

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

## Townfolk in world of show biz

By BILL O'BRIEN  
Herald writer

**THIS WEEK'S** death of Dennis Day, the golden era radio singing star of the Jack Benney show, brought to mind the fact that Mahanoy City produced a great Irish tenor who sang on radio back in the golden era of vaudeville.

His name was James Haughney and he was at his prime in the early Roaring 20s performing as "Jim Grady, The Singing Miner."

Under contract with the Keith Circuit, which was the No. 1 name in the business, Grady sang from the stages of theaters across the nation from 1924 until the end of the vaudeville era.

Grady didn't need a microphone. He had a powerful chest which imparted a strength to his voice that made it unique among tenors. A big man, he stood 6-2 and presented an imposing figure on stage in mining togs, his robust tenor voice reverberating off ceiling and walls — reminiscent of the folk hero miner named "Big John" who was made famous in more recent times by country-western's Tennessee Ernie Ford.

**GRADY'S** God-given talent was known to local theater patrons long before he hit the big time. As a boy appearing in the many minstrels and other musical presentations, his voice captivated audiences.

His stage name was a tribute to his mother, the former Maggie Grady. His father, Ed Haughney, went blind with old age and Jim had a weak left eye (evident on the photo) which may have been inherited from his father.

The details of Jim's entry into vaudeville were carried in the Record-American in March 1924: "Word was received by Edward

Haughney today to the effect that his son, James, has signed a two-year contract with the Keith Vaudeville Circuit at a substantial salary and is booked to appear at the Nixon Theater, 52nd and Market streets, Philadelphia, beginning next week.

"Young Mr. Haughney is the possessor of a voice of rare quality, known to singers as a robust tenor. He left for Philadelphia some time ago and was taken under the wing of Professor McCauley who recognized his ability as a singer and planned for his introduction to the world of stageland.

"His stage name will be Jimmy Grady and in miner's costume he will be introduced as a miner boy, the sweet singer from the mines. He has received several independent bookings at vaudeville houses in Philadelphia and vicinity.

"While in Philadelphia he was engaged to sing for the Gimbel broadcasting station (WIP) and made such a hit on his first appearance that he was given return dates."

"Tonight he sings at a reception given General Butler, city director of public safety, at which the mayor and many high-up officials will be present. Sunday, he will sing at Mass in the Philadelphia Cathedral.

"He is staying at the Morris Hotel, Seventh and Arch streets."

**JIM'S** homecoming performance for audiences in Mahanoy City took place the first weekend of May 1924 when "The Singing Miner" was billed on the marquee at the Family Theater.

When vaudeville died, Jim took a job managing an MGM theater in New York City. Eventually he was named district manager in charge of 11 movie houses. He settled in New Rochelle, N.Y.,

and is buried there. His wife, Nancy (Dooley), was a Mount Carmel native.

Jim made many trips home to Mahanoy City. His final visit was during the 1970s for the funeral of his sister, Mrs. Margaret Eichman, 803 E. Centre St. Mrs. Eichman's husband, Ed, was a great fan of "The Singing Miner" and recalled how people stood in front of Cleary's Music Store, 39 W. Centre St., to listed as the radio broadcast his performances from Philadelphia.

How unfortunate it was that tape recorders were not available in those days to preserve the voice of Jim Grady to be replayed in this quasiquicentennial years of the town that gave the world "The Singing Miner."

**LOCAL TALENT** was plentiful in Mahanoy during the Roaring 20s. Through the years, minstrels, variety shows, stage plays and other forms of theater presented by home town entertainers were sources of entertainment for townfolk.

Back in March 1924, some belles of Mahanoy presented a stage show patterned after the popular hits then playing on Broadway.

Check this list of stars in the Mahanoy City Follies of 1924 and you might find that your grandma had her day in the spotlight on stage at the Family Theater:

Anna Boley, Mary Boyer, Anna Burke, Adele Chunitis, Catherine Dochney, Ella Durko, Ruth Fenkner, Helen Gavala, Mary Gogoy, Beatrice Kulbinsky, Vera Long, Marie Maharg, Alberta Metz, Edna Mauer, Helen Olsh, Alice Smith, Katherine Pavlousky, Florence Petrachonis, Susan Salmon, Alice Smith, Mary Tierney, Sue Timko, Mary Szervell, Anna Victor, Helen and Mayme Waak, Dorothy Williams,

Helen Yankus and Florence Yiengst.

Too bad there were no video recording camera in those days. Wouldn't it be scintillating to see the Belles of '24 wowing the wide-eyed young lads (like Puck Sullivan) watching from the benches in the peanut gallery!

**MAHANOY'S** sons and daughters have left their marks of talent in faraway places and long-gone eras that have been forgotten in passage of time.

Take this 1924 news item: "Miss Dorothy Dennis, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dennis, East Mahanoy street, a student at the College of the Pacific, San Jose, Calif., received favorable critical review in the San Jose Mercury-Herald for the vocal recital she gave on Feb. 27 (1924).

"The paper's music critic had this to say about her singing: 'Miss Dennis, whose voice was lovely despite a slight hoarseness, gave a finely chosen group of solos in charming style. Sentimental, sprightly, pensive and brilliant moods followed one after the other, displaying versatility, ease, good range and beauty of tone.'"

"Her brother, Charles M. Dennis, the dean of music at the college, will sing over station KGO at Oakland on March 15. This is a new station operated by The General Electric Company and considered the best in the country."

How about that — a Mahanoy City sister-brother act making headlines 3,000 miles and 64 years ago. You have to wonder where their careers took them, and if they have descendents who might come home to Mahanoy this September to spend some time in the town that gave the world the musical siblings, "Dots" and Charles Dennis.



Jim Grady  
The Singing Miner