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'Most Livable City' took its lumps over tag

No. 1 ranking in 1985 drew scorn from disbelievers

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By Gary Rotstein, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Twenty-five years ago today, in an era when it was hemorrhaging jobs and population alike, Pittsburgh achieved a milestone that caused dismay from Atlanta to San Diego.

On Feb. 27, 1985, Pittsburgh for the first time was objectively proclaimed America's "Most Livable City." It has repeated the distinction since, but never attracting as much attention or bemusement as from that second edition of Rand McNally's "Places Rated Almanac."

It might have been better called "Places Berated Almanac," considering how many snickers it drew from so many directions in so many accents. The skeptics included other cities' mayors -- Wilson Goode of Philadelphia ridiculed us for potholes, snow and smog -- and went as high as talk-show king Johnny Carson, who described Pittsburgh in his "Tonight Show" monologue as "Newark without the cultural advantages."

But the smiles were bright around Pittsburgh's City-County Building, where popular Mayor Richard Caliguiri was the unofficial leader of a region in the midst of colossal manufacturing collapse, despite its Downtown Renaissance II. The "City of Champions" tag of the late 1970s held little luster when thousands of people a year were being thrown out of work.

David Matter, a friend and aide of the mayor's, was with him on a trip to Ontario when the call came that Pittsburgh had climbed to the top from its once-surprising No. 4 slot in the 1981 edition of "Places Rated Almanac."

In an interview this week, the retired Mr. Matter recalled joking with Mr. Caliguiri that "there should be a recount." The mayor was unamused.

"I was kind of cynical about that stuff, but that was not Dick at all," said Mr. Matter. "He was the city's biggest cheerleader. ... This was just confirmation to him that the outside world finally knew what he'd been saying all along."

The Caliguiri administration, Greater Pittsburgh Convention and Visitors Bureau and Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce trumpeted the distinction for the rest of 1985, and the "Most Livable City" tag is still bandied about occasionally in efforts to dispel the city's old-time, smoky image.

It was a label that might have never come, if one ex-Pittsburgher had his way. David Savageau, co-author of the book with Richard Boyer, recalled that Rand McNally's sales manager was a Steel City native aghast to learn his hometown would rank No. 1 in the new book.

"There was some discussion about whether this would have credibility in the marketplace," said Mr. Savageau, of Washington, D.C. "The sales manager didn't want to go with the ratings, but I don't know what choice we had. I didn't want to massage things."

The authors used statistics in nine different categories to compare cities -- crime, housing, recreation, arts, climate/terrain and more; Pittsburgh's advantage among the 329 metropolitan areas was that it fared decent to good to very good in everything -- terrible in nothing.

Mr. Savageau, a fan of the city as well as for the non-rankable character of its people and neighborhoods, said publicity over Pittsburgh's questionable-to-some title may actually have helped boost the second edition's sales by tens of thousands over its predecessor.

"I think we did our job well, but also, benefited from the cracks" made about the city, he said.

For the region, it was the kind of free publicity that marketers only dream of -- even if many denizens of the city itself admitted being dumbfounded.

"It shocked the world," said Bob Imperata, who was executive vice president of the Greater Pittsburgh Convention and Visitors Bureau and was interviewed at length by then-fledgling CNN the day after the announcement.

The bureau bought hundreds of copies of the book to deliver to clients and convention prospects. It incorporated "Most Livable City" on its stationery. It launched a billboard campaign in cities across the country to make sure they knew Pittsburgh's distinction, riling some folks in San Diego who retaliated with their own billboards in Pittsburgh, featuring a sun-bathing beauty.

Mr. Imperata said the tourism bureau had to be careful not to rub the designation in the nose of out-of-towners, but a staff enthused by the title used it to try to sell the city to convention planners.

"It came at a time when we didn't have anything else new or dramatic to sell," he said. "The convention center at the time wasn't a standout facility. The hotels were just OK. ... The Cultural District was nowhere near what it is now. There was no hook out there for Pittsburgh, and this was the hook we were looking for."

He and others have trouble, however, recalling any tangible benefits the "Places Rated Almanac" listing provided. The Pittsburgh Press sold more than 11,000 T-shirts that year boasting of the No. 1 ranking, but it might have been better if 11,000 fewer people left the area.

"I think [the ranking] does more for the morale of people than it does in translating into jobs and economic development," said Jim Roddey, who was in outdoor advertising at the time and would later become Allegheny County chief executive. "It's a nice arrow to have in your quiver, but it doesn't seal the deal as well as if corporate taxes were cut and it stopped snowing."

He had fun with the designation as a former Atlanta resident, however, in putting up a billboard along a freeway there telling incredulous people: "Want to live in America's No. 1 city? Move to Pittsburgh! Y'all come."

Atlantans didn't much cotton to that idea, nor did anyone else. Pittsburgh proper lost some 54,000 people from 1980 to 1990, and the metropolitan area more than three times that. And the slide has continued, even though those "livable" distinctions keep coming.

Subsequent editions of "Places Rated Almanac," still overseen today by Mr. Savageau but no longer published by Rand McNally, placed Pittsburgh third in 1989, fifth in 1993, 14th in 1997, 12th in 2000 and first again -- with less hullabaloo -- in 2007. It is the only city to finish in the top 20 in every edition.

And earlier this month, The Economic Intelligence Unit, connected to a prominent British magazine, repeated its own prior designation of Pittsburgh as America's most livable city.

While such accolades continue, including the positive publicity received from hosting September's global G-20 summit, the Rand McNally ranking of 1985 carried a special cachet when far fewer publications and computers were spitting out city rankings.

"I think it's like the Steelers winning the Super Bowl or the Penguins winning the Stanley Cup -- I don't think anything beats the first time," Mr. Imperata said. "I think the element of surprise was probably the most important and dramatic impact of all."

A quarter-century later, though, old assumptions die hard. When the White House press corps was first told last year that Pittsburgh of all places had been chosen as G-20 host, what was heard around the room?

Snickers, just like those in 1985.

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