
Fighting "Civic Smallpox": The Civic Club of Allegheny County's Campaign for Billboard Regulation, 1896-1917

by Kristin Szylvian Bailey

Introduction

IN February 1911, J. Horace McFarland, President of the American Civic Association, warned a Pittsburgh audience that their city was afflicted by a "civic smallpox." McFarland's audience did not have to go far from their seats to see evidence of this disease. As they emerged from the portals of Carnegie Institute, the magnificent cultural center built a few years earlier with a gift from the industrialist-philanthropist Andrew Carnegie to the city, they faced a wall of billboards enclosing the city block across what is presently known as Forbes Avenue.¹ The billboards were located several feet from the sidewalk, effectively walling off the view from the street. In 1911, people could erect a billboard in any part of the city, providing they obtained a city license and the written consent of the property owner.²

Evidence of the need for billboard regulation in the city during the early twentieth century can be found in photographs of the day. In 1915, the hillside of Mount Washington featured huge signs advertising Tech Beer and Beeman's Pepsin Gum which were intended to be viewed from downtown. Similarly, the bluff upon which Duquesne University is located was also dotted with billboards. In 1911, the corner of Hamilton and Fifth Avenues was photographed a month before Christmas. The billboards at that location featured advertisements of national products such as Kellogg's Cornflakes and local

Kristin Szylvian Bailey is a Ph.D. candidate in Social History at Carnegie-Mellon University. A modified version of this paper was presented at the Duquesne University History Forum in October 1986.—Editor

1 The Carnegie Institute was dedicated to the public in 1895. The present foyer to the Music Hall which faces Forbes Avenue was dedicated in 1907. See Agnes Dodds Kinard, *Celebration of Carnegie: The Man, the Institute and the City* (Pittsburgh, 1979), 10.

2 See: Pittsburgh *Gazette-Times*, Feb. 27, 1911, and related clippings in Scrapbooks of the Civic Club of Allegheny County, Record Group 70.2, series 5, Archives of Industrial Society (hereafter AIS), Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh.

items. Three of the billboards of local interest advertised vaudeville theaters, one of which promised "continuous vaudeville" that "positively opens Christmas Day." This billboard was directly next to one which advertised a toy store, featuring Santa Claus.³

The billboard blight that disfigured Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century plagued most major cities. Critics of unregulated outdoor advertising objected to "all forms of outdoor advertising display not relating to business conducted on the premises," usually referred to as off-site advertising.⁴ They called for the removal of the Pabst Beer sign that was located at the entrance of Philadelphia's Fairmont Park and for the prohibition of billboards on Fifth Avenue in New York City and the area around the Capitol grounds in Washington, D.C. While unregulated outdoor advertising marred the urban landscape, its effect on the appearance of the rural landscape was even more disconcerting. An early-twentieth-century visitor to Niagara Falls would have found "Coca-Cola advertised along the side, while Mennen's Toilet Powder hangs over the great gorge."⁵ Billboards surrounded many of the nation's scenic vistas including the Grand Canyon, the Palisades of the Hudson River, and the Great Horseshoe Bend on the Pennsylvania Railroad line in the Allegheny Mountains.

The presence of such advertising signs reflected the inability of various civic reform groups to convince local governments to establish an effective billboard regulatory policy similar to that of many European cities. The emergence of the City Beautiful movement, whose advocates campaigned for visual improvement of the cities, signaled the beginning of a change in public sentiment away from laissez-faire government and towards greater tolerance of government regulation of land use.⁶ Throughout American history, the rights of individuals to

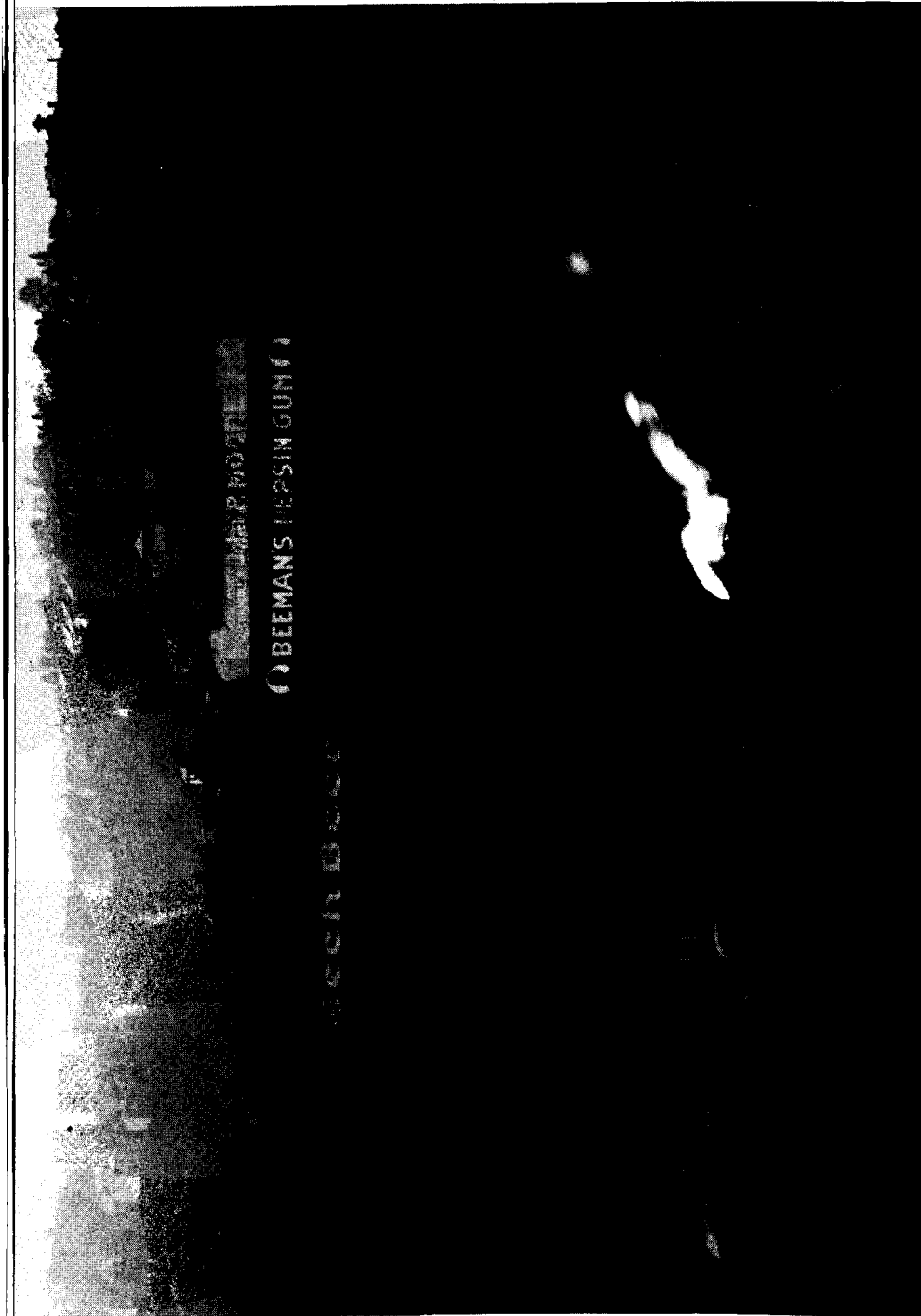
³ The forementioned photographs were taken by the city photographer of Pittsburgh. They are located at the Archives of Industrial Society.

⁴ J. Horace McFarland, "Why Billboard Advertising As At Present Conducted Is Doomed," speech given at the Waldorf-Astoria, New York, Feb. 11, 1908. Manuscript Group 85, Box 14, Pennsylvania State Archives (hereafter PSA).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ The term "City Beautiful" is a difficult one to define. Mario Manieri-Elia, in "Toward an 'Imperial City': Daniel H. Burnham and the City Beautiful Movement," *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, translated by Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 1-142, asserted that scholars should make distinctions between the architectural ideals of Daniel H. Burnham, the civic improvement movement led by Charles Mulford Robinson, the parks and boulevards movement inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted, and the movement for professional city planning. Many scholars have, however, understandably encountered difficulty in separating the above. For the purposes of this paper, the City Beautiful

Mount Washington and its signs, ca. 1915 (photograph courtesy of The Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh)



control the use of their property have been carefully guarded. However, some limits on property usage have always existed when the rights of other individuals were endangered. Such laws governing the use of private property must involve the health, safety, morals, or welfare of society for the state to exercise legally its policing powers. These measures, which have often been referred to as "nuisance laws," were transplanted from British society to the American colonies. In colonial times, some of these laws included prohibitions against the use of highly flammable materials in construction, the disposal of wastes, and the projection of signs into thoroughfares.

By the nineteenth century, a number of restrictions on land use existed. Long before zoning was introduced in the United States in the 1920s, many cities required slaughterhouses and cemeteries to be located in certain districts. Other such provisions concerned the use and disruption of natural waterways and the width of thoroughfares. While many of these laws helped to protect property values, they also served the public good. However, government regulation of land use was not viewed as favorably in the nineteenth century as it was in colonial times. As the United States became more urbanized and industrialized, legislative proposals affecting the use of private property met with increasing resistance. In this climate, cities grew in a haphazard fashion. It was not until the late nineteenth century that urban-based groups began to organize to improve the quality of city life and the lay-out and appearance of its landscape.

The Civic Club of Allegheny County's campaign for the regulation of outdoor advertising formed a little-known part of this movement for urban reform. The Civic Club was a typical early-twentieth-century reform group. It was a small, private organization made up of members from the community's business and professional elite.⁷

Movement, as explained by Manieri-Elia, "expressed a utopian order achieved by composing the most disquieting contradictions in a harmonious monument to the state" (*The American City*, 77). The best overviews of the movement are found in Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley, 1969), 47-109, and Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 262-66. A case study which concentrates on the Kansas City park movement is William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City*, University of Missouri Studies, vol. 40 (Columbia, Mo., 1964). A contemporary view of the campaign for civic aesthetics appeared in Charles Mulford Robinson's *Modern Civic Art or The City Made Beautiful* (New York, 1903). Important articles on the movement include: Jon A. Peterson, "The City Beautiful Movement: Lost Origins and Forgotten Meanings," *Journal of Urban History* 2 (1976): 415-34, and William H. Wilson, "Harrisburg's Successful City Beautiful Movement," *Pennsylvania History* 47 (1980): 213-33.

⁷ According to Samuel P. Hays, the Civic Club was one of two citizens' or-

... clubs and municipal improvement societies were formed throughout the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The motivations of these groups were nearly as numerous as the groups themselves. This diversity was recognized by contemporaries such as Charles Mulford Robinson. In "Improvement in Civic Life," a three-part article which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1893, Robinson divided the forces which aimed to improve urban life into three groups: philanthropic, educational, and aesthetic.⁸ The fight for civic improvement, then in its early stages, proceeded in some other directions in addition to the three discussed by Robinson. Nevertheless, the reformers tended to agree that aesthetic improvements would enhance the quality of urban life. As Paul S. Boyer has pointed out, in this era, civic groups advocated parks, boulevards, playgrounds, settlement houses, public baths, and city beautification in part because they believed that there was a connection between the physical appearance and conditions of a city and the moral character of its inhabitants. Such reformers believed that the improvement of the city's aesthetic appearance would provide for the

... larger happiness of great masses of people, whose only walks are city streets, whose only statues stand in public places, whose paintings hang where all can see...¹⁰

The advocates of housing reform, public parks and playgrounds,

organizations which were successful in bringing about centralized, executive political power in Pittsburgh city government. Hays found that the club's members opposed the localized ward system of political representation in which power was in the hands of blue-collar workers and individuals who lacked a professional business and administrative education. See: Samuel P. Hays, "The Shame of the Cities Revisited: The Case of Pittsburgh," in *Muckrakers and Society*, ed. Herbert Shapiro (Boston, 1968), 75-81, and "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 55 (1964): 157-69. One of Hays' students, Mary Young, wrote a paper, "The Civic Club of Pittsburgh, 1895-1945." Young's paper, which incorrectly identifies the Civic Club as that of Pittsburgh rather than Allegheny County, traces the social background of some club members. See Record Group 70.2, AIS.

⁸ Standard works on the municipal reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are Clifford W. Patton, *The Battle for Municipal Reform: Mobilization and Attack, 1895-1900*, 1940 reprint (College Park, Md., 1969); Charles N. Glaab and A. Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York, 1967), 211-21; Blake McKelvey, *The Emergence of Metropolitan America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1968), 11-12 and 53-55; and McKelvey, *The Urbanization of America, 1860-1915* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1963), 99-126.

⁹ Charles Mulford Robinson, "Improvement in City Life," *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (1893): 524-37, 645-64, and 771-85.

¹⁰ Robinson, 785.

and city beautification, whom Boyer labels "positive environmentalists," wanted to bring order to urban chaos. They believed that a morally superior society could emerge if the elements that disfigured and corrupted it were identified, and then eliminated or corrected. Unlike their earlier predecessors, these reformers rejected the idea that the moral order of the urban masses could be best ensured through personal contact with reformers. Instead, the improvements they advocated were examples of social engineering which would exert a positive influence on city dwellers by their mere presence.¹¹

The advocates of the City Beautiful movement campaigned for the aesthetic improvement of cities. Some civic improvement groups called for the grouping of public buildings in plazas or civic centers such as those designed for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 by architect Daniel Hudson Burnham. Others, inspired by the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, favored the development of parks linked by boulevards such as those designed for Boston. Many cities began to bury electrical wires, plant trees and gardens, clear debris from vacant lots, combat litter and air pollution, and adorn public sites with statues and fountains. These diverse attempts to improve the appearance of the urban landscape were often supported by businessmen, many of whom believed that enhancing the attractiveness of a community increased property values.

In Pittsburgh, civic beautification efforts were most successful in the Oakland section of the city where Carnegie Institute was located. Included in the Oakland civic center was the entrance to Schenley Park which featured the fountain "A Song to Nature" as well as several other examples of outdoor art. Efforts to beautify the downtown area were not as successful. One exception was the construction of a trolley-free boulevard, later dedicated to Edward M. Bigelow, a city engineer who was active in the establishment of several of the city's parks. This road, which was built overlooking the Allegheny River, provided motorists with a scenic route to downtown from the city's East End.¹²

When speaking in favor of urban beautification, most commentators advocated control of outdoor advertising, the "chief enemy of the city beautiful."¹³ Billboards were often found along a community's trans-

portation routes, in locations where greenery could have provided visual relief to passers-by, and were often regarded as eyesores. Others were located on the sides or tops of buildings, further contributing to the overcrowded appearance that characterized most American cities. Some civic clubs and municipal improvement societies also objected to the content of outdoor advertisements, sometimes because of the products advertised, but more often because they found the images offensive.¹⁴

Although the Civic Club began publicly to criticize commercial advertising in Pittsburgh as early as 1896, it did not actively begin to advocate the regulation and taxation of billboards until 1907. When the club's campaign for outdoor advertising regulation began, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania required billposters to obtain the written permission of property owners for the posting of advertising signs on private property and prohibited the posting of signs (except legal notices) on public property. The law's loose construction is an indication that the state legislature was only lukewarm in its determination to prohibit illegal billposting. The 1903 law did not designate who was responsible for its enforcement. Citizens were to look for infringements and were entitled to tear down illegal signs, but the penalties for illegal signposting were not a deterrent.¹⁵

The Civic Club Organizes

The by-laws of the Civic Club stated that its purpose was to "promote by education and organized effort, a higher public spirit, and a better social order"¹⁶ in the city which has been picturesquely described as "hell with the lid lifted." Politically, the Civic Club sought to ensure the continuance of upper-middle-class control of city government. Socially, one of the other thrusts of the club's activities was the assimilation or "Americanization" of the city's immigrants through devices ranging from citizen education leagues to public baths. It is unlikely that the Civic Club members, who were primarily businessmen, recognized that their efforts to improve the quality of urban life

¹¹ Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 277-78.

¹² Barbara Judd, "Edward M. Bigelow: Creator of Pittsburgh's Arcadian Parks," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 58 (1975): 53-67.

¹³ J. Horace McFarland, "Why Billboard Advertising . . . Is Doomed," PSA.

¹⁴ Mary Ritter Beard, *Women's Work in Municipalities*, 1915 (reprint New York, 1972), 303-05 and Charles Zueblin, *American Civic Progress* (New York, 1916), 348-50.

¹⁵ The Civic Club published and distributed copies of the law. See: Civic Club of Allegheny County (hereafter CCAC), *Annals*, ed. H. Marie Dermitt, 4 vols. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, vol. 1, insert.

¹⁶ CCAC, "1897 By-Laws and List of Members" (Pittsburgh: Civic Club of Allegheny County, 1897): 2-3, in *Annals*, vol. 1, unpaginated.

through the advocacy of city parks, the elimination of slum housing, and flood control helped raise public sentiment in favor of government regulation of land use.

When discussing its history in a publication commemorating its fiftieth anniversary, the Civic Club credited its existence to two other Pittsburgh organizations, the Women's Health Protective Association and The Twentieth Century Club. Little is known about the former organization. It was organized in 1890 by a group of educated, upper-class women who advocated municipal garbage removal, smoke abatement, and a ban on public expectoration, or spitting. The Women's Health Protective Association apparently no longer met under the same name after 1896, when several of its prominent members founded the Civic Club. The other organization with which the founders of the Civic Club were affiliated was The Twentieth Century Club. This women's philanthropic and social club, which was organized in 1894, considered annexing the Women's Health Protective Association as its Social Science Department, but this merger did not take place. It is possible that a separate club was formed because the women who were pursuing reform saw better chances of success in allying themselves with men rather than with a club whose purposes were primarily social. Perhaps the latter organization was, in the end, not hospitable to political activism.¹⁷ In any case, the Civic Club succeeded in recruiting no fewer than four hundred members within one year, including "many of the most prominent men and women in the community."¹⁸

While the organizing committee was made up of women, the Civic Club looked to leading male citizens for its leadership in the early days of its existence. Professor John A. Brashear of the University of Pittsburgh, a nationally prominent astronomer, served as its first president. He was succeeded in 1896 by Henry Kirke Porter, owner of the H. K. Porter Iron Company, who was elected and re-elected president until 1899.

While the structure and functions of the organization resembled closely those of the socially-active clubs in the fast-growing women's club movement of the day, its purposes were clearly immediate, practical, and reformist.¹⁹ The by-laws instructed members of the Art De-

¹⁷ CCAC, *The Civic Club of Allegheny County, 1895-1935* (Pittsburgh: CCAC, 1935), 5, Record Group 70.2, AIS.

¹⁸ CCAC, "Annual Report for 1907" (Pittsburgh: CCAC, 1908), 7, *Annals*, vol. 1, unpag.

¹⁹ Sara Essa Galloway, "Pioneering the Women's Club Movement: The Story of Carolina Maria Severance in Los Angeles" (DA dissertation, Carnegie-Mellon University, 1985).

partment to study and encourage interest in art with a "view to increasing the beauty of our parks and public places and to raising the standard of public taste in Art in all Departments."²⁰

The founding members evidently viewed outdoor advertising as a matter sorely in need of reform, for within three months of the organization of the Civic Club, they appointed a special committee to examine the effect of outdoor advertising on public morals. Its first attack came not against billboards, but rather against handbills which were being distributed on the street. On January 4, 1896, a special "committee of morals," consisting of three women and two men, was appointed to confer with Pittsburgh's public safety director, J. O. Brown, to "learn from him whether this manner of advertising is not only a misdemeanor, but an act tending to corrupt the public morals."²¹ This action was the result of the complaint of a club member who reported that a local theater owner was distributing handbills on the street to children advertising an "exhibition of a questionable character" at the admission price of five cents.²² It is likely that the "exhibition" was a vaudeville show or a motion picture such as those shown in arcades.

Whether or not the Morals Committee received a satisfactory response from the public safety director was not recorded by the club's secretary, but the club complained to him again nearly three years later. In December 1898, a Civic Club member proposed that Pittsburgh's public safety director should be requested to forbid the "posting of immodest and objectional posters," perhaps by theater owners. This motion advocating control of this "public nuisance" carried, and two months later, a letter from Brown was read at a meeting of the club's board of directors.²³ The members received a pledge of cooperation from Brown in "suppressing objectional posters and advertising."²⁴ Brown did not mention, however, how this aim was to be carried out, and one of the club's members who had met with him reported that they had agreed that "it would be unwise to propose new legislation on the subject."²⁵ Here it is possible that they discussed the

²⁰ CCAC, "1897 By-Laws and List of Members" (Pittsburgh: CCAC, 1897?), 2-3, *Annals*, vol. 1, unpag.

²¹ Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Directors of the Civic Club of Allegheny County (hereafter, *Minutes*), Jan. 4, 1896, Pittsburgh, 8 vols.; vol. 1, 101-02; Record Group 70.2 (1974 add.), AIS.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Minutes*, Dec. 2, 1898, vol. 1, 181.

²⁴ *Minutes*, Feb. 17, 1898, vol. 1, 191.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

