

## History Panel Discussion

**Andrew McElwaine**, Moderator

**Joel Tarr, Ted Muller**, Panelists

*The following is a transcription.*

**Andrew McElwaine**, Moderator

The Heinz family and Heinz Endowments became interested in Nine Mile Run because they came full circle with it. H.J. Heinz, the founder of the Heinz Company, was vice-chairman of the Pittsburgh Civic Commission in 1909 when that entity recommended a public park at Nine Mile Run. His son, Howard Heinz, the founder of the Heinz Endowments in 1923 was vice-chairman of the Citizens' Committee on City Plan which similarly recommended a very detailed public park and waterfront space at Nine Mile Run. So for the Heinz family, this is coming home. As we discuss the history of this site, I think it's important to keep in mind that the cycle that this particular parcel of land has gone through is significant, indeed, nationally and internationally significant. The reuse of this site perhaps represents a part of a very changing economic strategy, not only regionally, but on a much larger basis. The destruction of this site clearly represented a much older strategy, that of extraction of natural resources to produce both products and vast quantities of waste which in turn created jobs and growth. The waste had to go somewhere, namely, where we are sitting. As Pittsburgh enters a new renaissance and as that renaissance looks at the value of open space, and greenways as part of the redevelopment of the city, Pittsburgh is pioneering a different economic strategy— one based on amenities, attractiveness, and high quality of life. In turn this strategy attracts people and opportunity to a region which in turn creates jobs and growth. Perhaps that is part of fulfilling Glenn Eugster's vision of sustainable development. I hope so. As a historian "wannabe", I'm particularly honored to be on this panel, in that you have two of Pittsburgh's most distinguished historians and two of the leading authorities on Pittsburgh's history with you tonight. Ted Muller is the Chair of the History Department at the University of Pittsburgh and a frequent and prolific author on our history. Joel Tarr is the Richard Caliguiri Professor of Urban and Environmental History and Policy and the former

Dean of the Heinz School at Carnegie Mellon University. Joel and Ted will alternate with Joel discussing the remarkable history of this site and Ted discussing the role of the Olmsted family in Pittsburgh planning.

**Joel Tarr: Six Stages of Development**

Thank you. I'm delighted to be here today for several reasons. One is it gives me an opportunity to wear my frog tie which I don't get many opportunities to wear. But I think it fits in as a very appropriate piece of wearing apparel when we talk about green design and a beautiful natural area that has been despoiled over many years. I'd like to start by talking about the larger context of the Nine Mile Run project. I begin with a very simple aphorism that is, "Humans will alter their environment." How they alter it, however, depends upon their values and belief systems and the amount of power that they can bring to their efforts to shape or change the landscape. Today, society often faces issues of developing or not developing that provoke large conflicts among stakeholders. The environmental history of the Pittsburgh region has been actually shaped to a large extent by such clashes between opposing value systems, economic interests and various stakeholders in the population. The history of Nine Mile Run in terms of human uses extends for hundreds of years. It is an excellent case study of the conflicts and clashes that have shaped our landscape. These changes can be discussed in terms of overlapping stages of development affecting both Pittsburgh and Nine Mile Run. I am going to sketch out six stages of development.

We can characterize stage one as an indefinite period of time when the region was occupied by Native Americans, such as the Delaware and Shawnee tribes. These tribes likely used Nine Mile Run and the valley in a variety of ways. We could also say that these Native Americans who occupied the region made minimal alterations. I'm not saying that they "didn't alter their environment"—there is documented evidence of Native Americans using

fire to clear extensive areas of land, but the point that is important here is they didn't have the tools to accomplish the changes that we see in later years with European colonization.

Stage two of the development of Nine Mile Run and the greater Pittsburgh region is characterized by European colonization and American settlement. In this period of time extending into the middle of the nineteenth century we have the exploitation of natural resources: the cutting of timber, the regions mining of its coal and the construction of salt works and, of course, farming. Where does Nine Mile Run fit in this period? It is primarily through the development of salt works. Early maps from 1841 show two salt works at the mouth of Nine Mile Run along the Monongahela River. There was also extensive coal mining in the area, primarily above the hills which define Beechwood Boulevard and this no doubt also had an effect on the stream. A subsequent aspect of natural resource development, still in stage two, involved the development and tapping of natural gas wells. In the 1880s and 1890s the Pittsburgh region had a major natural gas development boom. Records from 1886 show that natural gas wells were drilled in the Nine Mile Run area; and they probably date back further than that. In the late 1940s Duquesne Slag was considering sinking six wells to capture the natural gas from the site.

In the third stage of development, Pittsburgh became a center for industrialization. The impacts of these developments came to Nine Mile Run rather early and in the 1841 map you can see a glassworks at the mouth of the river. We don't know how long that glassworks functioned, we are still in the process of investigating that. Undoubtedly the most significant impact of industrialization in the valley was the dumping of slag beginning in 1922. I'll talk about that more later in my comments.

Stage four of the development is marked by increasing urbanization. The city spread throughout the region by annexing contiguous territories. In



In the 1920s, Nine Mile Run was only partially culverted just east of Braddock Avenue in Edgewood.

Photos courtesy of Ted Rakovsky

1867 Pittsburgh annexed a huge area of land in the East End, increasing the city's land area 14 times. Up to that time Nine Mile Run was not in the city of Pittsburgh but rather in Pitt township. Urbanization brought with it the creation of a built environment. This built environment included streets, water supply pipes and sewers. In the process of sewerage the East End of Pittsburgh and the neighboring towns of Wilkesburg, Edgewood and Swissvale, many of the streams were culverted or placed underground. These were (and are) the original tributaries and upstream parts of Nine Mile Run. The stream becomes part of the sewerage network of Pittsburgh and the neighboring towns. As early as 1909, the head of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Health was trying to issue orders to the city of Pittsburgh and neighboring communities to cease polluting the Nine Mile Run but with no effect. Such pollution has continued without mitigation to this day.

Stage five is marked by the beginnings of a negative reaction to the excesses of industrialism and its environmental impact. Women played the largest role in this movement to clean up the environment in the early 20th century. There was also a greater concern with leisure type activities and recreation possibilities for urbanites.

The increasing emphasis on leisure activities led in 1901 to the construction of a 9-hole golf course at Nine Mile Run. In 1904 the Pittsburgh Country Club constructed a club house which stood on the site until 1913 when it burned down. In 1914 a new club house was built in Frick Park overlooking the valley. Later removed, its foundations are still visible. The concern for more popular leisure activities, not just for the elites but the rest of the population was also reflected in the Olmsted Plan of 1910. Ted Muller will discuss this, then I will return to talk about stage six.

#### **Ted Muller: The Olmsteds in Pittsburgh**

I'm going to look at the context within which Olmsted made proposals for the inclusion of Nine



By 1928, private development interests along the frequently flooding stream had instigated work that would eventually become the stream bed and base for Greendale Avenue.

Mile Run in a parks system for the city. Frederick Olmsted, Sr. is often considered the father of American urban parks. His design principals have carried on and had an enormous impact/legacy on the landscape architecture of American cities. The story of the Olmsteds picks up with John C. and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. In 1895, the Olmsted firm was invited to plan the model industrial town, Vandergrift, on the Kiskiminitas River. Within 15 years this firm lands a number of important contracts to landscape civic institutions (if you will permit the broadening of the definition) such as the Schenley Hotel in Oakland, to provide a revised plan for the upgrading and modification of Allegheny Cemetery, and to landscape a number of private residences including H.J. Heinz' home on the East End, and Greenlawn, W.L. Mellon's residence.

John C. Olmsted, was in charge of the Olmsted brothers private residential landscaping activity. An example of this is W.L. Mellons residence that formally stood at the head of the Schenley Park Golf Course on Darlington Road; the stone walls can still be seen. They did a number of these kinds of residences—Elizabeth Thawes summer retreat in Sewickly is another example.

It was the invitation for the Olmsted brothers and, particularly, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. in 1909 that brings us around to the issue at hand. This is one of those value clashes that Joel was talking about. In effect the progressive reformers in the city had been waging a battle against the environmental, social and political consequences of excessive (in their view) urban industrialization. By the middle of the first decade of the century they were beginning to have some success on the political front; they were establishing significant institutional, physical, health and related human services and they were also beginning to have some impact on environment issues. As a part of this effort, the reform mayor at the time created a civic commission to tackle several of these physical issues; as referred to earlier, H.J. Heinz was the chairman of this commission. One of these issues was to create a

comprehensive plan. The urban planning profession in April of 1909 was just emerging. The keynote speaker at their first national conference was none other than Olmsted, Jr. The Pittsburgh Civic Commission traveled to Washington for this conference and asked him to take on this plan for the city. By 1909 the Olmsted brothers were well known in the city and well connected through their private contacts. Frederick Law Olmsted said what the commission wanted to hear and they trusted him. The plan was undertaken. The brothers opened an office in the city with permanent staff, and they went about developing a plan that was issued in 1910. It focused mostly (at the civic commissions direction) on issues of traffic congestion, circulation, the downtown and finally parks.

Nonetheless, in looking at the downtown and the surrounding area, Olmsted proposed numerous features for the city many of which have in one form or another been realized. These include a plan for parks along the rivers, a point park and a downtown civic center. Most importantly, he saw in Pittsburgh's topography great opportunity for the future of the city. He argued strenuously in the report for reforesting of hillsides, to capture these hillsides as public space whether owned as private or public.

He planned for the filling of the ravine at Schenley Plaza in Oakland to create a nice entry into Schenley Park, a site that today is a parking lot! When he turned to looking at the larger topography, he thought of special opportunities for parks. Here he considered such things as the Saw Mill Run Valley, you know where we are with that, we have a road but not much of a parkway. He identified special opportunities for the Squaw Run Parkway and the Guyasuda Parkway north of the Allegheny River which have significantly materialized. Allegheny River Parkway also was created. But when he came to Nine Mile Run he saw an opportunity for creating a park much closer to the larger concentration of the urban and industrial population. I am simply going to read to you most of what he wrote on Nine Mile



Panoramic photograph depicting gasbelt along Nine Mile Run. (Commercial Avenue appears on the right.)

Run. It's not very much, but it is significant in the context of what developed.

*"Perhaps the most striking opportunity noted for a large park is the Nine Mile Run. Its long meadows of varying width would make ideal play fields. The stream when it is freed from sewage will be an attractive and interesting element in the landscape. The wooded slopes on either side give ample opportunity for enjoyment of the forest for cool walks and resting places. Above all it is not far from a large working population in Hazelwood, Homestead, Rankin, Swissvale, Edgewood, Wilkinsburg, Brushton and Homewood. And yet, it is so excluded by its high wooded banks that the close proximity of urban development can hardly be imagined. The entire valley from the top of one valley to the other should be included. For upon the preservation of these wooded banks depends much of the real value of the park."*

Moreover, he went on to argue that this park along with others in the Saw Mill Run Parkway would eventually fit into the creation of an extended park system. That was the vision of Olmsted for Nine Mile Run, and as Glenn Eugster has pointed out, the next larger scale outward.

#### **Joel Tarr: The Sixth and Current Stage of Development**

It's true that while some of the elements of the Olmsted plan were put into effect, many of them weren't. Nothing was done as far as Nine Mile Run was concerned. In 1918 another group of Pittsburgh elites (as you know a lot of the decision-making in this town over time has been top down) came together to consider city planning and talk about various changes that could be made to make Pittsburgh a more liveable city. This group produced a series of six reports called "The Citizens' Committee on Civic Plan" between 1922 and 1924. In the first of the six they considered parks and this

report devoted a number of pages to a discussion of the possibilities of building a water based park at Nine Mile Run.

Very little comes out of the Citizens' Committee on Civic Plan reports and nothing happens in regard to Nine Mile Run. At the same time as the Citizens' Committee was considering the Civic Plan, the city was working to pass the first zoning ordinances in Pittsburgh in order to improve land use patterns. (This was passed in 1923.) The zoning ordinance designated Nine Mile Run as a residential area. But this was too late, because the Duquesne Slag Products Company, founded in 1906 to take advantage of the economic opportunities relative to the disposal of slag, had purchased 94 acres of land at Nine Mile Run in September of 1922. The company began dumping slag in 1922 before the zoning ordinance designating Nine Mile Run as a residential area. Duquesne Slag was protected from regulation under the zoning ordinance because they owned and used the property before it was zoned. They had what is called a "non-conforming use." Over the years, they were also able to acquire more land in the valley on the basis of the fact that they already owned land. Between 1922 and 1972, a 50 year period, Duquesne Slag dumped something like 17 million cubic yards of slag in Nine Mile Run. The slag came from the iron and steel making activities primarily at the Jones & Laughlin Mill in the city of Pittsburgh, from the J & L Mill in Aliquippa and likely from the Homestead works as well. The disposal of slag at a low cost was a major objective of the mills. Cheap nearby disposal sites were important considerations, when you consider that each ton of steel produces 1/2 to 3/4 of a ton of slag. There were significant transportation costs to move the material away from the mill. Slag was originally brought in by rail and by barge; dumped hot, it was watered while being dumped, releasing heat and steam. This was a major industrial activity creating enormous problems for the residents of communities surrounding Nine Mile Run. Complaints about these activities came primarily from the



Photo courtesy of Nancy Horrocks Thomas

Swisshelm Park Civic Association formally founded in 1937. Between 1937 and the 1970s, the Swisshelm Park Civic Association made a number of complaints to the City Council and the Board of Zoning Adjustment that Duquesne Slag was acting without a permit and creating a nuisance. All these protests were to no avail. The Citizens Association in the 1950s went as far as to talk to the law firm of Thorpe, Reed and Armstrong to see about bringing a suit. They were discouraged by the law firm, and we think there may have been a conflict of interest on its part because there exist reports of work with another client with an interest in slag disposal. Again nothing happened. What you have then during the 50-year period in which Duquesne Slag was dumping was a series of protests but no action taken by civic authorities.

This brings us to the sixth stage of development, our situation today. It wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s, after its use as a slag dump had ended, that the city began to reconsider the property. This culminates in 1995 when the city of Pittsburgh bought the 238 acres of land primarily for residential development. Now in our own time, plans that were made in the past to utilize the valley for environmental goals may come to fruition through creation of a greenway and restoration of some of the natural ambiance that exists there. In a sense we are being given a second chance to realize the vision for Nine Mile Run held by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and the authors of the Citizens' Committee on Civic Plan.



On the new Beechwood Boulevard, one of the splendid views, Homestead and up the Monongahela