

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE
A LOOK AT WYOMING VALLEY HISTORY

CHAPTER FIVE

HIDDEN IN THE CORNER 1920 - 1950

The Great War, the war to end all wars, was over! The Treaty of Versailles was signed, and people who were tired of the exertion of war could now turn their attention to a “Return to Normalcy.” The Republican Warren G. Harding was in the White House, and American prospects were looking up. After all, hadn’t we just made the world safe for democracy?

The attention of the populace indeed had turned from the affairs of the world to their own interests. Wilkes-Barre’s population was over 73,000 by 1920, making it the eighth largest city in the state. The county was at more than 390,000 making it the third most populous county in the state. If the state experts were to be believed, Wilkes-Barre actually was much larger. In their evaluation of the area in 1921, it was stated that Wilkes-Barre’s population was more than 200,000 (Spear 189). As Sheldon Spear points out, most people, however, saw the Wyoming Valley “*in terms of wholly autonomous small towns and villages, whereas they would have to learn to think in terms of a Greater Wilkes-Barre political entity for the sake of promoting progress*” (Spear 189). Within the census statistics were those people not native to the country. Even though immigration had slowed, 25% of Wilkes-Barre’s children had foreign-born parents while nearly 20% of the general population were not native.

With the amount of people coming into the area, two challenges presented themselves: the lack of new housing and transportation. Trucks, buses, trolleys, and cars had replaced the

canals and now were a supplement to the railroad that moved our freight and passengers. Transportation would be handled sooner as state planners confirmed that our winding streets and trolley lines were hampering our growth, especially with the increase of auto and truck traffic. So, our streets were broadened and straightened



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with new traffic light systems installed to ease the congestion. Streets were designated as one-way while parking became more structured than before. Our pattern of trolley lines was also studied so their runs could be more efficient for the traveling public.

Bridges, too, were replaced and widened. The South Street Bridge, Carey Avenue Bridge, and the North Street Bridge were all restored or refurbished. The one that brought people to the heart of the city, the [Market Street Bridge](#), was the one that was the most majestic. Between 1926 and 1929, a brand new bridge was put into place. The approaches to the old one on each side of the river were moved out of the way so the old bridge could still be accessible while the new one was being built (Spear 195). Its four towers with eagles on the top of each present a rich entrance to the city.

People who needed to travel between Wilkes-Barre and other major cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Albany, and Syracuse could now board the Frank Martz Coach Company buses. Although Martz had been around since 1908, inter-city bus service didn't start until 1922. Other cities



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such as Detroit and Chicago were soon added. By 1926 Martz also added air service between New York, Elmira and Buffalo. He saw the need for a transportation system that connected major cities across the nation and helped to found the [National Trailways Bus System](#). This system “*through alliances with other independent carriers, set schedules and fares connecting service coast to coast*” (Martz martztrailways.com)

Since Ford’s assembly process had reduced the cost of his car, the auto was all the rage. The 1920’s car manufacturers had grown into one of the largest industries in the country.



Matheson auto 3

Oldsmobile, Stanley Steamer, Maxwell, and of course, Ford, were among the many car suppliers. Forty Fort could boast of its own luxury car, the Matheson. The Matheson Car Company employed nearly 500 in its Forty Fort location by 1910 (Spear 195).

By the 1920’s, some of the Wyoming Valley’s prominent men, Albert Lewis the lumber king, and Fred Morgan Kirby, owned a Matheson.

This expensive car, well-known in racing circles, particularly the Giant’s Despair Hill Climb, was tested on Wyoming Avenue. Of course, it was a dirt road in those days, and testing a car in the summer meant lots of dust. That angered the women who lived along the road when they had wash hanging in their backyards. So Matheson installed a siren at the corner of Welles Street and Wyoming Avenue to alert the residents that testing would begin within the hour. That gave women enough time to bring in their wash and close their windows.

Housing would be a harder challenge. We were short on houses. We had old houses and ramshackle houses but not enough new houses. Indoor plumbing and centralized heating were also lacking in most of the homes. Rents were increasing as well. In fact, rent had gone up 84% since 1914 (Spear 191). It would be some time before a construction boon would help to ease the

supply and demand.

The twenties are probably best known for their carefree, rambunctious lifestyle. Part of that culture involved illegal drinking. While the craze against Prohibition swept through the country, the Wyoming Valley was no different. Wets (those in favor of drinking) and Drys battled over the hooch sold in underground speakeasies. Mayor Daniel Hart of Wilkes-Barre was quite vocal in his support of the wet position. Even some local county judges used fines instead of imprisonment for those caught saying it was the federal government's problem to enforce the law. Even so, according to Spear *"a raid at the Morris Paint and Varnish Company on North Pennsylvania Avenue in Wilkes-Barre, uncovered seven stills, each with a capacity for 1,000 gallon*



Daniel Hart

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capacity, 4,800 gallons of alcohol, 500 empty five-gallon cans, fifty empty whiskey barrel, 200 steel drums, a truck, an electric pump, and a steam plant" (Spear *Wyoming Valley Revisited* 203).

Flamboyant and feisty, Mayor [Daniel Hart](#) was well-suited to the temper of the twenties. A prominent playwright on Broadway, his work was also shown in Philadelphia, Chicago and Seattle. He used his writing and oratory skills to lead

the city through the turbulence of the decade.

Five of his plays were produced on Broadway; his most famous was "The Parish Priest." He was so popular that he was nominated by both parties during his fourth election in 1928.

He was also a leading voice in the [City Beautiful Movement](#) that was influencing the architecture of the country. The idea was to create a city that would attract those upper middle class and wealthy residents to spend more time and money within the city. In turn, this would help to decrease the social ills of crime and

poverty so often associated with inner city life. As part of that idea, the Market Street Bridge was built and Kirby Park and its zoo were established.

Mayor Hart and others knew that one critical area that needed



improvement was education. One-room schools were numerous throughout the area. They would still serve the rural areas until the 1940's. In the populated areas like Wilkes-Barre, Central High School

had been built in the early 1880's. Recently, it had become overcrowded and three new city schools were erected to better serve the population. Coughlin High School opened its doors to the public in 1911. GAR, the school named for the Grand Army of the Republic, was finished in 1925 while Meyers accepted students by 1928. Bucknell University added a Jr. College in Wilkes-Barre in 1933. Now known as Wilkes University, it was led by Dr. Eugene Farley.

The Catholic community ran a private school system of grammar schools. Eventually, eight high schools were scattered throughout the valley including St. Ann's, St. Mary's, St. Leo's in Ashley, and St. John's in Pittston. The step for higher education was taken in 1914. A deed for 100 acres was presented to Mother Superior Theresa Walsh by a group of Wilkes-Barre attorneys for the site of a college. It would take ten years, however, before the Sisters of Mercy opened College Misericordia (heart of mercy) in Dallas on August 15, 1924 (Kashatus 136).

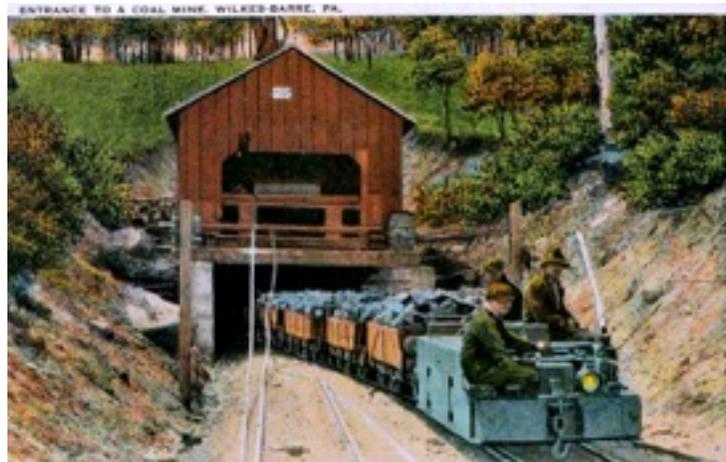
The local branch of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) showed their disdain for the Catholics by burning crosses on the Dallas property. They also held meetings designed to cast aspersions on the

Catholic church and its leaders. And on August 29, 1926, they marched through the streets of Dallas. While they claimed the march was attended by more than six thousand protestors, newspaper reports listed less than 100. (They did have 7,000 attend a picnic at Harvey's Lake, however, and 8,000 attended the dedication at Lehman Township High School in 1927, Spear 202). Despite the protests, the college grew until in 2007 it became a university.

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

The improvements to the infrastructure and our education systems did not stave off the bigger threat to our valley—the downturn in the economy. The transition from coal to natural gas and oil as fuels would throw first hundreds and then thousands out of work during the 20's. That created an unenviable choice for local governments to either raise taxes or cut services. Our local business community, once the center for innovation, became reluctant to put reduced profits into what had become a more perilous investment.

Coal production peaked in 1917 during the Great War with 100 million tons brought to the surface. Production reached 82 million tons in 1922. However, strikes in 1922 for over five months and nearly six months in 1925-1926 fueled the public's desire for alternative fuels. They felt hostage to the coal on which they had depended for so long, so markets, especially in the northeast, began to look toward oil and natural



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gas. Nonetheless, few here in the region saw the downturn as lasting very long.

The economy of the area was dependent on the wages of the miners (Spear 198). When they were on strike, of course, there was little money to be spent unless the women were working in one of the many garment or lace factories that began to move into the area. Other industries such as food processing, metal working, cigar manufacturing and the silk mills were welcomed by those who were losing their jobs in mining and by their wives and daughters who needed to supplement the family income (Spear 199).

Though the violence of early work stoppages had declined, unions were still pressing for safer working conditions, better pay and shorter hours. Owners, however, continued to take steps to keep unions from forming. The foreman sometimes scheduled men of different ethnic backgrounds—spoke a different language, had different customs—to work together. Anyone who tried to organize men into unions was at times, beaten, harassed, fired, or shot.

In 1928, Pittston was known as Little Chicago. It earned the name because of the number of shootings that took place within the city particularly on Railroad Street. It was here that union organizers Alec Campbell and Peter Reilly were shot in front of Campbell's house upon returning home after a labor meeting. Two men were convicted for the murders.

ENTERTAINMENT

The Roaring Twenties are well-known for the love of ballyhoo and carefree dances. The valley was not immune to its influences. Jazz was very popular, but that didn't mean everyone approved of this new musical style (Spear 203). In 1924, the [American Theater](#) opened on Main Street in Pittston. Vaudeville shows and big band concerts were provided for the entertainment



American Theater in Pittston 7

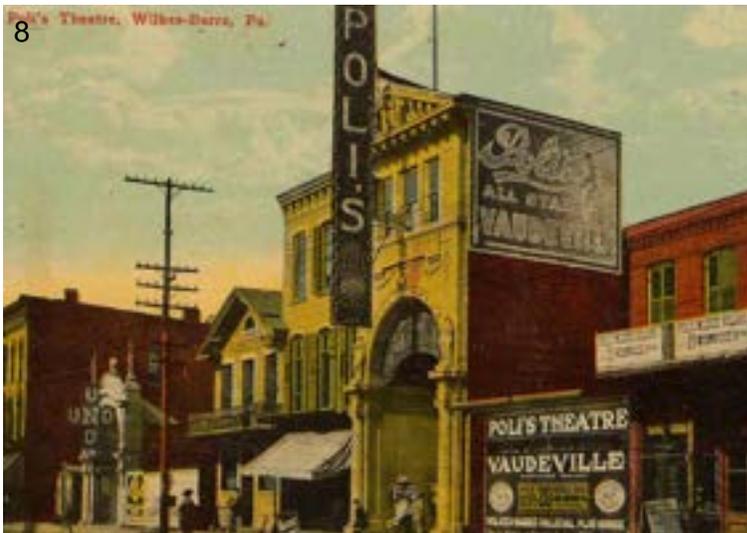
of its patrons along with a wide variety of movies. It was of course, just one of many local places to see a show.

Humorist [Will Rogers](#), actress [Ethyl Barrymore](#), among many others stopped in the Valley. Lee Tracy of Hanover was a Broadway star that would appear in the early talkies.

November 19, 1922, marked a significant musical event for a coloratura soprano from our area—[Florence Foster Jenkins](#). She was born in 1868 and lived on South Franklin Street in Wilkes-Barre. Music was her passion and she apparently played the piano well. Her real interest, however, was singing—and that she did not do very well at all. In fact, she was considered to be downright awful.

Though critics everywhere were quick to point out all of her flaws, the off-key, off-pitch soprano was not without her fans. In fact, the more she was lampooned, the more it increased her popularity. She performed to sell-out crowds for years including her last performance which was given at Carnegie Hall on October 25, 1944. She passed away from a heart attack a month later. She is buried in [Hollenback Cemetery](#). Her recordings have never been out of print since 1954 (Skrapitis “*Best of the Worst*”).

Nearly every small town had its own theater. In 1924, the American theater opened on Main Street in Pittston. The Forty Fort Theater, [Wyoming Theater](#), the Capitol, the Luzerne theater and many others operated throughout the valley. Vaudeville shows and big band concerts were provided for the entertainment of its patrons along with a wide variety of movies. Many believe that the saying of aspiring entertainers of “If I can make it in New York, I can make it anywhere should have “New York” replaced with “Wilkes-Barre.” The audiences here were known to be tough



on performers and quite a number of stars knew if they could “crack the coal” they indeed could make it in New York.

The city had several outlets for vaudeville shows within the city limits. The Savoy, Nesbitt,

Orpheum, and Capitol were all theaters in Wilkes-Barre. The largest venue, Poli’s Theater on South Main Street, could seat 2,400. Three shows a day were played many before sold-out crowds. These live shows contained “*short acts...included song and dance, comedy, acrobats, magicians, and trained animals*” (Kashatus 106). George Burns and his wife Gracie, Bob Hope, Charlie McCarthy, Abbott and Costello, Amos and Andy and the Dorsey Brothers are just a few of the acts to hone their talents and material in Wilkes-Barre (Kashatus *Valley With a Heart* 106). Apparently, Poli’s became the Penn Theater sometime after 1931.

The silver screen also had a number of places that entertained our residents. The [Comerford](#), named for its creator Michael Comerford, was the most well-known. It had 1800 seats and an “*eye-catching hybrid of art deco and moderne styles, fronted with cream, lavender, and blue terra cotta tile and highlighted by a brilliant, neon-lit marquee*” (Kashatus 106). Others that were also started by Comerford include The Savoy and The Capitol. There were also smaller

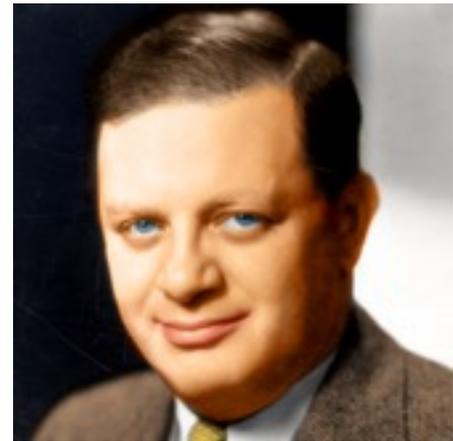


movie houses that showed films that had already been run. Patrons enjoyed watching Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart, Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, as well as the latest features at the cinemas.

Some of the films that came to us from Hollywood had the stamp of two of our natives—[Herman](#) and [Joseph Mankiewicz](#). Herman graduated from the Harry Hillman Academy on Academy Street in Wilkes-Barre. After spending his early years in Wilkes-Barre, the family moved to New York. While working as a playwright, he was offered a job in Hollywood in 1925. He was well-known and admired for his quick wit and clever lines that provided raucous laughter around the lunch table—his favorite time of the day.

His first movie was *The Road to Mandalay* written for the legendary Lon Chaney. He was involved in the “writing of seventy movies and worked behind-the-scenes rewrites on about a hundred more” (Lottick 210). He did some of the early writing on *The Wizard of Oz*, but his best known movie was *Citizen Kane* for which he won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. It is considered to be one of the best movies ever made. He also wrote the Oscar-nominated movie “*The Pride of the Yankees*” along with working with such notables as the Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields. About *Citizen Kane*, the critic Richard Meryman writes:

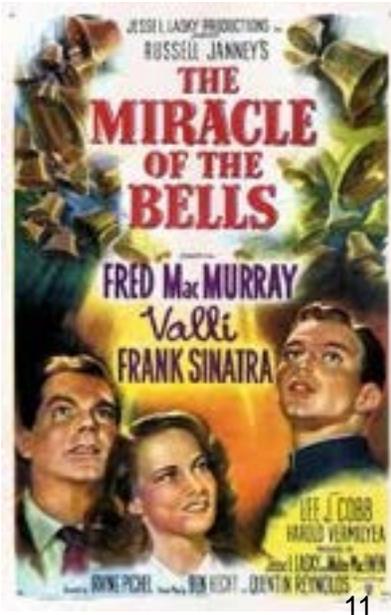
... the most important and seminal American movie ever made. Filmed in 1940, it was a synthesis and extension of everything innovative in film to that date. As a totality, Kane was so revolutionary in its techniques, so devoid of sentimentality, so advanced in its use of psychology, that the movie became a springboard for future motion pictures—and eventually landmark



Herman Mankiewicz 10

in cinema history. Perhaps no other script has provided a movie with a structure at once so complex and so perfectly machined (Lottick 208).

Herman's brother [Joseph](#) was also very gifted as a writer—some say even more brilliant than Herman. He was born in Wilkes-Barre in 1909 and lived on Sullivan Street with his family.



His movies *A Letter to Three Wives* and *All About Eve* won Academy Awards. In fact, *All About Eve*, was nominated for 14 Academy Awards and won six. *Cleopatra* was directed by him. He was involved in the writing, producing or directing of more than 100 movies.

Closer to home, the residents of Wyoming Valley could witness the sesquicentennial of the Battle of Wyoming over a four day period in 1928. The cast alone had over 5,000 participants.

One of the more famous movies involving our area was [Miracle of the Bells](#). Starring Alida Valli, Fred MacMurray, and Frank Sinatra, the film is about a young actress who replaces the star in a film when the star quits. Unfortunately, the young actress Olga Teskovna (played by Alida Valli) becomes ill from tuberculosis and dies as the film production ends. Her press agent Dunnigan (played by Fred MacMurray) takes her body home to Coaltown to be buried. He wants the film to be released, but the film's producer does not want to do so. Instead, he wants to reshoot the entire movie.

Meanwhile, Dunnigan convinced all the churches in Coaltown to ring their bells for three days in Olga's honor. It generated so much press that the producer reconsidered his refusal and the movie was released. Several exterior shots of the movie

were filmed in Glen Lyon. Miners from the Glen Alden coal company portrayed the miners in the film.

IF YOU WEREN'T AT THE MOVIES

Kirby Park, named for its donor F.M. Kirby, is a 52-acre park located by the Market Street Bridge in Kingston. The Olmsted brothers were hired as its designers in 1924. (Frederick Law Olmsted also designed New York's Central Park.) Along with the



Palm House and Gardens 12

beautiful grounds and walking trails, it had a zoo that thousands were able to enjoy. Many people also enjoyed the Palm House and Gardens. They were located near the Luzerne County courthouse. Unfortunately, they would fall into disrepair in the 1930's.

Too hot in the valley?

The trolley to Harvey's Lake made regular runs from Kingston. You could enjoy yourself for the day or perhaps stay at Hotel Oneonta. But if you did not want to take the trolley from Wilkes-Barre to Harvey's Lake for a nickel, you could go to Finch's Boathouse and enjoy a lazy afternoon on the river. You could also travel to Penobscot Mountain where you could visit Glen Summit.

It would keep you refreshed, and the beautiful views were sure to help those who wanted to relax.



Giant's Despair Hill Climb 13

If you liked fast cars, then the **Giant's Despair Hill Climb** was the place to be. It started in 1906, and it is one of the longest running auto races in the United States. Famous drivers such as Carroll

Shelby and Roger Penske have been among those who have attempted to navigate the six turns as the road rises 650 feet to the top of the mountain.

Of course many people were playing or watching tennis, football and basketball. But the most popular sports were baseball and football. They drew tens of thousands of fans. By 1925, a new ballpark called Artillery Park was built for the Wilkes-Barre Barons who drew 147,000 fans to their home games in 1927. Just a year later at the new park, Babe Ruth would visit the area again and take part in a game between Hughestown and Larksville belting what the Sultan of Swat called his longest homerun—about 650 feet.

[Ed Walsh](#), from Plains, won 40 games for the Chicago White Sox in 1908 and ended his career with a 1.82 ERA--the best in the history of the game. He wasn't alone in the professional ranks. [Hughie Jennings](#) was a premier shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles. He led his team to three straight national league pennants and later managed the Detroit Tigers to an American League



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Pete Gray 15

pennant. Both were elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. They are but two of the dozens of professional athletes to come from our valley.

During World War II, [Pete Gray](#) of Nanticoke played centerfield/left field for the St. Louis Browns. He became an important role model for wounded servicemen as well as an inspiration to the entire country as he played professional baseball with only one arm. Before moving to the

majors, he was named the 1944 Southern Association's Most Valuable Player batting .333 with 63 stolen bases.ended his major league career with a .218 batting average and a .958 fielding percentage while playing in 77 games. He died in 2002 and is buried in St. Mary's cemetery in Wilkes-Barre. A movie was made about his life entitled *A Winner Never Quits*.

In 1936, the Olympics were held in Berlin, Germany. This is where Jesse Owens achieved notoriety. But he wasn't the world's fastest human. That title belonged to [Ben Johnson](#) from Plymouth. Known as the Columbia Comet, he defeated Owens and other world-record holders in the AAU 60 meter championship. Unfortunately, he was injured for the Olympics and could not compete in 1936. However, in 1937 he became the first athlete in the 20th century to win three events: the 100, 220, and long jump at the IC4A championships.

Professional boxing and baseball had their fans, but the most fanatical belonged to high school sports. Whether baseball, football or basketball, people came out in droves to witness the contests. Over 13,500 saw the Thanksgiving game between Plymouth and Nanticoke. Area schools won eight state basketball championships in the 1920's and 1930's (Zbiek *Luzerne County* 84). During the summer, thousands would go to a nearby baseball park on Sunday afternoon to watch their town's team play. Baseball helped to break down ethnic barriers providing a way for the immigrants to assimilate into the culture.



POTTSVILLE MAROONS

The NFL and World Champion [Pottsville Maroons](#) were crowned by themselves in 1925. That's because a bitter controversy erupted between the NFL and the Maroons. The Pottsville team had been given a new National Football League franchise that year. College football, however, was supreme in the football world, and many considered the NFL to be far from playing the caliber of ball. So, at the end of the season when the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame with their fabled Four Horsemen scheduled the Maroons for an exhibition game, the bets were on. Would the NFL team beat the college team, or just get beat up?

The Maroons won the game 9-7 and now had the best record in the NFL. But the Commissioner stripped their title from them for playing an unauthorized exhibition game. The then-second place team was given the title—today's Arizona Cardinals. Although the Maroons protested bitterly, they lost their appeal and their trophy. They made their own trophy from a single chunk of coal enscripted with the title NFL and World Champions 1925 (*Kashatus Pottsville Maroons*).

Boxing was also one of the sports of the valley. Not only could it be viewed in Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, it could be seen in the newspaper comics. The most enduring fighter from the Wyoming Valley was [Joe Palooka](#). He was a syndicated cartoon by 1945 in more than “*nine hundred newspapers throughout the country with a daily readership estimated at fifty million*” (*Kashatus Valley* 18).



Jimmy King welterweight 17

Palooka, a term meaning a third rate boxer, was the brainchild of [Ham Fisher](#). Fisher was born in Wilkes-Barre in 1900, and graduated from Wilkes-Barre High School. A self-taught artist, Fisher worked for the *Wilkes-Barre Record* during the 1920's as a political

cartoonist and writer before moving to New York City in 1927 (*Kashatus Valley* 17). It was while he was working for the *New York Daily News* that he continued to submit his idea for Joe Palooka to newspapers. The characters were often based on real people from his childhood in Wilkes-Barre. Joe was also always involved in the current topics whether it was in the days of bootleggers, shantytowns of the Depression, or the Nazis (*Kashatus Valley* 18). Kashatus also stated that Palooka starred in three movies and had a serial comic book series released about his career (18).

Though Fisher died in 1955, Joe Palooka remained a good-natured boxer who fought against the ills of society in and out of the ring until he “retired” in 1984.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

By the time the presidential election of 1932 came around, the depression had arrived in full force across the country. Everyone was looking forward to Roosevelt’s leadership –relief, recovery, and reform. The president visited our area twice, and his representative, Harry Hopkins who ran the WPA, the Works Progress Administration, visited in 1936. The visits were due in part to the devastation of the [flood of 1936](#) though FDR also came as a candidate seeking reelection.

Due to the longest strike in anthracite history, September 1, 1925 to February 17, 1926, the valley miners and owners saw the economic downturn several years before the stock market crashed (*Spear The Wyoming Valley* 17). Coal supplies dwindled, new coal furnace installation declined, and large consumers turned to a more stable source of fuel—oil or natural gas. By the time the rest of the country was facing the depression, we were already in it.

The Great Depression story is riddled with the faces of the homeless, the desperate, and those who simply gave up. The valley was a sad reflection of the national trend. People who

desperately needed the coal yet could not afford its price resorted to stealing it. Spear writes about the theft of coal from the coal trains: *Probably the worst incident occurred on March 29, 1934, when eleven residents of Wilkes-Barre Township were arrested following a pitched battle with police on the tracks of the Jersey Central Railroad...In this particular operation two decoy shovellers had mounted the first two cars, and while the police chased them a swarm of shovellers raided the loaded cars at the rear of the train. They cleared about twenty tons of coal in five minutes of uninterrupted work* (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 17).



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Coal production had dropped from eleven million tons in 1930 to seven million by 1932 (Kashatus *Dapper Dan* 37). Of the 445,109 people employed in the anthracite industry, 70% were working on reduced schedules (Kashatus *Dapper Dan* 37). Shanty towns or Hoovervilles (as they were called in “honor” of former President Hoover) were built in the Heights section of Wilkes-Barre or near the North Street bridge (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 17). Our “Hooverville” had the infamous nickname of “Dump City”. It would not be until FDR’s New Deal programs ramped up that the makeshift camps would be somewhat cleaned up but not cleaned out as neighboring residents wanted. The homeless in 1933 numbered 1,600 including former miners, mechanics, plumbers, salesmen and other workers.

The local municipalities simply did not have the money to operate. People without jobs could not pay taxes. If there were no

taxes collected, there would be few relief or government funded jobs available. Some people did free labor for the government in lieu of paying their taxes (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 18).

According to Spear, the Talbot Act, passed in 1932, allowed the local governments to offer work on public relief projects (18). The participants collected certificates for food in the amount of four



dollars per day.

However, the maximum number of days worked per month was five (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 18).

Certainly the idea helped the few who were fortunate to

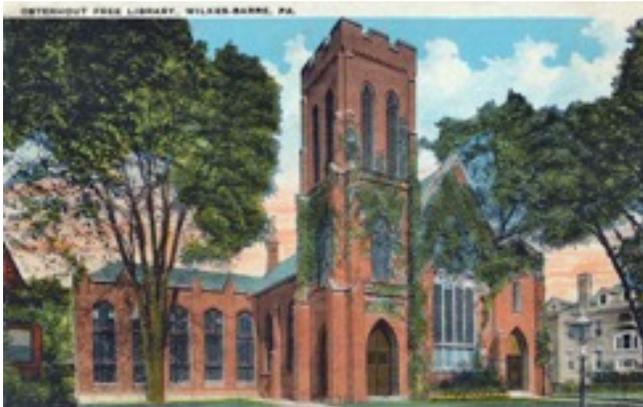
get onto the roll. However, the need for help was much greater than the amount of help offered.

Spear reports that in January of 1935, “85,711 were receiving direct or indirect work relief, a total roughly equal to the population of Wilkes-Barre” (*The Wyoming Valley* 18). Teachers either went unpaid or reduced their own salaries in order to help the municipalities (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 18). A “No Hungry Children” campaign was started by church groups that resulted in the preservation of thousands of jars of fruits and vegetables. These would be distributed during the winter months when the need would be greatest. Seeds and fertilizer were also given out by relief officials so that gardens could be planted (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 18). Unemployment hovered around 30 to 40% while many others were underemployed (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 18).

The federal government program called the Works Progress Association began in 1935. It ended in 1943. For an average monthly salary of \$41.57, the WPA employees built public works

projects such as bridges, dams, and roads (PBS WPA). Artists and drama troupes were hired to use their talents painting murals or entertaining throughout the country. The program stated that men and women would be paid the same though more men than women were hired. *“Women worked at lower paying activities such as sewing, bookbinding, care for the elderly, school lunch programs, nursery school, and recreational work”* (PBS WPA).

The WPA helped to finish the post office (now the Max Rosenn Federal Court) building as well as pave streets, improve sewers, and build swimming pools in Miner and Hollenback parks. Construction of other new buildings provided jobs, too. St.



Osterhout Free Library

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Patrick’s Church, the First Baptist Church, Temple Ohav Zedek on South Franklin Street all added to the city’s skyline while providing jobs. Federal money also helped to build the retaining walls of Solomon’s Creek, Harvey’s Creek, and Toby’s Creeks, make

street improvements, build schools and sewers, and cleaned up after the 1936 flood as well as manage other community projects. The flood had caused destruction totaling eleven million dollars.

In addition, this wide-ranging project provided funds to build the Wyoming Valley Airport in Forty Fort, immunize against diphtheria, create a WPA orchestra and mend books at the Osterhout Library. It also allowed WPA employees to index criminal records from 1918-38. According to Spears, this was a great aid to those in the legal system (The Wyoming Valley 19). However, as was true for the rest of the country, unemployment percentages would not change for the better until the U.S. became involved in World War II.

Surrounded by culm banks and coal breakers, suffering through severe economic depression and weathering natural and manmade disasters, our valley residents were strongly rooted in traditions of hard work, ethnic diversity, and enterprise. They would need those qualities for the new challenges and changes they would face in the decades to come.

Today, the country still struggles with the role of the federal government – is it too large or not large enough?

FLOOD OF 1936



FDR crosses the Market
St. Bridge 21

While jobs were the number one challenge, the Susquehanna presented yet another when the river went over its banks in the [flood of 1936](#). It was the largest to hit the valley up to that time. It began to rise on March 11th and would not begin to recede until March 20th.

Actually, it would have two crests eventually reaching over 33 feet which is well above the 22 foot flood stage. Nearly 15,000 residents had to be evacuated by boat. Bill Phillips, the radio DJ who coined the phrase “Valley with a Heart,” helped to warn the people to get out of the low-lying areas.

After the flood of 1936, the WPA provided laborers to build the Army Corp of engineer levee system that kept the valley safe until 1972.

President Roosevelt’s cavalcade is shown in 1936 crossing the Market Street Bridge to view the damage. He was greeted by more than 300,000 cheering supporters.

FROM BOOK TO FILM TO REAL LIFE?

Theodore Dreiser published his best selling novel An American Tragedy in 1925. He had written his story using a murder of a young girl in upstate New York. It was made into a film in 1931. Perhaps the film or the book gave an idea to Robert Edwards. He was indicted and convicted for the murder of Freda McKechnie at Harvey's Lake. Although he was the father of McKechnie's unborn baby, he had fallen in love with a New York socialite, Margaret Crain. The lure of a life on the rich circuit proved too much. He desperately wanted a way out of marrying McKetchnie so that he could wed Crain.

On July 30, 1934, Crain asked McKetchnie to accompany him to Harvey's Lake for a swim. It was there that he said she passed out in the rowboat. He then said he panicked and struck her on the head thinking that that mark would make it look like she had fallen. *"I didn't even realize what I had done and I carried the body out to water up to my chest and let it drop"* (Kashatus Valley 150). At the age of twenty-four, he was electrocuted at the State Correctional Institution at Rockview, Pennsylvania.

LABOR

During the 1920's, John L. Lewis was the head of the United Mine Workers supposedly helping the miners union navigate the treacherous waters of negotiation with the mine owners. The owners, however, were trying to push for wage cuts and other concessions (Zbiek Luzerne County 75). Though several smaller strikes occurred, two major strikes—one in 1922 that lasted 163 days and one in 1925 that lasted 170 days—took place under Lewis' presidency (Zbiek Luzerne County 76).

Though Lewis thought he did a good job, it was not good enough for many in the Wyoming Valley. More strikes followed in the 1930's. Slovak and Lithuanian members, particularly, thought

that Lewis and his leadership were siding with the owners and not acting for the union members (Kashatus *Dapper Dan* 37). They helped to form a rival union—the United Anthracite Miners of Pennsylvania (UAMP) led by Thomas Maloney. Tension between the two unions grew along with conflict between the UAMP and the operators and police (Zbiek 76). Clashes with police resulted in 50 men injured at the Nottingham Colliery in Plymouth, a UAMP member was killed while walking a picket line, the bridge between Plymouth and Hanover was bombed, and a car was bombed (Zbiek 76). The auto belonged to the daughter of Judge W. A. Valentine who sentenced Maloney for contempt. The well-known labor priest, John J. Curran, took the lead in quelling the riotous behavior. In 1935, the UAMP was judged illegal by the Labor Relations Board (Zbiek *Luzerne County* 76).

Though the UAMP disbanded, the destruction did not. What have been dubbed as the **Good Friday** bombings took place in 1936 (Kashatus *Mail Bomb Spree*). Marked as “sample” as if to indicate an Easter gift, cigar boxes filled with dynamite were delivered to Maloney’s house. When he opened it, the box exploded killing him and his four-year-old son. Six others received boxes as well. Michael Gallagher, a school director at Hanover Township School, died when he opened his box when delivered to his house. The others escaped injury.

Over 50 suspects were questioned while the valley residents were in an uproar. Police finally settled on **Michael Fugmann**, a former friend of Maloney, and charged him with the bombings. The state had quite a lot of circumstantial evidence against him, but Fugmann protested his innocence until he was executed July 17, 1938 (Kashatus *Mail Bomb Spree*).

WORLD AT WAR—AGAIN

The generation that had just suffered through the Great Depression was now being called up to fight against those who

were taking freedom from others and threatening ours. The 40's were dominated by WW II either waiting to get in the war, fighting it, or the transitions from wartime to peacetime. Practicing for air raids, rationing food and rubber, taking part in collecting metal scraps, buying liberty bonds, and planting victory gardens were prominent in the valley as they were in the nation.

With so many people needed to serve in the armed forces and in industry, the welfare roles shrunk to just a fraction of what they had been. The anthracite mines that had been on the decline for several decades, now needed men to get the coal out. As Sheldon Spear points out, "In May of 1942 shipments of the fuel were at 4,572,156 tons for April, compared to 1,897,988 for April 1941" (Spear Wyoming Valley 210). The mines were operating at 100% capacity by the summer of 1942. Nonetheless, they could not keep up with demand for fuel.

However, even war and the demands of it could not stop strikes. There were four during the war. The federal government had established the War Labor Board to settle disputes so that supply to those who were fighting would not be disrupted.

Fortunately, the strikes were settled relatively quickly.



Admiral Stark 22

President Franklin D. Roosevelt named valley native [Admiral Stark](#) as chief of U.S. naval operations in 1939. He commanded naval operations during both World Wars and was honored many times during his 40-year career. [Joe Toye](#) of Pittston and Harry Welsh of Wilkes-Barre were part of the famous 101st airborne that fought with the Allies throughout much of Europe.

Hollywood later made a movie based on their unit's exploits called the *Band of Brothers*. In 1944, the [USS Wilkes-Barre](#) destroyer was launched and would steam into Tokyo Bay as part of the Third Fleet when the Japanese

surrendered. We were and still are very proud of the more than 55,000 Valley natives, both men and women, who served with distinction in the two-front war.

In addition to sending our sons and daughters to the war front, we worked on the homefront as well. \$403,000 was raised in war savings bonds sales by B’Nai B’rith. Luzerne County collected over 22,000 tons of scrap metal in the first five months of 1943 as part of the homefront effort to support the war.



We also purchased millions of dollars in war bonds and planted victory gardens. U.S.S. Wilkes-Barre 23

Our residents followed the rationing rules as they were strictly enforced. The OPA, Office of Price Administration, banned all pleasure driving such as going to the movies, bowling, and boating in order to conserve gasoline (Spear Wyoming Valley 212). Ration books also curtailed the use of tires, sugar, butter, and coffee.

While many were employed during the war, its end meant that our residents no longer had the same job opportunities as the country simply did not need as many workers. Plus, the hard coal industry was now facing the reality that natural gas and oil were becoming the primary sources of fuel for residences and commercial buildings as they were more convenient—no smoke, no ash, and no strikes. Thus, by 1950, unemployment in the area reached 12%.