

A NEWCOMER'S PERSPECTIVE ON PITTSBURGH

BY MARY S. GILBERT

My husband's proposal that we move to Pittsburgh so that he could accept a new position here frankly took us both by surprise.

Although born and raised in Ohio, we had lived in Winston-Salem, NC, for nearly 20 years. We had developed a sincere love for the South, its people, places, and lifestyle, and assumed we would never leave.

True, we had never considered ourselves to be full-fledged Southerners. Native Southerners we met, though gracious and charming, seemed to view Northerners more as permanent visitors - granted, a contradiction in terms - rather than as adopted citizens. Perhaps the cultural divisiveness manifested in the Civil War, or the "late unpleasantness" as some euphemistically called it, still gently simmered. We never did acquire a taste for grits, sweet tea, or collard greens. By habit, we maintained our Midwestern accents and greeted friends with a "hi" or "hello" rather than the indigenous "hey."

Still, the thought of relocating to the North, and to Pittsburgh specifically, gave us pause. Our knowledge of Pittsburgh was sketchy. We knew it boasted a great airport, but wasn't this the city Charles Dickens had called "Hell with the lid off" during a visit last century? Our friends uttered vaguely well-intentioned yet cryptic assurances like "I hear that Pittsburgh isn't what it used to be." Was this a compliment or a warning?

Stirred by a sense of adventure and a belief in the positive nature of change, we took the plunge and moved.

Some differences as well as similarities in the two parts of the country struck us immediately. Others have taken time to unfold. The Shadyside Inn, where we are staying temporarily, is a prime vantage point for conducting our explorations of the East End and beyond. As a runner, I am relying on my sport to aid my discovery. Three mornings a week I traverse the sidewalks of Shadyside, making a mental note to return to shops and restaurants later in the day.

Having moved from a suburb, the appeal of an East End neighborhood like Shadyside with its intimate, upscale, boutique stores and variety of restaurants, all with walking distance, is irresistible. The tantalizing aromas from La Charcuterie beckon me to enter. Galleri Chiz tempts me with its eclectic display of

jewelry. I must have that outfit in the window at Pamar but not before I sample the sweets at Prantl's Bakery. I marvel that the proprietors of Shadyside Market greet their customers by name and permit them to buy their groceries on account.

Although our apartment at the Shadyside Inn has a kitchen, we opt instead for dinners out, wrestling with the appealing dilemma of choosing from the likes of Pasta Piatto, Pittsburgh Deli, Casbah, and Hotlicks.

As a guide for fellow newcomers to the city, I offer these initial observations (not judgments) about Pittsburgh and Pittsburghers based on the admittedly limited perspective of one month. Suffice it to say, though, what I have learned so far makes me look forward to the rest of the journey.

HOUSING

Unlike in Winston-Salem, urban rehabilitation and the updating of older neighborhoods seem to be foreign concepts. During our house hunting phase, our real estate agent explained that most Pittsburghers generally do not revamp the exterior of their homes for tax reasons. She said to judge a house by its interior, not its exterior; however, many interiors appeared to be in their original condition as well.

Also, we were astonished to learn that houses listed for sale do not include a total square foot measurement of the livable space. This was a key factor for pricing homes in North Carolina. Perhaps that helped explain the sharp drop between the listing prices and the selling prices of many homes we referred to as comparables.

Sticker shock is a reality. We estimate that our house in Winston-Salem would have sold for double the amount in Pittsburgh. This is despite being told the housing market is in a slump due largely to corporate downsizing.

WEATHER

Pittsburghers are fixated on the weather. Granted, we have not yet experienced a Pittsburgh winter, but how bad can it be? The majority of people we have met, once they found out we came here from the South, were stunned and expressed doubts about our sanity. "Are you crazy? Most people in Pittsburgh are trying to move to the South to get away from the weather. Nobody from the South actually moves here."

MULTI-CULTURAL NEIGHBORHOODS

Pittsburgh is a big city with a comforting, small town feel and attitude, say the locals. The diversity and ethnicity of the neighborhoods are appealing, considering the general homogeneity we experienced in the South. Possessing its own unique character, each neighborhood has a requisite bar/restaurant, bakery, dry cleaner, grocer, and hardware store, among assorted other retail establishments, comprising its commercial district.

HOSPITALITY

Hospitality, a virtue that if not born in the South at least was perfected there, is readily apparent here. Pittsburghers are friendly and gregarious. They genuinely welcome newcomers to their city and insist that you will enjoy living here. Drivers courteously wave you ahead of themselves in traffic. However, I detect a contradiction — Pittsburgh seems to be a place that people are leaving (note Housing and Weather), but on the other hand Pittsburghers profess great pride in their city.

CUISINE

Dining out has presented some unusual regional dishes. Order a grilled chicken salad and it is served topped with French fries or fried onion rings (a substitute for croutons, perhaps?). I hear that some chefs even place French fries inside sandwiches, rather than as an accompaniment beside them. Wedding soup, obviously not reserved for its namesake special occasion, is part of the daily fare in many restaurants. I am told that restaurateurs, in general, have been slow to adopt new culinary trends, or start any of their own, but that is changing gradually. Wine and beer can be purchased only in designated wine shops, beer distributors, or bars, rather than in grocery stores.

VOCABULARY

The Southern "y'all" (all of you) and the more inclusive "all y'all" has "yins" (or is it "yuns") as its Northern counterpart. "Wushed" replaces washed, and is used without a complete verb, i.e., the car needs wushed. Rubber bands are gum bands. Most bookstores sell a guide on speaking Pittsburghese. Buy it.

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

A lot happens in Pittsburgh, as evidenced by the calendar listings in the two free weekly papers, City Paper and In Pittsburgh and in the two dailies. Pittsburgh is a magnet for theatre, the arts, music, sporting events, and restaurants and it showcases its history in its architecture and museums. Evidently the presence of so many stellar universities, corporate headquarters, and hospitals plays a prime role in attracting the events as well as the participants.

Newcomers, if you are bored in Pittsburgh, it's your own fault. ■