MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES

Kline brothers put town on wheels

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

THE KLINE brothers, John, Frank and Bob, did much to keep Mahanoy City's vehicular population on the go during from the 1930s to the 1970s.

Ford, Kaiser-Frazer, Blue Sunoco and brand name auto parts all were provided to the Kline clientele.

By combining hard work with personable personalities, the brothers found a formula for success which enabled them to survive the toughest times that did in many other businesses. They came through the Great Depression of the 1930s and the the Great Recession of the 1960s which hit the town after the collapse of the anthracite industry.

THE KLINE story began with dad, John A. Kline Sr., from whom the boys took their example. He was born March 12, 1889, in the section of Coles Patch that once stood in the area now occupied by the high school stadium.

After his marriage to Anna Williams of Morea, they settled in Mahanoy City where their eight children were born. Those who survived to maturity were John Jr., twins Robert and Frank, Stanley and Jennie.

In 1928 dad moved back to Coles and the children grew up there in house No. 22.

Employed all his working life by the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, he began as a slate picker at Tunnel Ridge in 1908. Eventually he became a master mechanic at North Mahanoy and Tunnel Ridge collieries, and at the Locust Summit and Saint Nicholas central breakers. He retired from the Saint Nicholas job in 1955 and died in Florida in 1979 in his 90th year.

JOHN JR., born on March 31, 1913. He was 15 years old when the family moved from town to Coles in 1928 and during that same year he got a job after school at the Atlas service station just down the road from Coles. It was his start in a business that was to be part of his life for the next 50 years.

After graduation from Mahanoy Township High School in 1930, John became a full-time employee at the Atlas station, holding down the 5 p.m. to 3 a.m. shift, for which he earned $8 a week. He also attended the McCann School of Business and was graduated in 1933.

John's next move was into his own business. He and brother Frank, who was a year younger, pooled their savings and took over the operation of the Sunoco Station at Foundry Row (900 W. Centre St.) just west of the borough line. They opened on April 27, 1935, the midst of the Great Depression.

In 1937 brother Frank split from the gas station and joined his twin, Robert, in a opening a Goodrich tire store in the central business district.

JOHN, MEANWHILE, kept building his trade and by 1941 had become prosperous enough expand. He signed a 10-year ground lease with the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company and constructed a new building at the station site. He continued to lease the land until 1964 when the P&R decided to sell him the ground.

World War II found John in an army uniform. In 1943, at the age of 30, he entered the Medical Corps and became an x-ray technician-mechanic, serving at military installations in Missouri, Massachusetts and Indiana.

While he was away, the Sunoco station was left in the reliable hands of Jim Rissinger and Ronald "Peck" Jones.

When the war ended, Johnny came marching home and resumed operation of the Sunoco station. His next break came in 1947 when the local Ford dealership became available. The Graham Motor Company, located just east across Centre street from Kline's station, had been the Ford dealer for some years until the death of Dave Graham and the agency was up for grabs.

He enterprising Sunoco man was the successful bidder, and thus was born John Kline Motors. He constructed a new showroom just west of his Sunoco station and devoted full time to selling cars while leasing the gas station to Len Lesusky.

THE MID-1950S presented another business opportunity which John took advantage of. A new Route 45 (now Route 54) was being constructed at the eastern end of Mahanoy City. Whereas the previous route accessed town by way of East Mahanoy Street, the new route was by way of East Centre street which prior to that had been a dead end.

In March 1955, John secured a plot along the new road just east of the borough line and built a second Sunoco station. It opened for business on Sept. 25, 1955, and he now had the distinction of owning Sunoco stations just over the borough lines at both ends of town.

The new station did well but it soon became evident that the location had one drawback — its remoteness made it easy prey for burglars. It had had been open less that a month when the first break-in took place on Oct. 17, 1955. Since that time, through the succession of owners, the business has been victimized by burglars, thieves and vandals.

John retired in 1978, ending a business career of 43 years and a working career of 50 years. The original Sunoco station is now operated by John Grutza of Shenandoah Heights. The former auto showroom is vacant, the Ford company having phased out Mahanoy City as the site of a dealership. The east end Sunoco station is run by Hillside Auto Sales and Service.

DEALERS OF YORE — These Record-American ads from 40 years ago recall the new car dealerships operated in Mahanoy City by the Kline brothers. Frank and Bob ran in Mahanoy City by the Kline brothers. Frank and Bob ran the Kaiser-Frazer agency and John had the Ford agency. In those days the town also had dealerships for the Oldsmobile (George Koval), Plymouth-DeSoto (Koval Brothers), Dodge (Blackwell Brothers) and Studebaker (Penn Garage). Today, the only new car dealership left is Schaar's Buick.

JOHN KLINE'S residence for 40 years was at 99 S. Main St., the southeast corner of Main and Spruce streets where traffic turns to go up the Pottsy Hill. The home is one of the town's early mansion-like structures, having unique wooden folding shutters inside the windows. It was built by Phineas Garber, a pioneer blacksmith, and occupied from many years by Harrison Ball, a lumber company and banking magnate.

John bought the property on Oct. 12, 1946. He sold it in 1987 and left to relocate in Florida near his brothers and sister, all in the Saint Petersburg area.

He was married on Jan. 20, 1946, to the former Mildred Richards Hahn, who was actively involved in the Mahanoy City Woman's Club and was instrumental in establishing club scholarship grants for youth.

Mildred's daughter, Arlene, achieved distinction as a civilian librarian for the U. S. Army at military installations in New Jersey, England, Germany and Japan. She was serving in that capacity in Korea at the time of her death in 1987.

John's years in Mahanoy City were marked by active community involvement. He served as president and secretary of the school board, president of the Rotary Club and Travelers Protective Associaton, exalted ruler of the Elks Lodge and member of the official board of the First Methodist Church.

He was the founder in 1955 of a novel funloving organization known as the "You Can't Read Your Tombstone When You're Dead Club" whose purpose was to honor deserving people while they were still around to enjoy the tribute. It was unfortunate that the club faded before it had an opportunity to toast its founder. No one has been a more fitting candidate for the honor.

KLINE BROTHERS Auto Parts, a successful business for years in Mahanoy City, Shenandoah and Tamaqua, evolved from the tire store opened by Frank and Bob in 1937.

They operated their business at various spots, including the Bohard building on West Centre street, the Triangle building across the street next to Regal and Blum ("We starved there for two years," Frank recalls) and 15 S. Main St. (current site of a pool) where things went better during the 1940s.

Their best move, said Frank, was when they followed the advice of Horace Greeley and went west in the 1950s. They built the cinderblock structure at Foundry Row, just west of big brother John's Ford showroom, and opened the first of the Kline Brothers Auto Parts stores.

From 1947 to 1951, Frank and Bob also had the local dealership for the Kaiser-Frazer autombiles which debuted after World War II. Their showroom was at 810 E. Mahanoy St., and although the cars never reached the popularity of the big three automakers, the Kline Brothers sold more Kaisers and Frazers than any other dealer in the region — a total of 66 in four years.

Frank and Bob both were unsuccessful Democratic candidates for county recorder of deeds, and Bob also tried for state legislature with no better luck. As he looks back, Frank says it was probably for the best that they lost which enabled them to devote all their time to the business.

After selling the auto parts chain, Bob and Frank established winter residences in Florida to be near other members of the family.

Frank spends winters in Florida and summers in Mahanoy City (222 E. Mahanoy St.) where his wife, Agnes (Hawkes), keeps active in church work. Their son, Frank, is a highly successful Wall Street executive, currently a vice president of Drexel-Burnam-Lambert brokerage house. His business travels take him on constant travels to stock market capitals all over the globe.

Bob, a 1932 graduate of Mahanoy Township High School, worked at the Saint Nicholas Breaker until 1937 when he joined brother Frank at their tire store. He died in Florida in 1982. He and his wife, the former Blodwyn Holman, are survived by a son, Robert.

BROTHER Stanley, fourth boy in the family, devoted his life to civil service with the Pennsylvania state liquor store system. He began as a store clerk when the PLCB was established at the end of Prohibition in the early 1930s. Moving up the ladder, he became a manager, supervisor and retired as superintendent of the Eastern Region.

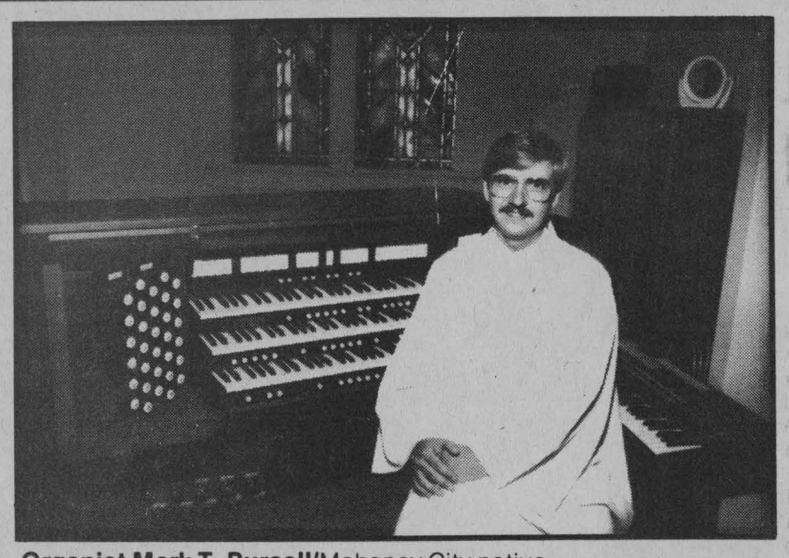
He and his wife, the former Edna Schlagel, have two sons: John, manager of a hospital supply firm in Glen Falls, N.Y., and Robert, a liquor control board enforcement agent in Dallas, Pa.

SISTER JENNIE was supervisor at the Ashland State General Hospital School of Nursing. She first went to Florida to visit dad when he retired to the Sunshine State, and she liked it so much she decided to make it her much she decided to make it her home.

Her husband, Tom Cosky (now deceased) was a Shenandoah native and had no trouble acclimating himself to Flordia. He opened a tile business, today operated by their son, Tom, which is one of the foremost tile firms in the state.

THE KLINE family, like so many others down through the decades, have drifted away from Mahanoy, but during their time here they made singular contributions that added the Kline flavor to help make Mahanoy City a place that countless others, here and afar, love to call home.

Bank display
Antique banking equipment (top) in the quasquicentennial display at the Meridian Bank's Mahanoy City office includes an 1890 coin tray, 1920 seal, 1884 check printer, change makers, vault mechanism, 1915 check writer, bank teller stool, ink well and coin bank. Michael sims (center, at right) and Paul D. Heck hold vault timing mechanism from former Mahanoy City American Bank, which later became part of the Meridian group. Sims, 94, at one time was cashier/manager of American Bank and continues to serve as an advisory board member. Heck is senior vice president of Meridian's Schuylkill Region. At left is Mary Caserly, Meridian's Mahanoy branch manager.
(Evening Herald/Robert N. Kyler)



Organist Mark T. Purcell/Mahanoy City native

Accomplished organist is a native of Mahanoy City!

MAHANOY CITY — Mark T. Purcell, currently living in Costa Mesa, Calif. and formerly of Mahanoy City, recently achieved the colleague degree in the American Guild of Organists. The American Guild of Organists is a prestigious national organization which offers its members a forum to sharpen their skills by competing in several degrees. It provides excellent resources for educational opportunities in the history and art of organ playing.

Mark studies organ with Richard Unfreid, former organist of the Crystal Catherdral in Garden Grove, Calif. Mark is a graduate of Marian Catholic High School and the University of Scranton, and is currently completing further studies at Chapman College in Orange, Calif.

RECENTLY, MARK completed a tour of Europe, playing the organ at Westminister Abbey and Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, the Salzburg Dom in Austria, and in Saint Thomas Church, the church of J.S. Bach, in East Germany. Mark has been the organist and director of music at Saint John the Baptist Roman Catholic Church in Costa Mesa, Calif., for the past six years. Under his direction, the music ministry program has expanded into over 250 members in five different choirs. The choirs have just accepted an invitation to concertize at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and at Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican in 1990. An audience has also been scheduled with Pope John Paul II.