

## MEMORABLE WOMEN: VIRGINIA CAMPBELL AND MARY MAGALDI



**Virginia Campbell, a charter member of the Brownsville Historical Society, was honored for her contributions to preserving the community's heritage.**

for memorials and monuments. The business was also moved to a location on Water Street in Bridgeport (later South Brownsville). T. S. Wright was a leading citizen of the town. Virginia noted that a stained glass window in the South Brownsville United Methodist Church was donated on behalf of her grandfather.

Thomas' son, Harry S. Wright, created the original designs for most of the monuments that were produced at the granite and marble works. Harry married Daisy Dell Renbarger. Their daughter Virginia was born in 1907 in Germantown, Pennsylvania.

On a sunny summer morning in 1992, I spent a pleasant hour with Mrs. Virginia Wright Campbell at her Prospect Street home as she reminisced about her life, most of it spent in Brownsville.

Virginia filled me in on some of her family history, noting that her grandfather, T. [Thomas] S. Wright, was "the original tombstone manufacturer of the three towns." At her mention of his name, I recalled seeing an 1882 photograph of the T. S. Wright marble works located in the triangle of land formed between the bottom of Front Street hill and Market Street.

Subsequently, the firm added steam power to facilitate working with granite, which supplanted marble as the material of choice



**This photograph shows the T. S. Wright Steam Marble and Granite Works in its later location on Water Street in Bridgeport (later South Brownsville).**

The untimely death of Virginia's mother led her father to move back to Brownsville with his two daughters, Elizabeth (who grew up to marry Nelson Bowman) and Virginia. The two girls, "Ginnie" and "Libby," were raised in the frequent company of aunts, uncles, and cousins in a home on lower Prospect Street.

Meanwhile, Harry Wright turned away from the marble works business to undertake ventures in entertainment and advertising. In 1921, the Wright Amusement Company became the original operator of the Plaza Theater in Snowdon Place, now known as Snowdon Square. Tragically, Harry Wright died in 1925, leaving the management of his Wright Poster Outdoor Advertising Company to his eighteen-year-old daughter, Virginia.

As she remembered happier times during our conversation, Virginia vividly described to me her fantasy-like birthday party, held in October of 1921 in the top floor ballroom of the new four-story Plaza Theater.

It was "all one big room on the top floor," she told me. "You had to go up a lot of stairs. The ballroom ran the length of the theater, and there were steps at the far end where they had a place high up off the floor for an orchestra. There were steps you could go up and you could go out on the roof. The (perimeter of the) roof had been built up so that when you stood up there it was at least up to your waist."

"They had it finished so people could go out there?" I asked.

"It was finished," she nodded.

“What did it look like?” I had a vision of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

“It was heavy roofing paper or something,” she answered. But to a teenaged girl, it may as well have been the Hanging Gardens. “I had my fourteenth birthday up there.”

“Up in the ballroom?”

“Up in the ballroom!”

She paused. Her eyes lit up.

“Did *I* think I was the *stuff!*”

She burst out laughing, and so did I.

“Did you go up on the roof during your party?”

“Oh, yes.” She was still laughing. “It was great, because I could stretch my invitations out! I could have a *lot* of people,” she said, delightedly extending the word “lot.”

“What a place to have a party,” I marveled.

“We had a little orchestra. What kid’s ever had a party like that?” She smiled mischievously. “I must have been an awfully good girl that year.”

We talked of her high school days at the old South Brownsville High School building. As she described her activities at the school, she caught me by surprise.

“I played basketball,” she said.

“You did?” I had thought girls’ interscholastic sports was a more recent innovation. Little did I suspect that they existed in the 1920s. “Did you play against other schools?”

“Oh, yes.” She paused. “We wore bloomers!”

We both erupted into laughter again. We were having a lot of fun.



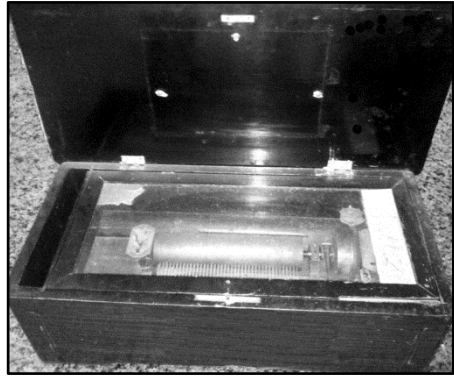
When we were finished with our talk, I thanked Virginia and prepared to leave. She took me over to the corner of the living room and showed me a beautifully polished, dark hardwood box. It was about two feet wide across the front, one

foot from front to back, and one foot high. The lid, which was closed, was hinged along the back.

Virginia carefully opened it to reveal the workings of an antique music box. A long metallic cylinder was fastened lengthwise across the bottom. The cylinder, silver gray, had hundreds of small protrusions,

similar to the “teeth” on a cheese grater. They formed a pattern reminiscent of that found on a player piano music roll.

Virginia reached for a crank that was on the outer, right-hand side of the music box. She gave it a few turns, tensing the spring mechanism inside the box. Then, she touched a button inside the box.



The living room was instantly filled with beautifully rich bell-like tones as the revolving cylinder plucked the notes of first one melody, then another. The volume amazed me. The entire room echoed with the tones. The antique music box rivaled the clarity of any modern instrument. It played a number of tunes without repeating one.



**The Barr House was originally a National Pike tavern called the Kimber House. Built around 1818 as the National Road was being completed through Brownsville, the Barr House’s main entrance faced Water Street. That segment of Water Street connected High and Bridge streets and was part of the National Road. It carried wagon traffic to and from the covered bridge that spanned the Monongahela River until 1910, when the bridge was replaced by a steel bridge.**

**The Barr House operated until April 1978, when it was demolished to make way for a parking lot serving the adjacent Gallatin National Bank.**

As it played, Virginia told me that this music box had once entertained the patrons of the Barr House, which stood for 160 years on the northeast corner of Water and Bridge streets on Brownsville’s South Side. Originally a National Pike hotel, it was razed in 1978 and replaced by a bank parking lot.

As I left Virginia’s Prospect Street home that sunny morning, the hypnotic music of the past still echoed in my mind, a charming reminder of a bygone era in Brownsville.

**REMEMBERING MARY MAGALDI**

“I often marvel at how much she accomplished with the limited resources at her disposal. I am still impressed fifty years later.”

Those were the words of Shirley Smith of Falls Church, Virginia, who wrote me to inquire about her former teacher, Miss Mary Magaldi. Shirley lived in the Playford mansion at 342 Market Street, which later became the manse of the First Presbyterian Church. Her fourth grade teacher at Brownsville’s Front Street Elementary School was Mary Magaldi.

“I’ve always wondered what happened to her,” Shirley wrote, “because she stands out in my memory as a really exceptional teacher. Does any reader happen to know when she retired and when she died?”

When Shirley’s request for information appeared in my newspaper column, the response it generated revealed the affection with which Miss Magaldi is still regarded by her former students.

Doralie Teasdale Maize of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, moved into a house on Union Street in Brownsville when she was thirteen. While living there, she got to know Mary Magaldi as her teacher and her neighbor.

“I lived almost across the street from Mary Magaldi,” Doralie told me. “Her house was at 60 Union Street between the homes of Marion Klingensmith and Gertrude Spence. Mary would sit out on her porch in the evening, and I would go over and talk with her.

“She was a good teacher and a very sweet person. When they built the Lane-Bane Bridge and four-lane highway [in the 1960s], they took our house, and we moved up on the hill near Hiller. I don’t know if the highway took Mary’s house or not.”

Doralie recently searched the Social Security records and learned that Mary Magaldi was born on March 4, 1918 and died in Pittsburgh on July 28, 1992 at the age of seventy-four. Hannah Millward Fisher of Corona, Arizona, gleaned some additional information about Mary from her collection of old Brownsville *Telegraph* newspaper clippings and local history resources.

Mary Magaldi’s father, Hannah explained, was Marco Magaldi, a first-generation Italian immigrant who owned a meat market in downtown Brownsville, several doors north of the Central Presbyterian Church (now the Masonic Lodge). At the time of Mr. Magaldi’s death in 1971 at age 81, he and his wife Matilda were living at 60 Union Street, which is where Mary lived. The couple had three children: John F. Magaldi, Sister Mary Sara Magaldi (Order of St. Francis, Pittsburgh),

and Mary Magaldi.

Mary never married, choosing teaching as her vocation. During her career in education, she taught in several different schools in the Brownsville community.

“When I was at Prospect Street School in the late forties,” recalled Hannah Fisher, “Miss Magaldi taught history to the fifth and sixth graders in a second floor room, and we looked forward to her history class. Mary had a sense of humor, she liked kids, and she enjoyed teaching. She didn’t appear to have any discipline problems, and I can’t remember her ever raising her voice. She must have also taught music, because I can still remember her playing our school song:



**Mary Magaldi**

*Prospect School forever  
Oh to our school be true,  
Loyal to the teachers and the pupils too.  
We will ever love thee  
Your praises we will sing.  
We'll loyal be as you can see to Prospect School.”*

Doralie Maize echoed Hannah’s recollection of Mary’s musical talent. Doralie recalled, “Mary had a piano in her room at Front Street Elementary School [where she taught before moving to Prospect Street School], and we would sing songs at times. I could play the piano, so she would sometimes have me play the songs we would sing.”

Brownsville native Bob Moore, Jr., another of Mary’s students during her days at Front Street School, was pleased to have the opportunity to sing her praises.

“Mary Magaldi was my fourth grade teacher at Front Street School,” Bob emailed from his home in Hampton, Virginia. “She stands as not only one of my favorite teachers, but one of my favorite people. You need to realize just how revealing this compliment is, for I have had nothing in my life but good teachers, and that includes through college. Mary Magaldi stands above most of them and certainly not

below any. Miss Magaldi was very much a ‘people person,’ which was obvious to those of us who had the good fortune to know her.

“Mary Magaldi was a natural at making the educational experience an interesting and fun part of a student’s life. For fourth graders to look forward to her class says something for her talent, interest, compassion, and just plain love of life that was so much a part of her character.

“It is not that Miss Magaldi couldn’t be firm at those times when it was necessary, but it is safe to say that she was so well liked that no one wanted to displease her or be the object of her displeasure. My memories seem to be focused on just how much Mary Magaldi loved what she did and those whom she taught. Miss Magaldi knew much more about her students than their names.

“She knew my parents well. My dad, who was on the Brownsville police force for about seven years in the forties and was then lieutenant of police on the P&LE Railroad well into the fifties, was a frequent visitor to Magaldi’s butcher shop and grocery store, which was located near the Bison Theater. My mom always seemed to know more about me than I wanted her to know, and I am sure it came from frequent ‘updates’ from caring teachers such as Mary Magaldi.

“On weekends, some evenings, and on school holidays, Miss Magaldi could be found in the store helping with the family business. Reflecting on this now, I think that two interests may have motivated Miss Magaldi to work there as she did; specifically, love of family and love of people.

“I remember Miss Magaldi attending a Little League ball game in which I played and how she was so excited and encouraging when I got a triple, one of the few hits I ever got. It was typical of Mary Magaldi, who encouraged her students in every manner that she could in and out of the classroom. I still remember Miss Magaldi’s hardy and contagious laughter to this day. If she was laughing and enjoying an experience, everyone around her was too.”

What became of Mary Magaldi after her years in the classroom at Front Street and Prospect Street schools? By the 1960s, she had become the principal of Prospect Street School, and in later years she taught at the Cox-Donahey and Colonial elementary schools in the Brownsville Area School District.

Some years after her retirement, Mary moved to Pittsburgh. One of her former pupils, Barry Kart of Pittsburgh, whose father was longtime Brownsville merchant Nathan Kart, learned of Mary’s whereabouts in a conversation with her sister, Louise.

“Mary’s sister, Louise Magaldi, was my father’s secretary for many years,” Barry explained, “before she decided to enter the convent. She

took the name Sister Mary Sara and was the head of the business office at St. Francis Hospital for a long time.

“Quite a while ago, I saw Sister Mary Sara at St. Francis Hospital. She told me that Mary was living in a nursing facility affiliated with and located beside St. Francis Hospital. Sister Sara was nearing retirement age the last time I saw her, and now that St. Francis Hospital has closed, I don’t know where she lives.”

After hearing from Barry, I learned that Sister Mary Sara still lives at St. Francis Convent in Pittsburgh. I received a handwritten letter from her in which she expressed her appreciation for Shirley Smith’s kind words about Mary. Then Sister Mary Sara passed along her own thoughts about her sister.

“Mary was a very compassionate woman who loved children,” she wrote, “and was a fantastic teacher. Mary was always generous with her time, talent, and money in helping anyone in need. It is wonderful that others still remember her as I do.”

It is said that the significance of one’s life may be measured by the positive impact one has upon those with whom that life is shared. It is clear that Mary Magaldi made a lasting impression on many of her students.

“I don’t remember exactly when, where, or under what conditions she passed away,” Bob Moore wrote, “but when I did hear of it, I remember how saddened I was. I still regret not making the effort to personally tell her just how special she was to me, and how thankful I will always be that she was involved in my life. She was the benchmark for measuring the rest of the educators in my life, and they had a tough standard to meet. I only wish I had made a point of telling her that.

“Maybe this remembrance praising her and acknowledging the impact she made on me will provide some small attempt of repentance for my youthful neglect. Even after all these years, there is one final lesson that I have learned from Miss Magaldi.

“If people make an impact on your life – be sure to tell them.”