

MAHANoy CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

For Welsh — Saint David's Day

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

IT'S SAINT DAVID'S weekend in Mahanoy City and, true to tradition, Welsh voices will be filling the air with music at Bethel First Congregational Church.

Since the earliest days of the borough, members of Bethel congregation have been celebrating the feast of their patron saint in the msucial tradition their ancestors brought here from their beloved mother country.

Years ago, the Welsh love for music and literature was expressed in festivals known as eisteddfods.

Eisteddfod is a word you seldom hear anymore, but during the first seven or eight decades of Mahanoy's existence it signified an event that brought cultural artists together to participate in competitive programs which afforded outstanding entertainment.

Mahanoy City's vibrant Welsh community made the town a center of eisteddfod activity. One of the big eisteddfods here took place during Saint David's weekend in 1921. It was sponsored by Bethel Church and held in the Family Theater.

The Record-American edition of March 3, 1921, had this report on it: "Both the afternoon and evening sessions were attended by enormous audiences and the patrons of this time-honored institution had a full meal of good things served to them. The competitions, every one of them, were intensely interesting and the talent entered was of unusual calibre. Especially was this true of the choral and major numbers which were all keenly contested, the winners being adjudged by only small margins in each event. Nor were the individual competitions lacking in quality. Professor Griffith, the adjudicator, had his hands full awarding the prizes. His work was very satisfactory and the decisions met with general commendation."

The leading contestants in the various events of that eisteddfod were:

—Piano: Catherine Hocking, Stewart Griffith, Esther Jones, Mahanoy City; Elwyn Jones, Pottsville.

—Children's solo: Catherine Lewis, Park Place; Lewis Rosser, Margaret Brown, Mary Bainbridge, Warran Davies, Mahanoy City.

—Children's recitation: David

Miles, Mary Craig, Eleanor Davies, Blanche Raudenbush, Mahanoy City; Trevor Williams, East Mauch Chunk.

—Cornet solo: Thomas James, Michael Cest, Harry Cahill, Mahanoy City.

—Soprano-alto duet: Mrs. Reese Rosser Jr., Mrs. Ivor D. Fenton (sisters), Mahanoy City, who sang "Whispering Hope."

—Violin solo: Arthur Lefkowitz (now of Philadelphia and nationally known as Arthur Lewis, authornovelist), Mahanoy City. The Record-American noted: "Master Lefkowitz handled his instrument like a virtuoso. He was accompanied on the piano by his mother whose clever work was noticed by many."

—Children's choir: Union Children's Choir led by Reese Rosser Jr., and Christ Lutheran Church Children's Choir led by Carl Zellars, both of Mahanoy City.

—Tenor solo: John Davis, Hazleton.

—Mixed quartet: Ida Cooper, Mrs. George C. Heinze, Gustave Snyder and David Thomas, Mahanoy City.

—Impromptu speech: Rev. W. Frank Gryce, First Presbyterian Church, Mahanoy City.

—Soprano solo: Mrs. Reese Rosser Jr., Ruth Edwards, Mahanoy City.

—Tenor-bass duet: John Lewis, Park Place, and John Davis, Hazleton.

—Champion solo: Harry Powell, Tamaqua.

—Male quartet: Vulcan Quarett composed of John Davis of Hazleton, John Lewis of Park Place, Joseph Lewis and Reese Rosser Jr. of Mahanoy City. They sang "Annie Laurie."

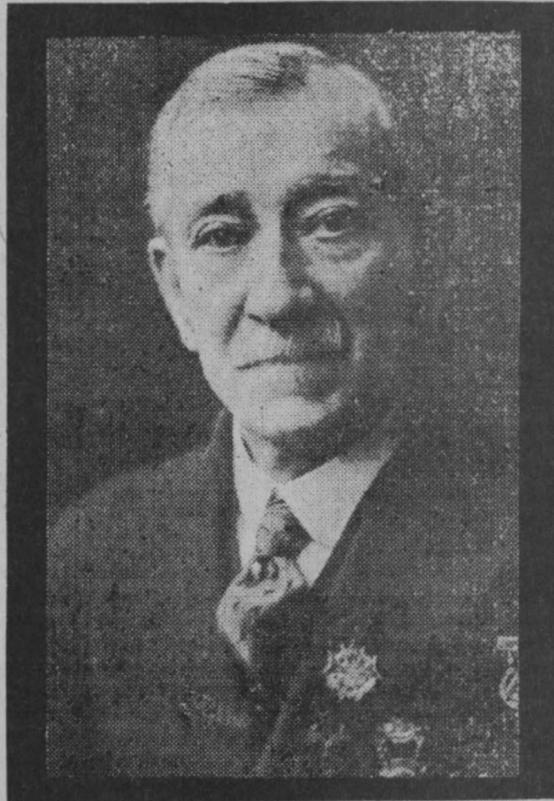
—Bass solo: Joseph D. Lewis, Mahanoy City.

—Adult chorus: Church of Faith (Episcopal) Choir conducted by James Pierson. Other choirs were from the Primitive Methodist Church conducted by William Oliver, Welsh Baptist Choir conducted by Nicholas Thomas, and Tamaqua Choir conducted by Harry Powell.

Official accompanists for the event were Elizabeth Davies and Melba Rosser.

THE EISTEDDFOD was an old tradition which the Welsh immigrants brought with them. The origin has been traced to the 12th century in Wales, where it became institution exceeded in popularity only by the pulpit and the public school system.

The Record-American in 1921 reported: "There are today in



Reese Rosser Sr.
His legacy is music

the United States as many Welsh people, including those of Welsh descent, as there are in all of Wales. Naturally the Welsh people who came to America to make this country their home brought with them some of their customs. They brought with them a skill and capacity as workers along industrial lines, a strong love of civil liberty, a love of poetry and music, an intense religious fervor — and the eisteddfod. This is no mean contribution to the forces that are moulding American culture and progress.

"The Welsh festival of literature and song has been given in many large cities of the United States. In Denver some years ago the festival lasted four days and the average attendance was 12,000. In Salt Lake City the attendance was 6,000. Very large audiences have been had in Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. In Utica, N.Y., and the state of Vermont, the eisteddfod is conducted in the Welsh language."

MAHANoy CITY'S Welsh community has seen some of its members attain success in the world of music. One of the most celebrated in the early days was

recognize his wife. After four months' recuperation he was able to return to the mines but his mental faculties were never fully restored and by the time young Reese was seven years old he had to go to work in the mines to help support the family.

In 1863, Reese and his father came to America and found their way to Saint Clair. A year later they moved to Lanigans Patch (now Ellangowen) to work in the new colliery opened by James Lanigan. It was there he met and married Harriet Price, a native of Hollywell, Flinshire, North Wales. She was a first cousin to Thomas Price, the contractor who built the capitol of Australia and later served as Australia's prime minister.

When the anthracite miners went on strike in 1868, Reese went to Illinois to work until the mine strike ended. He returned to Lanigans in 1869 and remained in the patch until 1873, when he moved his family (wife and two children) to 639 E. Pine St., Mahanoy City. The family eventually numbered 12 children.

PROFESSOR ROSSER'S musical career in Mahanoy began in the 1870s when he sang in a choir directed by William B. Harris, then a leader in the eisteddfod field. Rosser eventually began directing his own eisteddfod choirs, the first of which figured in a local competition on May 30, 1880, and his group won the first prize (\$50) over the United Choir of Shenandoah-William Penn.

Succeeding years saw his groups compete all over the region and win major prizes at eisteddfods where the judges included such prominent figures as Thomas Williams of the London Royal Academy of Music, Professor Ap Madoc of Chicago, Dr. Lewis Prothoe of Chicago, Haydn Evans of Scranton. His association with these musical luminaries spread his reputation across the land.

His final eisteddfod in Mahanoy City was on Thanksgiving Day, 1913, when he directed a female choir which one first prize with their rendition of "The Bells of Aberdovey." His wife died in 1914 and he went to Philadelphia to reside with his children.

A measure of his ability is the fact that he served as the adjudicator for many eisteddfods in communities such as Lansford, Pottsville, Saltington, Mount Carmel, Shenandoah and

Gilberton.

RARELY WILL you find a family so consumed by the love of music as was Professor Reese Rosser's clan.

His eldest son, Thomas, had a powerful baritone voice which earned him recognition throughout the region. He also served as leader of the Columbia Choir in Mahanoy City until his lost his life in a mine accident at the Primrose Colliery in April 1914.

The second son, Reese Jr., the lone member of the family to remain in Mahanoy City, was noted as a local choral conductor, bass soloist and as leader of the Citizens Band duthe World War I era. His son, Lewis, also was a musical prodigy but fell victim to tragedy. At age 13, in May, 1921, the boy lost his life when struck by an automobile as he played ball on the street not far from the family residence at 1410 E. Centre St. His soprano voice was hailed as one of the finest ever heard locally.

The third Rosser son, John, was possessed of an excellent bass voice which he put to use during musical programs locally and later in Philadelphia.

The fourth son, Edward, had a baritone voice of exceptional range and purity which won him many eisteddfod prizes and launched him on a professional singing career. However, illness forced him to change climate and he moved to Phoenix, Arizona, during the early 1920s.

The girls in the Rosser clan in 1922 were Mrs. Jenny Parry, Mrs. Ida Walters, Mrs. Elizabeth MacCartney, Mrs. Hattie Mass and Miss Anna, all then living in Philadelphia. All had splendid voices and competed regularly in eisteddfods, including the one held in Philadelphia on Jan. 1, 1922.

Today, the lone remanants of the Rosser family in Mahanoy City are Thomas, a son of Reese Jr., and his son, Joseph. They reside at 1311 E. Market St.

AS THE WELSH folk of Mahanoy City gather once more Mahanoy City gather once more in Bethel Church tomorrow evening for their annual celebration in this quasiqucentennial year, may they not forget the rich tradition that has brought them here.

The days of the eisteddfod are gone, the marvelous men of music like Professor Reese Rosser Sr. are gone, but their legacy will remain as long as there are Welsh folk and a feast of Saint David to remind us.