

# A Golden Hour With America's Historian David McCullough

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David McCullough arrived in Pittsburgh like a high-speed sunrise, a blur of brightness that quickly eased into chatting about how engineers helped furnish the building blocks of America's burgeoning towns, factories and bridges.

"Engineers are the symbols of U.S. enterprise and ingenuity, and Pittsburgh shares a lot of that history," said McCullough, as he reminisced about growing up amidst belching steel mills and tightly-knit ethnic neighborhoods.

Like most rapacious young boys, McCullough said he delighted in hearing all the foreign accents at streetcar stops on his way to spend a rainy Sunday afternoon at Carnegie Library.

"I loved looking at old photographs," said McCullough, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian who now lives in West Tisbury, Mass. "They made me wonder what it must have been like back then."

It was photography that led to his first book. Published in 1968, "The Johnstown Flood" brought him national attention and set him on a path to becoming the country's most popular historian.

McCullough said he never forgot the images of the 1889 flood he came across in the Library of Congress.

"They were these marvelously clear prints taken by a Pittsburgher who somehow got to Johnstown soon after the flood," he said. "I couldn't get over the violence they showed."

McCullough said he knew little about the flood despite his Pittsburgh childhood. "All I can remember as a kid was pouring gravy into mashed potatoes, then pushing the potatoes down to make the gravy flow out. 'Here comes the Johnstown flood,' I'd say."

Working nights and weekends, McCullough finished the book in three years. But he couldn't think of a title for it. "Finally, I called my editor and said, 'Look, I've finished the book, but I don't have a title.'"

The editor said, "How about 'The Johnstown Flood'?"

The title question was solved, but a bigger question faced the new author — what would he write about next?

McCullough, 72, said he remembered the words of Thornton Wilder, the playwright and novelist who was his adviser at Yale.

"Wilder said he got the idea for a book or play when he wanted to learn something. Then, he'd check to see if anybody had already done it, and if they hadn't, he'd do it."

When a friend wondered about the history of the Brooklyn Bridge, a span McCullough had often walked across when he lived in Brooklyn in the 1950s, the idea for the next book was hatched.

"I knew about the Roebling family — that they were from near Pittsburgh — but that was it. The

first thing I did was head for the New York Public Library. The card catalogue was on the third floor, and I took the steps two at a time," he recalled.

"I found more than 100 references to the bridge, but none was a history of it. I had my second book."

"The Great Bridge" appeared in 1972, but it was "The Path Between the Seas" that gained McCullough widespread attention. Published in 1977, the book arrived about the time the U.S. Senate debated the fate of the canal treaty that called for Panama to assume full control of it in 2000. He testified before a Senate committee and also discussed the canal with then President Jimmy Carter.

"I think my fascination for bridges and engineers really began at Linden Elementary School in Pittsburgh," McCullough said. "I'll never forget the matchstick model bridges we used to make in class to replicate many of the big, old bridges in Pittsburgh."

A tireless champion of Pittsburgh, McCullough remains active in his hometown, working with the Heinz History Center, where he was interviewed for this story, and donating money to the Pittsburgh Public Schools to transport students to Pittsburgh Symphony concerts.

"History teaches, reinforces what we believe in, what we stand

for and what we ought to be willing to stand up for..." he said as his right hand never stopped moving. The pile of autographed copies grew higher.

"Because Pittsburgh was this big steel powerhouse of the world, I sometimes think of research material as the ore out of which the steel of the book will be made," McCullough said.

Since late summer, the Pittsburgh native has been in constant motion. His new book, 1776, tells the intensely human story of a tenacious band of patriots who marched with George Washington in the fateful year of the Declaration of Independence.

"To a large degree, the book is about character. In an immediate and very human way it's about staying power on the brink of disaster. The people who make the difference are those who won't give up. It's to them we owe so much. Most of all, I hope I conveyed that no one knew how things were going to turn out."

For McCullough, who credits his Scottish-Irish heritage for his storytelling prowess, history relies on memory, and memory on will.

"I like to wait for the dust to settle before starting to write, and I think that's why I'm so comfortable in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century," said McCullough, who cautiously avoids technology. He still uses a dull black Royal typewriter and refuses to own a cell phone.

When asked about his next book venture, he slowly pushes back in his chair and says he's still thinking about it.

"Or as my old Shady Side Academy athletic coach used to tell me: 'Take the hurdles one at a time.' 'I'm not quite ready to go to the next hurdle.'"