

MAHANAOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

A glimpse of town during WWII

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

THE GRIM news that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and the nation was once again at war cast a pall of gloom over Mahanoy City on that Sunday morning of Dec. 7, 1941.

The U.S. was still at peace when the Record-American went to press on Saturday, Dec. 6. Christmas season was at hand and the Social Club's annual community tree campaign was underway with a \$50 contribution reported from the Charles D. Kaier Company.

Superintendent of Schools Harvey Bolan announced he was leaving his local post to become superintendent of the Ashland School District. He had headed the Mahanoy school system since 1937. Joseph E. Boyle was named to succeed him.

The football season had just ended with the annual dream game at Pottsville, which the South All-Stars won, 14-13.

Mahanoy City's Fran Malinowski figured in both North touchdowns. He carried a pass to the one-yard line to set up the first score, then caught a pass and lateraled to Mahanoy City's Fran Richards who scored on a 23-yard run. The North Stars were coached by Mahanoy Township's Jim O'Hara.

At Saint Mary's Slovak Catholic Church, Father Stephen Valasek announced that 40 Hours Devotion would begin on Sunday morning, not realizing there'd be special reason for the faithful to kneel in fervent prayer this year.

Perhaps an omen, the weekend movie at the Elks Theater featured Gary Cooper in the heroic escapade of the nation's most famous World War I hero, Sergeant Alvin York of Tennessee. By the time the next issue of the Record-American appeared on Monday, Dec. 8, the nation would be in a new war which would produce many more heroes.

The papers on Saturday bore a hint of trouble brewing with Japan, as the top headline declared: "Japanese Newspapers Renew Bitter Attacks on U.S. Government." But no one suspected that 24 hours later these warlike words would become war in fact.

WHEN WORD of the Japanese bombing reached here, the town, like every community across the nation, waited with grim anticipation for a report on the casualty toll.

For Mahanoy City, the worst fears were realized — one of its sons had died in the attack. Pvt. Jerome Szymatowicz lost his life in the bombing of Hickam Field.

The War Department telegram announcing the town's first Gold Star came three days later to his mother, Mrs. Anna Szymatowicz, 401 W. Mahanoy St., on the morning of Wednesday, Dec. 10,



Jerome Szymatowicz
First Gold Star

1941. It was the first of two such dreaded messages to sadden the widowed mother. Her second Gold Star, Staff Sgt. Stanley Szymatowicz, was killed in action in Italy on Sept. 14, 1944.

Before the war ended Aug. 14, 1945, a total of 73 Gold Stars would glisten on those familiar red, white a blue scrolls hanging in windows of Mahanoy City

PVT. SZEMATOWICZ was 21 years old. He had enlisted in peace time during May 1939. Hitler's march on Poland didn't begin until three months later.

Pvt. Szymatowicz's MCHS class of 1938 will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year. During his high school days he was interested in aviation and active in the local model airplane flying club, an attraction which was to lead him to his final fate.

This weekend, as the borough quasicentennial committee sponsors a model airplane demonstration near White Birch Golf Course, Barnesville, it will recall the boy who flew his model plane at Mahanoy's East End Park a half century ago.

When Pvt. Szymatowicz enlisted in the service he opted for the Army Air Corps and trained as a mechanic at Casey Jones School of Aeronautics at Chanute Field, Ill. He left for Hawaii in May 1940 and served 20 months of peaceful military life in the island paradise until the sudden end came while the GIs slept unaware there were about to become the nation's first fallen heroes of World War II.

Pvt. Szymatowicz's father, John, had passed several years earlier. His brothers, Stanley and Francis, were still at home along with three sisters, Florence, Irene and Mrs. John (Mary) Mackis. There were two other married sisters: Mrs. Anthony (Helen) Sharaka of Mahanoy City, and Mrs. John (Verna) Sanko of Philadelphia.

MAHANAOY CITY had the distinction of having a ship named in its honor during the war. The SS Mahanoy City victory, built in just 80 days, was launched on Feb. 26, 1945, at Bethlehem Fairfield Shipyard near Baltimore. It was a 10,700-ton, 475-foot vessel which could do 18 knots and was operated by the North Atlantic and Gulf Steamship Company, 120 Wall Street, New York City.

The privilege of christening the ship was given to 15-year-old Roseann Konsavage, a sophomore at MCHS, who earned the honor by writing the winning essay among 2,000 entries in a contest co-sponsored by United Mine Workers District 9 and the Solid Fuels Administration.

It's first assignment was taking cargo to Odessa, Russia. Upon return to New Orleans it was converted to a troop carrier capable of carrying up to 1,950 men. With the war in Europe over, more ships were needed to return the many GIs coming home. The SS Mahanoy's first troop carrying mission began at New Orleans on Sept. 30, 1945, when it sailed for Marseilles, France, to bring back units of the 413th AA Coast Artillery and 496th Air Service Group.

One of the crew who served on that voyage was Lt. E. K. Dilliplane who wrote about it in a letter to the Record-American:

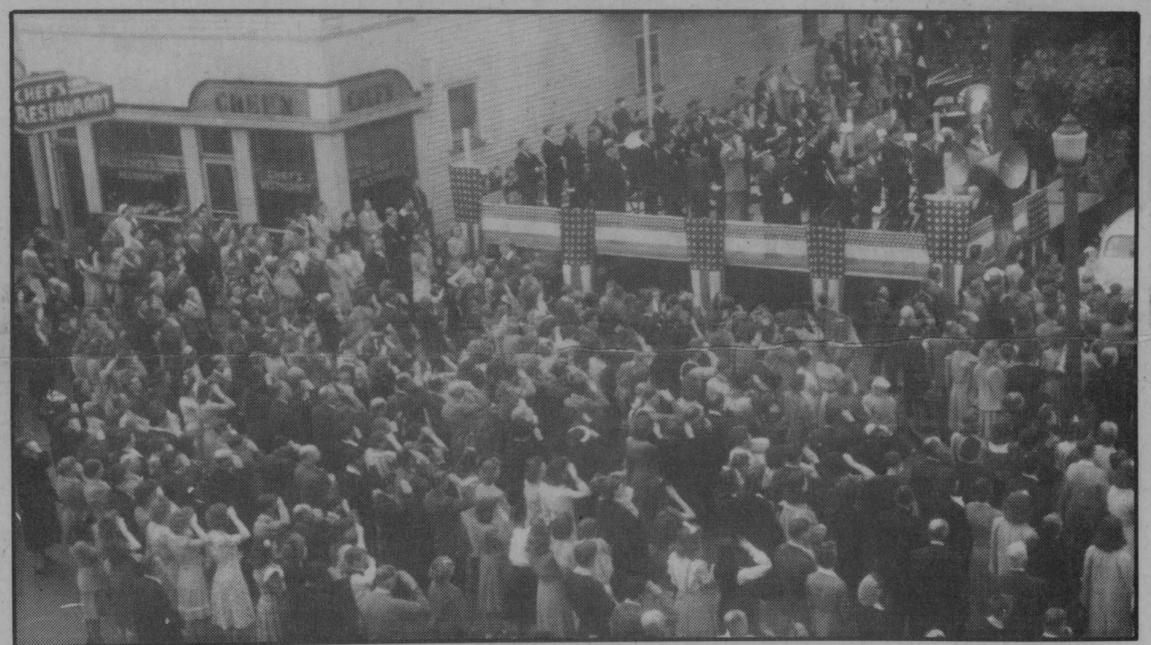
"It is with a pleasure, gentleman, that I serve aboard the Mahanoy City Victory. You see — my home is in Shamokin, 883 West Pine Street. Of all my duty in the service, 4½ years, this should be the most pleasant by far.

"Ya know, it's strange. I thought I was going to board an Irish ship. My orders from Boston read 'SS Mahoney Victory.' When I arrived here I learned there was a misprint in the name but no one could give the correct name. Someone told me it was named after an Indian City. Then and there I had a feelin'. Imagine, down here they were pronouncing it Mahoney City. I soon put them straight.

"She's due to sail Saturday (Sept. 29) or Monday. Let's hope for a beautiful maiden voyage for the troop transport Mahanoy City Victory. I hope the seas are calm so none of the troops have an unpleasant experience aboard.

The newsletter board the ship was named "Mahanoy Mike," whose first issue commented: "Every ship is a lady and the Mahanoy City was given her name by a little lady from Mahanoy City, Pa."

Wonder where the SS Mahanoy City Victory is today as the town it's named after observes Memorial Day weekend in its quasicentennial year.



WWII MEMORIES — Mahanoy City had one of the most impressive World War II memorials in the state when the roll of honor at top stood on the lot at the northeast corner of Second and Center Streets, now the site of Wagner's Service Station. Below is a scene of the crowd at the dedication. Chef's Restaurant was then located at the northwest corner, now occupied by the Liadrakis Laundromat. Erected in 1943, the honor roll bore the name of

every local resident in military service. By the time the war ended, the board had more than 2,000 names. The side panels bore the words of President Roosevelt on Dec. 8, 1941, as he announced the United States declaration of war with Japan: "With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph, so help us God."

(Photos by William Kates, Mahanoy High Rise)

YOUNG MEN of draft age were hard to find in town during the war years. Some entered the service even before they finished from high school, and a few returned after the war to resume high school classes to earn their diplomas.

One of the area students who left school to don uniform was Eugene Dunsavage of Morea. He was a starting member of the Mahanoy Township High School basketball team in November 1942 but played only a few games before leaving for the navy.

Had fate allowed him to finish high school he would have had the privilege of playing on the first MTHS North Schuylkill League championship team. And he would have competed for Coach Jim O'Hara's Purple Larks in the District XI playoffs against neighboring Mahanoy City High, a truly memorable game won by Johnny Goepfert's Maroons at Rockne Hall, Allentown. Led by an all-stater named Steve Wasilini, MCHS prevailed 42-39.

ARM 3/C Eugene Dunsavage, U.S. Navy, died of wounds on Jan. 6, 1945.

SERVING THEIR country was a family affair in many local households. In the fall of 1943 the Record-American ran a series entitled "Stars Tell the Story" which featured parents who had several sons in the service.

Topping the list was Joseph Oncidi, 518 E. Mahanoy St., who had seven boys in uniform: Pvt. William, Lt. Albert, Sgt. Alfred, Cpl. Ferdinand, Sgt. Paul, Sgt. Henry and Pvt. Joseph.

Four others had five sons in the

service: Mrs. Mary Markus, 610 W. Centre, Mrs. Joseph Sebastian, 226 E. Pine, Mrs. William Banks, 1300 E. Pine, Mrs. Anna Forgotch, 430 W. Spruce, Mrs. Eva Witconis, 119 W. Maple, Mrs. Sophie Whitecavage, 216 W. Spruce.

Those with four sons serving the colors were Mrs. Margaret Andrusis, 515 E. Pine, Michael August, 1225 E. Pine, Mrs. Peter Bross, 710 E. Pine, Mrs. Morino Capitanió, 100 E. Pine, Mrs. S. Fogel, 20 E. Pine, Mrs. Paul Elko, 727 W. Market, Mrs. Thomas Lord, 636 E. Centre, Mrs. John Kufrovich, 602 W. Market, Mrs. Henry Picciano, 210 E. Market, Mrs. Catherine Petrucka, 333 W. Centre, Mrs. Anna Gavula, 1127 E. Pine, Mrs. Martha Sincavage, 723 E. Mahanoy, Mrs. Rose Mazeikas, 623 W. South, Mrs. Elizabeth Stepalovitch, 525 W. South.

Three sons were given to the service by Mrs. Joseph Burke, 703 E. Centre, Mrs. Anthony Kavalsky, 1302 E. Market, Mrs. Anthony DiPietro, 1036 E. Pine, Mrs. Anthony Kilkuskie, 338 W. Market, Mrs. Anna Klipola, 617 W. Pine, Mrs. Mary Long, 906 E. Market, Mrs. Margaret McCann, 235 W. Mahanoy, Mrs. John Nolter, 1326 E. Pine, Mrs. Lillian Mellon, 604 E. Pine, Mrs. Lawrence Ryan, 523 E. Pine, Mrs. Lucy Rischar, 524 E. Pine, Mrs. Max Tulin, S. 10th St., Mrs. Stephen Souchak, 639 W. Mahanoy, Mrs. George Rhoades, 216 E. Market, Mrs. Michael Waba, 1103 E. Pine, Michael Peel, 413 W. Centre St., Mrs. Maru Lowatti, 414 W. South, Mrs. George Wonsock, 328 W. South, Mrs. Lottie Moncavage, 1013 E. Centre, Mrs. Elmer Heninger, 701 E. Pine, Mrs.

Robert McCormick, 736 E. Market, Mrs. Mary Silkuski, 424 W. South, Mrs. Jacob Humanick, 531 W. Centre, Mrs. Anthony Sluzevich, 1115 E. Pine, Mrs. Ira Brown, 224 W. Railroad, Mrs. Margaret Moyle, 226 W. Railroad, Mrs. Joseph Zelonis, 31 S. 10th, Mrs. Eva Mincavage, 829 E. Pine, Mrs. Mary Supernavich, 629 W. South, Mrs. Eva Witchin, 628 W. South, Ben D'Amico, 312 E. Pine, Mrs. Gussie Blackwell, 30 W. Market.

WHEN THE WAR finally ended on V-J Day, Aug. 14, 1945, a Jackson's Patch boy, Navy Seaman Paul Campbell, had the privilege of being aboard the Battleship U.S.S. Missouri at Yokohama to witness Emperor Hirohito bow in formal surrender to General Douglas MacArthur.

It was a day of joy and sadness here on the home front — joy that a terrible war had ended but sadness at the loss of those who would not return and for those returning with broken bodies — such as Sgt. John Smulligan of West Pine Street, who returned home blind; Sgt. Charles Lapinsky, a triple amputee; and Albert Mokai, a paraplegic.

There also came good news with GIs who had been missing in action GIs being liberated from Japanese captivity. Among them were Sgt. Michael Litchko, 29, of 624 W. Market St., Cpl. George Medwick, 27 W. Mahanoy St., and PFC Gerard Stanzola of New Boston, all of whom survived three years in Philippine prison camps where countless others had died of disease, malnutrition or Japanese cruelty.

The town celebrated the war's end with a gigantic V-J Day Parade on Thursday, Sept. 6, 1945. The Record-American described it as one of the most spectacular in the annals of the borough, with 3,000 participants making up 11 divisions watched by 50,000 spectators. It took three hours for the line of march to pass a given point.

Lamar Christ was the chief marshal. John Weitz and George Heffner were the co-chairmen. The \$50 prize for being the largest marching group went to Saint Casimir's Church, who had 124 people in the march, and the parish school received \$25 for having the most children in line, 64. The West End Fire Company, with 44 marchers, received the \$50 first prize for the largest turnout by a local fire unit.

The most inspiring entry was a float entered by Ashland veterans re-enacting the historic flag raising on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima.

Adding drama to the parade atmosphere was the fly-over by a fleet of seven planes owned by John Steif of Frackville, whose parents lived in Mahanoy City at 721 E. Centre St.

The 1988 Quasicentennial Committee will recapture some of the flavor of the old parades when it stages the big finale here next September.

Meanwhile, as the town celebrates Memorial Day this weekend, allow your thoughts to drift back to the early 1940s and the men and women who served the nation so magnificently.

God bless them; God rest them.