

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Jefferson Tribute

William C. Sennett: A Man for All Eras
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‘The world is divided into two classes, those who believe the incredible and those who accomplish the improbable.’
– Oscar Wilde, Irish Poet

Both the Jefferson Educational Society and the Erie community lost a treasured friend and accomplished leader with the recent passing of William “Bill” Sennett. Because Bill Sennett was a fundamental driving force in the conception and creation of the Jefferson Educational Society, we feel compelled to offer this tribute to his rich life. Without Attorney Sennett “the Jefferson” would not exist. The Erie community would have been starved of the opportunity to experience and grow from the local think tank that has contributed thousands of programs, hundreds of nationally acclaimed speakers and a variety of important programs since its inception.

At our beginning, skeptics questioned the possibilities of such an organization. They asked if Erie was large enough to sustain and support a think tank? Bill Sennett never doubted the possibility. His affection for Erie, bold vision, and love of an uphill challenge prevailed as he led a board initiative to establish this ongoing local source of creativity, optimism, and intelligent growth.

Friends, colleagues and family members were interviewed to create this testimonial. Rather than asking them to describe specific accomplishments, they were invited to talk about Bill’s values, the underlying philosophies that drove his life, and his approaches to leadership. As interviews progressed, participants were invited to provide adjectives that best described their friend and colleague. From a macroscopic perspective, Bill’s life was driven by three powerful forces: (1) faith, (2) family, and (3) friendships. These were the core values that defined his life, from childhood forward. But to describe him simply as a man of great faith who put family above professional accomplishments and a man fiercely loyal to friends is far too simple. Bill Sennett was a man of complexity whose depth and breadth require a list of descriptors.

Irish heritage

Anyone who met Bill quickly learned that he was a fiercely proud Irish American. His family was a “gift” delivered to America during the infamous potato famine of the mid-1800s. The blight that devastated Ireland between 1840 and 1852, during the years just before the American Civil War, drove an estimated two million people from Ireland. Of those, almost one million came to the United States. The pre-famine population of Ireland, which was about 8.5 million, fell to 6.5 million during the famine and has never rebounded to its previous level. The current Irish American diaspora is estimated to be well in excess of the current population of Ireland.



St. John Roman Catholic Church in Kilcash, Ireland is where the Sennett family attended Mass.

With plans to depart Ireland for America and passage already paid for, the first William Sennett, his wife Nora, and their five children were set to sail from Kilcash, Ireland (County Tipareri) when an unimaginable tragedy took place. William was murdered on the day of departure. At the very last moment a decision was made by family matriarch, Nora, and her oldest son, William Jr., to continue to America with the oldest daughter while the three younger children remained in Ireland. The younger Sennett children remained until a few years later when their mother was able to send for them and after they were old enough to cross the Atlantic by themselves.

Nora Sennett and her two oldest children settled in North East, Pennsylvania, where they built a downtown home on Pearl Street. Two generations of Sennett men used this home as a base as they worked for a series of railroads that originally stopped in North East. When the New York Central Railroad eventually took over many of the small independent railroad companies along its famous lake-level route between Chicago and New York, the family made the decision to move to Erie.



St. Gregory Roman Catholic Church of North East was the first major gift of the Sennett family.

There was no Roman Catholic church in North East when the family arrived, but the Sennetts helped to change that. They organized a community movement to create a local church and coordinated with the Erie Catholic Diocese to establish a new parish. In 1867, the family donated a plot of land next to their home so that St. Gregory Church could be built. The church opened in 1875. Later, when they moved to Erie, they donated their family home to be used as the parish rectory.

Family first

Bill Sennett's entire life has revolved around family. As a boy he, his parents, and three sisters – Mary Ann, Jane and Peggy – grew up on West 24th Street, next to Washington Park. Bill and his sisters faithfully attended Sacred Heart Church and school. After he left Erie for college, law school, and work in Washington, D.C., Bill came home to Erie and Sacred Heart Church, where he married Pauline Wuenschel. They continued the family tradition by creating their own large and loving Irish family. Bill and his wife were married for almost 60 years, from 1954 until Pauline's passing in 2005. Years after her death and after his retirement, Bill met and married Marlene Braham, formerly of Meadville, Pennsylvania. In addition to the six children and eight grandchildren that Bill and Pauline raised, Bill is survived by his second wife, Marlene, her three children, and four grandchildren.

Bill and Pauline's children are William Sennett (Lynn) of Reston Virginia, Tim Sennett (Nancy) of Erie, Patrick Sennett (Becky) of Erie, Mark Sennett (Lynn) of McKean, Kathleen Broadbent (John) of Erie, and Carolyn Sennett (Rob Schlaudecker) of Los Angeles, California. Bill and Pauline's eight grandchildren are Christopher Sennett (Washington, D.C.), Caryn Decker (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania), Katie Sennett (Denver, Colorado), Emily Sennett (Reston, Virginia), Alison Sennett (Pittsburgh), Morgan Sennett (Pittsburgh), Nora Sennett (Fairfax, Virginia), and Jamie Sennett (McKean).

Bill and Marlene's children are Cynthia Braham, Kimberly Braham Moody, and Douglas Braham. Their grandchildren are Taylor Moody, and Ava, Bridger and Coen Braham.

Importance of faith

William Sennett was a dedicated, lifelong Catholic. He continued his loyalty to Sacred Heart even after he moved away from the parish neighborhood and was also generous to St. Peter Cathedral, the downtown church that was just steps from his law office. His approach to his faith far exceeded the typical weekly Mass obligation and minimum giving that describe many modern people. Colleagues noted his regular attendance at daily Mass at St. Peter Cathedral, where he walked from his office every day, often through snow or rain, to the 8 a.m. service. He would predictably arrive at his office early, create a plan for the day, communicate

with staff members and then depart for Mass. He did not schedule or attend anything during that sacred morning hour.

His most important parish contributions, however, were to St. George, which was much closer to the new home that he and Pauline built for their growing family. Bill was an active member of St. George parish for more than three decades and was celebrated for his involvement in the development and success of both the church and the school. Bill Sennett has been acknowledged as the quiet force behind the success of the parish near the outskirts of town. He was the chief driver in the expansion and academic strengthening of the school. At a time when trends in local education were working against private, Catholic schools, Bill pushed an uphill fight to expand the school by establishing a kindergarten, followed by daycare and after-school programs.

He accurately predicted that if a parish school did not minister to the needs of families by attracting their children to both kindergarten and pre-school, it was doomed to fail. To that end, he arranged for a group of Gannon University graduate students to conduct a comprehensive market analysis and operational proposal. It was a comprehensive year-long study, which included national best practices and essential educational metrics. Findings of the MBA team that evaluated St. George Grade School confirmed Bill's intuition: "To appeal to modern, suburban families and attract them to both the church and school, it was important to provide for their children."



Happy kindergarten children at St. George School reflect one of the legacies of Bill Sennett.

While several parishes in the Erie Diocese have failed and countless churches and schools have disappeared, St. George is thriving. The formula for the St. George parish success has been due in large part to today's school, which offers K through 8 education, pre-school and sophisticated programs before and after school for young children. St. George School programs offer nutrition, individualized programming for children with unique needs, flexible scheduling for parents who

work, and summer sessions. Fees for these programs are capped at the total cost for two children, providing an important discount for large families. All these aspects of family parish life were championed by Bill Sennett and have proven to be at the root of the success of St. George parish.

Loyal friendships

Bill Sennett's parents, B. Walker and Rosanna Sennett, took up residence on West 24th Street, which borders the south side of Washington Park. As a youngster strolling the park, Bill discovered three other kids who became his lifelong friends. Coincidentally they were of Irish heritage. Chuck Dailey and the Mead brothers, Jim and Ed, lived in the same neighborhood and the four boys became an instant posse, roaming the park, playing every imaginable sport, and hanging out at all hours. Dailey, Bill, and the Mead brothers went to Cathedral Prep (the Meads spent two years at Prep and later graduated from Phillips Andover Academy and Princeton), and Bill, Chuck Dailey, and Ed Mead remained close friends as adults when they all returned to Erie.

Catholic education

Bill's earliest influences were formed at Sacred Heart School, the neighborhood parish school. He graduated in 1944, went on to Cathedral Prep and graduated in 1948 (Bill was later inducted into the Prep Hall of Fame). Friends later said that Ed Mead, who went on to become an All-American end on Princeton's football team and came back to work with his family in the newspaper business, inspired Bill's lifelong interest in football, while Chuck Dailey, who owned Dailey Chevrolet, helped to create Bill's love of golf. Committed to Catholic education, Bill continued at Holy Cross in Massachusetts, graduating cum laude in 1952. From there he went to Georgetown Law School (another Catholic school), where he earned the honor of being appointed editor of the prestigious Georgetown Law Review before graduating in 1955. His exceptional law school record helped him gain a clerkship at Washington, D.C.'s United States Court of Appeals, where he was supervised by Judge John A. Danaher. Bill passed the Bar Exam in Washington, D.C., so that he could more efficiently serve his clerkship with Judge Danaher.

Early law career

After the clerkship in Washington, D.C., Bill returned to Erie where he passed the Bar exam in 1957 after a mandatory six-month clerkship at his father's firm. He lived at home at first, and then moved to a house in his old neighborhood while he continued at Sacred Heart parish. In 1960, he and his wife Pauline moved with their family to South Erie to accommodate their growing family.

Bill originally joined his father, B. Walker Sennett, in a general law practice at the firm of Shreve, Sennett (Bill's father), Coughlin, and McCarthy. He continued

there as a partner from 1957 until 1962. His practice focused on general law, including civil litigation. Most of the firm's clients were regional. While practicing, Bill worked as an adjunct professor at both Erie Business College and Gannon College, teaching business and constitutional law. He was invited to join the Gannon faculty as a full-time professor but declined.

Local politics

Undaunted by the prospects of a challenge, Bill Sennett became involved with politics in the early 1960s when he became a driving force with several other young Republicans in the movement to elect Charles B. Williamson, a teacher at East High School, as Erie mayor. Bill, a moderate conservative and active in the Republican Party at the time, helped to determine that the time was "right" for a Republican to become the mayor of Erie. The task was daunting. Williamson's challenger, incumbent Mayor Art Gardener, was considered then and now to be the most visionary of all Erie mayors as he guided the city through significant economic growth while it reached its largest historic population (138,440 in 1960) during Gardener's seven-year tenure. Among his accomplishments, Gardener expanded the Erie port to coincide with the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and took the first steps toward developing Interstate 79 and the Bayfront Parkway. Gardener also ushered in a new strong-mayor form of government and reformed the Erie Police Department after his predecessor, Mayor Tom Flatley, was convicted of taking part in a gambling and bribery scandal. But a split in the Democratic Party after Gardener narrowly defeated City Councilman Mike Cannavino in the 1961 Democratic primary created an opening for Williamson to spring the greatest upset in Erie political history. With Cannavino's top campaigners working openly for Williamson in the general election and Cannavino himself refusing to back Gardener, the stage was set for the young Republicans led by Art Fowler, Bill Sennett, Harvey McClure and others to go to work.

Undaunted by the challenge of being a Republican in a long-time Democratic city, Bill was among those working tirelessly on the Williamson campaign. With a catchy slogan ("Where There's a Williamson There's a Way") and a well-organized team, the campaign was a success and Charles Williamson won the election. Years later, Bill Sennett demonstrated his considerable writing talent by contributing an article about the mechanics of the campaign to the *Journal of Erie Studies* and later wrote of his group's crushing disappointment when Williamson chose outsiders to run his government.

State politics

Following his success at electing a Republican mayor, Bill Sennett attracted the attention of the Republican Party in Harrisburg. Governor William Scranton appointed Bill Sennett to several positions. From 1963 to 1967 Bill worked in Erie

for Governor Scranton as “special assistant to the attorney general.” Then in 1966 he was moved to Harrisburg, where he served as “special assistant to the governor.”



Attorney General Bill Sennett with Governor Raymond Shafer in about 1967

In 1967 under newly elected Gov. Raymond P. Shafer, William Sennett became Pennsylvania’s youngest attorney general at the age of 36, a position that he held until 1970. During the Shafer administration there was a push to nominate Bill as the Republican gubernatorial candidate in the 1970 election, but the movement failed. The fact that Shafer was succeeded in 1971 by a Democratic governor (Milton Shapp) suggests that the party’s failure to have nominated Bill was a huge mistake.

Bill left Harrisburg and returned to Erie to work at the Knox firm. In 1972, he became a candidate for the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, a position that he clearly had the experience and skills to assume. But a nasty local political struggle ensued, and he was not appointed. Years later, Gov. Tom Ridge appointed Bill to the prestigious Keystone Committee, a post that he held for several years. Ridge also nominated him for the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, but local politics prevented the appointment.

Knox, McLaughlin, Gornall and Sennett

After his father retired, Bill joined the Knox firm. And when he returned to Erie after his political career in Harrisburg, he re-joined the Knox group, where he had become a partner at one of the region’s most prestigious law firms in 1966. Bill used his time in politics to develop a new and sophisticated specialty for Erie, bond law (public finance), which had never been practiced by a local firm. In fact, it was commonly thought that Erie was too small to have a bond law firm. Prior to his work at Knox, McLaughlin, Gornall and Sennett, when regional

organizations required this kind of specialty, they were forced to contract attorneys from major metropolitan areas. Bill argued that Erie's strategic location on the Great Lakes, sophisticated manufacturing base, five regional universities, transportation advantages, and a complex multi-government center made it a perfect location for an autonomous bond law practice.



The Knox firm's staff pose at the old office library in the Meiser Building. Bill Sennett is standing, third from the right. Wally Knox (testimonial contributor) is standing second from left, and Wally's father, William Knox, is in the center sitting. The photo was taken the day that William Knox was sworn in as a federal judge.

Within a few years, bond law became a significant portion of the Knox firm's practice portfolio and Bill Sennett had drawn senior and junior partners into the specialty. Several younger partners who viewed him as their mentor spoke in glowing terms about Bill's patience in teaching them the art and science of the specialty. Eventually, Bill Sennett and the Knox firm were included in the prestigious "National Red Book" that listed experienced and certified bond lawyers. Ultimately, William Sennett was appointed president of the Pennsylvania Association of Bond Lawyers.

Bill Sennett served as president of Knox Law from 1985 until 1994. Both before and after his time as president of the firm, Bill was instrumental in shaping the company's organizational culture. His supportive and kind manner crept into the day-to-day approaches taken by both the attorneys and support staff. He continued his organizational caring even after he retired, returning periodically to gather old friends and celebrate the growth of the firm. During his years, the Knox firm grew from eight to more than 40 attorneys.

As a result of his bond law practice, the following regional organizations have benefited from the Knox firm's municipal finance practice and or have been served by Bill Sennett and his colleagues as "solicitors."

Automotive Association of Erie County
Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority
Erie Sewer Authority
Millcreek Township Water Authority
North East School District



Above is the current West 10th Street home of Knox Law with St. Peter Cathedral in the background. The firm moved to its expanded location from the Meiser Building in 1977.

New home

To accommodate a growing family Bill Sennett and his wife Pauline purchased a five-acre lot on Red Pine Lane and built a large, sprawling home with a swimming pool and stunning gardens in 1960. The new home and its acreage awakened an interest in gardening for Bill, who proved to be more than talented as he planned, laid out, and participated in the placement of trees, shrubs, and flowers.

By the time the Sennetts made the decision to move to their large country home, Bill had traveled extensively and seen dozens of professionally designed homes and gardens. And the opportunity to create a beautiful outdoor environment for his family appealed to the artistic side of his brain. Once more his ability to visualize came to the fore as he threw himself into the challenge of creating an impressive garden environment.



Created from scratch, Bill Sennett's extensive gardens are a work of art

Passion for golf

Bill was introduced to the game by his friend, Chuck Dailey, who was a championship golfer. Dailey won the Erie Golf championship and was a “better-than-scratch” player. Some say the difference between the two men’s games was fundamentally related to practice time. Unlike his friend, Bill Sennett was rarely able to play. He was simply too busy with his family as well as his law profession, both of which took priority for him. But when he played, he was good. He hit straight shots down the center of each fairway, managed to master fairway woods and long irons, and was an excellent putter and chipper. When asked how he was able to be so good and play so few rounds he did not have an immediate answer but explained that he was able to visualize the shots and they “just happened.”

Bill Sennett watched the best golfers carefully and was able to emulate their swings and playing styles. He had standing reservations in Augusta, Georgia for the famous “Masters Tournament,” and attended each year for more than three decades, studying Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and other greats.

His boys tell the story of challenging their father to a match near the end of each summer. The Sennett home was almost within sight of Erie Golf Course and every year Bill would purchase memberships for his kids who played almost daily. There they learned the nuances of that course – the “local” shortcuts and secrets that help a golfer dominate their home course layout. Meanwhile, Bill never played at Erie. His favorite local course was Overlake near Girard. As the season-ending family contest grew closer, the boys would chuckle to themselves when their father complained that he had been too busy with his law practice to play for weeks at a time and was “rusty.” As the boys got older and better and they practiced on their familiar course (Erie), they “knew” that they would finally be able to beat their father. Bill never failed to play with them at the end of each season as they were growing up, but they never beat him.

Years later, after Bill had begun to live in Florida during the winters and was playing more regularly, his game continued to improve. Relative to other golfers in his age cohort, he reached a very high level. Bill played into his 90s, recording two “holes in one,” one of which occurred after he had passed the age of 80.

Football fan

Bill Sennett loved football. He was drawn to the game by his friendships with the Mead boys from his West 24th Street neighborhood. Both Jim Mead and Ed Mead played in high school and college and Ed Mead, the longtime editor and publisher of the Erie Times-News, was a three-year starter and team captain at Princeton University and was named All-Ivy League and All-East three years running. While Ed came home to a newspaper career, Jim’s career took him to Wall Street and the top leadership of Merrill Lynch. Bill continued his long friendship with Ed over the years and he became a pro football fan through that connection. Bill had season tickets to the Pittsburgh Steelers games and eventually became a good friend of Art Rooney, long-time owner of the Steelers.



Knox attorneys in 1996 with Bill standing second from the left

Always the competitor

Much more competitive than he might have seemed to casual associates, Bill revealed his true nature one year at the annual law firm picnic. For several years the firm’s summer picnic at St. Nick’s Grove included games of bocce that inevitably led to teams being selected and pitting themselves against each other and betting. Then one year Bill announced that he was going to bring a better game. As picnic participants watched with great interest, Bill produced two large, carpeted wooden boards. Each had three openings in its center, approximately the size of golf green holes. Carefully measuring the distance between the two boards as if there was a strict international rule regarding the precise separation, he propped them up 10 feet from each other with each elevated. From a modern

perspective, Bill's game looked similar to "cornhole." But it was years before anyone had seen the modern game that is played by trying to toss bean bags into round holes.

Bill Sennett pronounced the game "(Irish) Washer-Boards" and produced a bucket filled with large steel washers to toss. They were the kind of outsized washers that might be used to mount accessories on a lawn tractor. "Inexpensive and simple," he pronounced, as he picked up a handful of washers and began pitching them toward one of the boards. Not surprisingly, Bill proved to be "best" at the new game that became a popular tradition at the annual law firm picnic. And like the old bocce contests, small, friendly bets were placed at "Washer-Boards."

Gentle, understated, and smart

In discussing the general approach to work as well as the leadership style that Bill Sennett demonstrated throughout his career, several descriptors were clearly connected. Adjectives offered by Bill's colleagues painted a vivid picture of a quiet workmanlike man who was simultaneously competent and modest. He "led quietly from the midst of teams or groups that he belonged to." One partner summarized Bill's impact on friends and colleagues succinctly when he said, "Bill was a true gentleman who never raised his voice, always supported colleagues, listened intently and made the practice of law a joy." The words competent and smart came up repeatedly. And even though he was generally perceived to be "the smartest person in the room," Bill was never harsh or overbearing.

A true mentor

Several interview participants mentioned Bill's important teaching role in their lives. For these fortunate colleagues, Bill Sennett was much more than a partner or good friend. He patiently took time to teach; to meticulously show younger partners how to practice several aspects of law and especially bond law. Bill helped to grow the Knox firm's municipal practice by carefully showing colleagues how to proceed. Instead of simply assigning the firm's young attorneys to individual clients and describing the legal problems that were to be solved, Bill took hours to explain nuances. He regularly traveled with inexperienced colleagues to help them understand how to be effective.

As busy as he always was, he took time to shape younger colleagues; show them how to do the work that was required as opposed to telling them. Bill's mentorship extended to other activities, as well. Board members and staff from the organizations where he participated in governance were often gifted with his attention.



*Knox Law partners dressed formally to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the firm.
Bill Sennett is seated on the far left.*

Family business

Bill Sennett's professional fate was determined when he was born into a proud Irish family with a father who was an attorney. B. Walker Sennett practiced law in Erie for more than 50 years while Bill's mother Rosanna Cooney Sennett managed the family enterprises and their four children, actively immersing them in their Roman Catholic faith. Bill joined his father in the firm in 1957 at the age of 27 and worked with him and his partners on dozens of projects. Later when Bill returned to Erie after a political career and re-joined the Knox firm (and after his father had retired) Bill's son Timothy also joined the firm. Timothy's wife Nancy is also an attorney. To complete the family business, Timothy's son, Christopher, passed the bar and joined the firm. A four-generation family business.



Tim Sennett, Bill's son and law partner



Christopher Sennett, Bill's grandson

Florida years

Bill and Pauline Sennett traveled to Florida to attend the wedding of Erie businessman Dave Hallman. The Sennetts had come to know and like Dave Hallman, who moved here from up-State New York when he purchased the local Chevrolet dealership from Chuck Dailey. As Hallman's automobile empire expanded, he acquired dealerships in Florida and began to live there during the winter season. It was near the end of Bill's fulltime participation at Knox Law and both he and his wife had been thinking about simplifying their Erie lives as well as spending time away in the winter.

Pauline fell in love with Florida during the Hallman wedding trip and became convinced that she and Bill should buy a condo there. Eventually, they did so and during the final years of his practice, which went on for longer than originally planned, Bill and Pauline would fly to Florida regularly to enjoy the condo for weeks at a time. Typically, Bill would have to return to Erie and the law firm, which he did while Pauline stayed on. After his retirement, Bill and Pauline regularly traveled to Florida each winter and the couple remained there for longer periods each year. In time, they made Florida their primary residence. Pauline noted that they truly enjoyed their 20 years together, the many travels to Naples, Florida as well as the friends they made while playing golf at Grey Oaks Golf Club.

Mercyhurst University

Bill Sennett will forever be associated with Mercyhurst, Erie's "college on the hill." His original connection was influenced by lifetime friend Chuck Dailey, who was already serving on the school's board of directors. But Bill's presence and influence at the once struggling women's college soon eclipsed that of his friend. While Chuck Dailey was smitten by the operations of the college and drawn to such activities as the tennis team, which he coached, Bill became an integral part of governance and strategic decisions.

Bill was drawn to Mercyhurst by its Catholic culture and mission. The Mercy Sisters, founders of the college, were an ethnically Irish order, focused upon

service. Core principles of their mission included (1) ministering to the poor, especially women and children, (2) care of immigrants, (3) shepherding the Earth, (4) eliminating violence, and (5) fighting racism. While on the surface those core values may not describe all lifelong conservatives and Republicans, they illustrate the complexity of Bill Sennett, who fundamentally agreed with them. Bill was a moderate Republican who advocated financial conservatism but social progressivism. Once more his religious values overwhelmed his apparent political positions.

Bill's vision, sometimes counterintuitive approaches to decision making and fondness for football conspired to influence a decision that is now celebrated as a shift that helped launch a small, private women's college that was trying to redefine itself. Mercyhurst has become a thriving, coeducational and comprehensive university with academic programs ranging from two-year associate degrees to graduate degrees. It currently features a broad portfolio of NCAA Division I and Division II sports. Mercyhurst's sports portfolio now includes men's and women's hockey, rowing, basketball, baseball, soccer, lacrosse, and other sports. But one of the decisions that propelled this success was Mercyhurst's entrance into intercollegiate football.



The beautiful Mercyhurst campus

As testament to Mercyhurst's bold approach to growth, the school announced it would field a football team at a time when many colleges and universities were abandoning the sport because of its enormous expense. Similar to when the school launched a men's basketball program shortly after going co-ed, the decision to start a football program paved the way to success for Mercyhurst. How does a small women's college quickly add a significant number of male students? The answer, which was championed by Sennett and then-Mercyhurst President William P. Garvey, was to recruit scores of male student-athletes. And a further challenge was to do it without the ability to offer athletic scholarships, since Mercyhurst started several sports programs, such as football, on the Division III level. Today, Mercyhurst hockey is a Division I sport, and the marquee football and basketball programs compete in Division II.



NCAA football, along with several other sports, now helps define Mercyhurst University.

William Sennett served on the Mercyhurst Board of Directors for 40 years, including 13 as board chairman. At the time of his resignation, he was honored as an emeritus board member, and the executive meeting room was named for him. Later, and at the time of his passing, Mercyhurst President Dr. Kathleen Goetz listed Bill's many contributions and announced a new scholarship established in his name.

Book Club

Bill Sennett was a loyal, 45-year member of Erie's premier book club. Initiated by then-President Garvey, the club pursued the intellectual content of several contemporary published works each year. They began each new season by nominating and voting for books that they planned to read. And they did much more than just read the books. They disassembled and analyzed them, often turning them into elaborate field trips and inviting experts (sometimes the book authors) to attend meetings and lead discussions. The book club was one of the rare groups that selected challenging works to read and made sure that members actually read all the materials.

In one instance, the book club read a series of works on the American Civil War and then traveled to Gettysburg to walk the battlefield. Members stayed for several days as they were hosted by local experts, including academics who discussed the war in general and the impact of Gettysburg in particular. It was that trip and its books that were responsible for inspiring Bill Sennett's subsequent lifetime interest in the Civil War as well as his charter membership in the Gettysburg Foundation.

When a book club member suggested that the club adopt one of the five-book Lake Erie Quadrangle series books written about local and Lake Erie history, it was determined that any single one of the books was insufficiently deep or complex to merit consideration. Because the books were local and published by the Erie

County Historical Society, however, there was a compromise. Members purchased and read the entire five-book series, engaged the author to lecture and answer questions, and then launched a two-day field trip to the Ontario side of Lake Erie.

After each season's target books had been selected, the members used their connections with Mercyhurst to bring related films to that year's "Wednesday Evening Film Series." That allowed the members to further explore and discuss book topics. If there was no film taken directly from one of the select books, related movies were shown so that the book context could be discussed.



Mercyhurst's DeAngelo Performing Arts Center showed films related to "book club" picks.

Civic leadership

Bill Sennett contributed his considerable vision and talent to many regional organizations, often at the precise times when those organizations were most threatened and in need. He was not the kind of board member who joined highly successful organizations for the sake of being on a board. His community contributions are punctuated by participation on the boards of fledgling organizations or ones facing great challenges. But they were always organizations with missions he believed in. His work on those boards was characterized by intelligent and often counterintuitive approaches to helping the organizations where he worked to right themselves from difficult circumstances and to thrive. The following organizations represent a partial list of Bill's board participation:

- American Automobile Association (President)
- Erie County Bar Association (Chancellor)
- Erie County Historical Society
- Hamot Hospital
- Jefferson Educational Society
- Mercyhurst College (Chairman)
- Erie Club (President)

Erie County Historical Society

One of the most stunning examples of Bill Sennett's brilliance is evident today at West Sixth and Chestnut streets in the form of the emergent Hagen History Center, which is now flourishing. Bill was elected to the Board of Directors at the Historical Society's darkest hour. The organization had just merged with the "Erie Historical Museum," which had been operated by the Erie School District. Shortly after the merger, the newly expanded organization was experiencing severe financial distress. The merged organization was being governed by an oversized board that had been created by simply combining the two former sets of directors. Stock market issues and financial mismanagement had devastated the endowment and the operational budget was well in the "red." There was serious talk of shuttering the entire organization and selling off assets when Attorney Sennett arrived. In his typical counterintuitive and persuasive style Bill slowly convinced the board to persevere, hire a new director and reimagine itself.

During his board tenure an endowment campaign was launched, high-profile speakers that included Ken Burns and Bob Ballard ("Titanic") were brought to Erie to celebrate the society, new exhibits and programs were created, and the annual budget was balanced. Thanks to his wisdom and perseverance a new historical society emerged on a beautiful West Sixth Street campus. It has expanded to include new buildings on acquired land (purchased during Bill's tenure) behind the original Watson-Curtze Mansion, and original historic buildings, including the mule house once used by the Erie to Pittsburgh Canal, have been restored.



Recent major development of the Hagen History Center campus has been spearheaded by Tom Hagen, but Bill Sennett's leadership helped set the stage for its resurgence.

Civil War scholar

As a result of his involvement in the “book club,” Bill became interested in the American Civil War, and particularly the battlefield at Gettysburg. Within a few years he accumulated and read dozens of acclaimed books, both about the war and the battle. He also became a charter member of the Gettysburg Foundation. During his early years of the Erie County Historical Society Board of Directors, he initiated another of his seemingly counterintuitive strategies. At the worst of fiscal times for the society, he hosted the Gettysburg Foundation at the Watson-Curtze Mansion, where they invited dozens of influential locals to a reception designed to solicit financial support for Gettysburg. The idea to host the Gettysburg group seemed dysfunctional to most of the board members since ECHS had just announced, and was in the midst of, its own endowment campaign. But Bill gently continued to explain his reasons for the event, eventually persuading the rest of the board to move forward with the reception.

Once more, Bill Sennett was correct. When the financial fallout from the Gettysburg event had been calculated, both organizations were enormously successful. The Gettysburg group gathered several new friends and supporters and so did the Erie County Historical Society. A temporary exhibit of Civil War artifacts was arranged on the first floor of the Watson-Curtze Mansion, which was quite a hit with invited Gettysburg Foundation guests, and as a result several new members were attracted. But there were also several donations to the ECHS Endowment.

Lasting legacy

After listing Bill Sennett’s many accomplishments and contributions it might seem difficult to isolate the one that best represents his long life. But it is not. In 2009, he endowed Mercyhurst College (now University) with the “William C. Sennett Mercy and Catholic Studies Institute.” At the time of the gift, he included his longtime friend and former Mercyhurst board member, Chuck Dailey, as co-founder. Bill was concerned that the college might drift from its Catholic identity and wanted to insure that interested students would be able to continue to study the Roman Catholic faith in perpetuity.

The core mission of the institute is to provide an academic minor that would include a variety of college courses in religious studies as well as an ongoing budget to be used to sponsor visiting scholars as well as public lectures and programs that would help preserve and define the Catholic faith. Funds from the endowment were set aside to compensate an ongoing director for the institute and to that end the first director, Dr. Mary Hembrow Snyder, was selected and installed.



Institute students frequently meet to discuss their faith.

Glowing example

One story that emerged from the interviews seems to best summarize Bill's life and values. Recently, one of his granddaughters showed an interest in attending Mercyhurst University. Bill was delighted. He continued to talk with her about the choice and encouraged her to select Mercyhurst. Bill asked her to let him know when she was scheduled to attend a campus orientation visit. On that day, Bill picked her up, drove her to campus and attended the entire orientation with her. Bill walked the campus with his granddaughter, visiting academic buildings, the library, the chapel, and the cafeteria, where he had lunch with students and family members who were on the tour. Bill Sennett's granddaughter is currently attending Mercyhurst University.



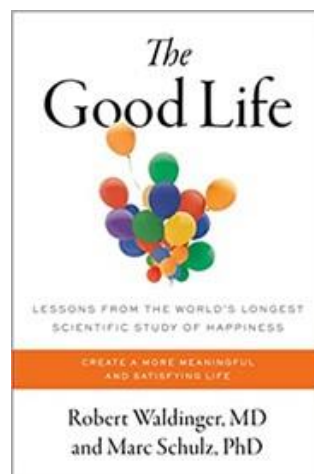
A new student-family orientation tour of the campus

Editorial Notes:

1. *Thank You: Wallace “Wally” Knox, Bill Sennett’s friend and law partner, labored over this testimonial. He provided many of the stories during the interviews, then read and edited final drafts. Tim Sennett, Bill’s son and law partner, was also an important source. Tim provided many of the photographs herein. Law partners Tom Tupitza and Ed McKean were other primary sources.*

2. *From the author: My academic training and professional experience has been in organizational psychology, a hybrid discipline that seeks to improve both job satisfaction and productivity for participants of all kinds of work organizations. In explaining the importance of job satisfaction to people who are less than familiar with the discipline, organizational psychologists often point to the connection between general happiness and job satisfaction. It is rare to find a person who is generally happy with his or her job while being unhappy in general. Life and job satisfaction are clearly connected, which suggests that the work of organizational psychologists must include efforts to improve general life satisfaction (subjective well-being).*

Providentially as I was developing this “testimonial” to Bill Sennett, a new book was published. “The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness” was released, adding a contemporary summary to an amazing 80-year study. Authors Marc Schultz and Robert Waldinger, directors of the study, summarize the decades of reporting on one of the most amazing studies in the history of applied psychology. There have been scores of technical journal articles as well as episodic publications describing the essential ingredients of a happy and fulfilling life, but this new book may be the very best summary to date.



The new book features a Harvard study aptly describing the rich life of Bill Sennett.

The Harvard study is beyond amazing. It has managed to follow several participants for more than 80 years, gathering detailed questionnaires and medical data, episodically. Lessons from the study have spread to other studies as well as a series of ongoing college courses in happiness, the most notable of

which is currently offered at Harvard and has been cited dozens of times in places like the Wall Street Journal and New York Times. Results of the study seem counterintuitive, quite like Bill Sennett. Be generous, do nice things for people without expectations, take responsibility for your own happiness even at a job, and more. For me, reading this new book as I was writing about Bill Sennett provided a vivid lesson. Working with Bill on several projects over the years demonstrated real-world lessons in the “theoretical” conclusions from the Harvard study. The combined results of the study define Bill Sennett.

It was my privilege to have known him and my joy to have been asked to write this testimonial.

Godspeed,
David Frew
March 2023

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



