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 tired of the exertion of war could now turn their attention to a "Return to Normalcy." Republican Warren G. Harding was in the White House, and American prospects were looking up. After all, hadn't America just made the world safe for democracy?

The attention of the populace had turned from the affairs of the world to their own interests. Luzerne County was booming, with a population in excess of 390,000, making it the third most populous county in the state. Meanwhile, Wilkes-Barre's population was more than 73,000 by 1920, making it the eighth largest city in the state. If state experts were to be believed, Wilkes-Barre actually was much larger. It was likely home to more than 200,000 residents in 1921 (Spear 189). Census reports from the era show that large numbers of these residents were foreign born or the children of non-natives.

As Sheldon Spear points out, despite rapid local growth, most people 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).

The booming population led to a variety of concerns. One ongoing challenge was to improve transportation, which took place through many innovations across the years. Local roads were straightened and broadened, and trolley lines were made more efficient. Bridges, too, were replaced and widened. The South

Trolley 1

Street Bridge, Carey Avenue Bridge, and the North Street Bridge were all restored or refurbished. The bridge that brought people to the heart of the city, the Market Street Bridge, would become the most majestic. Between 1926 and 1929, engineers made a new bridge on the site. The approaches to the old bridge 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). The new bridge's four towers with eagles on the top of each still present a memorable entranceway to the city.

Martz Bus 2

People who needed to travel between Wilkes-Barre and other major cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, Albany, and Syracuse, could now board Frank Martz Coach Company buses. Although Martz had been around since 1908, inter-city bus service did not start until 1922. Travel to other cities such as Detroit and Chicago were soon added. By 1926, Martz also added 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 the car, the automobile was all the rage. In the 1920s, car manufacturing had grown into one of the largest industries in the

Matheson auto 3

country. Ford, Oldsmobile, Stanley Steamer, and Maxwell were among the many car suppliers. Forty Fort could boast of its own luxury car, the Matheson. The Matheson Car Company employed nearly five hundred in its Forty Fort location by 1910 (Spear 195). By the 1920s, some of Wyoming Valley's most prominent men, such as Fred Morgan Kirby and lumber king Albert Lewis, owned a Matheson.

This expensive car, well-known in racing circles such as the Giant's Despair Hill Climb, was tested on Wyoming Avenue. At the time, the avenue was just a dirt road, and testing a car in the summer meant a great deal 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. Many of the houses of the region were old or decrepit, and new houses were rare. New families moving into the area struggled to find places to live. In old homes, indoor plumbing and centralized heating were rare. Rents were increasing as well. In fact, rent had gone up 84 percent since 1914 (Spear 191). It would be some time before a construction boon would help balance supply and demand.

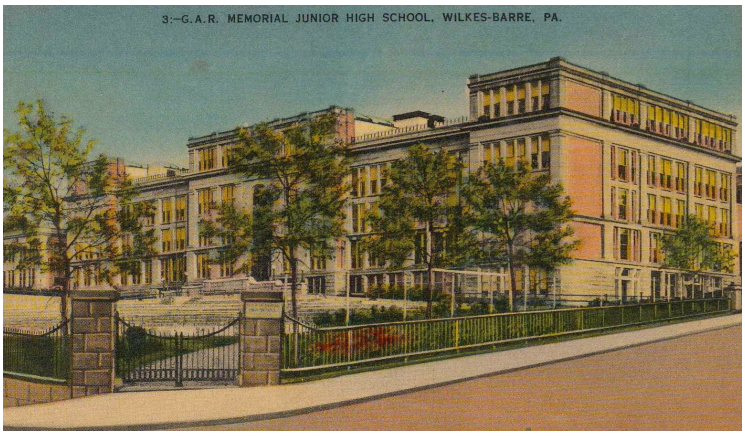
The 1920s are probably best known for the carefree, rambunctious lifestyle that came to characterize the start of the decade. Part of that culture involved drinking alcohol , which had been declared illegal. While the craze against Prohibition swept through the country, Wyoming Valley was no different. Wets (those in favor of drinking) and Drys (supporters of Prohibition) 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 who opposed 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 1,000 gallon 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).

4 - Daniel Hart

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 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 still numerous throughout the area. They would still serve the rural areas until the 1940s, but cities needed larger and newer institutions. In Wilkes-Barre, Central High School had been built



G.A.R. 5

in the early 1880s. (Recently, it became 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 Junior College in Wilkes-Barre in 1933. Now known as Wilkes University, it was led by Dr. Eugene Farley.

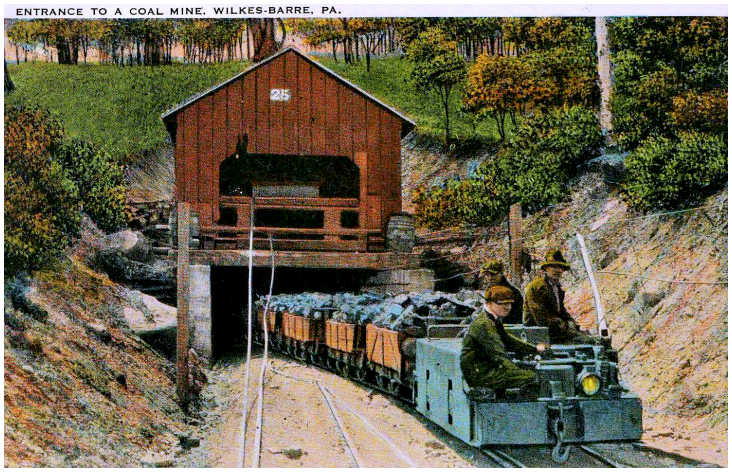
The Catholic community ran a private school system of grammar schools. Eventually, eight high schools were scattered throughout the valley including St. Ann's, St. Mary's, St. Leo's in Ashley, and St. John's in Pittston. The move for higher religious education was taken in 1914. A deed for one hundred 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 Catholics by burning crosses on the Dallas property. They also held meetings designed to cast aspersions on the Catholic Church and its leaders. 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 fewer than one hundred participants. Despite the protests, the college grew until, in 2007, it became a university.

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

The improvements to the infrastructure and educational system 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 1920s. That created an unenviable choice for local governments: either raise taxes or cut services. The local business community, once the center for innovation, became reluctant to put reduced profits into what had become perilous investments.

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 more than five months and nearly six months in 1925–1926 fueled the public's desire for alternative fuels. People 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 gas. Nonetheless, few people in the region believed the downturn would last long.



Bringing coal out 6

The economy of the area was dependent upon the wages of the miners (Spear 198). When they were on strike, much less money circulated. Often, women working in the many garment or lace factories that began to move into the area became the main wage-earners. Other industries, such as food processing, metal working, cigar manufacturing, and silk producing, 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, meanwhile, continued to take steps to keep unions from forming. The foreman sometimes scheduled men of different ethnic backgrounds, with different customs and languages, to work together. This reduced the chances that workers would start an alliance. Anyone who tried to organize men into unions was liable to be fired, harassed, beaten, or even shot.

In 1928, Pittston was known as “Little Chicago." It earned that 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 of 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 of its patrons, along with a wide variety of movies. Many other venues, for live and recorded entertainment, also sprang up. Humorist Will Rogers, actress Ethyl Barrymore, and many others stopped in the valley. Lee

American Theater in Pittston 7

Tracy of Hanover was a Broadway star who appeared in 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 she was not very good at it. In fact, many considered her singing downright awful.

Though critics everywhere were quick to point out 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, Capitol, Luzerne Theater, and many others operated throughout the valley. Vaudeville shows and big band concerts were provided for the entertainment of patrons along with a wide variety of movies. Many have heard the saying "if I can make it in New York, I can make it anywhere"—but, for many performers, Wilkes-Barre was just as big a challenge.

Poli's Theater Wilkes-Barre 8

The audiences there 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 each 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). 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 1,800 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 started by Comerford included The Savoy and The Capitol. Smaller movie houses 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.

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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

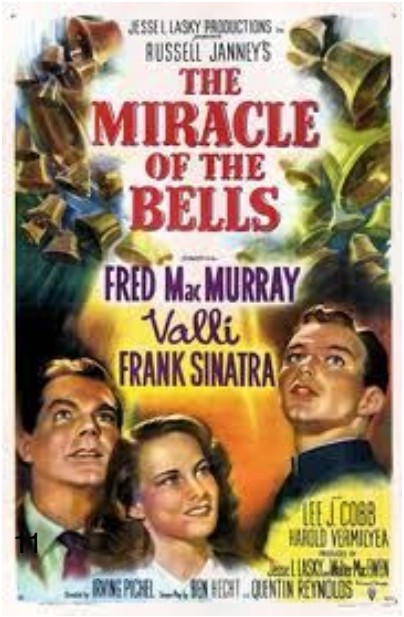
Street in Wilkes-Barre. After spending his early years in Wilkes-Barre, his family moved to New York. While working as a playwright, he was offered a job in Hollywood in 1925. He was well-known and admired for his quick wit and clever lines that provided raucous laughter around the lunch table—his favorite time of the day.

Herman Mankiewicz 10

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 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 a landmark 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 fourteen



Academy Awards and won six. He also directed *Cleopatra* and was involved in the writing, producing, or directing of more than one hundred 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 had more than 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 convinces all the churches in Coaltown to ring their bells for three days in Olga's honor. This generates so much press that the producer reconsiders his refusal and the movie is 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; notice Market St. bridge in background. 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 1930s.

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.

Tennis, basketball, baseball, and football were the most popular sports. Baseball and football, in particular, 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 and take part in a game between

Hughestown and Larksville, belting what the Sultan of Swat called his longest home run—about 650 feet.

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Ed Walsh, from Plains, won forty games for the Chicago White Sox in 1908 and ended his career with a 1.82 earned run average (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 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.

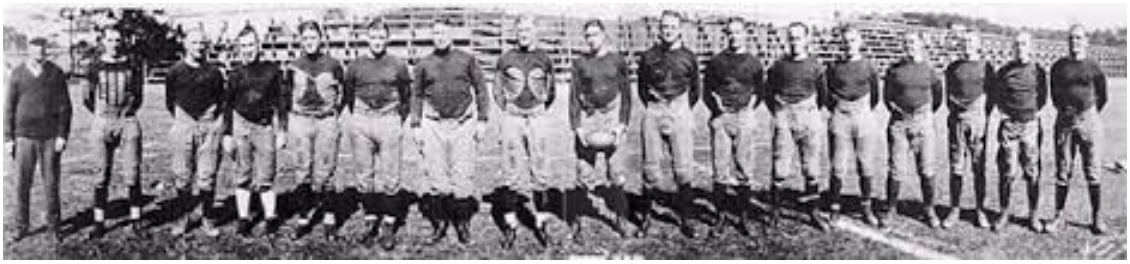
Pete Gray 15

During World War II, Pete Gray of Nanticoke played center field and 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. He 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 Olympic Games were held in Berlin, Germany. This is where Jesse Owens became a household name. 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. In 1937, he became the first athlete in the twentieth 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 passionate belonged to high-school sports. Whether baseball, football, or basketball, people came out in droves to witness the contests. More than 13,500 saw the Thanksgiving game between Plymouth and Nanticoke. Area schools won eight state basketball championships in the 1920s and 1930s (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 immigrants to assimilate into the culture.



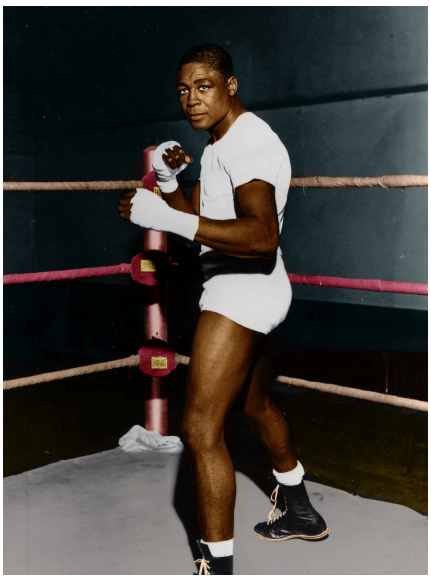
POTTSVILLE MAROONS 16

The National Football League (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 NFL franchise that year. College football, however, was supreme in the football world, and many considered the NFL to be far inferior. 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 beaten 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 later made their own trophy from a single chunk of coal inscribed with the title "NFL" and "World Champions 1925" (Kashatus *Pottsville Maroons*).

Boxing was also a big draw in the valley. Fans could watch it live in Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. They could also see it in the newspaper comics. The most enduring fighter from the Wyoming Valley was the fictional 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 for 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 1920s as a political cartoonist and writer before moving to New York City in 1927 (Kashatus *Valley* 17). While he was working for the *New York Daily News*, he submitted his idea for Joe Palooka to newspapers. His characters were often based on real people from his childhood in Wilkes-Barre. Joe was also always involved in the current topics of the day, such as bootleggers, the shantytowns of the Depression, or the Nazi menace (Kashatus *Valley* 18). Kashatus

also stated that Palooka starred in three movies and had a 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 Great Depression had arrived in full force across the country. Millions were looking forward to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's promises of relief, recovery, and reform. The president visited our area twice, and his representative Harry Hopkins, who ran the Works Progress Administration (WPA), visited in 1936. These 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—valley miners and owners tasted economic downturn several years before the stock market crashed (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 17). Coal supplies dwindled, coal furnace installations declined, and large consumers turned to more-stable sources of fuel like oil and natural gas. By the time the rest of the country was facing the Depression, the valley was already in it.

The Great Depression story is riddled with the faces of the homeless, desperate, and defeated. The valley was a sad reflection of the national trend. People who desperately needed coal, yet could not afford its price, resorted to stealing it. Spear writes about the theft of coal from 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 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 percent were working on reduced schedules (Kashatus *Dapper Dan* 37). Shantytowns 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 unemployed workers.

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 little relief and few government-funded jobs. Some people did unpaid 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

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idea helped the few who were fortunate enough 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 people could plant gardens (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 18). Unemployment hovered around 30–40 percent, while many other workers were underemployed (Spear *The Wyoming Valley* 18).

The federal government program called the Works Progress Administration (WPA) lasted from 1935 to 1943. For an average monthly salary of $41.57, WPA employees built public works projects such as bridges, dams, and roads (PBS WPA). Artists and drama troupes used 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 building (now the Max Rosenn Federal Court) as well as pave streets, improve sewers, and build swimming pools in Miner and Hollenback Parks. Construction of other new buildings provided jobs, too. Saint Patrick's Church, the First Baptist Church, and 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 Creek; make street improvements; build schools and sewers; clean up after the 1936 flood, which had caused eleven million dollars of damage; and manage other community projects.

Osterhout Free Library 20

In addition, this wide-ranging WPA 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 to 1938. 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 United States became involved in World War II.

Surrounded by culm banks and coal breakers, suffering through severe economic depression, and weathering natural and human-made 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?

THE FLOOD OF 1936

FDR crosses the Market St. Bridge 21

The Susquehanna presented yet another challenge to the valley when the river went over its banks in the flood of 1936. It was the largest flood to hit the valley up to that time. Waters began to rise on March 11 and would not begin to recede until March 20. Actually, it would have two crests, eventually reaching over 33 feet (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 people to get out of the low-lying areas.

After the flood of 1936, the WPA provided laborers to build the Army Corps of Engineers levee system that kept the valley safe from flooding until 1972.

President Roosevelt visited the valley in 1936 to survey the damage around the Market Street Bridge. He was greeted by more than 300,000 cheering supporters.

FROM BOOK TO FILM TO REAL LIFE?

Theodore Dreiser published his bestselling novel *An American Tragedy* in 1925. He had written his story based on the 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 of 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 McKechnie so that he could wed Crain.

On July 30, 1934, Crain asked McKechnie 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 1920s, John L. Lewis was the head of the United Mine Workers (UMW), supposedly helping the miners' union navigate the treacherous waters of negotiating with 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 1930s. 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 fifty 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 end. The so-called "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. The others escaped injury.

More than fifty 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 a good deal of circumstantial evidence against him, but Fugmann protested his innocence right up to his execution on 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 to fight against those who were taking freedom from others and threatening ours. The 1940s were dominated by World War II, either waiting to get in the war, fighting it, or transitioning 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 activities in the valley as they were throughout the nation.

With so many people needed to serve in the armed forces and industries, the welfare rolls shrunk to just a fraction of what they

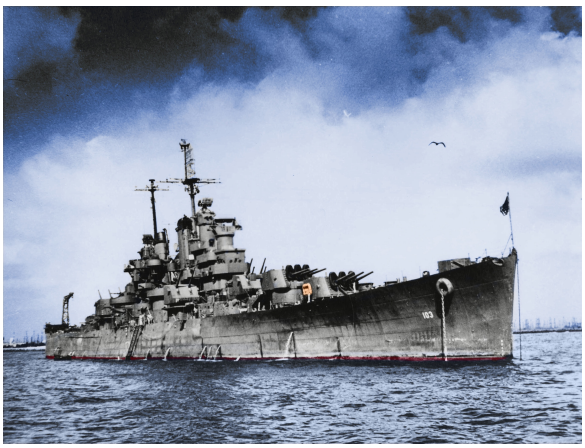
had been. The anthracite mines that had been on the decline for several decades now needed men to get the coal out. As Sheldon Spear points out, *"In May of 1942 shipments of the fuel were at 4,572,156 tons for April, compared to 1,897,988 for April 1941"* (Spear *Wyoming Valley* 210). The mines were operating at 100 percent capacity by the summer of 1942. Nonetheless, they could not keep up with the demand for fuel.

However, even war and its demands could not stop strikes. Four took place 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. Stark commanded naval operations during both World Wars and was honored many times during his forty-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 memorialized their unit's exploits as *Band of Brothers*.

In 1944, the USS Wilkes-Barre light cruiser was launched and would steam into Tokyo Bay as part of the Third Fleet when the Japanese surrendered. Valley residents were and still are very proud of the more than 55,000 local natives, both men and women, who served with distinction in the two-front war.


U.S.S. Wilkes-Barre 23

In addition to serving at the war front, valley residents worked hard on the home front as well. B'nai

B'rith raised $403,000 in war savings bonds sales. Luzerne County collected more than 22,000 tons of scrap metal in the first five months of 1943 as part of the home front effort to support the war. Residents also purchased millions of dollars in war bonds and planted victory gardens. Our residents followed the rationing rules as they were strictly enforced. The 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 percent.