather than trying to aim for success in the form of a return to its Industrial Revolution dominance or standing shoulder to shoulder with larger cities, this type of a

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<sup>166</sup> Alan C. Middleton, “City Branding and Inward Investment.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 20.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 36.



place branding endeavor plays to Pittsburgh's strengths, knowing that such attributes have a definite demand.

The rebranding reflected in Sebak's work attempts to avoid what Anholt claims is one of the major pitfalls faced by developing nations—and by extrapolation here, smaller cities. He says, "To put it brutally many third-world countries run the risk of becoming trapped in the role of second-rate, second-world country, still chasing the dreams of modernity and prosperity which the first world is just now beginning to question. Instead of playing to their strengths as a 'niche offering', many emerging nations are still running a very twentieth-century race which, truthfully, only countries with large economies, large armies and large populations could ever win."<sup>169</sup> In other words, Pittsburgh would be foolish to try to position itself as a replacement for a larger city like New York because it simply lacks the resources to compete on that level. Anholt adds, "One of the great benefits of globalization, and the rapid transformation of the world from global battleground to global marketplace, is that it enables smaller countries to find a profitable niche, and compete on the basis of their cultural, environmental, imaginative qualities rather than on raw power."<sup>170</sup>

While it may not be able to directly compete with the raw power—economic, cultural, or otherwise—of larger cities, Pittsburgh must still compete with these places on some level in order to successfully forge its own niche. For example, while Pittsburgh may not be able to trump a city like New York in terms of culture, it must still demonstrate some comparable cultural offerings in order to enhance its appeal. While it may not be interested in trying to become a replacement for New York, Pittsburgh is still ultimately trying to attract residents and business investment from such large cities and to prevent any further emigration of these from

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 37.

Pittsburgh. This necessitates providing competitive cultural offerings. Anholt explains, “And the loss of identity isn’t merely an unfortunate side-effect of growth: for smaller countries, identity is the *indispensable means by which they will achieve growth*. Countries that aren’t strong need to be interesting—they need to exercise some power of attraction if they cannot exercise compulsion, and the source of that attraction can only be their unique, individual identity, their culture, their history, their land, their traditions, their genius and their imagination. This is what competitive identity is all about.”<sup>171</sup> Put differently, while a city such as Pittsburgh cannot necessarily compel people to move there because its economy cannot compete with places like New York, it can attract them by playing up its own unique cultural identity.

### Familiar Food Culture

Certainly one of the most defining characteristics of Sebak’s documentaries is his attention to food culture. Nearly every one of his films includes at least one segment pertaining to food. Some of them—such as *Pennsylvania Diners and Other Roadside Restaurants*, *An Ice Cream Show*, *A Hot Dog Program*, *Sandwiches that You Will Like*, *To Market to Market to Buy a Fat Pig*, and *Breakfast Special*—focus entirely on food culture. Place branding has long relied upon such an emphasis. Richard Tellström explains that “a food’s value extends beyond its nutritional value and is one of the oldest tools and most concrete cultural expressions which state who we are and to what we wish to belong.”<sup>172</sup> He adds, “Branding an area with food should therefore be understood in the same way as branding with other art forms such as books, films or dramas; it is a question of creating a story about who we think we are, where we come from and,

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<sup>171</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 37.

<sup>172</sup> Richard Tellström, “City Branding through Food Culture: Insights from the Regional Branding Level.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 62.

more importantly, who we want to be.”<sup>173</sup> Through choosing certain types of eateries and foods, Sebak defines a particular type of character for Western Pennsylvania. While he does at times discuss some more upscale dining, Sebak mostly concentrates on rather unassuming food establishments and traditions. As is the case with some other subjects of his work, Sebak’s treatment of food culture largely centers around finding cultural value in the ordinary—such as diners—and not just the extraordinary or what we might generally value as cultured tastes. Years before such programming became the mainstays of cable stations like the Food Network and the Travel Channel, Sebak made a cottage industry out of finding culinary delights in out-of-the-way places. Regardless of whether the food is upscale or unadorned, Sebak concentrates on locally based dining establishments. For instance, while he does include a segment in *Stuff That’s Gone* about Winky’s, a local chain of fast food hamburger joints that operated from the early 1960s until the mid-1980s, at no point in the *Pittsburgh History Series* does he mention that Jim Delligatti, a man from the Pittsburgh suburb of Fox Chapel, invented the Big Mac in 1967 at a McDonald’s franchise he operated in the North Hills of Pittsburgh.<sup>174</sup>

While not the biggest focus of food culture in Sebak’s documentaries, fine dining establishments do make appearances, giving the viewer a sense that one can find impressive culinary offerings in Pittsburgh. Several examples in *South Side* illustrate this. In a segment about Station Square, Sebak visits the Grand Concourse Restaurant in the Landmarks Building, formerly the headquarters of the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad. Sebak and his interviewee—Howard Slaughter, a former banker who works in historic preservation for Pittsburgh History and Landmarks, the non-profit organization responsible for creating the Station Square

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>174</sup> Barbara Vancheri, “Golden Arch Angel,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 4, 1993, Magazine Section. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1129&dat=19930504&id=z6kkAAAIBAJ&sjid=0G4DAAAIBAJ&pg=5788,2805664> [accessed July 26, 2012].

commercial complex from an old P&LE Railroad hub—marvel at the lavish interior of the building. Sebak narrates, “The glorious space that houses its main dining room used to be the train station’s two-story-high waiting room.” He adds, “The P&LE built this place to impress. The stained-glass windows are still amazing.”

Here one can see a common theme present throughout Sebak’s discussion of Western Pennsylvania’s cultural offerings. He repeatedly encourages the audience to believe—and to be somewhat surprised—that this area has culture that is on par with that in much larger cities. Slaughter points out with some surprise that the restaurant has been a hit since it opened in 1978. He says, “It’s been a success ever since then—41<sup>st</sup> largest-grossing restaurant in the country, right here at Station Square in Pittsburgh.” Slaughter later ascribes the same sort of amazed attitude toward the buildings themselves. “A lot of these buildings—people didn’t realize what they had, the treasures that were there. It’s a new way to look at urban development. And you take the urban-design issues, and you take the old historic preservation, and you bring that together, and it makes for a wonderful place to talk about and to share, and it’s certainly great to work.” Sebak reinforces the value of this approach: “The success of the development of Station Square by History and Landmarks in the 1970s proved that an old, rundown area with some fine, old structures could be revitalized without destroying all the old stuff.” This approach to redeveloping parts of Pittsburgh can be seen in a number of other examples throughout the *Pittsburgh History Series*, and indeed, is reflected in the construction of Sebak’s films, as he mixes elements of the present and the past to create a new image of Pittsburgh. While this segment concentrates little on the actual food available at the Grand Concourse Restaurant, several other stories in *South Side* about fine dining establishments do.

Sebak profiles two of these restaurants, Le Pommier and Café Allegro, back-to-back. While he highlights their quality as fine-dining establishments, he also adds a Pittsburgh twist to them. He begins his description of Le Pommier, “When Christine Dauber opened her restaurant called Le Pommier on the South Side in 1983, it was one of the first fancy restaurants on Caron Street.” Having set it up as an elegant eatery verbally and visually—with shots of its well-decorated interior and well-dressed employees setting tables—he then changes directions somewhat with a sound bite from Dauber. She says, “I don’t think of it as being fancy, but ‘serious restaurant’ is the way I think of it. We’re serious about our cooking.” In these brief opening moments of the segment one can see the blend that Sebak tries to create when discussing Pittsburgh’s finer establishments. While presenting it as being of impeccable quality, he also encourages the idea that Pittsburgh’s fancy restaurants are comfortable and not overly pretentious. Throughout the segment, Sebak continues to strike the same balance between quality and comfort. He says, “Christine and her staff use the best-quality ingredients and prepare things relatively simply. She calls the cooking here ‘French family style.’ Dinner can be extraordinary. And the desserts . . . can be sublime.”

Transitioning to Café Allegro, Sebak continues to stress the quality of these restaurants. Joe Nolan, the restaurant’s chef since it opened in the late 1980s, tells him, “We’re famous for the idea that we’re not afraid to create different and new items. You know, we do a grilled calamari that’s absolutely dynamite. And most of the places, you might go and find breaded calamari fried, and we don’t *have* a fryer.” Sebak adds, “What they *do* seem to have is a concern for really great food, and for making some of the best breads in the city.” He supports this statement with shots of Nolan rolling bread dough by hand and placing the freshly rolled loaves into an oven. A sound bite from Nolan plays over the top of this: “Anytime there’s a new bus

person or a new waiter, I always give them my spiel. And my spiel is, ‘The most important thing in my mind is the customer’s first impression.’ And the first impression here is this nice, fresh bread that we make daily.”

Though the restaurant appears high-class in terms of its food and décor, it comes across as somewhat relaxed and unpretentious in terms of its attitude. Nolan, who appears affable throughout, volunteers—as Sebak mentions in his narration—to show the restaurant’s wine cellar. Nolan explains that the rather modest-looking cellar used to be a coal cellar and says, “Is it a *great* wine cellar? Well, it’s not Mario Lemieux’s, but it works nice for us, because, again, it keeps it nice and cool, especially in the summertime.” As he shows youthful and genial customers and staff members, Sebak narrates, “Café Allegro has won all sorts of awards for its food and its service. It’s really become a neighborhood landmark.” As he did with Le Pommier, Sebak invites the audience to believe that fine dining need not be pompous in Pittsburgh.

Despite covering some upscale restaurants, Sebak gives most of his attention to food culture that is much simpler in both its creation and presentation. The vast majority of eateries in his documentaries are along the lines of diners, hot dog stands, ice cream parlors, and other sorts of unassuming, of-the-beaten-path places that possess great reputations among locals. While the quality and freshness of their food are still emphasized, these places provide dishes that are generally much simpler with ingredients that are less exotic. In *Pennsylvania Diners and Other Roadside Restaurants*, he visits many such places, including the Venus Diner in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania. This segment contains themes common to many of the simpler restaurants he visits. Early on, Sebak establishes that this is a place that has drawn repeat customers, not just locals, for many years. Nick Verner, who bought the business in 1982, tells him, “We’ve got people that’s been coming here for thirty-five years—travelers from all over the country. They

get on the turnpike. They're going by. They'll say, 'Let's get off at the diner.' They remember it, you know." Sebak adds to this visually with shots of patrons enjoying their meals, most notably one of two men sitting at the diner's counter. One man—wearing a collared shirt, necktie, and dress pants, and slicked-back hair—gives off the appearance of being a businessman, while the other—sporting a jacket, baseball cap, and a bushy grey beard—appears more like a stereotypical truck driver. Such an image encourages the idea that this diner attracts customers from all walks of life.

Having established the dedication and diversity of the restaurant's clientele, Sebak moves on to discuss the quality of the food, pointing out that "the Venus is famous for its pies." Verner tells him, "They're homemade from scratch. And there's not many places that do that. My son and I make the pies." As he strings together close-ups some of the diner's many pies, Sebak attempts to cajole Verner and his son, Nick Jr., into divulging some of the culinary secrets behind their pies. The senior Verner obliges, mentioning that he uses pure lard, a choice that sets this up as pure comfort food. His son, who Sebak points out is called J.R. by everyone, is less inclined to oblige Sebak's requests. He says, "Well, he started baking years ago, and by trial and error and accident, he found out our own recipes. And it's just something that we don't share. And dad's still trying to figure out what we put in it and how we do it. Of course, he doesn't tell us all his secrets, either." Though his response does little to answer Sebak's questions, it adds to his narrative by making it clear that the foods are true family creations, rather than the result of cookie-cutter recipes.

Family becomes a major part of this story, and many others, as Sebak uses it to invite a sense of community and familiarity between and among the customers, staff, and owners. Sebak says, "It's no secret that the Venus is a Verner family business. Nick's wife, Mary, takes care of

the accounting and the paperwork, and there are other families, too, who have worked here for generations.” The elder Verner says, “The secret is to make everybody feel like they’re part of it.” Later he is shown mingling with customers as Sebak narrates: “So, while the building itself and the food play parts in any diner’s charm and success, a family commitment, a continuity across generations, can help keep a diner gleaming, sizzling, and profitable.” The message Sebak ultimately encourages is that Western Pennsylvania restaurants combine modest décor, simple, yet excellent homemade food, and dedicated customers who return not only for the food but also the sense of inclusion fostered by multi-generational family owners and operators.

While this is the case for many restaurants that Sebak covers, he also makes it clear that even newer additions that are not family-owned and operated are able to provide these same qualities. In an episode of *It’s Pittsburgh & a Lot of Other Stuff*, he visits one such establishment, Square Café, in Pittsburgh’s Regent Square neighborhood. He suggests that although it only opened in 2003, its owner and operator Sherree Goldstein has managed to engender a real sense of community at her restaurant. Sebak interviews a number of customers, including one woman who says, “It’s a great neighborhood place, and that’s what I love about it. I like coming in here and seeing all the people and the families.” Goldstein tells Sebak, “During the week, you kind of get to know people a little bit better than just serving them coffee. On the weekends, I’m typically in the kitchen, and I am waving through the window. Sometimes I’ll run around and say hello to a few people. It’s hard to know everybody, but we try.” Sebak makes it appear that she does more than just try, as he follows her statement with a montage of sound bites from customers and one employee who all rave about Goldstein’s dedication to her restaurant and her patrons. One middle-aged man says, “Sherree is one of those smiling faces that we all seek at the beginning of our day.” Another man adds, “Sherree runs this place. This is her baby.” One



woman comments, “And Sherree’s just fantastic. She always comes over, she gives us a big hug.” The restaurant’s hostess says, “She’s not really our boss. She’s more like our friend. She just happens to pay us.” She later adds, “When she’s not here, people are like, ‘Where’s Sherree?’” Another woman says, “Every time I’m in here, she has a great smile on her face. She just truly appears like she loves being here, loves the community and loves—you know, she’s a good hostess around here.”

In addition to Goldstein’s commitment to her customers and her ability to create a sense of community, Sebak gives the impression that the café has managed to carve out its own niche by having the feel of a local diner or other neighborhood restaurant but also having a slightly more upscale qualities. One customer says, “And it’s different. It’s not your average sort of dive place. It gives you a little bit more of a cultural experience.” The woman sitting next to her adds, “I would say for me, this restaurant reminds me of eating in New York City because the tables are very close together, you have to wait, they try and get you in and out so that the next people can enjoy the meal.” Sebak supports this assessment visually with shots of long lines of waiting customers and packed tables. As one woman explains, “You don’t want to go to a place where you walk in and you’re the only person there. You want to be there where there’s a great energy and a flow from the group that you’re with, but also the people that are surrounding you.” Goldstein explains that her restaurant’s successful blend applies not only to the restaurant’s atmosphere, but also to its approach to food. She says, “And we decided to do everything local, or as much stuff as we could locally. So we have our coffee roasted locally, our plates are made locally, we get as much food product as we can locally. We do some organic products.” She later adds, “We’ve had a chef since we started, and that was—it’s not just flipped eggs. You know, we

have really unique, interesting food.” One man describes it as “sort of a cross between a greasy spoon and a silver spoon. There are some fancy items on the menu, as well.”

Like any place, Pittsburgh is sure to have its share of poorly run restaurants that serve lousy food, but through his choice of restaurants to feature and the narrative he constructs for them, Sebak encourages viewers to believe that Western Pennsylvania has its own unique restaurant culture that can compete with major cities in terms of quality and activity but that also has a small-town simplicity and community-based feel. This often involves family-run restaurants or owners who create a sense of family among staff and customers. In either case, these dedicated, often colorful entrepreneurs are presented as having created substantive relationships with their customers that have made both proprietor and patron equally enthusiastic about these local eateries. As Goldstein says, “I love this. I love my job. I love the environment. I feel like we’re more of a co-op than a corporation.”

In addition to restaurants, Sebak devotes a great deal of attention to various stores and markets where food can be bought. Here he highlights many of the same characteristics—high-quality food, dedicated and often colorful owners, and a strong relationship with customers—he attributes to local restaurants. One recurring theme particularly noteworthy in terms of place branding is his emphasis on the fact that Pittsburgh food vendors can offer ingredients and prepared dishes that are equal to those available anywhere. This is demonstrated well in *The Strip Show*, a film that focuses largely on the Strip District’s ties to food, and in particular in a segment about the Pennsylvania Macaroni Company, a business owned and operated since 1902 by members of the Sunseri family.

Replete with shots of countless customers tightly packed into the confines of the rather sizeable store, this segment stresses the variety and quality of foods available there as well as the

store's atmosphere. Early on, Sebak says, "There's no mistaking this place, however. When you get inside on a Saturday, it's crowded. Sometimes, Salvatore Sunseri himself, the patriarch of this place, helps customers who line up to buy the great locally baked bread." He later adds, "Many people just enjoy the crowds, too, according to Sal's youngest son, Bill Sunseri." Sebak then cuts to the younger Sunseri, who says, "The unorganization, the chaos. Why do they come here and stand in line for a half an hour for a pound of provolone?" Sebak follows this with a brief montage of sound bites from customers who provide their own answers to Sunseri's question. One young man remarks, "I don't know. It's just the atmosphere, the aura." Sebak switches to elderly woman who says, "I don't know. Because I like the stuff they have." Another man adds, "'Cause I cook a lot, and I like really fresh ingredients." After comments from several other customers, the montage concludes with a woman who says, "Lots of people. I feel like I'm in Italy here."

As the segment progresses, Sebak continues to encourage the audience to see this business as a place that overwhelms customers with what it has to offer. Bill Sunseri says, "We sell the finest imported foods from Italy and other countries. That's our specialty—upscale gourmet foods." Sebak then adds, "Well, the variety of all the foods here can be a bit intimidating—all the different olive oils, the shapes of pasta. In one corner, there's an incredible selection of cheeses. Carmen Tripodi will let you taste anything your cheesy heart desires. Including some cheeses you can't get anywhere else. On a weekly basis, the Pennsylvania Macaroni Company sells around a hundred and twenty-five thousand pounds of cheese. Not just here—wholesale as well. But still, that's a lot of cheese."

While the selection of products may be overpowering, the simple, almost antiquated interior of the store does not aim to impress. Sebak invites viewers to see this modest, down-to-

earth appearance as an asset. He says, “The display is not fancy by any means, but that seems to be a big part of the charm. Shopping here can make you think you’ve stepped out of the modern world.” Bill Sunseri adds, “A lot of people—when they walk in, they say, ‘Don’t change the place. Don’t change the place. The majority of our customers come here because it’s the way it is.’” Sebak then concludes, “And obviously, the way a lot of people hope it will stay.” In a similar manner to how he discusses restaurants, Sebak presents this and many other local food stores as selling the kinds of quality products one would expect to find in much larger cities while at the same time retaining a humble, old-fashioned approach to conducting business. He creates a narrative that combines the simplicity and charms of Pittsburgh’s pre-existing, working-class image with the variety one usually associates with a larger city. The resulting mixture can appear quite appealing to those who seek the diversity of a major city and the simplicity of a small town.

Sebak often uses food culture as a highly visible means of celebrating Western Pennsylvania’s diversity. The universal allure of food makes it a prime means of demonstrating diversity because it provides a relatively safe avenue for cultural exchange. This notion is elucidated in a segment of *Sandwiches You Will Like* about a falafel restaurant whose owner and operator Walid Massoud, a Palestinian immigrant, tries to use his establishment to open dialogue between local Palestinian and Israeli immigrants. As one restaurant patron tells Sebak, “Reaching people through food and togetherness is probably the best—best of—as any other way.” While this particular establishment is in Watertown, Massachusetts, the same concept applies to Sebak’s treatment of Western Pennsylvania.

As previously mentioned, films like *Happy Holidays in Pittsburgh* and *Holy Pittsburgh!* delve into the connections between religious traditions, ethnic diversity, and food. *The Strip Show* also demonstrates the area’s diversity particularly well, as the Strip District is presented as

the city's most concentrated area for ethnic food. In this film, he visits a variety of shops and stands that offer pieces of cultures from various parts of Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. At one point in the film Sebak says, "Well, the Strip is a bit of the world. That's a big part of its charm. It's lots of people from lots of places, many of them selling exotic tastes and products." Many of the neighborhood's business proprietors featured in the film concur with him. Bob Ching, a Filipino immigrant who along with his sister sells various pan-Asian foods at a sidewalk stand in the Strip District, tells Sebak, "This is the Strip District. It's different from any other place in the world, I guess. This is the only place that you can find everything and anything you want in the world." Sebak follows this statement with his own narration: "Well, maybe not everything. But in terms of unusual foods, you have a better of finding it here than anywhere else in the area." In this film and many of his other works, Sebak is able to position Pittsburgh as a culturally diverse place through the readily apparent and appetizing avenue of food culture.

### Educational Endeavors

While perhaps less enticing than food, education serves a highly functional purpose in enhancing the life of an area, both culturally economically. It provides an area for the exchange of ideas across cultures and better enables citizens to contribute to the economic life of a region. A number of Pittsburgh's universities, museums, and libraries provide an avenue for Sebak to position this city—ranked the sixth most literate American city in 2011<sup>175</sup>—and surrounding region as a fertile ground for the expanding of minds. He invites the audience to believe that the area's various educational institutions are among the finest anywhere.

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<sup>175</sup> John W. Miller, "America's Most Literate Cities, 2011." Central Connecticut State University. <http://www.ccsu.edu/page.cfm?p=11107> [accessed July 23, 2012].

As the home to two of the city's most renowned universities, the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University, the neighborhood of Oakland, as featured in *Something about Oakland*, provides the site for much of Sebak's discussion of higher education. One aspect of Pittsburgh's universities that Sebak stresses is their commitment to cultural diversity. For instance, in a segment about the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning, he views some of the building's Nationality Rooms. Explaining the impetus behind these unique classrooms, Sebak says, "The idea was basically to allow various ethnic groups in Pittsburgh to celebrate their cultures by funding the design and installation of a distinctive classroom." All but two of these rooms, of which there were twenty-six at the time of filming, regularly serve as functional classrooms despite ornate decoration that could easily qualify them as merely museum pieces. The purpose of this, as Sebak explains, is to allow students to engage with other cultures. He says, "Many different classes meet in these rooms, and there are no rules about what gets taught where." Nationality Rooms director E. Maxine Bruhns adds, "You can have a Hebrew class in the German room. I've seen a Polish class in the Chinese room. That's our cultural-exchange aspect—that we want them to experience other cultures."

Sebak adds further weight to his suggestion that the university encourages cultural diversity in another segment of *Something about Oakland* focusing on parents helping their children to move into their dorms. He talks to a number of students, most of them young women of various races and ethnicities, about where they are from and why they chose to come to the University of Pittsburgh. Several of them comment about being from more rural parts of Pennsylvania, such as Lancaster, as well as the northeastern part of the state, and about how Pittsburgh provides a more lively setting to attend school. One young woman says, "Well, I'm a

city girl, so, I love the city and I like the fact that this campus is in a city. One of the other reasons I came here was how it's very multicultural."

Sebak suggests that in addition to their ability to enable cultural exchange, Pittsburgh's universities are noteworthy for the overall quality of education they offer. At Carnegie Mellon University, emeritus history professor Ted Fenton says that the university currently leads in technology similarly to Andrew Carnegie in the late nineteenth century: "He was building all kinds of steel mills. We're doing very different things. We're now the heart of a whole new technology. The business school is inventing new ways to do business. Computer science and engineering are all involved in dot-coms and other things like that—the kind of revolution today that he fostered in his own day in the steel industry." Fenton also claims that even the buildings themselves, much like the Nationality Rooms, have the ability to educate students.

Demonstrating the architecture of one building, he says, "That's the fine arts building, and everything is cool about it, starting with those niches you can see in the front of the building. The niches represent five types of architecture. Like much of the rest of the building, they serve as educational pieces. The whole place is designed so that people who are going to be architects or dramatists or musicians are surrounded by great works of arts." While universities play an important role in the educational life of Pittsburgh by increasing cross-cultural discourse and fostering innovation, they are not the most prominently featured in Sebak's documentaries.

An educational resource that Sebak highlights even more than the city's universities is its museums. Throughout the course of the *Pittsburgh History Series*, Sebak visits a wide array of museums, both large and small, from the Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History and the Senator John Heinz History Center to the Marx Toy Museum and the Butler County Heritage Center. Regardless of the size or focus of the museum, Sebak encourages the audience to see

these institutions as places that have much to offer to the intellectual life of the region. In the case of many of the larger museums, he even positions them as world-class educational facilities. For instance, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, which he visits in *Things that Are Still Here* and *Something about Oakland*, is described as world-renowned for its collections of dinosaur fossils and entomological specimens.

Speaking of the latter in *Something about Oakland*, associate curator John Rawlins says, “Well, it’s a huge bug collection. In fact, on a global scale, it’s a monster.” It is also part of cinematic history, as Sebak points out in *Things that Are Still Here* that it was the filming location for several scenes in *The Silence of the Lambs*. He remarks that this collection, which is so large that only a fraction of it is on display to the public, “also serves as a huge insect-lending library” where experts from around the world can have specimens shipped to them for research purposes. Rawlins says, “The actual number of specimens that are prepared, ready for shipment to a specialist who would ask to borrow them for study, would exceed eleven million specimens.” Even with such a large collection, Rawlins notes that it is greatly outnumbered by the plethora of species that exist in the world. He jokes, “We got a lot of bugs, and it would maybe sound like, ‘Well, maybe you have too many.’ There’s some concern in my mind as to whether or not we have *enough*.” He later adds, “Despite the multiple millions that are preserved here at the Carnegie Museum, we don’t even have a tiny fraction of the total.”

Robert Davidson, the curator who manages the lending collection, further emphasizes the importance of the collection. He says, “We mail these things all over the world—maybe one hundred to a hundred and fifty loans a year.” As he shows Sebak countless storage cabinets filled with boxes of individually prepared and labeled specimens, Davidson points out one particular box, which had been sent to Poland where the world’s leading expert on tortoise beetles



identified a number of them as belonging to previously unidentified species. Davidson notes that the vastness of the collection means that it can take many years before such discoveries occur. He says, “This bug was collected in about 1882 to ’84, so it’s been sitting in this museum for over one hundred years before somebody actually got around to working on it and knowing that it was a new one. And that’s essentially the game we’re playing here—we’re trying to figure out how you tell different things apart, write papers that tell other people how to tell them apart, put names on the ones that are unnamed.” Sebak suggests that despite housing many world-class collections, Pittsburgh museums often do not draw the kind of widespread attention as those in much larger cities. Bob Androw, a scientist who takes care of the live insects in the museum’s collection, tells him, “A lot of people right in the town don’t seem to know what truly amazing things there are to see right here.”

One collection that has garnered much attention, at least locally, is the dinosaur fossil collection, covered in *Things that Are Still Here*. Jay Apt, director of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and a former astronaut, tells Sebak, “Dinosaur Hall is the best collection of dinosaurs anywhere on the planet.” Mary Dawson, curator of the museum’s department of vertebrate paleontology supports Apt’s view of the collection’s stature: “We are one of the very few museums in the world that has a display like this.” She later adds, “We have one of the best, perhaps the best, collection in the world of Jurassic dinosaurs.” Sebak also talks to a number of museum patrons, many of them young children, who marvel at the grandeur of the collection. An elderly man says, “My in-laws-to-be took me to see the dinosaurs as the very first thing to see in Pittsburgh.” One woman adds that “it’s nice to have it right here in our hometown.” Paleontologist Luo Zhexi, “It is a world-famous skeleton. Very few people actually realize that the Carnegie Museum has the very first specimen of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*.” Like the

entomological collection, it is much larger than what is on display. Betty Hill, vertebrate paleontology collection archivist, takes Sebak on a tour of the large research collection in the museum's basement. She says, "People come from all over the world to study the things in here."

Highlighting the region's educational culture plays an important role in Sebak's rebranding of Western Pennsylvania. It broadens the palette of cultural offerings available to residents, and it provides opportunities for people to better themselves, a crucial factor when considering the quality of the local workforce. Sebak heightens the sense that the area has much to offer in terms of education by focusing largely on universities, museums, and libraries. His narrative invites the audience to believe that these institutions, whether they have a high public profile or not, are on par with those in much larger cities.

### Astonishing Arts

Pittsburgh's reputation, or lack thereof, in terms of the arts is in some ways symptomatic of the industrial image that continues to haunt the city. Just as Henry Clay Frick moved his art collection—the basis of the present-day Frick Collection—to New York to protect it from Pittsburgh's industrial air pollution, so too have other cities gained reputations as centers for the arts while Pittsburgh has sunk from polluted industrial center to a rusted-out shell of its former glory. However, just as he illustrates literally with the story of the restoration of an impressive two-story mural in home featured in *Houses Around Here*, Pittsburgh's artistic treasures are sometimes metaphorically hiding just below the dirt and soot of the past.

Sebak points out that although Pittsburgh may not have the reputation of some larger cities for art museums, it does possess several such museums that are on par with its larger

competitors. In *North Side Story* he positions a pair of these museums—the Andy Warhol Museum and the Mattress Factory—as being in a class with more famous art museums. The former of these is described as much more than a museum. Warhol Museum director Tom Sokolowski says, “Oh, I think this is an extraordinary place for the simple reason that we have works of art on the walls like every museum does, but the one thing that’s really unique in this museum and which is the heart of our museum are the archives. And I think we probably come closest in this country to being something akin to a presidential library.” In the case of the Mattress Factory, its executive and artistic director, Barbara Luderowski, explains that visitors who come from long distances are surprised to see a museum of this caliber in Pittsburgh. She says, “Most people who come from New York or Europe here say, ‘Well, what the hell are you doing in Pittsburgh?’ You know, we could never have happened anyplace else, I think. I think we are very much a Pittsburgh product.”

While these museums may be comparable in quality to those in much larger cities, Sebak is also careful to differentiate them by pointing out features that might make them more inviting than some of their counterparts. In the case of the Warhol Museum, Sebak explains, “What Andy was and Andy did and Andy would have liked are important here, but there’s a sense of humor too. The Warhol is more fun and familiar than most art museums.” Sokolowski adds, “I mean, maybe we should have called this ‘the Andy Warhol Factory’ because he called his studios in New York always ‘the Factory.’ We want people here to laugh and have fun and maybe disagree with us, and maybe a ‘factory’ would give off that idea better than the word ‘museum.’” Sebak demonstrates some of the playful nature of the museum when he visits the archives. Here he watches as two archivists open one of the 610 sealed cardboard boxes that Warhol saved and referred to as his “time capsules.” Sebak explains, “These guys have found unpaid bills, fourteen

thousand dollars in cash, and a mummified human foot, among other things, in these boxes.”

While the box they opened for Sebak did not include such unusual items, its contents were not the sort of serious items one might associate with an art museum. Marked “Gems and Junk,” it contains such items as a Mickey Mouse clock radio, an AC/DC adapter, a CB scanner/wristwatch, glass jewelry, Robert F. Kennedy/John F. Kennedy pendants, and empty decorated leather wallets.

Sebak distinguishes the Mattress Factory from stereotypical art museums in a similar sense. Luderowski explains, “It’s not a walk-by. And that’s what a lot of times I feel museums unfortunately become is sort of walk-bys. And there’s nothing in our place that’s walk-by.” Michael Olijnyk, the museum’s curator, adds, “I think you really have to experience it because a lot of them affect your body. It’s not like looking at a picture and understanding it and deciding if you like it or not. Some of these pieces, it’s like *walking into* a painting.” Sebak supports such statements visually with shots of various massive art installations that fully encompass the viewer. Olijnyk also differentiates this museum from many competitors in terms of its commitment to its artists. He says, “I think we’re really here for the artist first. It’s like a beehive and the artist is at the center of it and everyone is there to help them realize something. And because of the way we work with artists, it gives the public a really interesting product.” This statement touches upon another recurrent theme found in Sebak’s discussion of art in Pittsburgh.

Sebak suggests that in addition to merely housing great works of art, Pittsburgh provides an ideal home for artists to pursue their work. He invites the viewer to believe that here artists are able to find the kind of supportive culture, programs, and institutions that will help them thrive. In several segments about local artists, Sebak stresses that art, a profession not generally known for its lucrativeness, is a feasible pursuit in Pittsburgh because of the affordability of

studio space in the city. In *South Side* he visits the Brew House Association, an artists' collective located in one of the former buildings of the Duquesne Brewing Company. Bob Bingham, an artist who lives there with his wife and daughter, tells Sebak, "And the mission of the Brew House is really to take these spaces and fix them up so that they're livable for artists. It's not high-class living, by any means, but I believe that artists, younger people in Pittsburgh, need a reasonable place to live and work if you want to expect them to stay here and have some kind of art community." As Sebak shows sections of this large disused brewery building that have been converted into apartment and studio space, Bingham says, "There's a mix of ceramic sculptors, metal sculptors, painters, photographers, filmmakers. And usually what attracts them to the space is the amount of space and that it's affordable. So it's people that need large working space and don't mind living a little bit on the rustic side."

This emphasis on the affordability of being an artist in Pittsburgh is seen in other films as well. The "letter Q" segment of *Pittsburgh A to Z* focuses on Robert Qualters, a local artist who created series of painted panels depicting local life that adorn lampposts in Homestead. Qualters, who shows Sebak some of the works he is creating in his Homestead penthouse studio, reinforces the idea that Pittsburgh is a prime location for artists. He says, "I've been here for, total, about eleven years—in this studio for about nine years. And the rent's really good. It's a good place to be."

As one might suspect from Bingham's comments, young artists in particular become a focus of Sebak's narrative about Pittsburgh's conduciveness to creation. For instance, in *It's the Neighborhoods*, he includes a segment about young artists who have painted a series of large outdoor murals on buildings and walls throughout Pittsburgh. The Sprout Fund, a local organization that sponsors a variety of community improvement programs, helps to make these

public art projects happen by connecting local artists, communities, and funders. Sprout Fund executive director Cathy Lewis tells Sebak, “The public art program really was sort of a natural extension of our mission, which was to improve the visual landscape of our community and to create works in the public realm that would help to bring vitality to neighborhoods and communities.” This objective of improving communities receives much attention from Sebak. Sandy Kessler Kaminski, an artist painting a mural on the side of a 10-story building in the Strip District, tells him, “I mean, my whole goal as an artist is to reach people in a positive way. I think this one, hopefully, will reach not only just the Strip District, but the whole city of Pittsburgh, because I have—there’s people in my neighborhood that work downtown and they can see it from their buildings, you know. And hopefully it’ll entice them to come over here and maybe, you know, stand a little prouder at what Pittsburgh has to offer.” Casey Dill, a team leader at a Whole Foods store receiving a mural, draws a connection between this enhanced civic pride and economic improvement. He says, “You know, I mean, there’s a trickle-down effect. Obviously, as a business we do better with a neighborhood with this much spirit.”

In addition to focusing on the goals of heightened civic pride and economic development, Sebak also positions this program as a way for Pittsburgh to retain young adults by encouraging their creative pursuits. He introduces Lewis by explaining that she “says murals are just part of the fund’s efforts to help keep Pittsburgh young,” and the majority of the muralists he talks to are young people. Jordan Monahan, an artist who along with his assistant, Alison Zapata, is shown painting a mural on two sides of the Novum Pharmaceutical Research building in East Liberty, tells Sebak, “Young people having the freedom to create is going to break the ice a little bit and, you know, breathe some life into this place again, you know?” Not only does Sebak encourage viewers to see connections between art and the retention of Pittsburgh’s youth population, he

also invites them to think of art as a way to reflect the diversity of the local culture. The murals he shows depict a range of subjects related to the lives of the communities they inhabit, including men and women of various ages, races, and ethnicities. A pair of young African American women who are shown painting a mural on a large retaining wall in Squirrel Hill tell Sebak about how they arrived at their design by hearing input from a local committee and walking around the neighborhood taking many photographs to capture ideas. Art, like religious worship or food culture, provides a highly visible and visually appealing avenue for Sebak to highlight the diversity of Western Pennsylvania.

Sebak uses more than just the visual arts to encourage this association between art and the region's racial and ethnic diversity. In *Pittsburgh A to Z*, he dedicates the "letter O" segment to "opera," specifically the National Negro Opera Company. Founded in Pittsburgh in 1941 by Mary Cardwell Dawson, it was the first African American opera company in the United States. Sebak uses the segment as an opportunity to highlight some of the achievements of African Americans, particularly women, in Pittsburgh. Evelyn Hawkins, a Ph.D. candidate at Carnegie Mellon University who has researched the life and achievements of Dawson, tells Sebak, "It's more than a surprise. One, you don't think of it happening in Pittsburgh. You would think, 'Oh, something like this would've started in New York.' But Mrs. Dawson had a real vision." This sound bite, much like those used in Sebak's coverage of local art museums, reinforces the notion that Pittsburgh has played host to artistic ventures that are of a caliber seemingly superior to the area's reputation.

This segment's interviewees, all of whom are African American women, emphasize the accomplishments, innovations, and talents of local minorities as evidenced through the company. Barbara Edwards Lee—Dawson's niece, secretary, and confidante—explains, "When Aunt Mary

was young, she taught. She went to the New England Conservatory of Music, and when she would come home for the summer, she would teach. This is how she made her money to go back to school.” She later adds, “She wanted to present to the world the black musician at its best.” Peggy Pierce Freeman, who began taking piano lessons from Dawson at age nine in the 1930s and later became an officer in the company, explains how novel this organization was at the time. She says, “Naturally, it was a new idea—blacks singing opera. They thought it could not be done. But the Madame did this. And she’d always go to the churches and gather together the people from the churches to involve them in the chorus.” Hawkins later adds, “And just the whole grand notion of people being told this is something you can’t do, and they do it!” Hawkins also stresses another one of the company’s unique ideas: “And the whole notion of doing operas in English. She said people enjoy opera in Italy because it’s sung in Italian.” Lee adds, “She made it so that the community could understand what it was all about, and it was not something that was in another language and not able to touch.” Hawkins also notes, “In 1957, they were the first opera company that the Met allowed to perform on their stage.”

In his films, Sebak presents Pittsburgh as an innovator in other artistic realms, such as film, as well. He concentrates not so much on the region’s contributions to the creation of motion pictures, but instead on its role in revolutionizing how people view films. The lead segment of *Things that Aren’t There Anymore* focuses on local residents reminiscing about old movie theaters that used to be in Western Pennsylvania. Sebak points out Pittsburgh’s ties to the origins of moviegoing. He says, “The experience of going to the movies actually started in Pittsburgh. The world’s first movie theater, the first space devoted exclusively to showing moving pictures, was downtown on Smithfield Street. It opened on June 19, 1905—the Nickelodeon. It was an immediate, huge success, and the rest of the world adopted the new Pittsburgh word



“Nickelodeon” and the idea of the movie house.” In *Things that Are Still Here*, he visits the site of another important early theater, opened in 1907 in New Castle, Pennsylvania. Called the Cascade, it was the first permanent movie theater opened by the famous Warner brothers. Much like the story of the National Negro Opera, Sebak stresses surprise that such a historically noteworthy development took place in the region. Tom George, one of the partners in the company that eventually redeveloped the site, tells Sebak, “I’ve lived here all my life, and it wasn’t until like 1994 that I ever knew that they had their first theater here.” One could easily imagine that members of Sebak’s local audience would share a similar reaction to learning about this region’s role in cinema history.

Sebak also mentions the region’s involvement in the growth of drive-in theaters. He begins the lead segment of *Things that Aren’t There Anymore* by discussing the importance of the South Park Drive-In in Bethel Park. He says, “It opened in the late 1930s when outdoor screens were a new idea. It was the third drive-in in the world. It closed in 1985 because nobody went anymore and it cost too much to operate. When I was a kid in the 1950s, the only movies I ever saw were here at this drive-in.” He returns to the story of local drive-ins in the sequel, *Stuff That’s Gone*. Visiting the ruins of several disused theaters as well as one still in operation, Sebak says, “Pittsburgh was often considered a center of drive-ins, with over 40 in the Greater Pittsburgh area, but most of them have closed.” Despite such closings, Southwestern Pennsylvania still has the highest number of drive-ins per capita in the nation.<sup>176</sup> However, Sebak chooses to focus more on the historical importance of the region to cinema rather than its current offerings. Nonetheless, he does dedicate a great deal of his documentaries to various recreational opportunities around the area.

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<sup>176</sup> Jennifer Sopko, “Movies, Motors and Memories: Westmoreland County’s Drive-In Theaters,” *Westmoreland History Magazine*, Fall 2008, 4.

### Regional Recreational Opportunities

Recreational activities are undoubtedly a selling point for any city, and Sebak has made them the focus of a significant portion of his work. Two of his documentaries, *Kennywood Memories* and the national PBS program *Great Old Amusement Parks*, concentrate solely on amusement parks, as do segments of several of his other films. Like many of his subjects, Sebak blends things that are here and things that are gone. In the case of the former, he invites the audience to be impressed by Pittsburgh's available opportunities. With the latter, he encourages viewers to feel a sense of nostalgia as well as astonishment and pride in the activities that once took place in the area. In true Sebak fashion, he attempts to bring to various hidden histories to light.

His discussion of professional baseball in Pittsburgh provides a prime example of his treatment of the region's recreational past. While the Pittsburgh Steelers and Penguins have been much more successful in recent decades than the Pirates, Sebak demonstrates that the city has one of the richest heritages in baseball. In *North Side Story*, he walks around the parking lot of Three Rivers Stadium—home to the Pirates and Steelers from 1970 until 2000—with local sports historian Dan Bonk, who shows him where members of the Society for American Baseball Research marked the location of the bases at once was Exposition Park, the ballpark where in 1903 the Pirates played four of the eight games in the first-ever World Series. Standing at the marker for home plate—which is merely a spray-painted representation of the plate on the parking lot pavement—Bonk says, “So I think it’s kind of interesting in that if you knew where this home plate was, and you came down here, you could literally stand where some of the great baseball players of all time stood—Honus Wagner, Cy Young. There are very few places anywhere where I can say I’m standing right where a significant piece of history occurred.”

The final segment of *Things that Aren't There Anymore* focuses in part on another historic aspect of baseball, and more specifically, African American culture. Here he takes up the subject of Negro league baseball in the 1920s and 1930s. Visiting a rather unassuming baseball field that was once home to the Homestead Grays, he says, "The Grays were originally a sandlot baseball team from Homestead. They became the most successful franchise in the Negro National League and one of the greatest teams of all baseball history." He talks to several locals who are particularly knowledgeable about the Grays and the city's other famous Negro league team, the Pittsburgh Crawfords. Ted Brown, who was a batboy for the Homestead Grays in the early 1920s, speaks to the players' prowess. He says, "And the Grays won ninety-eight times out of a hundred. One year, they opened up the season—they won their first forty-four games. That made them popular." He later adds, "Very few towns or cities had two good black teams situated in it. And the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays were two of the best." Local journalist Frank Bolden supports this view: "Actually, the Crawfords and the Grays made Pittsburgh the center of black baseball, and together with the Pirates, in my opinion, Pittsburgh was the center of baseball."

These teams were not noteworthy only for their playing ability. Sports historian Rob Ruck points out that they were important in terms of their role in the African American community. He says, "I think it was unusual for a black community to support two teams, and it was unusual—especially in that they were both black-owned, which wasn't the case in most cities. But the black community came out and supported these teams. When the Pittsburgh Crawfords were just a bunch of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds playing teams made up of older men, you would have three thousand, four thousand, or five thousand people coming to a game in a field like this."

This sense of communal spirit appears later in the segment as Sebak transitions into the reminiscences of locals about Forbes Field, home to the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1909 to 1970. Local record store owner Jerry Weber explains that despite being home to a major league team, the park had a much more relaxed attitude than that of modern stadiums. He says, “When you were a kid, we knew which gates you could sneak under, which places you could get through if you were quick enough. There was guys that used to just run past ’cause they knew where the slow ticket takers were. We were little kids—we were like ten years old, eleven years old—and we just loved the Pirates, so we’d get into games no matter what. People would hand us tickets on the street, you know. It was more of a community type place.” Art McKinnan, who was the public-address announcer at Forbes Field, suggests that the design of the park fostered this sense of community because it allowed fans to communicate. He says, “Before the game, you could actually, if there weren’t too many people in the park, you could see somebody in right field, and you’d be in the third-base boxes, and you could holler over and he could hear you and answer you back, too.”

Several interviewees encourage the belief that this sense of community was due in part to the fact that the park was physically ensconced in the neighborhood. Weber says, “At that time, the Forbes Field was surrounded—on all the side streets were little, like, counter-type establishments where you could, like, get a beer and get a hot dog and that, finish it, talk to your friends, talk about the Pirates, and then when you heard the National Anthem playing, you’d walk right across the street. It’d be like ten yards right into the stadium. You’d be right there.” McKinnan supports this view: “There was tradition about the place, and you could get to it. And if you wanted a beer after the game, you didn’t have to take a bus. You could go up to Gustine’s or someplace else in Oakland or Coyne’s or somewhere.”

In fact, Sebak invites the audience to believe that the park was so deeply entrenched in the community that for many people it took on a life of its own. Discussing the closing game at the park in 1970, McKinnan says, “And I felt like I’d lost an old friend. I felt like sitting up the night they closed Forbes Field with the park until morning, just like I’d sit with a sick friend or a dying friend. And that sounds silly, doesn’t it?” Ruth Lavalley, co-owner of Kunst Bakery in Oakland, adds, “I think everybody loved the Forbes Field. When they said they were tearing that down, I think I’m not the only one that cried. I think everybody cried.” Sebak further encourages such ideas with a segment of *Something about Oakland* in which he joins several hundred people at the last standing piece of the Forbes Field outfield wall for a yearly celebration of Bill Mazeroski’s 1960 World Series winning home run, arguably the most famous event in the ballpark’s history. Displaying great devotion to Forbes Field and the events that took place there, the crowd—among them several former Pirates, including Mazeroski himself—show up for this “unusual” (Sebak’s words) event, which consists of little more than sitting by a section of the park’s brick wall and listening to a cassette tape of that famous game on a small boom box.

Through all of this nostalgia about long-gone days of baseball, Sebak encourages that belief that in Pittsburgh people are able to tap into that sense of community for which they long. His concluding comments to *Things that Aren’t There Anymore* indicate that even he shares in that yearning: “You know, I went to Forbes Field once when I was a Cub Scout. I don’t remember a lot about it, but people’s memories and all these old pictures and movies make me wish it were still there. I like to imagine a fine summer evening when we could leave the ballpark, maybe walk over to Isaly’s, or catch a movie at the Schenley, and then we could all take the streetcar home.” While he concentrates on feelings on nostalgia, community, and civic pride when discussing the past, his goals differ somewhat when discussing the present.

Sebak's handling of Western Pennsylvania's current recreational activities aims more at generating interest and excitement about the region and what it has to offer. This is exemplified in the "letter R" segment of *Pittsburgh A to Z*, focusing on rail trails, specifically the Great Allegheny Passage. This multi-use trail, built along several former railroad right-of-ways, aims to link Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Maryland, where it meets up with another trail leading to Washington, D.C. While its purpose may be recreational at face value, Sebak quickly hones in on its economic implications for the region. Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trails Alliance (ATA), tells him, "This trail is going to re-create this region. Western Pennsylvania is going to be defined by this trail." She later adds, "The railroads were built for economic-development purposes. And, really, the reason we're building these trails is economic-development purposes. Sure, it's recreation, and people love it, but the reason it's getting such great support is because it's revitalizing these towns and cities through which it passes."

Brett Hollern, who also works for the ATA, also concentrates on the trail's economic possibilities. He says, "I think it's going to attract people from all over the world. We're getting people that are hard-core cyclists. We're getting people that are coming to the region for a vacation, and this is part of the reason they're coming. We're getting the people that are coming because they want to go from Pittsburgh to D.C. on a completely non-motorized trail system, which we're providing." He later points to some tangible economic boosts resulting from the trail: "We've seen bike-rental shops, snack shops, bed-and-breakfasts, and with the completion of our hundred miles is really when we feel that the economic development's really gonna start to occur." This statement is accompanied visually with corresponding images of shops and restaurants in a town along the trail. Sebak attends a ceremony to celebrate the linking of the trail's first one hundred miles in 2001. Boxx explains to him that the growth of the trail can only

be increasingly beneficial to the area: “And we’re finding that the longer the trail is, the further people will come. And so now that we have a hundred miles, we’re expecting people to come from really all over the nation to visit the trail.” Sebak’s attention to such a project, which encourages the reclamation of disused industrial space and underutilized infrastructure in order to create more green space with more sustainable uses, demonstrates an understanding of the branding value of green initiatives. Jared Braiterman writes, “Cities with abundant green spaces hold a competitive advantage in a global economy with increasingly mobile corporations and workforces. Both mature and emerging cities can support low-cost and high-return initiatives that promote job growth, reduce the cost of infrastructure maintenance, and attract creative residents as well as national and international visitors.”<sup>177</sup> He also makes it clear that this advantage extends to improvements in less tangible realms such as quality of life. Braiterman explains, “Unique green space relates to local resources and culture. The opportunities for branding cities with green space are growing with peoples’ expectations for everyday experiences and quality of life. Reclaiming abandoned and underutilized resources enables the creation of new green spaces that connect people with nature and with each other.”<sup>178</sup>

Lest it seem that all those involved share only economic motives, Sebak switches gears midway through the segment to focus on comments, including some from riders, about the less tangible values of the trail. One man involved with the ATA says, “I honestly never thought about it in terms of commerce. I thought about it in terms of the ride. I mean, you scratch any real trail person, that’s what they’re in it for.” He later adds, “You get out there, and you go, ‘Ahh.’ You hear all the noise behind us. You hear all the cars and all the noise behind us. You get out on that trail, you don’t hear a thing. You hear the sound of your ties on the pavement.

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<sup>177</sup> Jared Braiterman, “City Branding through New Green Spaces.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 70.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 80

You hear birds.” Holler speaks similarly, “Gives you a chance to clear your head, forget about your troubles, and just enjoy nature.” While such a trail enables people to seek solitude, one rider points to the opportunities for camaraderie and socializing: “Many, many bikers I meet, there’s never a one that won’t stop and talk and reminisce. And it’s a very familiar thing, family kind of activity, and it’s healthy.”

The final interviewee sound bite comes from the previously mentioned unnamed ATA member. He says, “They might talk about nature, and they might talk about commerce and all the other wonderful things, but we’re working on this thing so we can ride it—plain, pure, and simple. Sebak concludes the segment in agreement: “He’s right—riding *is* what it’s all about.” While the source of the passion for creating the trail might lie in the opportunity to use it, the fact that roughly half the segment is devoted to comments about economic development demonstrates that money plays a large role in such a project. Regardless, green initiatives like this one function as branding tools that can benefit a place and its residents across the board. Braiterman writes, “By re-imagining cities as natural habitat, cities can compete in terms of human health, quality of life, job creation, and environmental innovations.”<sup>179</sup> Whether the motives are financial or otherwise, recreation serves as a means to boost a place’s appeal as well as local pride. Ultimately, this is the case with all of the recreational activities covered by Sebak. Whether they are nostalgic memories of the past or segments that aim to impress the viewer with current activities, he invites the audience to be impressed with what the region has to offer and to feel a sense of local pride—both of which are key pieces in a larger place branding project.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 81.



## Conclusion

While rebranding a city or region necessitates stressing some of the heavy, more fundamental concerns, such as the economic climate and the quality of communities, lighter concerns like local culture are of great importance as well. Retaining residents and acquiring newcomers require a place to have a vibrant cultural life. Given that Sebak often appears most at home when presenting the playful and amusing, it comes as little surprise that he would dedicate a significant portion of his work to such subjects. However, one would be wise to avoid the temptation to think that he does so simply for the sake of frivolity. Careful examination of his coverage of cultural activities demonstrates an attempt to change perceptions about Pittsburgh as a cultural hinterland. He encourages viewers to see Western Pennsylvania as a potent player in the provinces of food culture, education, the arts, and recreation. This reminds locals of what their region has to offer and serves to galvanize civic spirit. Likewise, outsiders, and even some locals, are made aware for the first time of the cultural opportunities available in the area.

While not trying to dethrone larger cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, Sebak invites the audience to see the cultural offerings of Pittsburgh as being of a comparable caliber as those available in much larger, more renowned centers of culture. This helps Pittsburgh to carve out its own niche that allows it to be successful without having to directly compete with massive cities that have greater resources. He suggests that while Pittsburgh can play host to fine dining and world-class museums, it also has the ability to offer quality in a much homier package. This builds upon the city's preexisting reputation as a working-class city without trying to undercut it and completely reinvent its image from scratch in order to strive for some unattainable goal like trying to be the next New York City.

The fusion of the old with the new characterizes Sebak's discussion of most topics, local culture included. By discussing cultural contributions of the past, he ignites nostalgia that enhances civic pride, and he provides a sense of foundation that positions Pittsburgh as a city with staying power, rather than just a new, faddish "hot spot" for relocation that will quickly be replaced by another competitor. His presentation of current cultural happenings in the region particularly target young people—who local leaders have been attempting to retain for decades—by demonstrating to them that Western Pennsylvania need not be a place to escape for hipper pastures afar.

## CHAPTER V. SEBAK AS A PLACE BRANDING MODEL

Pittsburgh, like many former industrial centers, has spent several decades trying to lose the “Rust Belt” image that presents a threat to its economic recovery. According to Anholt, this desire to discard an outdated image is far more common among places that try to rebrand themselves than attempts to create a manufactured brand. He says, “The best possible reason for wishing to present a particular national image is that it is both fair and true; the desire is simply to be properly understood, rather than allow one’s country to remain forever the victim of an out-of-date cliché, truly ‘branded’ by public ignorance. The experience from my own practice is that very many governments, far from trying to present an idealized or invented ‘brand’ for themselves, are in fact trying to shed the ‘brand’ which public opinion, or public ignorance, has foisted on them.”<sup>180</sup> Indeed, the success of a place’s brand rests heavily upon its basis in fact. Keith Dinnie echoes this idea. He writes, “The motivation for cities to engage in city branding frequently stems from a feeling that existing perceptions of the city have become outdated and need to be updated to reflect the contemporary reality of the city. Repositioning the city brand is often seen as necessary and urgent.”<sup>181</sup> Dinnie adds, “A city brand needs to be rooted in reality, rather than a delusion peddled by mendacious marketers. Making exaggerated claims for a city will backfire as soon as target audiences realize that they have been misled. Therefore cities need to ensure that they have got the tangible evidence to back up their proclaimed strengths.”<sup>182</sup>

While many places try to fight inaccurate images, some approaches are more successful than others. As Anholt explains, places that try to adapt commercial branding practices merely create oversimplified images that fail to serve all sectors of their audience:

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<sup>180</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45.

<sup>181</sup> Keith Dinnie, “Introduction to the Practice of City Branding.” In *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, ed. Keith Dinnie. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 98.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

I have long argued that places are exactly the opposite, and that this is one of the main reasons why commercial branding practice doesn't apply in any straightforward way to their management or promotion: good sense suggests, and research tends to confirm, that richness and complexity are valuable image attributes for any country, city or region. This is primarily because the image must be able to embrace and support the wide variety of industrial, cultural and political activity which countries and cities are likely to engage in. It's difficult to imagine any single "positioning" for a country which could span all the activities of its private and public sectors, without being so bland and generic as to be useless as a distinguishing narrative.<sup>183</sup>

Indeed, this attempt at a more nuanced narrative is a defining characteristic of Sebak's documentaries. However, such complexity cannot be properly conveyed in brief slogans and advertising campaigns. It requires the brander to continually unfold the breadth of a place's identity. Sebak sets out to do this over the course of dozens of documentaries and television specials, rather than trying to define Pittsburgh in one film. At the same time, a project of this sort can only succeed if the audience puts in the effort to watch this identity unfold over time. Anholt argues that "acquiring a rich, tolerant, nuanced and complete perception of another country takes time, and requires a certain commitment on the part of the perceiver: she or he has to *learn* the country, and this surely cannot take place in a passive way, simply as a consequence of the 'single shot' of conventional marketing and branding techniques. The visitor, investor or consumer has to *want* to learn about a place in order to arrive at a fuller and richer understanding of it."<sup>184</sup>

Sebak helps to maintain the viewers' interest over time by appealing to their needs and desires in a format that is mentally and visually pleasing. In the process of trying to explain his vision of Western Pennsylvania, Sebak considers both the needs of local residents and outsiders. He encourages locals to have pride in the region and "live the brand" by reminding them, or making them aware, of the things it has to offer. Simultaneously, by pointing these things out, he

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>184</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 39.

makes Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania seem more appealing to outsiders with an interest in relocating themselves and/or their businesses. The major assets he stresses include neighborhoods that retain a sense of closeness and community as well as ties to their history; a forward-thinking workforce that can innovate without discarding the working-class values of the past; and a vibrant cultural life that can compete with larger cities in terms of quality while at the same time lacking the pretensions of culture found elsewhere. Sebak does not rely entirely on appeals to the needs and desires of his audience in order to maintain their engagement. He presents this information in a way that is mentally and visually enticing. His filmmaking style departs from that of many public television documentaries by adopting an upbeat, lighthearted, celebratory approach to his subjects. Rather than lecturing his audience, Sebak narrates in an informal, conversational manner that on the surface makes his films appear less like education than entertainment. His preference for on-site shooting results in works that are loaded with the sights and sounds of the region. This often includes shots of many alluring foods that capitalize on the hunger of his audience. His playful approach and inclusion of interviews with many colorful characters also tend to make his documentaries more humorous than the average PBS fare.

Part of what makes his films unique is his effort to present an image of Western Pennsylvania that portrays the diversity of its people and culture while at the same time producing an overarching picture of the region that differentiates it from other places. Anholt describes this ideal balance of complexity and simplicity as such:

Simplification has a tendency to reduce appeal, since so much of the ultimate appeal of a country is its richness and complexity. The true art of branding is distillation: the art of extracting the concentrated essence of something complex, so that its complexity can always be extracted back out of the distillate, but it remains portable and easily memorable. The distillate, rather than actually attempting to contain all the detail of the

country in question, is simply the common thread, the genetic constant, which underlies the basic commonality between the different parts of the brand.<sup>185</sup>

Through the major themes he uses throughout his films, Sebak attempts to distill the complexity of Western Pennsylvania down to basic common threads that underlie the identity of the region.

As Anholt explains, place branding films frequently fail to achieve this:

Most ‘nation branding’ films I’ve seen are simply strings of library shots of the country’s most impressive buildings, beaches and landscapes, interspersed with shots of smiling families, aeroplanes taking off (look! we have airports!), chemists in white coats looking at blue fluids in glass beakers (look! we do science!), and trails of red tail-lights stretching along night-time freeways (look! we have cars!), set to pompous and triumphal music tracks with just a hint of something ethnic, in order to create the correct impression of respect for ancient traditions co-existing with a dynamic and thrusting modernity. It is remarkable what a great job these films do of making very different countries look virtually identical, and it’s hard to believe that they achieve anything else at all, except of course for enabling the department that commissions them to prove that it has actually spent its promotional budget and not handed it out to friends and family.<sup>186</sup>

At first glance, one might be inclined to see Sebak’s documentaries as following this same sort of formula described by Anholt. However, while he chooses to include some of these elements, Sebak does so with nuances and additions of his own that ultimately do more than just make Western Pennsylvania look identical to any other region.

The three major themes expounded upon in the prior chapters demonstrate how Sebak takes some of these seemingly bland elements mentioned by Anholt and revamps them to make Western Pennsylvania stand out from other places. Sebak does indeed present the region as successfully balancing both progress and the maintenance of old traditions; however, he does so with more than just a “hint of something ethnic.” Ethnic and racial identity play a significant part in his films, as he presents them as some of the region’s most important sources of community and culture. He encourages viewers to see Pittsburgh as different from other cities because of its

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<sup>185</sup> Simon Anholt, *Brand New Justice: How Branding Places and Products Can Help the Developing World*. Revised Edition. (Waltham, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 128.

<sup>186</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 87.

ability to retain a strong sense of small-town community feel despite being a city. To him, traditional ways provide Pittsburgh neighborhoods with a stability and personability that distinguishes them from other places.

While Sebak does flaunt many of the Western Pennsylvania's achievements, he tends to focus, both in terms of content and style, on the ordinary and everyday rather than trying to amaze the audience with the region's most impressive sites. Houses, hotdogs, and neighborhoods hardly fall in line with Anholt's description, yet these types of seemingly mundane subjects form the crux of Sebak's documentaries. Even when he does cover some of the region's more remarkable elements, such as its business and technological innovations, he brings them down to a human level by focusing on individuals rather than institutions or concepts. Even his choice of music, far from pompous and triumphal, adds to the quaint, friendly tone he creates in his films. Sebak's tendency to find value in the everyday demonstrates a commitment to hidden histories and the attitude that history is shaped just as much, if not more so, by ordinary individuals as it is by the powerful and elite. One could even say that this outlook applies to how he views Pittsburgh's role in the nation as a whole. He suggests that while Pittsburgh may not be glorified like New York or other elite cultural and economic centers, it shapes the nation's history at least as much as those places.

Sebak also displays greater nuance in his discussion of Western Pennsylvania's cultural offerings. In a sense, his intent can be seen as trying to make the region seem similar to other places because he encourages the audience to believe that Pittsburgh's food culture, educational institutions, artistic life, and recreational opportunities are just as vibrant as they are in much larger cities. However, he is also careful to distinguish Pittsburgh from those other cities by presenting local culture as more accessible, welcoming, and working-class. He invites the belief

that Western Pennsylvania culture matches the quality of that found elsewhere while lacking the pomposity of its cultural competitors.

Despite his many strengths as a place brander and a presenter of local culture, Sebak neglects certain elements of the region's story. Though he does emphasize Western Pennsylvania's cultural diversity relatively well, his focus is at times Eurocentric, and some groups, particularly Native Americans, are given little voice in the region's narrative. Even when ample voice is given to minority groups, the emphasis is on cultural aspects that can be celebrated. Issues like significantly higher crime and poverty rates in largely African American neighborhoods like Homewood and the Hill District are avoided entirely in stories that emphasize communal spirit and revitalization. While the once vibrant cultural life of the Hill District is celebrated, its subsequent decline as a result of "urban renewal" projects in the 1960s is dodged by Sebak. The story he presents also glosses over some of the less palatable parts of Pittsburgh's past, such as its more nefarious entrepreneurs and the decline of the steel industry. While such subjects would perhaps provide a more accurate picture of the region and its history, they would arguably weaken Sebak's branding efforts. Casting off the somewhat depressing image of Western Pennsylvania as a dirty, rusted-out, gloomy, hopeless region would likely be more difficult to achieve if the alternative image presented includes the displacement of Native Americans by early European settlers and later by twentieth century politicians in search of their vision of progress as well as the mistreatment of working-class laborers by nineteenth century robber barons and perhaps their late-twentieth century equivalent. These subjects, the latter in particular, dredge up ill will and unresolved negative feelings that keep the specter of the past very much in the present and stand in the way of bringing a new image of the region to the fore.



In addition to conflicting with the more positive image Sebak wishes to convey, these darker episodes in Western Pennsylvania's past also present a liability to him as a public television documentarian. As B. J. Bullert explains, public television can be a hostile environment for political filmmakers, particularly independent producers with alternative views. The various gatekeepers that determine which programs ultimately reach the airwaves take into consideration a variety of factors, including their perceptions of a producer. Bullert write, "Was he or she an 'advocate' or a 'journalist'? If the gatekeepers didn't trust the producer or questioned the producer's journalistic standards, they rejected the program unless it came to them as 'commentary'—usually from a highly regarded cultural authority, such as Bill Moyers—or was part of an ongoing series, like *Frontline*."<sup>187</sup> Another factor he alludes to is "the national programmers' judgment about whether the stations were likely to carry it."<sup>188</sup> While Sebak, as a public television employee, perhaps faces fewer obstacles than an entirely independent filmmaker, forays into more controversial topics threaten to brand him as more of an advocate and to potentially alienate segments of the audience. Having to appease the variety of stakeholders involved in the process of bringing these documentaries to air in some ways necessitates a relatively "safe" approach to filmmaking, at least in terms of content. These issues notwithstanding, a place branding project such as Sebak's is a complicated undertaking.

Trying to rebrand the image of a place requires more than the usual methods of commercial or tourist marketing. As Anholt explains, "In place branding one is promoting something that isn't for sale to people who are almost certainly not interested. Under such circumstances, the whole panoply of marketing communications is fatally compromised."<sup>189</sup> He

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<sup>187</sup> B.J. Bullert, *Public Television: Politics and the Battle Over Documentary Film*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 185.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 43.

expounds on this further in the context of branding nations: “Instead of asking how they can charm or coerce people into admiring their country, they should ask themselves *why* people in other countries should even think about their country in the first place.”<sup>190</sup> This same notion translates to the branding of individual cities or regions. In order to win the attention and open-minded consideration of the audience, one must make that place relevant to its needs. A successful brand must address not only how that place meets tangible needs, such as jobs and the presence of adequate infrastructure, but also intangible needs, such as a sense of community and security. Graham Hankinson argues that “a brand needs to reflect not only the physical/tangible experience of the location, but also the intangible/value-based attributes.”<sup>191</sup>

One key aspect that makes Sebak’s films particularly effective place branding tools is that he takes into consideration the needs of the audience rather than merely focusing on telling viewers why he thinks Western Pennsylvania is a great place. Anholt contends that this is one of several important ideas pertaining to relevance often forgotten in place branding discourse. He says, “The first of these—which incidentally happens to be one of the basic rules of marketing—is to base one’s strategy on a clear analysis of the perceptions, needs, habits, and aspirations of one’s target audience; indeed, to treat this as a more important consideration than the product offering itself.”<sup>192</sup> While Sebak certainly does not shy away from describing what he considers to be the strong points of Western Pennsylvania, he also takes into account subjects in which outsiders would likely have an interest. He appeals to those who seek a sense of connection, belonging, and security by emphasizing community in a variety of circumstances. His concentration on the region’s economic climate takes into consideration business leaders’ needs,

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Graham Hankinson, “Location Branding: A Study of the Branding Practices of 12 English Cities,” *Journal of Brand Management* 9, no. 2 (2001): 135.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

such as the work ethic and capacity for innovation demonstrated by the local workforce. His attention to the cultural life of the area allays the concerns of those who might believe that Pittsburgh has less to offer than larger metropolitan centers. Sebak's consideration of the needs of non-local viewers differentiates his body of work from mere acts of commercial or tourist marketing. Rather than trying to make Western Pennsylvania famous, he attempts to make it relevant.

However, as already explained, the latter is a process that takes much more time and commitment on the part of both the brander and the audience. As such, the complexity conveyed by the brander is not always immediately apparent. Despite this difficulty, Anholt suggests that the audience can be provided with a jumping-off point into this complexity. He writes:

The definition of brand as shorthand or signpost for value, or quality, or equity, is a useful one: in other words, you don't attempt to pack all meaning into a single proposition or slogan, or jump the gun on the time it takes for a consumer to "learn" the complex product, but be content with a sign which can stand for, and later refer accurately back to, the whole experience, once it is more familiar to the consumer. One has to have the wisdom and patience to accept that this sign will not be wholly meaningful to the consumer at the start, but it is a vessel which will become more and more replete with meaning as meaning is absorbed.<sup>193</sup>

This type of signpost brand allows a place to enter the minds of the audience and be added to their mental shortlists of places that might serve their needs, whatever those may be. The signpost brand purveyed by Sebak—and further emphasized in the press by stories like Pittsburgh's ranking as America's "most livable city"<sup>194</sup>—is one in which Western Pennsylvania offers a comfortable mix of the new and the old, tradition and progress, and the amenities and opportunities of large economic and cultural centers packaged in a small-town community. Such

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<sup>193</sup> Simon Anholt, *Brand New Justice: How Branding Places and Products Can Help the Developing World*. Revised Edition. (Waltham, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 127.

<sup>194</sup> Francesca Levy, "America's Most Livable Cities," *Forbes*, April 29, 2010. <http://www.forbes.com/2010/04/29/cities-livable-pittsburgh-lifestyle-real-estate-top-ten-jobs-crime-income.html> [accessed July 23, 2012] and Julie Percha, "Move Over, Honolulu; Pittsburgh's No. 1 in U.S.," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 22, 2011. <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/neighborhoods-city/move-over-honolulu-pittsburghs-no-1-in-us-285701/> [accessed July 23, 2012].

a brand appears to be succeeding for Pittsburgh, as it has witnessed demonstrable improvements in economic and population trends. This raises questions about how such efforts can be applied in other declining cities and regions.

### Further Research

Sebak's work demonstrates the potential for place branding theory and documentaries to foster revitalization without sacrificing the unique qualities of places. Rather than just selling an image of Western Pennsylvania to his audience, he uses his films to preserve a sense of the region's unique character. His methods, as described in the previous chapters, have been successful for Western Pennsylvania and Sebak as a filmmaker. As such, they provide a potential model for other cities and regions wishing to reclaim control of their identities and spur on a cultural and economic renaissance.

As mentioned earlier, a number of public television stations in other cities have attempted to mimic Sebak's homegrown style of filmmaking. Perhaps the most copied of his works is *Things that Aren't There Anymore*. In a special introduction created for that film's 2004 DVD release, roughly fourteen years after its first airing, Sebak drives through Pittsburgh's Liberty Tubes while recounting the story of how he came up with the idea for the film while driving through those same tunnels. He also mentions that about two years after that film's initial release, a station in Philadelphia "did a very similar program with the same title, and then eventually, fifty or sixty different stations around the country did a similar program." With one hand on the steering wheel, he even holds up a VHS copy of *Things Not in Tulsa Anymore*, which he describes as one of his favorites. Sebak's success and the fact that he has spurred on such imitators across the country demonstrate that documentaries can play a role progressive

urban and regional renewal. However, to date most of these copycats have not enjoyed his level of success.

Perhaps the most comparable, in style and success, of these imitators is Jack Frank, the producer of *Things Not in Tulsa Anymore* and not unsurprisingly, a native of Pittsburgh.<sup>195</sup> Since the 1990s, he has produced twelve documentaries about the Tulsa area. His *Tulsa History Series* owes much to Sebak, from concepts and titles for programs (e.g. *Stuff That's Gone*, *Holy Tulsa*, *Let's Go Downtown*, *Tulsa A to Z*, *OKC A to Z*, and *Tulsa's Uncommon Houses*), the playful narrative style, the overall format and narrative arc, down to his use of jaunty polka music to create a sense of fun and frivolity. Sebak's regard for *Things Not in Tulsa Anymore* comes as little surprise, given Frank's direct imitation of his work. While Frank's films have appeared on Oklahoma Educational Television Authority (OETA) stations and the local CBS affiliate KOTV they have not gained the national exposure of Sebak's films, and unlike Sebak, Frank has not produced national PBS programs. While Frank has managed to create a successful series of documentaries about the area in which he lives, in many other cases imitators have each generated one or two profitable pledge-drive projects but have not created a body of work as expansive as Sebak's. As already mentioned, effective place branding requires a sustained effort over time, rather than one or two brief bursts, and as such, these imitators have not been as effective at place branding as him.

Unfortunately, delving into these other works is a project of its own that simply cannot be shoehorned into this current one. Nevertheless, there are some questions and concepts to be considered here, such as why have many other filmmakers failed to achieve Sebak's continued degree of success? This question brings up many possibilities. Have they simply not tried to continue on that path, or were they unable to consistently secure the necessary funding to embark

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<sup>195</sup> For more information of Jack Frank and his productions, see <http://www.tulsafilms.com>.

on a project of the magnitude of the *Pittsburgh History Series*? Did these other stations consider these documentaries as part of a more long-term project, or were they viewed as one-time attempts to capitalize on the success of Sebak?

In the case of stations that were not met with demand for more programming of the sort, one must consider how their films and circumstances differ from those of Sebak and WQED. One might wonder if these other stations simply have less captivating locales to work with than Pittsburgh. This hardly seems to be the case, as Sebak has enjoyed continued success creating national PBS programs that focus on locations and people around the country. If he can make hot dogs in Alaska as interesting—and profitable for public television—as pierogies in Pittsburgh, then it seems unlikely that other cities have less noteworthy material with which to work. Is it merely the case that these other films are not as stylistically engaging as those of Sebak? This is certainly a possibility.

For example, Maine Public Broadcasting Network's 1994 documentary *Things that Aren't There Anymore* comes across as more Ken Burns than Rick Sebak. It lacks Sebak's lively narration, playful writing style, and cast of colorful interviewees. In contrast to Sebak's films, which tend to switch subjects every five to ten minutes, the MPBN version covers only two subjects, a pair of old railway stations and an auto rest park, in the course of its entire forty minutes. It relies more heavily on narration and old photographs and films than Sebak's original. Indeed, the only portions of the documentary not consisting of these were the interviews and a couple of shots, each lasting for a few seconds, of the present-day sites of these former structures. Its sequel, *More Things that Aren't There Anymore*, follows a similar pattern. Frank's *Tulsa History Series* demonstrates that a more direct imitation of the Sebak model can succeed elsewhere.

In addition to examining the work of Sebak's many imitators, some other related areas provide potential sources of fruitful study. For instance, the present study focused on how Sebak's rhetoric invited the audience to take certain messages from his films rather than concerning itself with his personal intentions or the editorial decisions or environmental circumstances not readily apparent in the films that shaped the final products. Such a project would require extensive interviews with Sebak and the various crew members who have assisted him in his work. Nevertheless, it would provide an interesting angle on this subject. Additionally, funding sources are another one of these unseen factors that influence the final appearance of films, and indeed whether or not they get made in the first place. Given the scarcity of funding for public television, the courting of financial benefactors has a great potential to impact the content and direction of such documentaries. The mixture of public and private contributions that is characteristic of American public television productions in and of itself makes this a complex subject worthy of further investigation. Finally, the present study concerns itself mostly with the verbal and aural rhetoric of Sebak's documentaries, but a greater examination of their visual rhetoric would add an additional layer. It is my hope that these various avenues will be explored in the future, whether by me or others, as they will broaden our understanding of how public television documentaries can allow a place to reshape its image while maintaining its unique character.

Ultimately, by considering the place branding potential of documentaries, the present and suggested future studies seek answers to the question of whether or not places can rebrand themselves in such a way as to allow them move forward without abandoning the valuable parts of the past. As Anholt says, "These are the central dilemmas of modernity, and it is no coincidence that they are also the central questions of competitive identity . . . . Our age needs a

new model and a new ethos of development and progress: and the first countries that can prove the viability of such models are assured of gaining as much in reputation as they gain in prosperity.”<sup>196</sup> In the preceding pages, it has been argued that Rick Sebak and Western Pennsylvania have achieved this to some degree. It remains to be seen how far such success will proceed and to what extent this model can succeed elsewhere.

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<sup>196</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 37.



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