THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF CHARLES "TEENIE" HARRIS

Ralph Proctor

Editor's Note: Charles "Teenie" Harris photographed the events and daily life of African Americans for the Pittsburgh Courier, one of the nation's most influential Black newspapers (see Trailblazers in this edition). One of the paper's principal photographers from 1938 to 1975, Harris documented nearly all of the notable events in the city at that time, as well as a wide range of activities in daily life, including Little League games, weddings, church groups, night-life, and beauty pageants. In 2001, the Carnegie Museum of Art purchased Harris' archive of nearly 80,000 photo-graphic negatives. The archive, a richly detailed record of the lives of public personalities and ordinary individuals, is considered one of the most important visual records of twentieth-century African American life. Ralph Proctor, Ph.D., offers a personal appreciation of Teenie Harris in this essay written specifically for this special edition of Pennsylvania Heritage commemorating the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's annual theme for 2010, "Black History in Pennsylvania: Communities in Common."

A photographic collection held by Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art reflects the life's work of a remarkable individual, Charles "Teenie" Harris (1908–1998), a freelance and staff photographer from 1938 until his retirement in 1975 for the internationally renowned Pittsburgh Courier. Founded in 1910, the Courier was the premier Black-owned newspaper in the world. At the height of its prominence, the Courier, headquartered in Pittsburgh, also published national editions that were distributed throughout the United States by members of the largely African American Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters employed by the nation's vast railroad system.

There can be no doubt about the importance of the words on the pages of the Courier; it was the voice of the Black community. It informed, it educated, and it strongly advocated for justice and equality. At the same time, no one can underestimate the importance of images that also informed people about the events covered by the Courier. Those
moving, informative, sad, provocative, joyous, and heart-felt images came primarily from the camera lens of Teenie Harris.

While Teenie’s primary concern was providing photographs for publication by the Courier, he was much more than a photojournalist. He became an icon. All the youths in Pittsburgh’s Black neighborhoods came to recognize “Mr. Harris” and realized that there was some magic link between this man, his camera, and fame. If you could just get “Mr. Camera Man,” as he was often called, to stop and allow you to strike a pose while he clicked his camera, you too had a shot at fame. I was one of those youngsters following Teenie and

*Charles “Teenie” Harris*

- **1908**
  - Born Charles Harris to William F. and Ella May “Olga” Taliaferro Harris, owners of the Maslo Hotel in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, on July 2.

- **circa 1921**
  - Completed eighth grade at the Watt School (now the Robert L. Vann School) in the Hill District.

- **1926**
  - Played for and coached the Paramount Athletic Club basketball team (later the Hotel Bailey Big Five team).

- **mid to late 1920s**
  - Worked at the Maslo Hotel and for his brother William “Woogie” Harris, numbers game baron and owner of the Crystal Barber Shop on Wylie Avenue.

A young woman knelt on the sidewalk with two small dogs beside a garden fence for a photograph, circa 1940–1950.

A stylishly dressed bride and groom posed for their portrait on the steps of a house numbered 5913, circa 1940–1950.
screaming, "Take my picture! Take my picture!" Teenie was never too busy to help the children indulge in this bit of fantasy. We vowed that we would someday do something important so the newspaper would send Teenie out to take our photograph!

The African American community embraced the charming Harris, affectionately nicknamed for his diminutive stature. Without hesitation, we invited him into our homes for weddings, funerals, baptisms, birthday parties, anniversaries, and other momentous family events. He photographed Pittsburgh's Blacks, but never exploited his subjects. Somehow we were assured of the importance of our events if Teenie was there. The same went for civic events and other happenings: churches, fraternal organization, civic groups, and civil rights organizations had to have Teenie at their events. Furthermore, a remarkable number of beautiful women were also eager to have "Mr. Teenie" photograph them. There were other photographers during Teenie's reign, but our presence simply did not assure people that they, or their events, were of prime importance. When one of the "other" photographers arrived at an event, camera in hand, you could see others looking over our shoulders to see if Teenie was also there.

Teenie not only covered events for the Courier, but he was a familiar figure at entertainment venues. He also photographed people walking down the street, sitting on their front porch, having a drink at a bar, or waiting at a beauty salon or barber shop. Of course, he photographed the famous; presidents and would be chief executives, sports figures, and entertainers. His remarkable portfolio contains images of the famous, the infamous, and just ordinary folks. His images tell the story of both the good times and the bad times of Pittsburgh's African American community. While you will recognize many notable people in his photographs, you are just as likely to see images of a woman who lived in the neighborhood, the druggist, or Aunt Mary and Uncle Joe.

Teenie operated his private photography studio on Centre Avenue, the bustling Black business district in Pittsburgh's Hill District. The neighborhood—simply known as "The Hill" to locals—was the most famous of several African American enclaves in Pittsburgh. Other Black neighborhoods included Homewood (where Harris and his second wife, Elsa Lee Elliott Harris, and their four children lived), Manchester, Beltzhoover, the West End, and the North Side. The Hill was the proverbial
“place to be”; it was Pittsburgh’s counterpart to New York’s Harlem. In fact, it was known as “Little Harlem” from the 1930s through the 1950s. It was home to the city’s most famous places for musical entertainment, which attracted enthusiastic audiences and celebrity performers.

Duke Ellington at the piano with dancer Honey Coles clowning for the camera on top while Billy Strayhorn smiled in back at the Stanley Theatre, circa 1942–1943.
Jerry Sumpter and barber Clarence Williams posed inside William "Woogie" Harris' Crystal Barber Shop on Wylie Avenue, in the Hill District, circa 1952.

William "Woogie" Harris and Cab Calloway at the Loendi Club, April, 1938 (detail).

Group portrait of the Homestead Grays, including Seward "See" Posey (seated in front center), photographed on Forbes Field, circa 1941.

Many of these individuals stopped by Teenie's photography studio. Many of the important photographs in the Charles Teenie Harris Archive were taken in his studio. The remarkable studio collection is a treasure trove of period fashions, elaborate hairstyles of the women, and portraits of famous people. In addition to providing material for many exhibitions, it also offers exceptionally valuable research opportunities. With this remarkable photographic archive, students and scholars now have the opportunity to research the life and career of Teenie and the changing events in the lives of Pittsburgh's African Americans.

His photographs record a rich tapestry of life in a vibrant community that thrived despite racism and discrimination. You can get a glimpse of the Negro Baseball League and see some of the finest players ever to don a uniform. You will find that Pittsburgh was the only city to have two such teams, the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, both financed by well-known numbers game barons William A. "Woogie" Harris (1896–1967), the photographer's older brother and owner of the Crystal Barber Shop, and William Robinson and Walter
Augustus "Gus" Greenlee (1893–1952), owners of the Crawford Grill, a renowned jazz club which enjoyed its heyday from 1931 to the 1950s. (When Greenlee opened the first of the three Crawford Grills at the corner of Wylie Avenue and Crawford Street, he was known as "King of the Hill.") Other photographs capture most of the rhythm and blues and jazz musicians that played in Pittsburgh and surrounding communities, as well as the nightclubs such as the Crawford, the Hurricane Lounge, and the Savoy Ballroom. There are images of the segregated movie theaters in the Black community, including the New Granada, the Roosevelt, and the Rhumba. Many images document African American groups meeting in the basements of churches because white-owned meeting halls and hotels would not allow African Americans to use their facilities. Teenie photographed

1953
Closed the Harris Studio on Centre Avenue and moved darkroom to his Mulford Street residence.

1975
Retired from the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

1986
Signed a management agreement with Pittsburgh artist and entrepreneur Dennis Morgan for the collection of images, which is housed at the University of Pittsburgh until 1988.

University of Pittsburgh organized the first public exhibition of Teenie Harris photographs.

1988
Morgan formed the *Pittsburgh Courier* Photographic Archive, a commercial venture, based on his negatives by Harris and other photographers.

1991
PHMC passed a resolution recognizing Harris for his "outstanding contribution made to the documentation of the African American community of Pittsburgh."

Three elderly women on the porch of the Lemington Home for the Aged, on Lemington Avenue, circa 1940–1950 (detail).
Teenie's camera caught Nat "King" Cole entering an Owl Cab Company taxi with Cole's wife Maria in February 1947 in the Hill District.
many African American businesses which prospered before misguided urban renewal—often decried by critics as "urban removal"—gutted the soul of the community. He recorded civil rights leaders and the events in which they participated. His photographs bore witness to baptisms, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, and funerals—the complete cycle of life.

Each photograph is important as a memory marker. Equally significant is the fact that behind each image is a story that must be told and documented. For example, one photograph records people climbing into an Owl Cab Company's taxi. One of the individuals is Nat "King" Cole (1919-1965), a leading jazz pianist whose soft baritone voice brought him international fame. While the photograph of the celebrated crooner is,
Children in Halloween costumes posed in front of a florist shop on Centre Avenue in the Hill District, circa 1940–1946.

John Nelson Jr. was captured in this photograph licking the icing from his cake as his guests watched at his birthday party in the Nelson home, 2224 Tustin Street, July 1946.

in itself, important, what is most significant is the story behind Owl Cab. An African American, Silas Knox, established the company in 1948 on The Hill because white cab companies, including Yellow and People’s, refused to serve the African American community. Another image depicts housing in The Hill. A close examination shows galvanized tin tubs hanging from rear windows. What is important was that the tubs indicated that the houses did not have bathtubs. There are many such stories hidden behind the photographs taken by Teenie and they must all be documented.

Harris was a superb photographer. Some photographers excel at technique, able to create images that are perfectly exposed technical marvels, but their photographs may not “speak” to you. Teenie’s images might not always be technically perfect. Nonetheless, his photos not only informed; they reached out and touched your heart, moved your soul, brought a tear to your eye, or a smile to your face. They transported you back to a happier time or rekindled a memory long forgotten. They still do so, many years after Teenie first tripped the shutter of his Speed Graphic camera.

Teenie was an unassuming individual who did not consider himself famous. Even in the latter years of his life, he could not understand what “all the fuss” was about over several boxes of negatives that he made many years earlier. Fortunately, for all of us, Charles Teenie Harris provided us with a legacy equal to any photographic legacy left by the nationally famous, highly paid photographers. Their skills were no better, their visions no more profound, and their community impact no more important than Charles Teenie Harris.
FOR FURTHER READING


Harris photographed a woman lounging on a wooden porch bench while a child gazes at the camera in the foreground, circa 1959.