

MAHANNOY CITY CHRONICLES/ Special edition

Eagles once flew high in Mahanoy

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THE FRATERNAL Order of Eagles No. 167 faded from the scene in Mahanoy City since the early 1970s, but in its day the organization had one of the largest and most active memberships of all the fraternal groups that have come and gone in the 125 years of borough history.

The popularity of the club was evident in the huge classes of candidates initiated into membership each year. A typical example was the group of inductees who entered membership in December 1937 — a total of 66. Even as late as 1954, the induction class numbered 50, which was a tribute to the 50th anniversary of the club's charter.

Whenever a community activity centered around entertainment, the eagles were involved. Be it minstrels, variety shows, follies, parades, band concerts, beauty contests, boxing shows, night club revues, dances, carnivals — the eagles to lend support as producer, promoter, sponsor, participant or any other way they could help.

A HISTORY of the club, published in 1954, contains the names of men who were well-known about town in days of old.

Evan Griffiths, who served in the state legislature during the 1890s, was elected the first president when the aerie-to-be held its first meeting in 1901. For three years before the aerie applied for a charter, the meetings were held in the Grand Army Hall on the upper floor of the Cooperative Building once located at the northwest corner of Main and Centre streets.

The aerie received its charter on Sept. 13, 1904, at which time there were 70 charter members and meetings were moved to Knapp's Hall at the southeast corner of Main and Centre, just across Centre street from where the club would eventually have its own quarters.

In August 1905 the aerie acquired the Bricker building at 9 E. Centre St. and made plans to construct a three-store brick building. The building committee, composed of John Kelly, John Tracey, Eugene McAtee, Adam Schaeffer, Harvey Tecklenberg, William Kerns and James McElhenny, raised \$18,000 through a 20-year bond.

The new building was dedicated on April 16, 1907. The committee for that occasion consisted of James Foley, Dr. David Holland, John Brownmiller, James McElhenny, William Gintner, William Hyland, Howard

Hopkins, Thomas Ryan, Daniel Guinan Sr., Thomas Haughney, Patrick Manion, Peter Thornton, Martin Portland, Valentine Krauter, Abe Hakwes, Harry Dugan, Adam Schaeffer, Charles D. Kaier, Charles Silliman, Thomas Howard, David Thomas, Guy Shaad, John Goynes, Lester Hendricks, Herbert Noakes, Harvey Stauffer, Martin Cunningham, Daniel Creedon, Peter Litsch, Jesse Webb and James Kirchner.

The program included orations by Daniel F. Guinan Sr., State President Paul W. Houck (of Shenandoah) and National President Edward Krause.

MENTION OF the eagles will bring to mind the sound of music for folks who were in Mahanoy City during the 1920s through the 1960s. During that era, the aerie sponsored the local community band which presented countless concerts and appeared in countless parades.

Originally known as the Mahanoy City Band, the musical group was taken under wing of the eagles on Dec. 5, 1921. Charles Unsinn, one of the early directors, was succeeded by his brother, John, who for three decades was a familiar figure holding the leader's baton at the front of the band. When John died in July 1951 the directorship passed on to Professor Guy Dower, the instrumental music director at Mahanoy Township High School. In later years the leadership role was filled by John Kozy and Sterling Litwhiler.

The year 1926 was significant for the aerie. The 20-year bond issue was retired on March 1 and the mortgage was burned during a celebration at Lakeside Park.

As long as the aerie was in operation, the focal point in the grille room was a large mounted eagle, symbol of the FOE, which was presented to the lodge by Charles Kaier Jr. The symbolic bird, along with most of the other objects d'aerie, were reportedly transferred to an aerie in Mount Carmel or Shamokin when the local grille operations ceased.

OLD DEMON FIRE struck on March 3, 1946, gutting the Whalen Drug Store, tenants on the ground floor, and the grille and lodge hall on the upper floors. The Whalen store then moved to the northeast corner of Centre and Catawissa streets, where it continued in business until the early 1980s. The site is now occupied by Unlimited Videos.

The fire made it necessary for the eagles to once again form a building committee to restore the quarters. John Waba, then



EAGLES NEST — A huge eagle atop the building at 9 E. Centre St. identified the home of the Mahanoy City Fraternal Order of Eagles Aerie No. 167 in early 1900s. This photo shows the building at its dedication in April 1907. It remained intact until gutted by fire in March 1946. The last of the eagles left the nest in the early 1970s and the Nelson T. Davis insurance agency, current occupant, acquired ownership.

presiding as worthy president, appointed a construction-finance committee consisting of Victor Lobichusky, Joseph Lodanosky, James Kirchner, Anthony P. McLaughlin (police chief), Charles Rice, Daniel Guinan Jr.,

Patrick J. Foley (chief burgess), Walter Myer, James Dwyer, John Unsinn, Dr. John Bonavich, Joseph Wirtz, John Sadausky, William Davis, Henry Petritsch, Martin O'Brien and Anthony Waak.

The repairs took more than a year, and it wasn't until July 1, 1947, that the social club and aerie were officially able to reoccupy their quarters.

THE POST-WAR era during the late 1940s and early 1950s were active years for the club, with the boys bank from the war and the area collieries working steadily. In addition to the busy grille business, the aerie made its hall available for rental, and it became a popular site for class reunions, wedding receptions and similar functions.

However, 1954 brought the abandonment of the deep mines and signaled the beginning of the end for the eagles. Like so many other landmark institutions so familiar to past generations in town, the eagles fell victim to economic recession and population exodus. Like old soldiers, they just faded away.

The lodge was still active for the borough's 1963 centennial week, and Tony Waak, a long-time promoter for the aerie, played a key role in the centennial queen pageant. However, by 1970 the activities at 9 E. Centre St. were just about a Stewards like Tom Mathews, Red Hilbert and Ed Ryan had kept the grille open, but the decline in patronage continued. In 1972 the Nelson T. Davis insurance and real estate agency moved into the ground floor and eventually purchased the property. The last of the eagles had deserted the old nest.

SOME OF THE leaders who served as worthy president of the aerie from 1901 onward were: Evan Griffiths, James J. McElhenny, John M. Coombe, John J. Kelly, Thomas H. Nolan, Edward F. Britz, George H. Stern, Eugene McAtee, Adam C. Schaeffer, Jesse Webb, James H. Kirchner, David Thomas, John E. Adam, John Unsinn, James H. Wagner, Lawrence J. Ryan, Abe Hawkes, Joseph Wirtz, Nicholas Lipp, Patrick J. Hylan, Todd M. Curley, Edward T. Byron, William R. Davis, John J. Waba, Joseph Lodanosky, Anthony J. Waak, Charles Rice, James C. Dwyer and Joseph P. Meluskey.

A MEMORABLE event for the eagles was the golden anniversary of the aerie's charter. The celebration took place during the third weekend of October 1954. That was a memorable weekend in Mahanoy City for another reason — Hurricane Hazel struck on Friday, creating wind havoc the likes of which had not been seen here since the cyclone of June 26, 1924. One of the tragic results of Hazel was the death of Tommy Morgan, son

of the local assistant postmaster, who was electrocuted at Indiantown Gap when he stepped from the bus he was driving and came in contact with a felled high voltage line.

The eagles 50th anniversary induction class brought 50 new members into the aerie. The class was dedicated to Kaier Brewery magnates Lloyd W. Fahler and Charles A. Domson, who were staunch supporters of the eagles, as was their predecessor, the late Charles Kaier Jr.

Other highlights of the golden anniversary weekend were a sidewalk concert was presented by the Eagles Band and a dinner program with floor show that packed 170 people into the aerie hall. Attorney Tom Noonan delivered the anniversary address.

The floor show featured a special guest performance by Pottsville's Jill Whitney, a county celebrity through her television appearances on the Ted Mack and Arthur Godfrey shows. She also cut recordings for Coral Records, and if your 1950s memory has no cobwebs you may recall some of the singles she waxed under titles such as "Pretty-Eyed Baby," "Old Man Mose," "Tulips in the Springtime," "Tennessee Wigwalk," "Old Potato Idaho," "My Friend the Ghost," "Mama Don't Cry at My Wedding" and "Oh You Little Darlin'."

The show was emceed by Joe McCarthy, late of Mahanoy Plane, who could act the comic with the best of them. Dance talent from the Jean T. Dixon Studio was much in evidence. Monica Kardisco of Morea and Ann Rafferty of Gilberton danced a "Tops in Taps" number; Elaine Baney and Jan Wilkinson of Frackville presented a baton twirling hula; Joyce Perlacia of Frackville danced in Spanish style.

Linda Barthel and George Mock did a comedy and song routine, and Mary Lou Sanders of Lansford presented a comedy novelty act. Piano and solovoc accompaniment was provided by Buddo Sweet.

The anniversary committee included Charles Suscavage, William Kates, Andrew Raddie, James Murtin, Andrew Tichy and Joseph Digris.

MANY ARE the memories housed in the now-empty rooms on the upper floors of 9 E. Centre St.

Were the walls able to talk, they could tell local folks in this quasiquintennial year many tales of the memorable citizens of yesteryear who frolicked in the grille and fraternalized in the aerie of the Mahanoy City FOE Aerie No. 167.