The Carnegie Medal

By Timothy Nathan Pinnick

Researchers are constantly in search of any kind of information that will help tell the story of their ancestors. From the incarceration record of great uncle Fred doing a stretch in Menard Prison in downstate Illinois to the prohibition-era mug shot of cousin Billy nestled in the regional branch of the Washington State Archives in Ellensburg, all finds help when it comes to placing meat on the bones of family members.

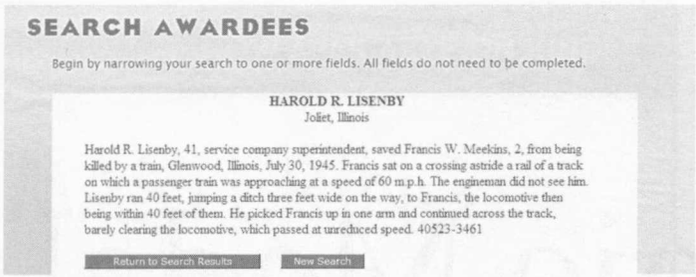
Many unique records have been uncovered by genealogists that allow us to compile a more substantial profile of the lives of the average person. Most provide small, albeit important, events; on occasion we discover resources that reveal common people performing extraordinary deeds.

The Carnegie Hero Fund Commission

Andrew Carnegie was one of the most influential industrialists of the late nineteenth century and owned dozens of companies, including the largest steel producing operation in the world. His critics, particularly the ones with strong ties to organized labor in the coal-mining and steel industries, felt that the self-made millionaire accumulated his wealth at the expense of his workers.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the businessman had devoted his time and energy to philanthropic endeavors. Carnegie spent millions to build libraries, but not all his efforts were quite so visual.[1] A large coal mine explosion near Pittsburgh in 1904 and the heroic efforts of two rescuers led the millionaire to set aside $5 million to establish a fund to celebrate and support such actions.[2]

The website of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission provides many of the details surrounding its creation and the criteria for selection. "To recognize persons who perform acts of heroism in civilian life in the United States and Canada, and to provide financial assistance for those disabled and the dependants of those killed helping others"[3] is put forth as the primary mission. It goes on to state that


SEARCH AWARDEES

Begin by narrowing your search to one or more fields. All fields do not need to be completed.

HAROLD R. LISENBY
Joliet, Illinois

Harold R. Lisenby, 41, service company superintendent, saved Francis W. Meekins, 2, from being killed by a train, Glenwood, Illinois, July 30, 1945. Francis sat on a crossing astride a rail of a track on which a passenger train was approaching at a speed of 60 m.p.h. The engineman did not see him. Lisenby ran 40 feet, jumping a ditch three feet wide on the way, to Francis, the locomotive then being within 40 feet of them. He picked Francis up in one arm and continued across the track, barely clearing the locomotive, which passed at unreduced speed. 40523-3461

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Harold R. Lisenby citation.

"those who are selected for recognition by the Commission are awarded the Carnegie Medal, and they, or their survivors, become eligible for financial considerations, including one-time grants, scholarship aid, death benefits, and continuing assistance."[4]

Potential awardees were to be ordinary citizens of the United States and Canada that did not hold occupations in which heroic acts were a routine part of their service. Nor could they be children who were too young to comprehend the risk involved. As of 2012, an astounding 9,576 medals have been awarded.[5]

Medals at the outset were cast in bronze, silver, and gold. The latter two are no longer awarded as of 1981; the last gold medal issued was for a rescue in 1923, the final silver for one in 1979.[6]

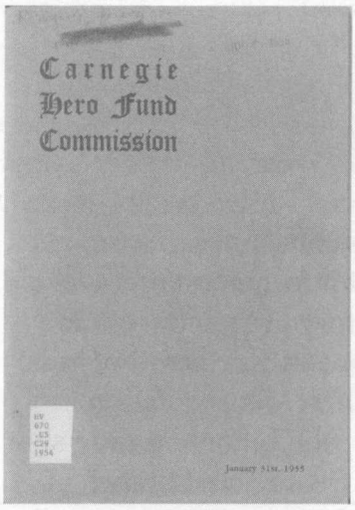
Searching for heroes online

Do you have a medal recipient in your past? The quickest way to find out is to go to the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission site and investigate. In the upper right corner of the main page is a "search awardee" link. From there, you can search using name, location, date (year), or type of heroic act performed. A single piece of information is all that is required to search the database. A successful search will produce a results list from which users will ultimately be able to view a detailed description of the act performed.

Researchers should take advantage of the database by conducting location searches on communities of interest. The benefits can be two-fold. Someone who is part of your family could be the person that was in need of rescue and therefore included in the event narrative. Additionally, it is a timeline event that you can incorporate into your written family history and possibly use to stimulate discussion with relatives who were alive at the time. The potential for a heroic act was present in any city or town. In a search for Brazil, Indiana, a relatively small coal mining town, I discovered nine hero medals awarded.

It should be noted that the locality information appears to be associated with the hometown of the awardee, and not where the rescue attempt took place. Take the case of Harold R. Lisenby, whose name appears on a database query for the city of Joliet, but the award citation gives Glenwood, Illinois, a town thirty miles to the east, as the site of his successful rescue attempt.

Searching for heroes offline


Carnegie
Hero Fund
Commission

Cover of the 1955 Carnegie Hero Fund Commission Annual Report.

As genealogists, we are always in search of original records whenever possible. Gaining access, however, to the nominating forms and other correspondence submitted over the years to the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission is not very likely. But, long before the creation of its Internet presence, the Commission produced the required annual reports in print. They reside in numerous university libraries across the country and provide additional information of substantial value.

The printed reports are, in many cases, the only source where the type of medal is indicated, as well as the disclosure of any monetary consideration. Financial compensation was given in most cases with the typical amount being either $250 or $500 with the stipulation "for a worthy purpose as needed." The Commission, however, weighed each case on its own merits—the end result produced a wide range of awards.

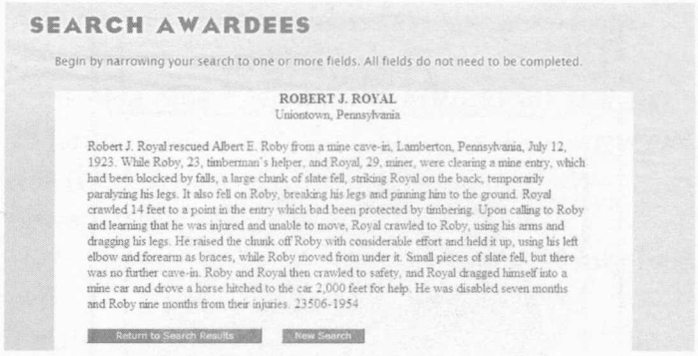
Details from several individuals are shown below:

- Eileen F. Benoit; bronze. Medal to daughter and $25 a month each for the support of her, her brother, and her half-brother, until further notice, or until each reaches the age of eighteen; also $1,000 to Mrs. Benoit's father as needed.
- James L. Smith; silver. $1,000 toward purchase of a farm.
- George A. Grant; silver. $25 a month for support of widow, during her life, or until she remarries, with $5 a month additional for each of four children, until each reaches the age of sixteen.
- Elbert Gray; bronze. $2,000 for educational purposes, as needed.
- Frank Treadway Sr.; bronze. Disablement benefits in the sum of $150 and the sum of $500 for a worthy purpose as needed.[7]

When examining the text of the event narratives and doing comparisons with what is present on the website, one may encounter small, inconsequential modifications to some of the uploaded versions. But in one particular area, race, the transition to the web was significant. African Americans who received awards or were otherwise part of the circumstances related to the attempted rescues were identified by the word "colored" in parentheses; this was not carried forward. The practice was ended in the printed reports beginning in 1964.

Another useful section worth mentioning is "Dates on which awards were made." The table in the annual report published in 1955 indicates that award dates were typically in the months of January, April, and October of any given year. An analysis of the award numbers show a lag time between the act and award acknowledgement ranging from several months to a couple years. Therefore knowledge of this date can greatly assist any related newspaper work—especially those forays into the microfilm world.

The printed material, unlike its online counterpart, will not provide genealogists with the hometown/current residence of the award recipient. Each resource, web and print, has


SEARCH AWARDEES

Begin by narrowing your search to one or more fields. All fields do not need to be completed.

ROBERT J. ROYAL
Uniontown, Pennsylvania

Robert J. Royal rescued Albert E. Roby from a mine cave-in, Lamberton, Pennsylvania, July 12, 1923. While Roby, 23, timberman's helper, and Royal, 29, miner, were clearing a mine entry, which had been blocked by falls, a large chunk of slate fell, striking Royal on the back, temporarily paralyzing his legs. It also fell on Roby, breaking his legs and pinning him to the ground. Royal crawled 14 feet to a point in the entry which had been protected by timbering. Upon calling to Roby and learning that he was injured and unable to move, Royal crawled to Roby, using his arms and dragging his legs. He raised the chunk off Roby with considerable effort and held it up, using his left elbow and forearm as braces, while Roby moved from under it. Small pieces of slate fell, but there was no further cave-in. Roby and Royal then crawled to safety, and Royal dragged himself into a mine car and drove a horse hitched to the car 2,000 feet for help. He was disabled seven months and Roby nine months from their injuries. 23506-1954

Return to Search Results | New Search

Robert J. Royal citation.

value and both should be employed during the research process when possible.

Using newspapers

My initial introduction to the activities of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission came as the result of a 2004 query generated by the Coal and Coke Heritage Center in Pennsylvania. It was in regard to Robert Royal, an African American coal miner who had received the Carnegie Hero Medal in the 1920s. Since the curator was calling upon me as a researcher specializing at the time on African Americans in the coal mining industry, I fulfilled my role on the team and did no investigation into the medal. It would be years later while spending hundreds of hours in African American newspaper research that several more awardees crossed my path and my interest was piqued.

Digitized newspaper collections, like ProQuest Historical Newspapers and GenealogyBank, allow researchers to find a wide variety of information on many of those who are recognized by the Commission. Entering the search string *carnegie medal* in quotes will return more than one thousand hits. Much of the coverage surrounds the award announcements, which were picked up via wire services like the Associated Press. Royal's selection was found in a number of newspapers stretching from Omaha to Norfolk. Interestingly enough, only one identified his medal as bronze.

Searches using combinations of related terms like *carnegie, medal, hero, award,* and *rescue* can prove productive. Constricting the date range and other search strategies should be employed

Heroine

Louise Levis of Weymouth, Mass., is attending Boston university's music school as a reward for her heroims in rescuing a man from drowning at Humarock beach. She is studying music under a special scholarship awarded by the Carnegie Hero fund.

as well. Be creative. Taking the surname of awardee Louise Levis of Massachusetts, along with *carnegie* and the unique portion of her hometown, *weymouth*, turned up four matches in GenealogyBank; three were relevant. An edition of the *Morning Star* newspaper in Rockford, Illinois, published her picture along with the short notice informing readers that she enrolled in the music program at Boston University because of the educational money received along with her medal.[8]

Locating news close to the date of the actual rescue event can be challenging. Despite this, there are benefits to trying. Checking for Harold Lisenby in the *Chicago Tribune* on ProQuest uncovered an article from 30 December 1945, five months removed from his deed. He received an award from a different organization and the story included a picture of Lisenby holding the medal. In the final analysis, procurement of news in the immediate aftermath of the rescue effort will in most cases require the examination of a hometown paper in print or microform.

Reverence for the Carnegie Medal

Recently when I dived into the GenealogyBank newspaper search results for *carnegie medal*, it was a purely random process. I skimmed the titles, honestly not knowing what I was looking for, but somewhat confident that I'd recognize it when it was in front of me. After easily investing two full hours in search of articles, it was in the first five minutes that I discovered the crown jewel sitting at position ten on the list.

The article was from the *Patriot* newspaper of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1908. It was titled, "Carnegie Medal Exempt but Sheriff Will Get Clover Club Medal of Mark Castro." Captain Mark Casto was his real name, although the article referred to him as Castro. A sea captain, Casto had led a group of six men on a daring rescue mission saving fifty-four people from a distressed freighter in 1906. He was one of only nineteen people to ever receive a gold medal. Casto had fallen on hard times and was in federal bankruptcy court; however, his creditors agreed to allow his Carnegie Medal to be exempt from the proceedings.[9] A warm gesture for a man who six months removed from this very public crisis would be quoted thusly: "The world is as bright as ever, and there are as many opportunities as ever for earning an honest living. It is my intention to resume work and work harder than before this misfortune overtook me."[10]

A moment in time remembered?

Heroic actions were much more commonplace than one would think. The newspapers give testament to that fact. They were heroes in the true sense of the word, consisting of young and old, men and women, black and white.

The Carnegie Hero Fund Commission from its inception to the end of 2012 has been notified of 85,420 acts of heroism.[11]

Robert J. Royal's obituary from 1982 reveals that he was a World War I veteran and affiliated with a couple of organizations.[12] Not surprisingly, there is no mention of what was perhaps one of his greatest accomplishments. A member of the Coal and Coke Heritage Center research team was able to find descendants of Royal, one of which recalled seeing and touching the medal.

One has to wonder how many of these stories have fallen by the wayside? How many medals hold a venerable spot on the mantel? These medals and the stories they represent were meant to be shared and treasured. No doubt Andrew Carnegie endorsed and embraced this belief when in his inaugural letter, called a "deed of trust," to the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission he decreed that

> *A medal shall be given to the hero, or widow, or next of kin, which shall recite the heroic deed it commemorates, that descendants may know and be proud of their descent.*[13]

Notes

1. "Andrew Carnegie biography," *Biography.com*, (http://www.biography.com/people/andrew-carnegie-9238756: accessed 29 October 2013).

2. Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, *Annual Report* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, 2010–12), 2, 5.

3. "Mission," *Carnegie Hero Fund Commission*, (http://carnegiehero.org/about-the-fund/mission/: accessed 29 October 2013).

4. Ibid.

5. Carnegie, *Annual Report*, 3.

6. "Carnegie Medal," *Carnegie Hero Fund Commission*, (http://carnegiehero.org/about-the-fund/carnegie-medal/: accessed 2 November 2013).

7. Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, *Annual Report* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, 1955), 43. This entry reflects the award information for Benoit. The remaining individuals come from transcriptions of African American medal recipients in a Microsoft *Excel* spreadsheet created by the author.

8. "Heroine," *Morning Star* (Rockford, Illinois), 25 January 1929, p. 8; digital images, *GenealogyBank.com* (http://www.genealogybank.com/gbnk/newspapers/: accessed 1 November 2013).

9. Newspaper publication date was 24 July 1908, p. 5.

10. "Casto Begins All Over Again Today 'The World is As Bright as Ever,' Declares the Skipper-Hero of the Cherokee Wreck," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 January 1909, p. 3; digital images, *GenealogyBank.com* (http://www.genealogybank.com/gbnk/newspapers/: accessed 1 November 2013).

11. Carnegie, *Annual Report*, 3.

12. Patrick Trimble, Pennsylvania [(e-address for private use),] to Tim Pinnick, e-mail, 5 December 2004, "Robert Royal's obit."

13. Carnegie, *Annual Report*, 6.

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