

MAHANoy CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

Jim Kirchner: the last of a breed

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

IF ONE citizen of Mahanoy City were to be singled out as having had the most influential impact on the community's everyday life during the 20th century, the choice would have to be James K. Kirchner.

As the town's leading journalist for more than 50 years, he informed, influenced and entertained countless thousands of townsmen. The pages of his Record-American reflect the passing parade of humanity in all of its aspects.

The joys and the sorrows, the humor and the sarcasm, the fellowship and the acrimony, the triumphs and the tragedies, the successes and the failures, the building up and the tearing down, the influx and the exodus — all are recorded in Jim Kirchner's journal.

THE KIRCHNER story began in Saint Nicholas Patch where he was born on May 5, 1875, son of William E. and Rebecca C. W. (Sauerbrey) Kirchner.

Jim was just a young boy when his father died in a boiler explosion at Saint Nicholas Colliery, leaving the mother with seven children and no income.

Years later, Jim wrote of the heroic manner in which his mother struggled through those dark days. On her 80th birthday in September 1924, he told her story:

"Mother Kirchner was born in Hanover, Germany, on August 30, 1844, and came to America at the age of six years with her parents and her father's two brothers. They settled at Five Points, near Pottsville. Just three weeks later, her father and one brother were killed in a mine explosion.

"Rebecca became the bride of August Diehl, who died shortly after the birth of their first child, a son, August. She then married William E. Kirchner who also had emigrated from Hanover, Germany, but they hadn't known each other there.

"Five sons and one daughter blessed the second union which was severed by death when her husband was killed at his mining job, leaving her without support. But she had no time for grief or self-pity. With back to the wall, she faced the situation with the courage of a true mother.

"A little store was started. A dollar earned here and there, a penny saved everywhere, until the youngsters, one by one, started to work and gradually helped.

"Later years found her with an ambition to move to Mahanoy City and own a home. Six hundred dollars was the nest egg,

and James Gallagher, keeping a saloon at 206 W. Centre St., loaned her the rest — no paper signed, no agreement other than word of mouth — and the house was hers on West Centre street area of the First Ward. The neighborhood was known as 'the dead line' but she loved it and stayed there for many years until a move was made to 435 E. Centre St.

"Of frail human structure, she never weighed more than 115 pounds and today weighs about 100."

MRS. KIRCHNER died eight months later at the East Centre street home, April 24, 1925. Jim's love for her was evident in the obituary he wrote, beginning with words quoted from Baroness von Hutten:

"It is a wonderful thing, a mother. Other folks can love you but only your mother understands. She works for you, looks after you, loves you, forgives you anything you may do, understands you and then the only thing bad she ever does to you is to die and leave you."

He added: "It can be said that the history of Mother Kirchner after the death of her husband is a duplication of the many other histories found in the short and simple annals of the poor. She was engaged in that most remorseful of all battles, the fight against poverty, the struggle to keep a roof over the heads and bread in the mouths of her little brood. But despite the fact that her struggle was made during a period when the coal region was passing through one of its worst economic eras, when men toiled for less than the so-called living wage and even the most affluent were denied most of the common comforts of life, this courageous woman managed to keep the family together and she started each of her children on a career of usefulness.

"It is beyond the imagination to visualize even part of the sacrifice made by this heroic soul in behalf of her children, but the sacrifices were made on the altar of a good mother's life and were made uncomplainingly and willingly in order to spare them the trials and tribulations that had been her own lot."

The surviving children at the time of her death, in addition to Jim, were August C. Diehl, Port Carbon; Charles E., Buffalo, N.Y.; William E., inside foreman at Mahanoy City Colliery; Joseph E., affiliated with the Refowich Brothers clothing store; Ann, wife of John Link, Gordon. The fifth son, Frederick, had died in an accident before the turn of the century at the Foundry Colliery.

She also had a brother, William Sauerbrey, in Philadelphia.

Anniversary Banquet

IN HONOR OF

JAMES H. KIRCHNER

75th Birthday



1875

1950

Lakewood Ballroom

May 9th, 1950

James H. Kirchner
Rossburg superintendent

THE MINES exacted a harsh toll from the family of Mother Kirchner — her father, an uncle, her husband and a son — so it's understandable that Jim steered clear of the mines, although his writings through the years reflected a love for the ore of the mines and respect for the men and boys who kept the collieries going, though it cost countless of them their life and limb.

Young Jim started in the coal industry, which was about the only work available to a boy in the patch. He spent just 18 months in school and then went to the Saint Nicholas Breaker to help the family income by working long and tedious nine-hour shifts, six days a week, as a slate picker.

After the family moved to Mahanoy City he took a job as a newsboy, then worked briefly as a painter before becoming a printer's apprentice.

JIM'S DAUGHTER, Bette Kirchner Stevens, provided the

following history of local newspapers which led to her dad's role as the last of the Mahanoy City publishers:

In 1865 The Mahanoy City Gazette was started by Dr. George B. Swayze. He sold it in 1866 to William Ramsey who published as The Mahanoy Gazette until 1879. The paper was then bought by Andrew Comrey and Thomas H. B. Lyon who changed the name to The Mahanoy Tribune.

In 1881 Eli S. Reinhold and Isaac Y. Solenberger, Esq., brought the paper but the partnership lasted only six months when Sollenberger became sole owner. In 1886 it was bought by Livingstone V. Raush and J. S. Irish, whose partnership was expanded shortly afterward to include Guy C. Irish.

In 1871 The Mahanoy City Local was established by Charles Spencer. The name was changed in November 1871 to The Tri-Weekly Record. Mr. Spencer also started The Mahanoy Valley

Record, a small subscription newspaper, which he sold to John Parker. Parker, in turn, left it to his son, John W., who changed it to a tri-weekly in 1877 under the name Parker's Tri-Weekly Record. About this time, Thomas J. Joyce was getting ready to start The Daily American, and Parker changed his tri-weekly to The Daily Record.

Parker sold The Daily Record to Thomas O'Connor and Harrison Ball, who changed the name to the Mahanoy City Record. Thomas Joyce then sold the Daily American to David M. Graham. Joyce later started the Black Diamond but its existence was short-lived.

Around 1910, Dr. A. P. Seligman and H. F. Bushar became part owners of The Daily American and changed the name to The Mahanoy American. A few years later the paper was sold to Frank J. and Austin T. Noonan, who then sold it in 1917 to James H. Kirchner. Kirchner operated it as The American Tribune until Sept. 1, 1919, when it merged with the Mahanoy City Record to become the Record-American.

The Mahanoy Press was started on July 31, 1923, by William E. Barr and later because the official organ of United Mine Workers District 9. The union sold its interests in July 1926 to the Record-American.

THE DEATH of James H. Kirchner on August 11, 1956, saw the his two daughters continue the operation, Betty Kirchner Stevenson as president/publisher, Jane Kirchner Owens as vice president.

They continued the Record-American tradition until Jan. 15, 1968, when the business was sold to Ralph Ingersoll's Newspaper Publishing Inc. of New York. The end came for the Record-American in 1973 when the metropolitan firm abolished the publication.

Mr. Kirchner's wife was the former Carrie Hensyl, whose father, Rev. J. B. Hensyl, served at Salem Evangelical Congregational Church. His survivors consisted of his two daughters and their families:

Bette lives at 76 S. Main St., which has been the family homestead for 68 years. She and her late husband, Ted L. Stevenson, who was a native of Chicago who served as the paper's manager, were parents of a son, Ted II.

Jane lives in Barnesville and is the widow of William H. Owens, a native of New Boston who served as the Record-American advertising manager, later established the Creative Printing shop in Ashland, and was serving as the county prothonotary at the

time of his death. He was survived by his wife and their four children: James E. married to Karen Collins of Delano, parents of two children, Allison and Christopher; Nancy J., a teacher in the North School District; William H., a commercial printer in Ashland; Carol, wife of Joseph Stofko, Locust Valley, parents of two daughters, Carrie and Katie.

JIM KIRCHNER'S biography reveals the portrait of a man who was deeply involved in all aspects of life in his home town.

He served as postmaster for eight years, county commissioner for eight years, superintendent Locust Mountain Hospital under Governor James, secretary of the board of health, registrar of vital statistics, chairman of the World War I draft board and chairman of Liberty Bond drives also World War II bond drives and Salvation Army and Red Cross drives.

He served as president of the Schuylkill County Newspaper Publishers Association, belonged to the three Mahanoy City Masonic organizations as well as the Caldwell Consistory of Bloomsburg, Tall Cedars of Lebanon and Rajah Temple of Reading; was a member of the Elks Lodge (past ruler); Eagles Aerie, Moose Lodge, POSofA, Social Club, Citizens Fire Company and like his mother, was a faithful member of Christ Lutheran Church, also served on the church council.

In his day, Jim was one of the town's most sought after toastmasters and after dinner speakers. The tables were turned on him during the 1950s when American Legion Post 74 honored him as man of the year.

And the most memorable occasion of his golden years took place on May 9, 1950, when he was guest of honor at an elaborate gathering in the Lakewood Ballroom for his 75th birthday. Among the dignitaries present for that tribute were State Senate Secretary G. Harold Watkins, County President Judge Cyrus Palmer, old friend Dick Edwards of Lansford, his pastor the memorable R. E. Kramer of Christ Lutheran Church, Reading Mayor John Davis, PUC Commissioner Henry Houck and Father Kelly of Saint Canicus Church.

WHEN THE New York publishing chain pull the switch on the Record-American teletype, linotypes and presses in 1973, it marked the first in the 20th century that the Kirchner name was no longer associated with the newspaper world in town.

An irreplaceable slice of Mahanoy City history had become history.