

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

The father of the public library ...

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

DR. W. N. EHRHART, Mahanoy City's superintendent of schools for 18 years around the turn of the century, was the father of the borough's free public library.

His tenure as superintendent of schools covered the hectic two decades in which the borough's population grew to its all-time high. When he took office in 1896, the town numbered 11,286 people. When he retired in 1914, the community was at its peak of 15,936.

Providing for the educational needs of an influx of almost 5,000 new citizens in the brief span of a decade was no small challenge for the school system, but Professor Ehrhart was equal to the task. The 1916 J.H. Beers history of Schuylkill County took note of his accomplishment: "When he assumed the reins of the Mahanoy City schools he gave his undivided attention to placing them in the first rank among similar educational institutions and such is the standing they now occupy."

This emphasis on the importance of education which Dr. Ehrhart fostered had its full impact in the decade after his death. For several years during the mid-1920s Mahanoy City's high school enrollment was the highest in Schuylkill County.

It wasn't until 1927 that the City of Pottsville was able to overtake Mahanoy City. The official county figures for that year showed Pottsville with 663 students (325 boys, 338 girls) while Mahanoy

City had 651 students (321 boys, 330 girls).

Shenandoah, with nearly twice the population of Mahanoy, had 549 students in high school. Tamaqua had 502.

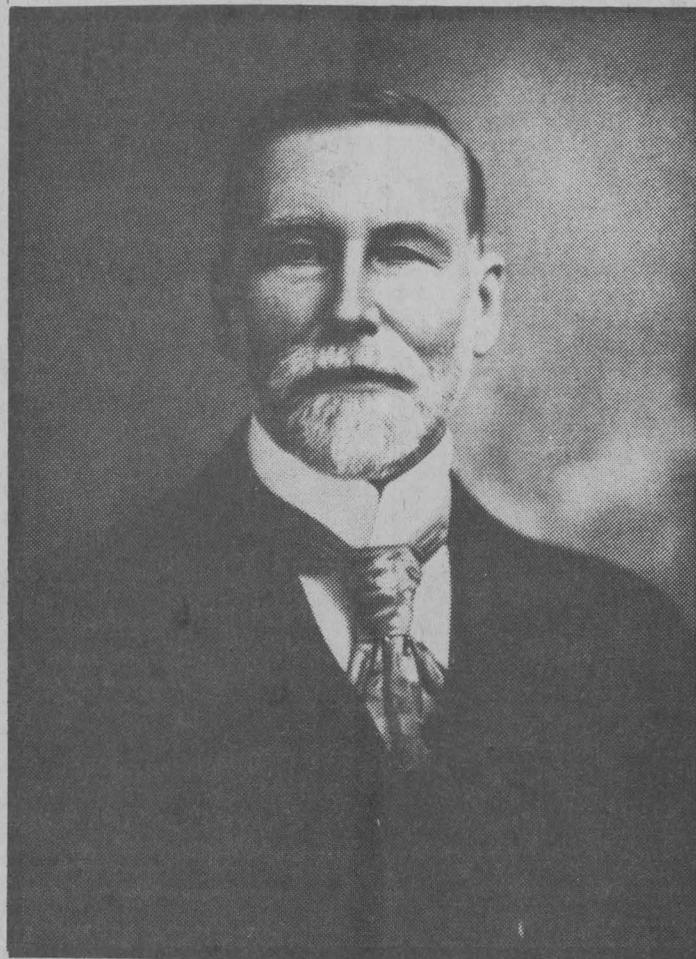
DR. EHRHART devoted 40 years to the education of Schuylkill County's youth. He came here from his native Perry County in 1872 to serve as principal at the Branch Township school at Llewellyn. Two years later he moved to Tamaqua to serve as high school principal.

In 1884 he became principal of Shenandoah High School and remained for nine years.

He left the educational field in 1893 and opened a business in Pottsville. However, education was still his first love, and when the position of principal of Mahanoy City High School was offered to him in 1895 he accepted. The following year he was promoted to superintendent and held the post for 18 years. Failing health forced him to retire at the end of the 1914 term and he died on March 31, 1915, aged 67 years.

COMING FROM a family line noted for literary eminence, Dr. Ehrhart was an avid reader, especially of the classics, history and science, and was thus a great advocate of the free public library. He was responsible for the establishment of school libraries open to the public in both Shenandoah and Mahanoy City districts.

In Shenandoah, he established a school-housed public library in the 1880s and it remained in the school district until 1982 when the



DR. W. N. EHRHART
School superintendent

new high school opened and the public library became a separate entity in the borough municipal building.

Dr. Ehrhart established the Mahanoy City School District

school library and remained there for 18 years.

It was 50 years ago this month that the movement was launched to set up a free public library outside the school system. With the help of WPA funding, the first non-school public library was established in the Pine Street Building on May 23, 1938. A month later the library with its 900 books was moved to the West Mahanoy Street School and finally in 1945 it secured the former Knights of Columbus building which it occupies today.

BORN NEAR Newport, Perry County, on Feb. 15, 1848, William Nelson Ehrhart was 17 years old when he enlisted in the Union Army in March 1865. He remained in uniform until the Civil War ended.

He then attended the state normal schools (now universities) at Bloomsburg and Millersville, and went on to Taylor University, Indiana, for master and doctorate degrees. He taught for a while in Perry County before finally locating in Schuylkill.

Dr. Ehrhart's family tree dated back to colonial times in America. His paternal grandparents, Michael and Sarah (Wolfe) Ehrhart, were born in York County in 1795.

His father, John Ehrhart, a carpenter, was born in York County in 1818, and his mother, Eleanora Super, was born in Perry County in 1823.

Education was an ancestral tradition in Dr. Ehrhart's maternal blood line. His mother had two paternal relatives who were prominent in higher

education: Dr. Charles Super was president of the State University at Athens, O., for 17 years, and Orvanda Super was professor of languages for many years at Dickinson College, Carlisle. Both were noted authors of text books used in many universities of the era.

DR. EHRHART met and married Julia Whitenight at Tamaqua in 1877. Their only child was a son, Raymond Nelson, who lived only briefly in Mahanoy City. He left to pursue an electrical engineering degree at Cornell University after which he located at Edgewood Park, Pittsburgh, and became a chief engineer for Westinghouse Corporation.

So there no more Ehrharts here in the town where Dr. William Nelson Ehrhart devoted the last two decades of his life to the education of a generation and left a lasting legacy in the form of the free public library.

There are some oldtimers still around who attended the Mahanoy City schools during the tenure Dr. Ehrhart from 1896 to 1914. Perhaps they'll take some time to remember their old superintendent as the borough marks the 125th year of its history.

And when the free public library notes its golden anniversary on Monday, May 23, 1988, Dr. William Nelson Ehrhart will be there in spirit just as he was back in 1896 when he introduced the concept of a free lending library to the people of Mahanoy City.