

MAHANAOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

John Unsinn was man about town

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

FEW MAHANAOY City residents were better known and admired in their time than John K. Unsinn. In mining, musical, fraternal, church and political circles, he was a respected leader.

Although he had no special training in music, for 27 years he directed the Eagles Band which was known throughout the region as a prize-winning parade group as well as for its concerts and performances at social functions.

His education, outside of local schools, was obtained via correspondence courses.

MR. UNSINN had a mining career that began on the lowest rung as a doorboy and reached a zenith with his appointment to the superintendency of two major collieries where thousands of Mahanoy City mineworkers came to know him as a gentleman and a friend.

He began tending door in November 1899 at North Mahanoy Colliery, later being promoted to mule driver. When he was old enough to fill an adult's job, he to become a miner's helper, and when he had gained enough expertise in the skill of cutting coal, he became a contract miner in 1908.

He transferred to a mining job at Tunnel Ridge Colliery in 1913 and became an assistant foreman in 1915, inside foreman in 1928 and superintendent of the entire colliery in 1929.

In 1930, when Tunnel Ridge was in the process of being phased out, Mr. Unsinn was transferred to the superintendency of the larger Mahanoy City Colliery and continued in that position for 14 years.

With greater emphasis being placed on mine safety during the early 1940s, the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company made use of his experience by

promoting him to the position of safety inspector in the Maple Hill division in 1944. He had his headquarters in an office building at Ellangown Colliery until that section was torn up by the strip mines in the late 1940s.

AT THE TIME of his death in 1951 he was completing his first six-year term on the Mahanoy City School Board and had been board president for two years.

At the local Eagles Aerie he was one of the livewires who served in many chairs, including the presidency.

At Saint Fidelis Church he was a leader of the Holy Name Society and was treasurer of the Holy Name Regional Union of Schuylkill and Carbon Counties. Two of his daughters entered the religious life as members of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Order. Frances became Sister Regina Theresa, and Theresa became Sister Mary Joan.

His parents, John and Theresa (Koff) Unsinn were early settlers in the borough. His wife was the former Elizabeth Cahill. Their home was at 1315 E. Mahanoy St., across the street from his "war garden" where he collapsed and died on July 6, 1951.

SPEAKING OF the Eagles Band brings to mind the earliest and longest-lasting instrumental musical group in Mahanoy City's history: the old Citizens Band. The borough was only three years old when it was organized in 1868 and it was still going strong into the Roaring 20s.

According to a 1921 item in the Record-American, the band received a charter on May 17, 1869, and played every Decoration Day for the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Post. During World War I the group played for many of the flag raisings at collieries, neighboring patches and borough neighborhoods.

For years the band's treasurer was David M. "Red Dave" Harris and the secretary was



John K. Unsinn
Prominent townsman

Michael Meehan until he moved to Philadelphia.

Leaders through the years included William Smith, Jacob Britz, Henry Ferg, "Old" Zeitz, John Both, John Glover, John Harlon, Newton Reed, Charles Halderman, William F. Williams, Harry Harris David Harris, Professor B. J. Schnable, Reese Rosser Sr. and Elisha Harris.

SPEAKING OF the mine patches, William A Haak was one of the pioneer carpenters who helped build and repair company homes in the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company villages around the Mahanoy Valley. He also was one of the founders of the Citizens Fire Company.

Born at Womelsdorf on April 23, 1847, he was a boy of 15 when his parents came to Mahanoy City in 1862.

He worked as a coal company house carpenter for 20 years, and also did carpentry work for contractors Solomon Faust and Cap Schoener. At the same time he was regarded as one of the area's most skilled cabinet-makers.

He served several terms on the borough school board and was chairman of the building committee which directed the construction of the Twelfth Street School in 1893.

He also served at one time as a member of the borough police force, and in 1876 was employed as a guard at the U.S. Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

At the time of his death on Oct. 2, 1922, he was 75 years old and residing at 601 E. Centre St. with his wife, Luza, and their sons, Ralph, a borough mail carrier, and George, a Lehigh Valley Coal Company office employee.

MENTION THE first ward in Mahanoy City and the name Koval comes to mind.

What resident from the good old days in the 1930s and 1940s doesn't recall the Koval clan? There was Koval's Flower Shop in the 600 block of West Centre Street and greenhouses in the 700 block; Koval Brothers Plymouth-Dodge-DeSoto garage at Center and B Streets (the building was recently torn down), and George Koval's Oldsmobile agency in the 800 block (now occupied by Paesano's auto service).

A glimpse of the fascinating history of this memorable family is available in from the obituary of their matriarch, published on Monday, April 18, 1938:

Mrs. Elizabeth Koval, aged 70 years, of 616-18 W. Centre St., died in the Ashland State Hospital on Sunday.

The departed was born in old Austria-Hungary, now Czechoslovakia, on March 19, 1868. She was a daughter of the late John and Dorothy Polaschak.

Her father was blacksmith in his native village, as was her father-in-law whose name, Koval, is Slovak for blacksmith.

Mrs. Koval had been a resident of Mahanoy City for 46 years. She came to the United States in 1892 on the same boat with her husband-to-be, the late John Koval, who died on March 20, 1922. They were married upon

landing in New York, and came immediately to Mahanoy City.

Shortly after their arrival here, work was begun on one of the Mahanoy City Water Company dams. Between 100 and 150 men were employed on this project, and Mr. and Mrs. Koval were in charge of sheltering them. This was handled by erecting tents in the vicinity of the project.

Around 1898 the couple opened a grocery store which Mrs. Koval continued to operate until her death.

In her later years Mrs. Koval made four trips back across the ocean to the home of her childhood. The last of these journeys was in 1924, where she was accompanied by several of her children to whom she pointed out the scenes of her youth.

Throughout their residency in Mahanoy, Mr. and Mrs. Koval worshipped at Saint Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church which was founded in 1890, two years before they arrived here.

Tragedy visited the family in 1911 when a young daughter, Anna, was fatally burned when her dress caught fire while she was at play.

Surviving children at the time of the mother's death were John, Stephen and Joseph in Mahanoy City, Mrs. Nicholas (Mary) Yutko in Saint Clair and Mrs. John (Katherine) Oleksick of Frackville.

YOU NEVER KNOW when a flash of nostalgia may strike and fill you with a longing for the old home town and the haunts of childhood. It happened to Alice Raber Rosica 20 years ago at her home in Toms River, N.J.

The happy times at MCHS in the mid-1940s; sipping on Cokes and slugging the juke box at Georges Soda Fountain; Sunday afternoon hikes to the cemeteries and Kaier's Dam; record hops at the Polish Hall; watching the big steam locomotives puffing up with long trains of coal from the Saint Nicholas Yards, or the

passenger trains pulling in and people alighting at the Reading Depot.

It was yesterday once more for Alice as she took pen and paper on the 26th day of April in 1968 and wrote:

AN ODE MY HOME TOWN

Though very few have heard of you

or care just where you are,
In my mind and in my heart
you're never very far.

I think of you when evening comes

and that's when I pretend
I'm just the kid who went away
then came back home again.

I make believe I'm walking down

your shaded streets once more
Heading for the old house
where

I lived when I was four.

Along the way I pass the church

where happy hours were spent
While praying with the ones I loved,

no one was more content.

The park, the stores, the movie house

all looked the same to me,
The faces of my dear old friends
I tried so hard to see.

Now I suppose you wonder what

you've really given me;
You've given me a place to love
and precious memories.

You're just a little one-horse town

that no one cares to see
Still in my mind and in my heart
you're all the world to me.

NO ONE could have said it better.