



QUESTIONABLE DEMISE

Death kindly stopped for the University of Pittsburgh in 1982, when the Coroner's Office of Allegheny County handed over nearly 205,000 files documenting untimely and many suspicious deaths in the county from 1887 to 1973. Files include witness accounts, physician notes, legal documents, photographs of reenactments (like the one above with a man posing where a train ran over someone), and the occasional instrument of death itself—a metal shard that impaled a factory worker, a sample of poison.

With support from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the Allegheny County Case File Project is led by university archivist Kate Colligan, who directs the team of Pitt students making sure the files rest in peace and not in pieces. The preservation project will wrap up this year. A sampling of Allegheny's "questionable" demises:

- A man who hitched a ride on a boxcar in March of 1890 hopped off directly into the path of another train.
- In 1892, two men were cleaning out a cesspool. One of them was overcome by fumes and passed out, tumbling with a splash into the stagnant water. The other man dove in to save him. Both met death by drowning.
- In 1924, a man zealously picking his nose nicked the inside of a nostril with his fingernail. He contracted septicemia, a deadly bacterial infection in the blood, and died on April 24.
- In September 1925, a man died of septicemia that flared from an infection in the right knee. Records state that the infection arose when he scratched at a pimple with a pin.
- In the late 1930s, a man cooking pancakes for his friends ran out of flour. The previous resident had left powdered rat poison in an unmarked bag in the cupboard and, mistaking it for flour, the man mixed it into his batter. His friends scraped by with stomachaches, but, because he ate more pancakes than the lot of them, the cook's poisoned breakfast did him in.
- After a hotel burned down in Homestead in November 1932, neighborhood men Peter and Adam Ratkiewicz and August Brezicki rushed in after the firefighters to hack off pieces of firewood for their houses. They unintentionally chopped into the support beams, and the building collapsed on them.
- When a man robbed a single mother of \$20 during the Depression, she chased him down the street with a revolver, screaming, "Give me back my shoe money!" Her bullets missed the thief, but she shot five innocents accidentally, she said. The woman turned the gun on herself and discovered that she'd used the last of the bullets. She was arrested. —*Meaghan Dorff*

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