

MAHANoy CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

Dr. Noonan a renowned educator

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IN ITS DAY the Mahanoy Township School District was hailed as "one of the finest education systems in the nation" and the man credited for making it thus was Dr. Joseph F. Noonan who was revered by contemporary educators as "the foremost exponent of modern education in this country."

These quotes are found in a 1933 Schuylkill County history volume and at first impression might seem outlandishly boastful accolades for an educator and his tiny school district in a mine-ravaged corner of the anthracite region.

So let's take a look at the story of Dr. Joseph F. Noonan and see what it's all about:

DR. NOONAN was a native of southwestern Schuylkill County and inherited his educational interest from his father, Joseph C. Noonan, who was supervising principal of the Schuylkill Township School District.

His mother, Ellen, was one of the historic Hepler family members who trace their U. S. ancestry back to 1748 when Johan Casper Helper came over from Saxony. His four sons, Jacob, Christopher, Casper and George, served in the Revolutionary War, after which Casper settled in Northampton County and later became a pioneer resident of Eldred Township, Schuylkill County, where he located in 1795.

BORN IN NEWTOWN on June 28, 1892, Joseph F. Noonan attended the grade school there and the high school in Branchdale.

He was graduated from Millersville State Normal School with a bachelor of pedagogy degree in 1911 and received a master of pedagogy there in 1913. He earned a bachelor of philosophy at Muhlenberg College in 1923, a master of arts in 1924 and a doctor of philosophy in 1925. He also studied law during the latter 1920s at the office of Attorney Michael Ryan in Mahanoy City.

His career as an educator began in 1909 at the age of 17 as principal of the Reilly Township schools. In 1910 he became supervising principal of the West Penn Township schools, and in 1911 he went to Rahway High School, New Jersey, as head of the social

studies department.

In 1914, at the age of 22, he became superintendent of schools of Mahanoy Township and proceeded to construct a model educational system.

HE IMMEDIATELY mapped plans for a building program to consolidate the district 13 schools into a centralized system — a concept which decades later developed into the jointure system for school districts across the commonwealth.

He began with the construction of a model junior-senior high school on the hillside at the south end of Fourth street in Mahanoy City. The new building opened in 1919, replacing the two or three room village type school at Coles Patch.

His next move was consolidation of the village elementary schools which began with construction of the Lincoln Building in 1921, combining the former one-room schools at Morea, New Boston and Vulcan.

Next on the agenda was to be an elementary school at Suffolk to combine nine other one-room buildings. However, this project was tabled to give priority to an unexpected need for more space at the new high school, where the enrollment began to swell rapidly as the reputation of the school system's excellence attracted many tuition students from other districts. From an enrollment of 75 students in 1916, the number jumped to 642 by 1932.

Dr. Noonan solved the problem by adding an extension to the high school. The wing was added to the east side and opened in 1933, featuring one of the largest and most modern gymnasiums in the state, plus physics and home economics facilities.

With the wing completed, Dr. Noonan turned his attention to the construction of the central school at Suffolk, designated as the Saint Nicholas Elementary School, which opened in 1937. At the same time, he proceeded with construction of the township stadium which opened the same year and was regarded as one of the finest in the region.

With his building plan now complete, Dr. Noonan was able to look proudly upon a school system on par with the any in the commonwealth.

THE NOONAN high school was



Dr. Joseph F. Noonan

unlike any other in the region. He was a pioneer in the concept of the departmentalized curriculum. He developed innovative courses in academic and commercial departments, introduced cultural subjects and an extracurricular sports program.

When he introduced talking motion pictures as a regular facet of the curriculum in 1932, Mahanoy Township was reported to be the first high school in the world to boast this feature. The idea aroused such interest among educational authorities across the nation that Dr. Noonan was prevailed upon to write a book on the subject.

As his reputation spread in the educational world, he was invited to share his concepts for the benefit of education everywhere.

ripples through the statewide educational picture.

Other school boards organized opposition to the idea and the state secretary of education was pressured into publicly opposing unionized faculties. Thus another of Dr. Noonan's educational innovations was far ahead of its time and had to be shelved for decades until political conditions were ripe.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS in Mahanoy City had been observing the great strides accomplished under the Noonan regime in the neighboring township, and when the borough superintendent, Harry Oday, retired in 1935, they asked Dr. Noonan to lend them his leadership.

It was no easy task trying to direct the operations of two separate districts, but Dr. Noonan agreed to take on the burden to help his neighbors. He was elected to a four-year term, but an omen of trouble ahead became evident when two members of the borough board (Dr. Burke and Mr. Joyce) opposed the hiring and walked out when the vote was taken.

Never one to procrastinate, Dr. Noonan went to work immediately and within two months after his hiring, he presented the borough board with an 18-point program for improvement for the school system. Part of the plan was a building program, the first phase of which was an extension at the high school.

His plan was adopted by the board but the critics wouldn't accept defeat. They began a campaign of opposition. As the 1935 election approached, unsigned circulars appeared in town attacking Dr. Noonan's policies and portraying him as a dictator. He replied to the anonymous critics at public meetings and the board majority continued to support him, but it was evident that the political unanimity which enabled him to make put the township schools on the map would elude him in the borough.

How long Dr. Noonan would have remained in this area, had he received the good will and cooperation he felt necessary to attain his goals for the borough, is not known. He had lifted Mahanoy Township to the pinnacle of educational excellence and could have done the same for Mahanoy City, had he been afforded the cooperation. But less than two years into his four-year term, he

decided to move on.

He could have had his choice of administrative posts in many commonwealth school districts, but he chose to step up to a higher level of education. On April 7, 1937, he announced that he was accepting the position of president at Mansfield State Teachers College. He left to assume those duties on Sept. 30, 1937.

IM A FAREWELL editorial upon his departure from town, the Record-American said:

"Mahanoy City can ill afford to lose the high type of school man that Dr. Noonan has proved himself to be.

"Whether or not you like Dr. Noonan, no man in the state has shown his progressiveness. Thanks to him, in Mahanoy City there is now under construction an addition to our high school which will give to us a modern school building where proper care is given our children and the pursuit of education can be followed as it should be. (Note: the annex opened for the 1937 term.)

"While others are resting, dreaming or playing make believe, he comes along and does things and does them in a substantial way that in the future will show the finest results.

"No greater achievements have come to our town and township than the school buildings and excellent system introduced under the Noonan regime. He planned, he worked and he acted for the benefit of Mahanoy City and Mahanoy Township.

"We love our children and we want them to be better boys and girls. We fully appreciate Dr. Noonan's fine efforts and we wish to say that Mahanoy City and Mahanoy Township will suffer an irreparable loss now that he has decided to leave us."

DURING THE 1940s, Dr. Noonan left Mansfield and became president of East Stroudsburg State College, remaining there until his retirement in the 1960s.

He spent his last years in Philadelphia as resident manager of an apartment complex where one of his neighbors was United Press reporter Russ Green, who, as a reporter for the Record-American in the 1920s and 1930s, had written reams of copy on the unique story of Dr. Joseph Noonan, educator par excellence.