Carrie Donovan, Christopher Lemery, Rob Stammitti, and Clare Withers

Iron City icons

Pittsburghers yinz should know

The city of Pittsburgh has been inexorably shaped by its people, many of whom have achieved success in ways that are too vast to feature here. In this piece, we will introduce you to four Pittsburghers who were legends and revolutionaries in their own time. They have influenced our collective culture and consciousness in extraordinary ways. These individuals showcase the spirit of community and activism that has been inherent to the people of Pittsburgh over the centuries. They were engaged in the sociopolitical atmosphere of their times and left us with enduring legacies that continue to shape the heart of our city.

Joe Magarac: Folklore or Fakelore?—*Clare Withers*

You have probably heard of Paul Bunyan, the lumberjack who was 63 ax handles high and capable of superhuman feats. Or Pecos Bill, who as a baby fell off the back of a wagon along the Oregon Trail, was raised by coyotes, and became the roughest, toughest cowboy of the American West. But have you met Pittsburgh's own larger-than-life millworker, Joe Magarac?

Photograph of Joe Magarac by William Gropper, 1947. Courtesy of the collection of the University Art Gallery, University of Pittsburgh.

Joe was born of an ore mountain and made of steel. The story goes that he appeared in Braddock, Pennsylvania, where a group of young men were competing in a contest of strength for the hand of Mary Mestrovich. Joe bested them all, lifting an unimaginable amount of steel bars along with one of the competitors. He declined the honor so that Pete Pussick, the second-place winner who was courting Mary, could wed his sweetheart. Joe was a nice fellow but had little interest in anything except making steel! He was tall as a smokestack, with hands big as buckets. He would dip into a vat of molten steel and squeeze out ingots between his fingers. He sculpted cannonballs from cooling metal like a child making snowballs. He happily worked around the clock again and again, doing the work of 29 men.

Tall tales such as these, ostensibly from an oral tradition, promulgate culture. Where did the narrative of the mill hunk who lives to work and is unaffected by harsh conditions come

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from? There is a lot of conjecture about the origin of the story. In a 1931 *Scribner's Magazine*, a Pittsburgher and unsuccessful screenwriter, Owen Francis, introduced Joe and claimed he overheard the stories when working in the mills, placing the tale firmly in the oral tradition.[1] Over time, writers such as Hyman Richman of the *New York Folk Quarterly*,[2] and Stephanie Misko,[3] a writer with ties to the Mon Valley, surveyed Eastern European mill workers and found not one of them to be familiar with Joe. In 1950, American folklorist Richard M. Dorson questioned the origins of many tall tale figures and coined the term fakelore.[4]

Is Joe a celebration of the region, emblematic of the best qualities of immigrant mill workers that enabled the production of quality steel? Or is he the epitome of a good worker—uncomplaining, content with low wages, and unconcerned with hazardous work conditions?

Joe is enshrined in the pantheon of American tall tale figures, included in books like *The Treasury of American Folklore* by B. A. Botkin.[5] His story expanded to include more commentary about the immigrant experience and was captured in Irwin Shapiro's 1948 *Joe Magarac and His U.S.A. Citizen Papers*.[6]

Much about Joe Magarac is complicated—lots of folks have embraced him as exemplary. For instance, a 1950 cover story of *Boys Life* celebrated Joe's work ethic.[7] In 1943 an issue of *Folksay*,[8] published by the American Youth for Democracy (a reconstitution of the Young Communist League), featured Joe. These two very different entities held up Joe Magarac as a role model for kids. The United States Steel Corporation produced *Joe the Genie of Steel* corporate comic book,[9] which proved so popular that a follow-up comic book was created that featured Joe (inexplicably) as a genie who takes a young boy and the reader on a tour of a mill site.[10]

What is Joe's status now? You can judge for yourself by travelling 30 minutes outside of Pittsburgh to Braddock's Edgar Thomson Works. There, just inside the mill gates, is a statue of Joe, the colossus of the Mon Valley, hands outspread, smiling, as he bends a metal bar above his head, happy to be working steel.

Mary Roberts Rinehart: Life in the Raw—*Carrie Donovan*

Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876–1958) defied the conventional life of Victorian women through her career as a writer. She came of age during an economically depressed time and realized she would need a vocation to support herself, so she settled initially on nursing. During her training, she experienced "life in the raw,"[11] which took shape in her storytelling and drew her to volunteer as a war reporter in World War I at the French, Belgian, and British fronts. From this adventurous beginning, her writing career flourished due in no small part to what one biographer referred to as her unfailing sympathy for all humankind and "her common touch, although she walks with kings."[12]

Mary Roberts Rinehart with stunt plane from the University of Pittsburgh Mary Roberts Rinehart Papers.

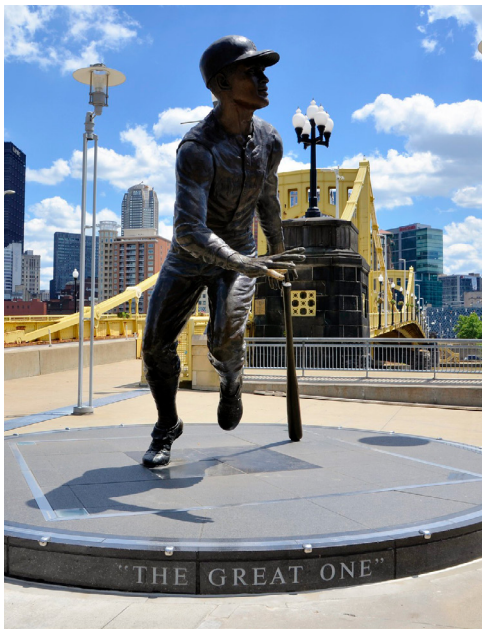
Rinehart lived half her life in Pittsburgh and traveled internationally as she wrote plays, short stories, newspaper articles, poetry, mysteries, and novels. Several of her pieces were optioned as films and her plays were performed on

Broadway, including *The Bat*.[13] The play is about a group of people vacationing at a summer home who are in search of stolen money. They are terrorized by a masked criminal known as "the Bat," whose victims are labeled with a bat-shaped sign. *The Bat* and its adaptations inspired other comedy-mysteries with similar settings and influenced the creation of the larger-than-life superhero Batman. Fans of Batman will appreciate the symmetry that situated Pittsburgh, years later, as the backdrop for Gotham city in the Hollywood film *Batman: The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and featured hometown hero Michael Keaton as the star of the first installment of the Warner Brothers' *Batman* (1989) franchise.

Through the tenacity, courage, and moxie that defined Rinehart's career, her work can be connected with other contemporary writers from Pittsburgh. Rachel Carson and Annie Dillard, the authors of *Silent Spring* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, respectively, are both Pittsburghers who have garnered incredible influence through their work. Both writers resisted traditional lifestyles, as did Rinehart, to pursue their passion for science and exploration of the environment, raising thought-provoking questions about the way we live and forcing us to reconsider our connection to the natural world. It is no accident that two authors who shaped an environmental movement were both raised in Pittsburgh during a time when it was an industrial powerhouse. One cannot help but think of the inspirational Carson and Dillard when observing the city's current steps toward climate action and sustainability.

Roberto Clemente: Pittsburgh's Timeless Baseball Hero —*Christopher Lemery*

Pittsburgh has a well-earned reputation as a sports-crazed city. While the Steelers currently garner the most attention, the Pittsburgh Pirates have a proud tradition of success, winning five World Series titles and boasting many famous players. The most legendary of these players is the larger-than-life Roberto Clemente, the Major League Baseball (MLB) Hall of Famer who played for the Pirates from 1955 to 1972.



The Great One statue honoring Roberto Clemente outside PNC Park in Pittsburgh. Photograph by jpellgen, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Roberto Clemente is regarded by many baseball historians and his peers as among the best to ever play the game. While his hitting skills were slower to develop, he ended his career with 4 batting titles (awarded to the player with the highest batting average) and 3,000 hits; only 33 MLB players have done the latter. From the beginning of his career, however, his intensity and speed on the basepaths and in right field were hallmarks of his play. As David Maraniss states, "Clemente ran out every ground ball, hustled on the bases, and thought he could catch any ball hit to the outfield and throw out any runner on the bases. . . . He had one of the most fearsome throwing arms in baseball history."[14]

While not the first Puerto Rican to play in the major leagues, Clemente was the first to have sustained success and served as a trailblazer and idol for generations of Latin American players. Throughout his life, Clemente remained intensely proud of his heritage as a black Puerto Rican while acknowledging how this heritage made him a subject of unique scrutiny.

In a 1972 TV interview, Clemente said, "I am between the worlds. So anything I do will reflect on me because I am black and . . . will reflect on me because I am Puerto Rican."[15] Clemente returned to Puerto Rico during the MLB offseason to see his family, play in the Puerto Rican professional winter league, and work on community development projects.

A key part of Clemente's legacy is his humanitarianism and empathy. Upon accepting an award in 1971, Clemente said, "If you have a chance to accomplish something that will make things better for people coming behind you, and you don't do that, you're wasting your time on this earth."[16] During his time in the major leagues, Clemente would visit hospitalized children in major league cities when the Pirates were visiting. His lifelong goal was the creation of a youth sports complex in Puerto Rico that would welcome children from all backgrounds as a vehicle for character development. He once said, "I get kids together and talk about the importance of sports, the importance of being a good citizen, the importance of respecting their mother and father."[17]

Clemente's death at age 38 is as important to his fame as his accomplishments in life. On December 23, 1972, a devastating earthquake hit Managua, Nicaragua. Clemente had been the manager of a Puerto Rican team that played at the world championships held in Nicaragua just three weeks before, so the damage and suffering the earthquake caused were personal to Clemente. He led an earthquake relief effort in Puerto Rico, collecting food, clothing, and medicine for delivery to Nicaragua. On December 31, Clemente was a passenger on a relief flight departing from Carolina, Puerto Rico, en route to Nicaragua. The plane, poorly maintained and overloaded, crashed soon after takeoff. Clemente was posthumously inducted into the MLB Hall of Fame just six months after his death.

Maraniss sums up Clemente best: "He was agitated, beautiful, sentimental, unsettled, sweet, serious, selfless, haunted, sensitive, contradictory, and intensely proud of everything about his native land, including himself."[18]

You can cross the Roberto Clemente Bridge to visit the Clemente statue on the North Shore outside the PNC Park Center Field Gate. There's also a Clemente Museum in the Lawrenceville neighborhood; tours are available by appointment only.[19]

Tony Buba's "Exploded Documentary"—*Rob Stammitti*

Braddock, Pennsylvania, is just about ten miles down the Monongahela River from Downtown Pittsburgh, and for documentarian and activist Tony Buba, these ten miles have always been at once a leap and a step away. Buba has been making films in his native Braddock for forty years, documenting its cultural and political life right on the edge of Pittsburgh's ebb and flow with the larger American film industry.[20] While the city has made its name in the film world for producing some of its most ubiquitous cultural figures (horror maestro George Romero, iconic actor Jeff Goldblum) and playing temporary haven for some of its most radical ones (silent film pioneer Lois Weber, experimentalists Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton), Buba has played Zelig to it all, working in the background of many of its productions while accumulating a filmography rich with detail and innovative form.

The Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh celebrated Buba's 40th year of filmmaking in 2022 with a screening of his 1988 quasi-documentary *Lightning Over Braddock: A Rust Bowl Fantasy*, which his production company Braddock Films refers to as an "exploded documentary."[21] The film is a perfect encapsulation of Buba's presence inside and out of

the mainstream Pittsburgh film culture. It depicts with humor, style, and a surreal blend of reality and fiction his push and pull between twin poles: a lifelong call to humanely document the state of his home borough, and the potential growth of his professional prospects in the larger film industry.

The film's conflation of fact and fiction sits comfortably beside Pittsburgh's well-worn but often larger-than-life legacy as a crucial presence in the nation's industrial economy—the declaration of Pittsburgh as "forge of the universe" from one account of the city's history would be right at home in Buba's outsized milieu.[22] Buba's prolific career, and his "explosion" of the documentary form, seeks to align our focus to what the city of Pittsburgh itself so crucially illustrates: this is a city made up of people, each with their own story; from Buba's work to the celebrated photography of Teenie Harris to the grounded theatre of August Wilson, this ability to find the human in the monolithic urban landscape tends to take root in Pittsburgh.

Notes

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8. Marshall K. Horby "Joe Magarac," *Folksay* 1, no. 4 (June 1947).
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12. Cyril Clemens, "A Visit to Mary Roberts Rinehart," *Biography* 8, no. 47 (1936–37): 8, https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt:31735062230036.
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15. Martín Espada, "Clemente's Overzealous Romp: Roberto Clemente and Baseball as Theater," *Massachusetts Review* 56, no. 2 (2015): 249–55.

16. Maraniss, *Clemente*, 266.

17. Maraniss, *Clemente*, 267.

18. Maraniss, *Clemente*, 2.

19. Clemente Museum homepage, https://clementemuseum.com/.

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21. Carnegie Museum of Art, "Working Thought Film Series: Lightning Over Braddock," Carnegie Museum of Art, 2022, https://cmoa.org/event/lightning-over-braddock/.

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