

MAHANAY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

The memories of minstrels linger

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

THERE'S NOTHING like a minstrel show, There's nothing like it that I know..."

These opening lines of an old minstrel tune reflect the excitement prevailing each March 17 back in the days when minstrels were yearly traditions. In Mahanoy of yesteryear, it wouldn't have been Saint Patrick's Day without an Irish minstrel.

Folks knew that a Patty's Day minstrel spelled fun. Irish costumes, Irish songs, Irish dances, Irish laughter and Irish names (intertwined with a generous sprinkling of other nationalities) — all came together on stage in those classic shows of yore.

THE TRADITIONAL Patty's Day minstrels are no more in Mahanoy, but the memories linger. They had a charm that lightened the heavy heart and lifted the spirit. The minstrels helped folks forget, if only for a little while, the dismal seasons of life.

The last of Mahanoy's annual minstrel shows were sponsored by the Eagles Social Club, the fun-loving arm of Fraternal Order of Eagles Aerie 167.

The Eagles are gone from the local scene and the vacant spot they left can never be filled. The FOE was one of the largest and most active organizations in the community, but that's a story for another chronicle.

A glance at the programs from some of those old shows evokes fond memories of the colorful local characters who entertained townsfolk in a bygone era.

Each generation of minstrelsy had its own style and flavor, as the following comparisons of two such shows will attest.

THE YEAR 1921 saw a conglomeration of talent put on a March 17 minstrel in the Family Theater for the benefit of Saint Canicus Church. The vocal music was directed by Mahanoy's most accomplished choral leader of the era, Professor Reese Rosser Jr., a true son of Wales and prominent in regional Welsh eisteddfods.

The show opened with the entire company singing "My Wild Irish Rose" — one of those ageless melodies still being sung in minstrels.

The raising of the curtain revealed the singers arranged in tiers, attired in evening clothes, the black and white forming a pleasing contrast and each wearing a green carnation. Another contrasting feature was the white costume of the interlocutor, Jim Carrick (managing editor of the Record-

American) who occupied a chair in the center of the setting.

Chorus numbers included "Honolulu Eyes," "Margie," "Overalls," "Rose of My Heart" and "Somebody."

The Record-American published a review of the show: Joseph Malloy sang "Old Pal Why Don't You Answer Me," his interpretation perfectly describing the beautiful sentiments in the tune.

John Burns delighted the audience with "That Old Irish Mother of Mine," and John O'Connell, a veteran minstrel man, was in splendid voice as he sang "There's Only One Pal After All."

Jim Leahy showed no signs of his recent attack of bronchitis as he sang the pretty Irish ballad, "Laddiebuck of Mine."

James Huaghney, the town's premier tenor, also was handicapped by a slight cold but did a fine job with "The Old Fashioned Mother."

The reported that the premier ends, Dick Ward and Al Becker, "made their entrance to the strains of a lively coon song, 'I Love the Land of Old Black Joe'."

Ward executed a clever dance routine and his rendition of "Mammy" was a real hit.

Becker's singing of "My Gigi from the Fiji Isle" was a laugh-getter and he made the most of it.

THE END MEN, Bill Sheehan, Tom Horan, Mart Murphy and John Melley, were applauded for the way they performed the dance steps taught them by Professor Jack Mills.

The finale was presented by Justin McCarthy in his initial appearance as a soloist. Attired as a hotel bellhop, he arrived carrying two grips and sand, "Don't Take Away Those Blues."

During the olio part of the show, Professor Mills gave an exhibition of fancy, eccentric and hard shoe dancing that have made him one of the best step dancers in the state.

The classical dancing of Dennis Boyle and Evelyn Shaud was highly applauded and they danced several encores, at the conclusion of which they were presented with a bouquet of carnations.

One of the most outstanding performances, which received calls for encore after encore, featured George Groom, who is possessed of a rich baritone voice, together with Master Lewis Rosser, the boy soprano and son of Professor Reese Rosser. They sang "When We Played Together in Ireland" as Master Rosser, starting from the balcony, wended his way slowly down the stairs, up the center aisle and onto the stage where he sang "I'm in Heaven When I'm in My Mother's Arms."



Tony Waak
Minstrel maestro

Young Lewis Rosser, age 13, was to meet a tragic death seven weeks later when struck by an automobile while playing ball near his home in the 1400 block of East Centre Street.

AN AMUSING sketch entitled "An Unknown Military Post in France" was directed by Charles Martin. The scene took place during the recent World War and was replete with funny dialogue and comic situations. Included were a recitation, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," by Donald Mulhall; "The Trail to Home Sweet Home" by John Burns and the Soldier Quarett; and "My Home Town Is A One Horse Town" sung by Tom Horan and the chorus. The "Awkward Squad" composed of Mark Holland, Al Becker, Dick Ward, Mart Murphy and Toma Horan presented humorous situations. Mart Murphy portrayed "a stray nigger" who didn't like being in the army. Justin McCarthy was the sentry; Donald Mulhall, captain; Professor Rosser, Phil McArdle, Joseph Malloy and John Burns, campfire singers; John Melley, messenger, George Heffner, bugler.

The following made up the chorus: Joseph Boyle, Raymond Creedon, Michael Doyle, William Davis, Thomas Dowling, Leo Doyle, Thomas Faust, Ed Fogarty, Albert Farrell, Charles Haley, William Haughney, John Humes, Joseph Hanlon, Thomas Jenkins, Thomas Jones, William Jenkins, William Kilroy, Francis Knox, William Lynch, Joseph Larkin, James Landy, Patrick Muldowney, Charles McKerns, Thomas Morgan, John McNiff, Joseph McCarthy, Aloysius McGill, Thomas Miles, Anthony Pangonis, Henry Post, James

Russell, John Shinnors, Thomas Stanton, Edward Thomas, George Trakes and John Welsh.

THE YEAR 1950 saw the Eagles Social Club at the height of its minstrel era. The man behind the Eagles minstrels was A. J. "Tony" Waak, Mahanoy's version of Florenz Ziegfeld. Tony is still around town and looking chipper in his mid-80s.

Reporting on the 1950 show, the Record-American (where Tony Waak was a composing room employee for many years) had this to say about the show:

"From the opening chorus to the spectacular patriotic finale, the minstrel is high class entertainment...a genuine triumph of minstrel art."

Enthusiastic applause attested to the audience enjoyment, especially the end men numbers such as Joe Foley's "Ma She's Makin' Eyes at Me," Chirp Hall's "Who's Sorry Now," Ken Capper's "Alabama Bound," Mike Dearcot's "Baby Face," Jerry Davis' "Floatin' Down the Old Green River, and Mike Burke's sensational rendition of "Old Man River."

Louie Liachowitz was an incomparable interlocutor and a foine broth of a lad as he sang "Toora Looa Looal."

The olio segment featured the Jean Dixon Dancers. A Spanish tap was performed by Monica Kardisco, Janet Davidson, Doris Wesner, Donna Stitzer, Ann Rafferty and Mary Shaulis.

Danny Flynn of Pottsville, Schuylkill County's teenage tap dance champion, performed an outstanding rope dance.

ANOTHER FEATURE was the rendition of a brand new copyrighted song, "When You're Not Here," by three local residents: Music by Al Moucheron Jr. and Ed Malinowski, words by Petrie Kluchinsky.

Other vocals in the program were "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen" by Bill Farr, "Dreamer's Holiday" by Joe Dowd, "Rain or Shine" by Helen Rada, "If I Knew You Were Comin' I'd A Baked a Cake" by Helen Rada, Pete Rada and Chirp Hall, "How Deep Is the Ocean" and "Why Do I Love You" by Gloria Miller (Mahanoy's own "Kate Smith"). The chorus numbers were "I've Got A Lovely Bunch of Coconuts," "Toot Toot Toosie," "Dear Hearts and Gentle People," "Music Music Music," "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," "Irish Lullabye" and "My Wild Irish Rose."

Accordion music by little Gretchen Lieberman and a harmonica medly by Mike Corinchock added variety to the menu.

EAGLES BAND Director John Unsinn presented a spectacular finale entitled "Battle Hymn of

Eagles Social Club's 1960 Edition

Annual St. Patrick's Day

Minstrel SHOW

Region's Top Variety Entertainment!

THURSDAY
EVENING
MARCH 17, 1960
VICTORIA
THEATRE

Mahanoy City, Pa.

[CAST OF 60]

Curtain Promptly at 8:00 P. M.

Sponsored By The
EAGLES SOCIAL CLUB OF MAHANAY CITY
(Benefit of Eagles Club Building Fund)

Minstrel Part of Show Directed by
JOHN SLEZOSKY, Shenandoah

Second Part, or Olio, Directed by
JEAN DIXON HOCKING, Mahanoy City

END OF AN ERA — This was the front of the program booklet for the last of Mahanoy City's old Eagles Minstrels which entertained local audiences from the 1930s until 1960. Declining population, economic recession and advent of television all combined to spell finis to the era of the annual minstrels. Among the cast in this final show were three female ends: Joanne Rubel, Marle Becker and Carole Ann Stanakis.

the Republic" which featured five patriotic tableaux:

"Spirit of '76" with Jerry Davis playing fife, Walter Musser and George Bross on drums.

"Civil War" with John Kane Jr. as Abe Lincoln, Bill Boley and Bill Hylan as Union and Confederate soldiers.

"World War I" with Ray Savitsky as a sailor, Joe Lodanosky Jr. as a soldier, Mike Dearcot a marine.

"Two Jima" with Bernie Valenta, Warren Miller, Duke Stank, Carroll Hilbert and Truman Litwhiler as the flag raisers.

"Spirit of Peace" with Rose Durkin Fletcher.

Chorus members included William Hylan, James Noonan, Joseph Meluskey, Frank Moucheron, Marty O'Brien, William Foster, Joseph Lodanosky, Walter Musser, Bernie Valenta, Charlie Rice, Warren Miller, Paul Rada, Truman Litwhiler and Mike Cornichock.

Tony Waak chaired the minstrel committee whose members were Charles Rice, George Bross, Robert Wary, Joseph Lodanosky, John Hall, James Dwyer, Joseph Meluskey and Theodore Lazo.

Makeup was in charge of Pat Donovan and Gloria Miller. The stage committee included Bill Davis, Edward Moneavage, Albert Uditis, Peter Chuhinka.

TIME HAS TAKEN its toll among those entertainers yore. Few are around to see the town they entertained celebrate its quasiquintennial.

Frank Moucheron, Puck Sullivan and Mike Corinchock are among the very few relics of the vanishing generation still happy to step into the spotlight and entertain when the occasion presents itself. They are the breed who put the meaning in the words of the old song:

There's nothing like a minstrel show,
There's nothing like it that I know.....