

PITTSBURGH IN 1837

As seen by an Eastern Physician

In 1837 Edward Jarvis, then 34, moved himself and his family from Concord, Massachusetts to Louisville, Kentucky, where he sought to make a new start in medicine. In the course of the trip--by stage, railroad, canal and river boat--he stopped off to see friends in Pittsburgh, already a city of nearly 20,000 and a vigorous manufacturing center. The following is a considerably abridged version, slightly edited and rearranged, of the ten page section on Pittsburgh in Jarvis's journal account of his trip west.

The city of Pittsburgh is situated on a point of land between the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers on a clayey soil, surrounded by high hills, which come almost to the rivers. Coal is found near the top of these hills, dug out and in some places sent down in troughs; at others, in little cars on rail roads to the foundries or shops below. At others, it is sent down to be discharged into boats, big flat boats, which anchor under the hill. I saw a dozen or twenty of them loading and waiting for loads.

Pittsburgh is a smoky dirty city. The first thing that strikes the eye on approaching the city is the cloud of black smoke that hangs over it. The immense coal fires from the furnaces, forges, and engines throw up such an incessant smoke that it has no opportunity to escape. There are more than 120 steam engines continually at work, all driven by coal; nothing else is burned in this city. This smoke is charged with flakes of soot which are perpetually dropping down upon the houses, upon the stores, and on the public buildings; upon the merchandize, upon the books, upon the people and the clean linen--every thing is tinged with it. However, it was a beautiful sight in a clear still day to see the columns of fire blaze out of the tall furnaces, then the gracefully curling columns of black smoke rolling up in thick and spreading volume, mixed with the intermitting jets of white steam from the numerous engines.

This is a place of very great business. I was surprised at the extent of the manufactures and the trade. The iron manufacturing of every sort is immense. It is carried on without suspension from Monday morning till Saturday night, and different sets of hands supply each others places night and day. The approach to [one of the factories] was as if to a great volcano, so bright were the immense fires.

This iron business is exceedingly profitable. The investments, I was told, pay 30 to 40 percent profit clear of all expenses. Steam engines, nails, cutlery, ploughs, and every sort of casting are here made. In one foundry cannon are cast. One manufactory makes about

100 ploughs a day. And all this iron is sold in the west; none goes to the east. Many steam boats are built here. Timber is brought down the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers and sold here. Much more goes by the city in huge rafts.

I found my townsman Dr. Merriam, married, living in an obscure part of Pittsburgh, [and practicing medicine] in a small house. He has been here 13 months. He said, the first week he got no business, the second week he got a little, and the third week made up the deficiency of the two preceding, and after that, he made a profit each week. He is an economist [economizer] and a money making man. I suppose few would be able to lay by so much. He advised me to stop in Pittsburgh, said there was business enough and plenty of it. There are many physicians, but all get along well; many are rich. Stone says the profession there is not well educated. He seems to have but little confidence in them.

There are several schools here, public and private, and an abortive attempt at an university, which is now merely a high English school equal to a second rate academy in Massachusetts. There is a theological school perched upon the top of a very steep hill as if a man wanted always to live on a steeple. The people of this land are fond of show. I know not how much moral and spiritual light they shed over their neighborhoods, but yet there is much intellectual and spiritual darkness to be cleared away.

Pittsburgh is a very rich and busy place; never did I see a people so exclusively devoted to business. Every body is at work or walking fast. I saw no loungers, no gentlemen of leisure, no ladies walking to air themselves (or besoot themselves), no idlers about the groceries, no loafers about the markets or taverns; all men active with something doing or to be done. The people are not cultivated, not polished, not genteel. I saw not one, who would pass for genteel in Philadelphia or Boston. The ladies were not dressed in taste. They have very little time or taste for books or the refinements of the older cities, but all are active and hurried, laborious, money getting.

I was sick with cold, headache and nausea most of the time.

These excerpts have been compiled by James H. Cassedy from Edward Jarvis's manuscript journal, "Concord to Louisville, 1837," which is in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine in Boston. They are distributed to participants in the Pittsburgh meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine, May 3-5, 1979, with the kind permission of Richard J. Wolfe, Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts.