

ROUND UP

Going Down ...and Up!

Pittsburgh has it covered with 739 sets of steps

by Hilary Daninhirsch

IT'S NOT EASY TO NAVIGATE STEPS in a wedding gown, especially when those steps are located outside.

But that's exactly what Rita Gloff did on her wedding day June 7, 1947, when she and her newly wed husband, Art, climbed 110 steps of the Rising Main Way to Rita's parents' home.

Later, the Gloffs took over ownership of the home in 1960 and raised their own children in the house located at the 110th step of the 331-step public stairway overlooking the East Street Valley in Pittsburgh. Their home had been one of about 12 located on the Rising Main Way (last fall, the house, abandoned for years, was torn down).

"Grocery shopping was fascinating," recalls Elizabeth Gloff, one of the children. "We had seven in our family. My father would park the car at a set of crossover steps, and we'd un-



Newly married couple Rita and Art Gloff climb the steps to the house of the bride's parents in Pittsburgh.

load the car and walk up about another 60 steps.

"There was never a delivery-man who was happy to come to our house," she adds.

A City for Mountain Goats
PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING JOURNALIST Ernie Pyle, in 1937, famously observed that Pittsburgh must have been laid out by a mountain goat. It is one of the hilliest cities in the country, and embedded on these hillsides within the city limits are at least 739 sets of outdoor steps.

No other city in the United States has more. Cincinnati and San Francisco are not even a close second with 400 and 300 steps, respectively, to their credit.

If many of Pittsburgh's steps look daunting, perhaps it's because they are. But that doesn't deter thousands of folks from climbing them regularly.

Bob Regan, a retired professor at the University of Pittsburgh, first came across the steps on his daily bicycle rides. Intrigued, he made it his mission to locate and map as many sets of outdoor steps as possible, even taking a two-month leave of absence from work in 1999, a time period he describes as one of the happiest in his life.

When Regan began his quest, about 150 sets of steps had been mapped out, initially by the Sanborn Maps



BRIAN OSWALD

company, which produced fire insurance maps.

"I sort of suspected that there were more than 150, though I didn't really appreciate the magnitude then," says Regan.

His journey of discovery resulted in his publishing of *The Steps of Pittsburgh: Portrait of a City* in 2004. At that time, Regan had found 712 sets of steps, but since then, another 27 sets have been found by other step aficionados and brought to his attention. He

has a new version of the book coming out in September.

The steps have long

(clockwise from above) **The South 30th Street steps in South Side Slopes; the view is worth the climb when reaching the top of the South 15th Street steps; the George K. Cupples Stadium and South Tenth Street Bridge can be seen from the top of the South 18th Street steps; the Gladstone Street steps ascend from Hazlewood at the bottom to Greenfield at the top; runners descend a set of stairs while participating in the Fineview Step Challenge.**

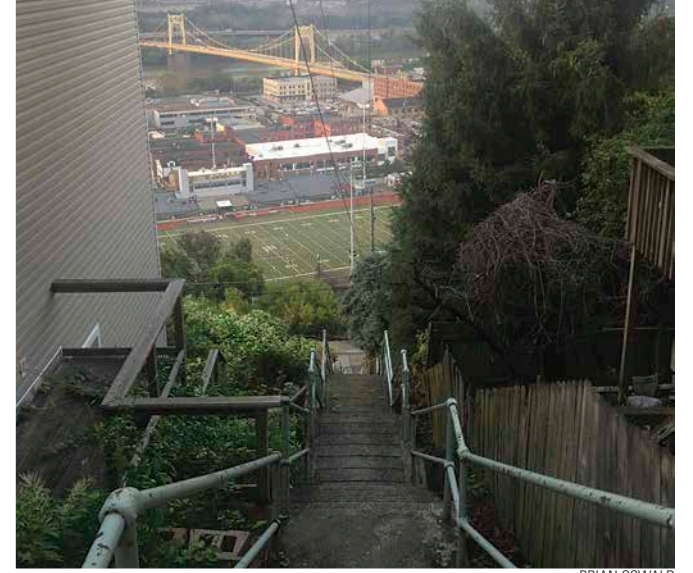
confounded drivers following maps, since approximately half of the steps, 344 sets, are considered *paper streets*—legal streets comprised of steps and complete



Allegheny County



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with street signs—that appear on maps.

Thanks to Regan's work, the city has been able to obtain some federal funding for repair of these streets of steps. The city has an annual budget of approximately \$100,000 to repair steps, says Guy Costa, chief operations officer in Mayor Bill Peduto's office. This year, the city planned to repair five sets of steps, up from two sets in previous years. Costa wishes even more money could be spent for their upkeep.

"If they're dangerous, we will close a set temporarily until the change is made; if

they are not worth repairing, we will close the steps permanently," Costa explains.

First Mass Transit System

PITTSBURGH'S OUTDOOR STEPS have a rich cultural and historical legacy: they were the primary means used by millworkers who lived on the hillsides above to reach their work along the flats of the three rivers.

According to Regan, the steps were initially built by people to climb down the hillside. Eventually, the city built them, and they became the first mass transit system

in the city. He also notes that the steps predated the many inclines for which Pittsburgh became famous.

"Even after they built the inclines, the workers preferred the steps because the inclines cost five cents," he says. As a result, the Fort Pitt Incline, for example, was replaced by a set of steps.

Economic distinctions played a role in the form of transportation used in the early part of the 20th century. Journalist Ernie Pyle had observed that the wealthy class drove, the middle class used the inclines and the poorest folks chose the steps,

Regan explains.

Of Pittsburgh's 90 distinct city neighborhoods, 66 of them can claim ownership of at least one set of steps. Pittsburgh's neighborhood leaders who recognize the value of the steps work tirelessly to both honor and preserve them.

Fineview, a tiny hilltop neighborhood on Pittsburgh's North Side, is home to 17 sets of outdoor steps. In fact, Fineview has dibs on the longest set of steps, Rising Main Way, with 331 treads, the height equivalent of a 17-story building.

"I use the steps every day to walk to work. I take three sets

Steps by the Numbers and Materials:

20+ total miles the steps encompass

45,000+ total number of treads

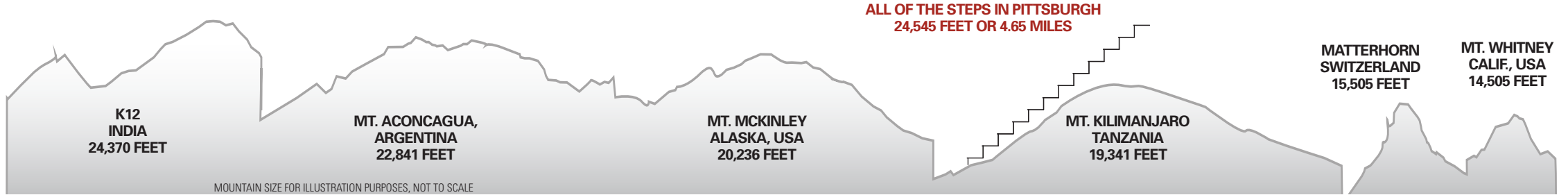
739 total sets of steps in Pittsburgh

concrete what the vast majority of the steps are made of today. Although the steps were mostly wooden in their earlier days, the city replaced many wooden steps with concrete.

WOOD what the city is currently using to replace the concrete steps during repairs since concrete is more expensive and difficult to manage.

Would you like to help the city survey all of the steps? Visit pa-mag.com/pittsburghsteps for the link with more information.

ELEVATION CHANGE Compared to Well-Known Mountain Peaks



on the way to work and on the way home,” says Jessica Slean, vice president of the Fineview Citizens Council.

“They’re not as fun on the way back uphill,” she quips.

To showcase not only the steps, but the one-of-a-kind

views from the top of many of the steps, the neighborhood holds an annual event called the Fineview Step Challenge, a competitive race that involves 12 sets of steps and raises money to maintain their upkeep. More than a

fundraiser, the race is a way to raise awareness of the small neighborhood that has limited commercial offerings.

“In a city like Pittsburgh with these hills, the steps make it manageable and add to the livability of the city,” says Slean.

Prior to the event, the council notifies the city if anything needs to be cleaned or repaired, but during the rest of the year, many of the neighbors take a proactive role in maintaining and caring for the steps on their own. This year, the community is implementing an Adopt-a-Step program to continue the efforts.

Amazing Engineering Structures

SOME STEPS, SUCH as the 57th Avenue steps in the neighborhood of Lawrenceville, have houses on them, so proper care of those steps is a must to keep residents safe.

The City of Pittsburgh will begin to make locked saltboxes available, says chief operations officer Costa, so that residents will be able to salt the steps in the winter. Since saltboxes have been stolen in the past, the city plans to designate a neighborhood

Prior to the lighting project of the 140-step staircase that connects 18th Street to Pius Street on the South Side Slopes Neighborhood, the area was poorly lit and public safety was a concern. The newly lit steps have relieved these concerns.

caretaker to keep watch of the boxes this time around.

On the opposite end of the city from Fineview is South Side, which boasts the most sets of steps of any Pittsburgh neighborhood. South Side has 66 sets (down from 68), containing more than 5,400 treads, and almost 10 percent of the total sets of steps in the city.

A large majority of these sets are still in use today, says Brian Oswald, president of the South Side Slopes Neighborhood Association. Each October, the organization hosts a fundraiser called StepTrek, drawing as many as 1,000 participants, who explore two routes of steps and traverse between 1,000 and 2,000 treads per route.

“It is a fitness testament to complete both routes; it’s a sense of accomplishment,” says Oswald.

The event raises money to help in the maintenance of the steps, but he notes that the number of steps in his neighborhood varies as steps deteriorate and must be ripped out and replaced.

“A lot of these numbers will have to be fluid numbers,” he explains. “The city won’t be able to repair all of the steps, and some will be retired.”

One of the most spectacular sets of steps that had ever existed in the city was the Duquesne Heights Steps, known as the Indian Trail. These steps were extended for a mile long and consisted of 1,000 treads, but they were

torn down in the 1930s, leaving nothing but a dusty memory and a few remaining posts.

“The steps are pretty amazing engineering structures, originally built in a time when they didn’t have the technology that we have today,” Oswald says.

Tourist Attraction and More

WITH THE ADVENT of modern transportation and multiple cars per family, of what value are Pittsburgh’s steps today?

For many regular users, the steps are not simply nostalgic, vertical monuments to a by-gone era. Pittsburgh’s topography demands them, something the earliest residents knew and had the fortitude to do something about.

“The steps are not just historic curiosities but an integral part of the city’s infrastructure,” Regan points out in his book.

“The toughest problem is keeping them up and repairing them. It’s critical for the city,” he says, adding that while most steps are in decent repair, a few are no longer useable.

Even though they have been a part of the city landscape for a hundred years or more, Regan believes that the steps of Pittsburgh are gaining in popularity as a tourist attraction. Since the publication of his book, he has learned of hundreds of people who have traveled to Pittsburgh just to traverse the steps, perhaps making the steps the newest

oldest tourist attraction in the city.

“Step climbing is now a rage,” he says.

Apart from a means of moving from here to there, folks are drawn to the steps for exercise purposes and for unparalleled views of the ‘burgh.

“They showcase the beauty of the city,” says Costa.

Slean, who uses several sets of steps to travel to and from work each day, can attest firsthand to the value the steps bring to Pittsburgh, its neighborhoods and its residents.

“Much of time we don’t take them into consideration, but they are a huge asset to our city,” she says. “They are a way of life for those who live on hilltops around the city, and they are a uniquely Pittsburgh asset that will only serve to accelerate the positive attention Pittsburgh is receiving from around the country.”

—Hilary Daninhirsch writes from Pittsburgh.

WHEN YOU GO

The 15th annual **Pittsburgh StepTrek** will take place Saturday, October 3, at South Side Park at Josephine and 21st streets on the South Side. The event begins at 11 a.m. southsideslopes.org/steprek

The 20th annual **Fineview Step Challenge** race begins at 9 a.m. on October 17 at Howard Street and North Avenue. facebook.com/events/821327011255171/

More information, including a map of Pittsburgh’s 739 sets of steps, can be found at <http://gis.pittsburghpa.gov/steps/>.

To order a copy of Regan’s new book (and others on Pittsburgh topics) visit your local bookstore or rowman.com.



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