

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: 1880-1930

-Brother James L. Coogan, F.S.C.

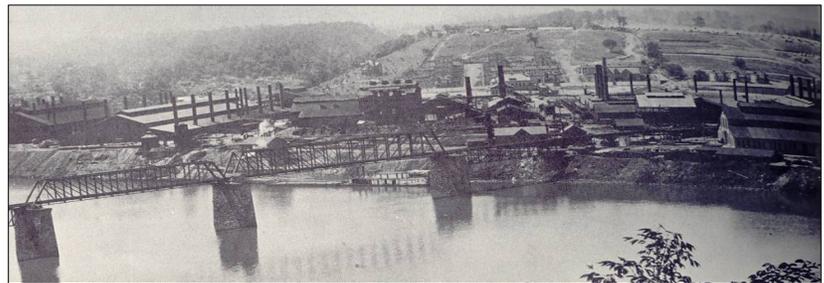
Since there does not appear to be any written record as to “why” the Quinn and Coogan families settled in Pittsburgh, the question is open to speculation. Even the little that could be collected from oral history is silent on the motivation that brought these immigrants to the same city, leaving homelands, relatives, and the pursuits that had been followed there for decades or even centuries. Whether forced by economic pressures, attracted by friends and relatives who had preceded them, or simply to shake free from unsatisfactory government control - they risked all they had to cross the ocean, never to return.

The Quinn’s Come to America

A probable date when the Quinn’s saw Pittsburgh for the first time would be about 1884. Then the city had a population of slightly better than 275,000 persons. Already a thriving industrial city for several decades, it boasted of being served by four separate railroads, miles of traction lines to connect its neighborhoods and a large number of well-established industries that were in dire need of unskilled labor.

Starting with an earlier history as a supplier of transportation, food, and building materials that fueled western expansion Pittsburgh quickly advanced to the manufacture of iron, steel, glass, paper, munitions, paper and even tobacco products. Recently connected by both rail and road to the larger eastern shipping port of Philadelphia - it came into its own as a producer of materials that even that city could not duplicate.

This city was modern in every sense and could not have been more attractive to the new arrivals traveling from the farmlands of County Limerick. Oil was discovered in Western Pennsylvania and was being refined within city



Homestead Steel, 1891

limits. Soon, electricity would be available and natural gas piped to every home and industry. George Westinghouse had invented the single-phase alternating current variable speed motor capable of powering cars that proved to be a boon to interurban transit.

By this time, Andrew Carnegie had firmly established a reputation of being the largest producer of steel giving the city a name that has remained with it beyond the peak of that industry’s fame. Through numerous takeovers he along with Frick, Phipps, Captain “Bill” Jones and others capitalized mills that were in international competition with the finest and cheapest steel products available anywhere. While their business methods were often unscrupulous and labor practices demeaning (with its 12-hour, seven-day workweeks),

employment was to be had. The Homestead strike of 1891 was proof that the worker paid dearly for his earnings.

It was not long before the moneyed class felt obliged to share their windfalls with the people who made it possible. Hence, cultural centers were established, libraries were built, hospital and facilities opened to benefit, if not the workers who had no time to enjoy them, then at least their children. By 1900, Pittsburgh had a population of 300,000 and soon the twin city of Allegheny was incorporated into the metropolis. The East End became home to millionaires who built mansions along Upper Fifth Avenue - Homewood was fashionable.



Homewood, East End Pittsburgh

Across the tracks and to the north modest homes went up away from the pollution and dirt of heavy industry. Here Irish and German families began to settle in large numbers soon to be followed by the construction of churches and schools for their children's education. In short, many of the dreams that drove immigration became realities: people could own decent homes, find steady employment and enjoy the security of stable neighborhoods.

As far as we know the Quinn's lived first in East Liberty,²⁸ at least during the 1890's if not earlier as they owned a house at 625 Whittier St. and another nearby property²⁹. John Quinn could have been employed by the Pennsylvania Railroad as a steamfitter although that has not been firmly established. One son, Tim, was a student at Holy Ghost College it is possible that his brother Jerry was as well.

Will Quinn worked his trade with the Union Plumbing Co. whose services were in great demand to meet the expanded housing market. After his marriage in 1899, he built a home on new ground in the Belmar Plan of Homewood at 922 Gerritt St., and shortly thereafter was able to set himself up in a business to which he followed for the rest of his life.³⁰ He was deeply involved in the development of Holy Rosary parish and school seeing it through the

²⁸ United States Census, 1900, Allegheny County, sheet 10, no.248, line 46, house 625

²⁹ Pittsburgh City tax records.

³⁰ Cf. Scrapbook for artifacts and photographs.

construction of three new church buildings to handle an increasing membership³¹.

The Coogans Arrive in Fayette County

At this time, south of Pittsburgh in Fayette County on the banks of the Monongahela River, a there was a large coal-mining town and from its pits came mountains of coal to fuel downriver mills.

Such an occupation at this time was both hard and dangerous. Accidents were common with the average worker seldom reaching beyond age 45. His house was owned by the company; he could only buy on credit at a company-owned store that overcharged for its goods there were no death or accident benefits. Talk of unionism was cause to be thrown out of work and home. Work stoppages were frequent and oftentimes in summer digging was suspended altogether when river levels dropped below navigable levels.

Still, in 1903 it was to this town and work that John Coogan along with sons James F. and Thomas came and to which they later brought their families from Scotland. However, it was not for long! As noted in their biographies³² the horrors of mine accidents, injuries and low wages soon convinced the new immigrants that their dreams would not be realized here.

Thus, their relocation was to East Pittsburgh, more particularly Turtle Creek. Here George Westinghouse had constructed a huge plant for the manufacture of a variety of electrical equipment. It was also here that he developed the air brake. The new invention vastly increased the effectiveness and safety of railroads across the nation. In addition, at nearby Pitcairn repair shops had been set up to service the hundreds of engines and cars in use by the Pennsylvania Railroad and it is known that the Coogans also worked there for a while. The children were educated in the parish school of St. Colman. Shortly after the death of John Coogan, Sr., the family moved into nearby Swissvale where they were financially able to purchase an attractive home at 2412 Woodstock Ave. This was more easily accessible to many employment opportunities. From there the children married and established households of their own. It was then that the Coogan and Quinn families met and the next generation begun.

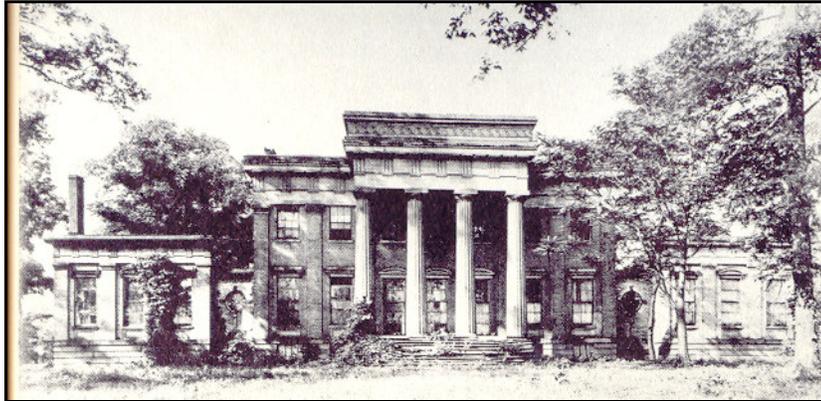
Dreams Realized

Without evidence to the contrary, one would assume that our immigrant forbearers settled in Western Pennsylvania because of the opportunities it offered at the time of their arrival. Here their families grew, became educated, and attained modest prosperity. Was there ever any thought about the countries they left? Undoubtedly, there was but men and women who came originally are not known to have ever returned even when travel was affordable to them. Nevertheless, a trickle of correspondence was maintained so that a distant relationship has been sustained over the years and even today second and third generations on both sides of the Atlantic are quite well known to one another despite the fact that more than 100 years have elapsed those first departures took place.

³¹ Golden Jubilee, Holy Rosary Parish 1993-1943, a commemorative book.

³² Coogan biographical sketches

The present generation, far removed from their ancestors, must wonder what life would have been like for them had not their great grandparents not had the courage, foresight, ambition and a trust in Divine Providence to seek a life better than the one they knew. Whatever may have been their concerns then one may say without doubt that their fondest hopes were realized many times over.



'Homewood', Residence of Judge William Wilkins, 1835