

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

## The patriarch of sports promoters

By BILL O'BRIEN  
Herald writer

JAMES J. QUIRK is the man who put Mahanoy City on the map as a center of sports events.

Quirk was 35 years old when he came here from Shenandoah in 1885 to join Owen Mackinson, a well-known local personality, in the opening of a saloon in the Kaier Opera House building. It became one of the most popular drinking establishments in the East, not only because it was situated in the most famous opera house in the region, but mainly because it was the place where Quirk and Mackinson made arrangements for the sporting events they promoted.

Mackinson, who died a year after the saloon opened, had a reputation as a trainer of foot racers who competed all over the county, and his association with Quirk in the saloon helped to attract sports-oriented clientele.

Quirk and Mackinson introduced professional baseball to Mahanoy City in 1886, importing seasoned players from Philadelphia and paying them salaries to play four games a week. The West End Park (now the site of the Mahanoy Area Education Complex) was the home field and the team competed in a league with Mount Carmel, Ashland, Hazleton, Lansford, Minersville and Milton.

AFTER THE DEATH of his partner, Quirk carried on the bar business and sports promotions, and did the job more effectively than any promoter before or since.

He booked world champion class wrestlers to stage bouts in opera house concert hall.

He lured the nation's top pocket billiard pros to stage exhibitions or compete in tournaments. One of the big attractions he brought here was an 11-year-old from Chicago whose talent amazed the crowds who attended his exhibition in the opera house. A few years later this boy wonder was ranked as the best in the world — Willie Hoppe.

FOOT RACING was a very popular sport in the decades immediately before and after the turn of the century, and Mahanoy City was the scene of many such contests promoted by Jim Quirk. Runners and fans came from all over the country.

Indoor races often totaled 100 miles or more and lasted several days, with each contestant setting his own pace for running and

resting.

Outdoor races were of the sprint type, covering the 100-yard or quarter-mile distances. Through the efforts of Quirk, Mahanoy City was placed in the world spotlight when a 100-yard world champ named Rogers competed against the British champ, named Vokes. The event made sports headlines from New York to San Francisco.

Quirk also brought Fred Harris, world quarter-mile champion, to run a race in town.

BICYCLE racing also flourished in Mahanoy, all thanks to the influence of Jim Quirk. He booked the best bikers in the country to compete in professional races the West End Park.

As a result of the great fan interest, bicycles became one of the most popular items in town and provided thousands of people with an outlet for recreational riding.

In addition to all the aforementioned activities, Quirk took on the responsibility for promoting cultural entertainment at the opera house. One of the popular events he initiated was a Saturday night concert series.

Because of his promotional success, the Kaier family named him general manager of the entire opera house enterprise.

QUIRK'S importance to his adopted town was summed up by the Record-American on the occasion of his 80th birthday:

"Jim Quirk did more to bring sports to Mahanoy City than anyone else."

He was Mahanoy's patriarch of sports. His influence can be seen through succeeding generations until today. The many MCHS championship basketball teams of the John Goepfert era (1920s-50s) evolved from the tradition established by Jim Quirk — a tradition evident today in the championship football teams of recent seasons and the 1988 state championship girls basketball team at Mahanoy Area High.

QUIRK retired from the theater life in 1901. He was still living in town when the famed opera house burned down in October 1913. Three years later he moved to Shamokin and did some theatrical promoting there, but called it quits when "moving pictures" came along to elbow-out live theater.

Jim and his wife, Ann (Garrity), a Weatherly girl, celebrated their golden anniversary in Shamokin in February 1936. Their family at

### Mahanoy City Barbers' Association

MAKES THE FOLLOWING

## Announcement

ON AND AFTER JANUARY 12, 1938

THE FOLLOWING PRICES WILL PREVAIL

Adults' and Ladies' Hair Cuts . . . 35c

Children's Hair Cuts . . . . . 25c

Shave . . . . . 20c

#### HOURS

Weekdays . . . . . 8:00 A. M. to 7:00 P. M.

Saturdays and Pre-holiday, 8:00 A. M. to 9:00 P. M.

#### ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

JOE ANCERAVAGE  
VINCE ANCERAVAGE  
VINCE TANGAVAGE  
IRVIN BROWN  
JOE SYZDEK  
GEORGE ALANSKY  
GEORGE WHITTICH  
ROY WHITTICH  
NORMAN FISHER  
FRANK KEISER  
MAFF BROTHERS  
N. LAZORCHECK  
PETER HRICISAK  
M. TANGELFERI  
JOHN SOMMERS  
JACKIE DAVIDSON

MAURICE PEDRIANNI  
FRANK OSCHMAN  
JOHN STRAKA  
JOE COOK  
JIM HULSMAN  
YESRIAL ECKROTH  
JAKE HERMAN  
M. G. STARKEY  
P. PRONCAVAGE  
GEORGE OSCHMAN  
WILLIAM SCHUKIS  
JIM WAGNER  
JOE RICCHUITI  
GEORGE RADA, New Boston  
HARRY PERRY, Delano

**TONSORIAL ROSTER** — Fifty years ago, when Mahanoy City had 14,000 citizens, it took at least 30 barbers to keep the hirsute outcroppings of the male population neatly trimmed. Today, with the population down to 5,600 citizens and male tresses sometimes longer than the curls of Goldylocks, the ranks of barbers have diminished to four: Frank Maff, Maurice Pedriani, Joe Flamini and Joe Vesce. The advertisement above in 1938 listed the union barbers who organized for their own benefit to prevent price-cutting in hair-cutting. There were other licensed barbers who refused to join the union, plus a few "bootleg" clippers who operated without state licensure. It's evident by the prices quoted in the ad that the old "shave and a haircut, two bits" era a thing of the past. Of all the names on the 1938 list, two are still snipping: Pedriani and Maff.

that time included three daughters and a son: Ruth, a teacher in Kulpmont; Mae, a theater manager, and Mrs. Joseph (Ann) Dondero of Mount Carmel; Charles, at home. Two other children, James and Jennie, died in childhood in Mahanoy City.

ONE OF THE bartenders who became popular through his position at Jim Quirk's opera house saloon was John Williams, who later became a noted hostelry proprietor in his own right.

After Quirk retired from the business, Williams struck out on his own and opened a tavern at 61 N. Main St., which he ran for 35 years until his retirement in November 1936. He would have stayed longer but was required to surrender his lease on the premises because Charley Lieberman wanted to expand his adjoining hostelry in the former Kaier House Hotel.

When you read the description of the Williams Saloon published in the Record-American on the day of John's retirement, you understand the reason for its popularity:

"At John's you always were safe from the buzzer, the ear-bender, the barfly, the hanger-on, as John would not permit anyone interfering with his trade. He always felt that a barroom could be conducted on the same level as any other business, and for 35 years it was so handled — no rowdiness, no noise, no loud singing, very little profane language, but always good liquor, the finest beer in the world and all-American sandwiches: ham, cheese, or combination, Coleman mustard mixed with beer, served on a small plate with the neatness of the best. It never varied from the day he opened until his the day he closed. The John Williams sandwich was known almost coast to coast, and that isn't stretching it too far.

"Johnny's serving of Kaier's beer made this excellent product a world beater: temperature correct, head just right, clean glasses, coils that never knew anything but cleanliness. It was a pleasure to spend an evening in John's place.

"How well we recall the early days, the playing of the piano by Eddie Barr, the singing of Frank Hill of Reading, the late Charley Kaier giving John and argument about the beer, Reddy Haldeman tapping his cane, Charley Silliman rushing the duck, Frank Ball, Jack Adamson, Jim Carrick, Doc Holland with his

pleasant 'How-do, Shorty,' Hiram Morgan dropping in and sometimes staying an hour or more, Charley Domson, Charley Dieter delivering the best rye bread in the world and, of course, staying long enough for a glass or two in the way of refreshing himself.

"A long list of celebrities from surrounding towns found their way to Jack's place: Billy Adamson, Johnny Jones, Dick Riddle, Charley Butler, Pete McCarron, Fred Beck, Harry Krebs, Jim O'Connor visiting from Allentown with his uniform on, a little fellow from Jacksons they called Paddy, Doc Camobell, Harry and Bill Clifford, Johnny Shovlin, Slim Foley, Bill Price, Jimmy Whitaker, Jimm Kehoe, Pat Hegins of Pottsville."

CONTINUING on his nostalgia trip, the Record-American writer of 1936 recalled opening day at Johnny Williams' saloon 35 years earlier:

"Everything was in apple pie order. Johnny, a little worse for wear, was hobbling about with a cane. Customers started coming in and among them were a few hard-boiled linemen. One of them became unruly and dashed a glass of beer upon the newly papered ceiling and ran to the street, his pals following.

"Once outside they dashed a half brick through the glass door and that was the signal for Bill Price, as fleet-footed as a deer, Bert Shafer and a few others to give the bruisers a chase. Catching his man at the Main street bridge, Bill hauled him back to John's and you can almost guess the rest.

"They settled for the damages and all was glory again. With the closing of John's place this week, Bill Price is going to be on hand making a complete score of 35 years of patronage and friendship at the Williams Hotel."

In conclusion, the writer noted: "It's regrettable that John's place is to go. It was a saloon conducted on the highest scale: no violations, no substitutes, no rowdiness, but a rendezvous where good fellows met, swapped stories, talked politics, bought and sold railroads, elected and defeated candidates from burgess to president, drinking to the health of one another, laughing at this one's jokes, jibing that one, kidding another, but always with a smile and a stein."

Makes you wish you could turn back the calendar to the decades when John Williams was making memories at his North Main street cafe.