

MAHANAY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

The community's early hotels...

By JOHN 'PUCK' SULLIVAN
and BILL O'BRIEN
Special to the Herald

IT'S A RARE pleasure reading the Augusta (Dillman) Thomas history of Mahanoy City dating from the 1860s to mid-1930s. She covered those seven decades thoroughly, recording fascinating information about such things as Grand Army Day, catastrophes, public halls and epidemics.

Especially interesting was her thorough coverage of the town's early hotels, of which the Mansion House at Main and Centre streets was first and foremost. It was built in 1861 by Wilbur Smith, a Vermonter who had the foresight to see that the coal industry would bring people from all walks of life into our region.

His brother, Harry W. Smith, also came here from Vermont and was one of the signers of the petition for incorporation of the borough. He operated a livery business connected with the hotel, keeping horses and carriages in stables at the rear along Market street. He also ran a store in the hotel block, and later was superintendent of the borough's gas manufacturing plant of which his brother Wilbur was one of the founders.

After 20 years of prosperous business, Wilbur sold the Mansion House to Charles King, a civil engineer who also was as an agent for the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and served terms in the state House and Senate. King's reign at the hotel lasted 10 years, at the end of which he sold it to Charles Burchill. About 1900, Peter Gorman became the proprietor and ran it until the Roaring Twenties. Next owner, Bob Fobia, made many structural changes and thereafter it was known as the Mansion Hotel.

Oldtimers (like "Puck") can remember the original large front porch facing Centre street with comfortable rocking chairs where boarders and traveling salesmen whiled away summer evenings in conversation.

It was the hub of the town's activities. Here was posted the bulletins of the latest news flashes of world events, especially sports. It was our fountain of information.

MRS. THOMAS mentions the hotel's street porch which existed well into the 1890s and served as a ladies' entrance. It was considered a gross breach of etiquette for a woman to enter a hotel by the same door used by the men.

A room on the second floor, very artistically furnished, was known as the ladies parlor in which the mesdames gathered. All hotels had such rooms.

The Mansion building of more modern times left its own special memories for the bobby socks and saddle shoes generations who gathered in the Embassy Grille for Coke klatches. And for the 1950s-60s, when it was Howie Everett's Manion Hotel, there was the Saturday night dancing

to the softly romantic tones of the Swing Flamini's Trio. As the song says, memories are made of this.

It's regrettable that no diary was kept to provide a list of the illustrious visitors to our town who made the old Mansion their home away from home during the century and more that it served as the focal point of Mahanoy City.

THE EAGLE HOTEL, built in 1862, stood on the east side of North Main street, a block north of the railroad. Its original owner was Seth Kaley (Kahley). He was one of the pioneers who signed the petition for boroughhood in 1863. After selling the hotel in 1870 he moved to Reading.

Harrison Derrick, the next owner, was another pioneer who signed the petition for borough incorporation. Originally he owned the Washington House Hotel at 39-37 E. Centre St., and later had a tavern at 101-03 E. Pine St. After purchasing the Eagle Hotel he changed the name to Derrick House and ran it until 1884 when he moved to Buffalo and his hotel became the Hotel Kaier, part of the Charles D. Kaier Estate.

Though not as early as the Mansion House, the Kaier House was noted as a very fine hostelry. By the time the Volstead Act (Prohibition) became law in 1919 the Kaier House had closed. During the 1918 flu epidemic it was used as an emergency hospital and later became an apartment house with a first-floor tea room operated by Mr. and Mrs. Beck.

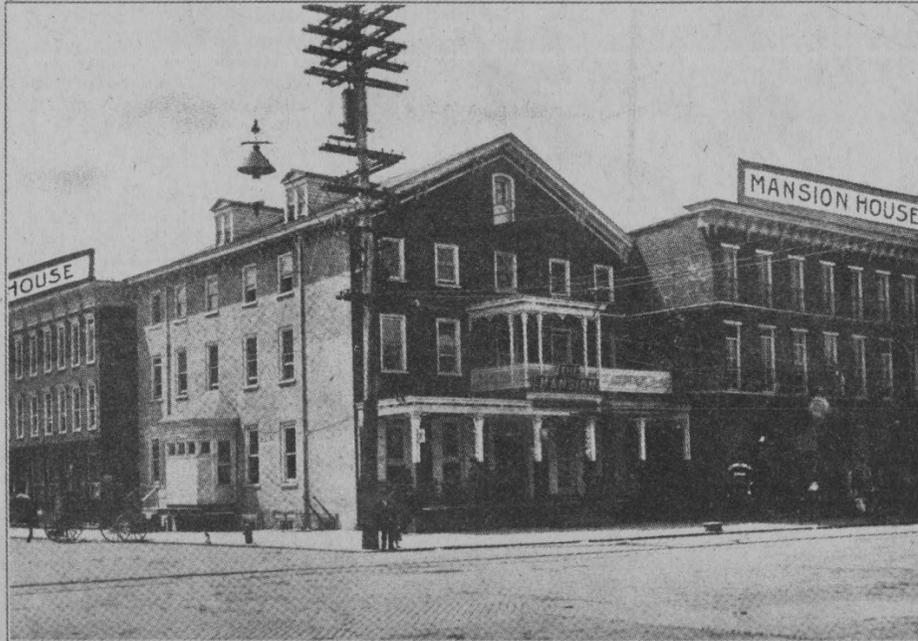
Finally, for a number of years beginning with the end of Prohibition in the 1930s, it was the popular Charley Lieberman's bar and restaurant. Advertisements in the Record-American invited everyone to sample the beverage, food and musical menu at the Charles Lieberman Hotel, opposite the Lehigh Valley Station.

ANOTHER HOSTELRY on North Main street mentioned by Mrs. Thomas was the Anthracite Hotel at 62-68 which stood on the site now occupied by Jim Weber's Mahanoy Valley Door and Supply Company. The hotel burned to the ground on the night of Saint Patrick's Day 1873, which certainly must have disrupted more than a few Gaelic celebrations.

Another hotel with the dignified name of Miners Arms, owned by Joshua Holt, was located on the eastern side of the extreme northern end of Main street.

The Washington Hotel at 37-39 E. Centre street (one of the few George never slept in) during "Puck's" time was occupied by the Di Sanctus Hotel, Ed Timm's Hotel and a meat/grocery establishment.

Vivid in memory is the star border during the Di Sanctus era. He was a ruggedly handsome chap, always in flashy attire and what made him totally unique was his set of gold teeth. The kids knew him as the guy with the



HOTELS OF OLD — The Mansion House and Kaier hotels, pictured here in the early 1900s, rated with the finest hostelries in the

richest mouth in town.

THE MERCHANTS HOTEL, 232 W. Centre St., was built in the 1860s by Henry Sharp, another pioneer who signed the borough petition. Next owner was Francis Keiser who operated the establishment in the 1890s. Keiser eventually sold to Senator Daniel Thomas who changed the name to Pennsylvania Hotel.

In the early 1920s, when it was owned by the Kurtz brothers (Steve, Mike and Joe), quite a few of the Mahanoy City Bluebirds baseball players boarded there and local kids would loiter outside just to see and talk to their favorite players.

Later owners were John Hodowanetz and Jake Markus. Fire finally claimed the old spot which is now part of the Service Electric parking lot.

BROWNMILLER'S Hotel, First and Centre streets (now the home of Mahanoy's VFW Post 1420, first floor occupied by Noonan's law offices) was noted for seafood. On the side of the building, extending three stories high, was painted an immense filled with champagne, at the brim of which was a gnome who had climbed a ladder and was about to take a sip.

Thirty years later Brownmiller sold the place to Jacob Frank, another pioneer petition signer. Frank up until that time had operated a hotel in a four-story building at 433-35 E. Mahanoy St., with a top-floor hall that served as a meeting place for the Masons and Odd Fellows.

About 1923, with Prohibition having dried up the libation business, Frank sold the First and Centre street establishment to John "Cutie" Retson and another Greek entrepreneur

named George, who converted it into the Crystal Restaurant. The Crystal flourished for the next decade. It was the town social center, our Stork Club without booze, the late night gathering spot for after-theater clientele and after-dance fans. They had to have a snack before retiring, and all roads led to the beloved Crystal.

Then came the Depression and repeal of prohibition. Taprooms popped up like mushrooms and each offered weekend platter menus at unbelievably low prices: Rainbow Inn, 939 E. Mahanoy St., real Italian spaghetti and meat balls, 15 cents; Fowler's Cafe Unique, 100 E. Centre St., deviled crab, fried clams or deviled oyster platters, 25 cents; Baubley's Cafe, 609 E. Centre St., chicken platters, including a beer, 25 cents; Robinson Cafe, 132 W. Centre St.,

roast turkey platter, 25 cents.

Regular restaurants began hurting, among them the Crystal, and the building sold to the VFW. The Crystal was history.

SOME OF THE other early hotels mentioned by Mrs. Thomas were:

Carl Scheurman's at the southwest corner of Sixth and Mahanoy streets. He was one of the pioneers who signed the petition for the borough's charter in 1863. He also founded the Scheurman Building and Loan Association and co-founded the German Protestant Cemetery Association.

Matthew Donahue's at 301-05 W. Centre St. He, too, was a signer of the petition for boroughhood and during the early elections in the borough his establishment was the West Ward polling place.

Ferdinand Metz's, at the southeast corner of Main and Market streets, now the site of the Victoria Theater. Metz was a signer of the borough petition. He erected his hotel in 1872 and called it the Town Hall. It was the first local opera house, having an entertainment hall on the second floor and a tavern on street level. The property was sold to the Kaier Estate in 1885 and the Kaier Grand Opera House was built there in 1893. Fire destroyed the opera house in October 1913 and the Victoria Theater was opened in 1925.

Peter Otterbach's in the first block of East Centre street, north side. He was a signer of the borough petition and built the structure long since known as Kaier's Mansion at 8th and Centre streets, but lived there only a few years because his wife and young child died before they could call it home.

Emmanuel "Manny" Boyer's Mahanoy House at 10 E. Centre. This hotel was built in 1857 and the town's first male child, William Boyer, was born there on Feb. 15, 1858. Manny Boyer came to the site of Mahanoy in 1853 and us recorded in history as the first permanent resident. He sold his hotel in 1863 to M. I. Johnson, another pioneer petition signer, who came to town to work as a plasterer and stone mason until he became an agent for Howe sewing machines. Manny Boyer lived to see his town celebrate its 50th anniversary in 1913, and he was the honored celebrity during the Old Home Week celebration that year. It was also the year of his death.

MRS. THOMAS' history will be published in its entirety as part of the souvenir book being prepared for the quinquennial celebration.

This book will be one of the most comprehensive compilations of local history ever seen for a community in this region. However, the printing will be limited, which means that anyone who wants to be certain of obtaining a copy would be wise to reserve one as soon as possible at quasqui headquarters in the Victoria Theater lobby. When they're gone, they're gone.