

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE:  
A LOOK AT WYOMING VALLEY HISTORY

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**KING COAL DETHRONED:**  
**THE TRANSITION TO NEW HEIGHTS, 1950—1975**

Celebration sirens sounded, church bells rang, and horns honked incessantly when the Japanese surrendered to end the Second World War. American men and women returning home were greeted by a thankful nation. When the hugs and kisses subsided, we turned our attention to rebuilding lives, homes, and industries.

The valley was short on housing and that would not be rectified for a few years. Factories were transitioning to peacetime goods from the production of wartime materials. Women, who had been working in the factories, now turned their attention to being brides and mothers. The Baby Boom, Sinatra and Presley, credit cards, color television, school desegregation, and the “Better Dead than Red” moments came into the collective national consciousness within the next few years.

By the middle of 1950, the United States was at war again. North Korea attacked South Korea on June 25, 1950. Thousands of valley residents were involved during the Korean Conflict—often called the “Forgotten War.” Tragically, while on its way to a training camp in Indiana, the 109th Field Artillery troop train crashed, killing thirty-three men from this area. These tragic deaths



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were added to the grim toll of valley servicemen killed.

## GOING TO WORK

The mines had been operating at 100 percent during the Second World War, but when the war ended, so did much of the need for the fuel. While more than 130,000 men and boys labored in the mines at the beginning of the century, just more than 5,000 now remained. King Coal was dying. In addition, few jobs that resulted from the war would remain after it was over. The exodus from the valley that had started earlier in the twentieth century now picked up. In 1940, the county's population was 441,518. Nearly 100,000 people would leave during the next two decades. The valley would have to transition to other industries if it was to survive.

While some men and women went outside of the area to work in defense plants during World War II, many did stay here. Women, more so than men, found work in the valley garment industry. Nearly two hundred garment factories opened in the valley between 1937 and 1962, employing more than 10,000 women. The plants were sometimes called “runaways” as they left the higher expenses of the New York/New Jersey area and “ran away” to lower costs in Pennsylvania.

After the war, Min Matheson took over the newly formed [International Ladies Garment Workers Union \(ILGWU\)](#) in this area for those in the textile industry. Her father had been shot



Min Matheson rallies the workers

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and wounded in Chicago by gangsters after thwarting their strong-arm tactics. Her brother was killed in New York City for trying to organize a union. She knew the difficulties and the dangers of



Min Matheson 3

union organization but worked from 1944 to 1962 to make the ILGWU an effective voice for its members. The organization played an important role in the lives of these workers as they were able to achieve a seven-hour work day, paid holidays, and a health center.

Although there were only 650 union members in the ILGWU when Matheson arrived, there were 11,000 when she made plans to return to New York in 1963 (Kashatus *Valley* 29). As with most union leaders, she was an advocate

for better wages and better working conditions.

Matheson knew that long-lasting change for her garment workers had to come through the political arena, so she enlisted the help of the most influential politician from the valley on a national level: Dan Flood. The congressman had long been involved in the fight to increase employment in the area even as the anthracite industry raised the unemployment percentage. In the book *Dapper Dan Flood*, author William Kashatus writes:

*“garment workers often put in fourteen-hour days and were paid less than two dollars a day. Many of the factories were controlled by organized crime, and the gangster employers who operated them were staunchly anti-union. They engaged in intimidation, threats, and physical violence to undermine union efforts to organize workers”* (104).

Nonetheless, Matheson worked non-stop to improve the lives of many. Matheson and the garment workers supported Flood

because they felt he supported them. She stated, “We support Dan Flood because he voted to raise the minimum wage from 40 cents to 75 cents, from 75 cents to \$1, and from \$1 to \$1.15, and to \$1.25. Each of those raises put money in the pocket of the garment workers. Each of them was won through political action” (Kashatus *Dapper Dan* 105).

Unlike most union leaders, Matheson also worked tirelessly for a “union way of life” in the Wyoming Valley (Kashatus *Valley* 29). That way of life included “*a popular chorus, college scholarship fund, evening classes at Wilkes College, a sprawling Pocono Mountains vacation resort and conference center, and a health care center located in Wilkes-Barre which, in its first decade, provided services to more than twenty thousand district members*” (Kashatus *Valley* 29).

Another way to combat the unemployment challenge was through higher education. [King’s College](#) opened its doors in 1946. It joined College Misericordia (now Misericordia University) which began in 1924 as an institution of higher learning. King’s started as a college for men—mainly the sons of miners—until 1970 when it welcomed its first female students. By 1947, Bucknell Junior College became a four-year institution named



Wilkes College (now [Wilkes University](#)). Penn State opened satellite campuses in [Hazleton](#) and [Wilkes-Barre](#) before the war. Enrollment in all of them went up due to the GI Bill. [Luzerne County Community College](#) would be added to the list of higher education facilities in 1967.

In addition to educating the labor force, William O. Sword, president of Petroleum Service Co., headed a group of businessmen calling themselves the “Committee of 100.” In 1955,

this dedicated group developed a plan to reorganize the valley employment outlook. Sword said, *“My main objective would be to galvanize the Wyoming Valley into a constructive, aggressive community so that we may continue to live here in contentment, with a feeling of security, and—more important—so that our children will want to remain here after us”* (Kerstetter “Sword” 86).



**William O. Sword**  
 Founded Petroleum Service Co.

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the park were built by the county.

A promotional film titled *This is Wilkes-Barre* was made so that the area’s resources, including its labor force and culture, could be showcased to selected industries. In fact, Sword and others often went to neighboring states to speak with other CEOs



Eberhard Faber, Inc. Crestwood Industrial Park 6

about moving their factories to the area. Some of the businesses that came were Foster Wheeler, King Fifth Wheel, and Eberhard Faber. Eberhard Faber manufactured pencils, erasers, ballpoint pens,

and easels from its 7.5-acre factory while providing jobs for hundreds of employees (*Hanlon Wyoming Valley* 245). Other businesses, such as Leslie Fay, Rex Shoe Company, and Natona Mills, also provided much-needed jobs. (The space-faring chimpanzee “Ham” had a fireproof suit made for him at Natona Mills.) Along with other businesses, these companies provided employment opportunities over the succeeding decades for many.

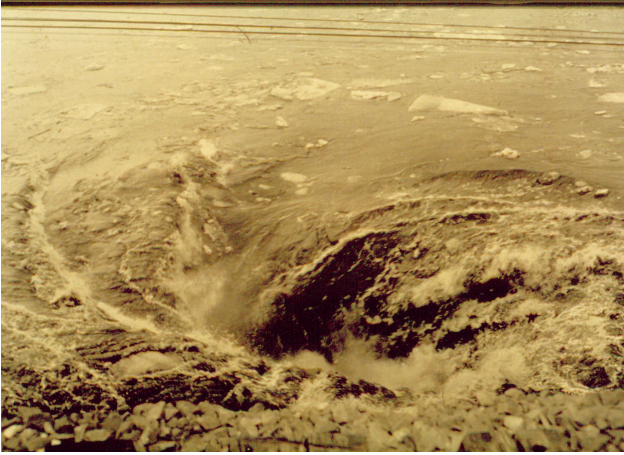
Other efforts including Can Do, the new community development organization under the leadership of Dr. Edgar Dressen in the Hazleton Area, helped to bring businesses to the Valmont and Humboldt Industrial Parks, helping to ease the unemployment rate in that area of the county.

Politicians were also part of the thrust to uplift the depressed areas. Dan Flood, the U.S. Congressman representing our area, worked on a series of programs on the federal level to funnel monies into long-term, low-interest loans for businesses. The Flood-Douglas Bill provided \$394 million dollars in such federal grants (*Kashatus Valley* 21). Flood later channeled millions of dollars through the federal Model Cities program designed to “*clear entire city blocks of slums and replace them with new residential and commercial buildings*” (*Kashatus Valley* 21).

## **THE KNOX MINE DISASTER**

The last year of the 1950s started with disaster. On the morning of January 22, 1959, eighty-one men reported for work at 7:00 a.m. at the [Knox Mine](#) in Pittston. About twenty minutes before noon, the Susquehanna River broke through the mine roof into the tunnels below.

Jack Williams, a foreman, was talking with “Tiny” Gizenski, Charlie Featherman, and Gene Ostrowski about 11:30 that morning. The three men were called “rock men” as they tunneled through rock from one chamber to the next. That morning, they



Knox mine break-in site 7

were finishing a tunnel from the Pittston coal vein to the Marcy vein.

Jack said to Tiny: “*Are you going to break for lunch?*”

Tiny replied: “*No, we’ll finish here and then go up top and eat our lunch there.*”

About the time Jack was finishing his conversation with Tiny, another worker came from the River Slope area to Jack and said that the props were making noise in a chamber higher up. “Come up to see what is going on.”

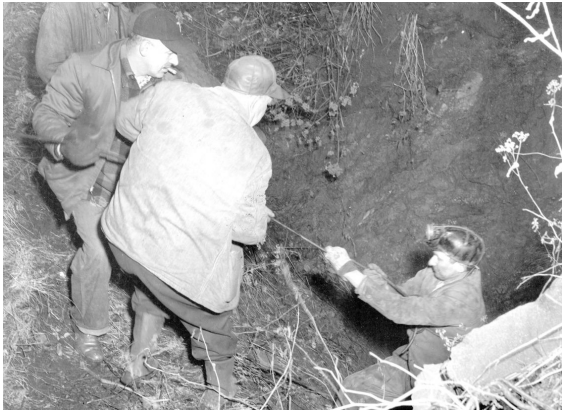
So Jack started up. He reported: “*Just as I stepped into the chamber, the roof gave way and the river poured in—right on top of Tiny and the two men about 100 feet down.*”

In an odd premonition, Gene had spoken about a recurring dream in which his bedroom ceiling opened up and the roof and ceiling collapsed on him.

Williams and the other two men ran up the River Slope to warn Bob Groves, the superintendent, about what happened so he could tell the miners to get out. Groves made the call down into the mines to warn the men.

The U.S. Geological Survey instruments indicated that 10.37 billion gallons—about 2.7 million gallons a minute—poured into the River Slope and surrounding chambers.

After a harrowing few hours, most of the men made it out of the mine safely. However, thirty-three others were trapped. They



Rescue out of the Eagle air shaft 8

had to pick their way to the Eagle Air Shaft. Water was pushing ice chunks the size of teachers' desks through the gangways. The noise was as loud as two freight trains passing in a tunnel, according to the miners.

The water continued to rise to the knees and then to the thighs of the trapped men. Eventually, they made it to the safety of the [Eagle Air Shaft](#). Tragically, twelve other men never made it out.

For three days, workers tried to fill the gap the river tore into its bed. Approximately 400 one-ton coal cars as well as 25,000 cubic yards of dirt, rock, and boulders were poured into the hole. Eventually the water was slowed to about 20,000 gallons a minute. Only in the spring did engineers achieve a more permanent solution, using 1,200 cubic yards of concrete and 26,000 cubic yards of sand to seal the hole.

Survivors were taken to nearby [Pittston Hospital](#)—the “Haven on the Hill.” The superb nursing staff and their administrator, [Esther Tinsley](#), took care of the cold, wet men.

Under Miss Tinsley's guidance, Pittston Hospital had grown into a modern, well-known facility. The nursing school graduates were so well-trained that they had no trouble finding positions in their field no matter where they applied. The prestigious Pennsylvania Nursing Association Award was presented to Miss Tinsley in 1955. The reputation of the staff, the cleanliness of the hospital, and its up-to-date procedures were due to her diligence and oversight.



Not many women would complete high school in the early twentieth century, let alone college. Miss Tinsley did both. She rose to the top of her profession and served as a role model for many women. After sixty-one years of service, she retired.

## **POLITICS**

Republicans, under the leadership of [John S. Fine](#), ruled the roost in political circles in the valley from the 1920s through the 1950s. Born in Alden, Fine attended Nanticoke High School (*Kashatus Dapper Dan 55*). After receiving his law degree from Dickinson School of Law, he returned to the area to practice law in 1915. When America entered World War I, Fine enlisted and served with the 23rd U.S. Army Engineers in France (*Kashatus Dapper Dan 55*).

After serving as the youngest jurist ever appointed to the Luzerne Court of Common Pleas, at age 29, Fine was elected in his own right in 1929 (*Kashatus Dapper Dan 56*). After his reelection in 1939, he was appointed to the state Superior Court by Governor James Duff (*Kashatus Dapper Dan 56*). Fine resigned in 1950 to run for governor. He was elected as Pennsylvania's one-hundredth governor in 1950, the third governor from our area. (Arthur James from Plymouth and Henry Hoyt from Kingston were the other two.)

Under Fine's administration, public education cost nearly 50 percent of the budget. He reformed public health services, trying to ensure all citizens had equal access. Public works, such as the paving of six thousand miles of dirt roads, was also emphasized. While life improved here, it was not enough for thousands of residents who continued to leave the area in search of employment.

As Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower finished his second term as president, John F. Kennedy, the Democratic nominee, ran against Vice President Richard Nixon. When Kennedy made a campaign stop in our valley, the crowds were so large and enthusiastic to see

the Massachusetts senator that he fell behind in his schedule. The election would be a close call, with Kennedy declared the winner.

A personal friend of the new president, Congressman Daniel



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J. Flood had been active in area politics for decades since his election to Congress in 1944. (He lost only two elections, in 1946 and 1952.) The actor-turned-politician was a graduate of Coughlin High School where he played football and was the class

president. After graduation from Syracuse University and a brief entrance into Harvard Law School, Flood followed his true dream: becoming a professional actor. While he pursued his dream on the stage, he grew his famous handlebar mustache.

Returning home in the 1930s, the future congressman became active in local and state Democratic politics. When first elected to the U.S. House in 1944, Flood struck hard at reducing unemployment and attracting new businesses (*Kashatus Dapper Dan* 43). The congressman was particularly moved by the miners in his district who suffered so much hardship from anthrasilicosis, commonly called “black lung disease.” He labored long and hard to get Congress to provide federal funds for the miners as well as their families.



Kennedy campaigning in Pittston

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With Kennedy’s election, he now had the chance. He co-sponsored a bill, the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, which was signed into law by Kennedy. It had previously been twice passed by Congress but vetoed by President Eisenhower. Dr. Hanlon writes about this accomplishment: *“The law required that the federal government give preference to contractors in areas of high unemployment, send funds to sustain and improve public services, provide assistance to local businesses through a series of loans and encourage national businesses to locate in such regions”* (Hanlon *Wyoming Valley* 166).



Route 81 construction 11

The valley became a testing ground for this new law. Local leaders also tried ideas such as food stamps, urban renewal, and low-cost housing before the rest of the nation thanks to Dan Flood’s influence. Valley Crest nursing home opened in 1961 as part of the application of federal money. Included in Mr. Flood’s accomplishments is a state-of-the-art Veterans Hospital, the

Avoca airport, and the positioning of U.S. Route 81 through the area.

With the area’s unemployment rate at 14 percent, the new ideas were a welcome sign. Federal aid money was used for new high-rise towers for the elderly. Shopping areas and malls were added, such as the Narrows in Edwardsville and the Gateway in Kingston (Hanlon *Wyoming Valley* 170). Eventually, in 1972, the Wyoming Valley Mall was constructed. It would continue the



trend of drawing customers away from the valley's towns, adding to their misery of empty buildings and limited parking.

Suburbs grew at alarming rates in the Back Mountain and other outlying areas. Route 309 struggled to keep up with the traffic; drinking water and sewage systems became greater concerns too. School consolidations also took place in the 1960s. The county school board, following the mandate from the state, oversaw the reorganization of sixty school districts into ten units. Intense local rivalries and large enrollments would bring conflict into the debate from the very start.

Although the schools were brought together, albeit very reluctantly, the combining of seventy-two municipalities presented an insurmountable obstacle. The proposal to make Wyoming Valley one unit would propel the area to become the third-largest city in Pennsylvania, making public services more efficient and less subject to local politics. That, however, was not going to happen.

As the 1960s drew to a close, people in the valley as well as the rest of the nation felt the impact of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy; the heightened tension between “hawks” and “doves” during the Vietnam War; and the voices proclaiming Civil Rights. It seemed as though the country was coming apart.

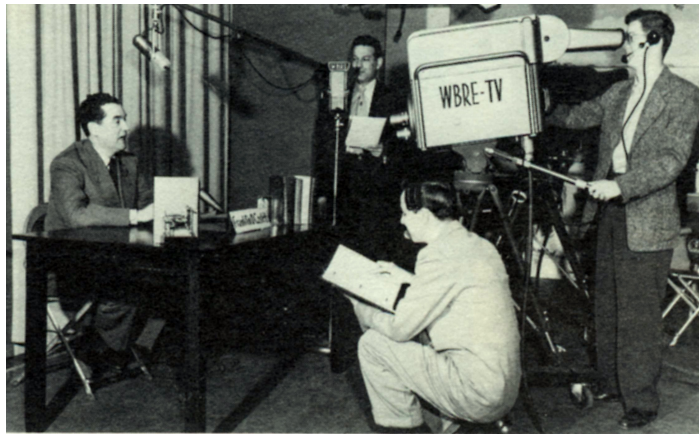


Bobby Kennedy 13

## **ON SCREEN AND STAGE**

If you were a child in the 1960s and 1970s, you would certainly remember watching the nationally syndicated television

children's show *Captain Kangaroo*. Locally, the children's television show that was very popular was *The Land of Hatchy Milatchy*, starring Miss Judy. Otherwise known as Lois Reed Burns, Miss Judy was a familiar name to the young residents of Wyoming Valley. Many learned about their numbers and their



*Franklin D. Coslett in an early newscast at WBRE-TV.*

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station, WBRE-TV, went on the air in 1953. On January 1, it aired the Tournament of Roses, the Cotton Bowl, and the Orange Bowl to ten thousand homes. Franklin D. Coslett was the area's first anchorman and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1981.

Born in Kingston in 1927, Edie Adams found fame and fortune in Hollywood by the 1950s. Married to Ernie Kovacs, a comic extraordinaire, she worked her way from the nightclub circuit onto Broadway, winning Theatre World Awards and a Tony Award. Jack Paar, Rock Hudson, and Doris Day were just a few of the stars with whom she worked. After the death of her husband in a tragic car accident, she still continued to perform.

manners from Miss Judy (*Kashatus Valley 3*). The show won an Emmy in 1991–1992 and a National Education Award in 1993 and 1995 (*Kashatus Valley 3*).

To keep us informed about breaking news, our first television



Nick Adams 15

A friend of the late James Dean, [Nick Adams](#) was born in Nanticoke in 1931. He was best known as Johnny Yuma in the television series *The Rebel*. His work in the movie *Twilight of Honor* garnered an Oscar nomination for him. Carole Androsky, born in Pittston in 1942, appeared in *Little Big Man* (1970), and *Dante's Peak* (1997).

The popular television show *Bewitched* (1964–1972) featured [Marion Lorne](#) from West Pittston. Born in 1883, Lorne played the role of bumbling Aunt Clara to Elizabeth Montgomery's character, Samantha Stephens. She had been a star on New York's Broadway since 1905 and on the London stages as well. Eventually, she was a star on television as well. She was posthumously awarded an Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series.

[Hugo Winterhalter](#) became a composer and arranger for musicians such as Count Basie, Tommy Dorsey, Claude Thornhill, and many others. Born in Wilkes-Barre in 1909, he later studied at the New England Conservatory of Music. He wrote scores of hits including "Blue Christmas," "[Canadian Sunset](#)," and "Jealous Heart." He was the musical director at MCM Records and later signed with RCA Records. He arranged songs for Perry Como, Eddie Fisher, and the Ames Brothers.

Another well-known musician with ties to our area was [Russ Morgan](#). Born in Scranton, he moved with his family to Nanticoke. His father was a foreman in the Truesdale Mines and that is where Russ worked when he was about eight years old. He developed bronchial pneumonia and became very ill. Doctors told his parents that he should pick up a brass instrument in order to develop his lungs. Trombone was his first instrument and launched a career that eventually took him across the country as he formed his own band. He played with Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey and Lawrence Welk, and arranged for notables like Peggy Lee, Paul Whitefield, and Louie Armstrong. He also had his own radio shows and a



C. Edgar Patience coal sculpture 16

television show in 1956. Morgan's best-known tune was "[You're Nobody Till Somebody Loves You.](#)"

[Mary Eileen McDonnell](#) was born in Wilkes-Barre in 1952. She worked in film, on stage, and on television for decades. Her roles in *Dances with Wolves* and *Passion Fish* garnered her Academy Award nominations. She has also appeared in "Battlestar Galactica," "Independence Day," "Grey's Anatomy," "Major Crimes," as well as many other projects ("[Mary McDonnell](#)" IMDb).

In 1969, *The Molly Maguires*, a movie about an alleged secret Irish organization in 1876, was filmed at Eckley near Hazleton. The breaker and patchtown houses built as movie props are still standing. They are next to a museum about the miners who worked in the area. The movie starred Sean Connery and Richard Harris.

The fine arts were well represented, too. For example, C. Edgar Patience, from West Pittston, learned to sculpt coal from his father, Harry. He went on to sculpt larger and more complicated pieces for notables such as Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, the Prime Minister of Barbados, and several U.S. presidents. King's College has a two-ton altar that was sculpted by Patience.

Born in Wilkes-Barre, [Franz Kline](#) studied art in London before settling in New York in 1939. Kline used large black-and-white brushstrokes on his canvas and became associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement. Known as a Minimalist, Kline had a large international following.

[Santo Loquasto](#) is a scenic and costume designer from Wilkes-Barre. He has been nominated fifteen times for Tony Awards and has won three, along with Drama Desk Awards for outstanding set designs as well as outstanding costume design. He has worked on more than sixty Broadway productions.



Santo Loquasto 17

The arts, from symphony to sculpture to plays on the stage of local companies like Little Theater, have played an important role in the life of those who live in our valley.



Barbara Weisberger founder of the Wilkes-Barre Ballet and Pennsylvania Ballet Companies 18

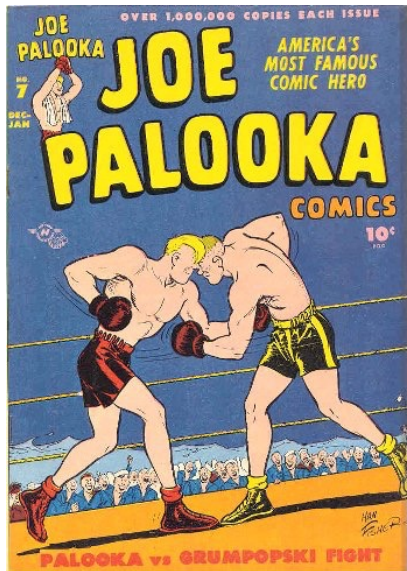
Ballet and dance performers like [Barbara Weisberger](#) have graced national stages. She founded the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, and later the Carlisle Project.

One of the most endearing entertainers was not a person, but a comic-strip character.

The brainchild of Ham Fisher, Joe Palooka was a very popular boxer. According to Fisher, he met a boxer in Wilkes-Barre by the name of Pete Latzo in 1921. Latzo would become the World Welterweight Champion in 1927. In some way, he inspired Fisher, as explained to *Collier's* magazine:

*“Here, made to order, was the comic strip character I had been looking for—a big, good-natured prize fighter who didn't like to fight; a defender of little guys; a gentle knight. I ran back to the office, drew a set of strips and rushed to the newspaper syndicates.”*





Joe Palooka comic 19

Though Fisher would die in 1955, [Joe Palooka](#) ran in national newspapers from 1930 to 1984. He was supported by a cast of characters including a little boy who didn't speak and was dressed in oversized clothing. That character of "Little Max" was based on local businessman Max Bartikowsky. Other characters also had Wilkes-Barre inspirations.

The comic book hero and his sidekicks enjoyed life in comics, on the radio, and in movies and television shows. A statue of Joe Palooka overlooks part of the valley from its perch on Route 309 on the way to Mountaintop.

Although his birth name in 1907 was Antonio Grande, his stage name was [Tony Grant](#). A former vaudeville performer, he and his wife Topsy took over a children's talent show in Atlantic City in the mid-1940s. Together, they transformed it into the Stars of Tomorrow. Grant estimated that he helped more than fifty-thousand youngsters develop their onstage talents from 1947 to 1978, including Connie Francis and Frankie Avalon.

Born in 1927 in Ashley, Pennsylvania, [William G. McGowan](#) graduated from King's College and went on to Harvard Business School. Later, he became the founder and CEO of Microwave Communications, or MCI. As the company grew, McGowan's federal antitrust lawsuit facilitated the breakup of AT&T in 1974 in a classic "David and Goliath" struggle. Eventually, MCI was sold to World Com for \$37 billion dollars in 1996.

Three other members of the valley deserve special recognition for their achievements. [Frank Carlucci](#) helped Dan Flood navigate through the myriad details of the Agnes flood disaster. A graduate of Wyoming Seminary, Princeton University, and Harvard Business School, Carlucci joined the Foreign Service. He later became Undersecretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. After serving as Ambassador to Portugal, he later stepped in as Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Following his work there, he became the national security advisor and then served as Secretary of Defense.

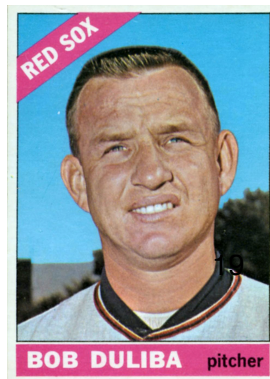
[Max Rosenn](#), born in Plains, would leave the valley for only brief stints. After graduating from Cornell, he returned to the valley to open what became the largest law firm in the area: Rosenn, Jenkins, and Greenwald. Serving as an Assistant District Attorney from 1941 to 1944, he then joined the U.S. Army as a first lieutenant and served during World War II in the Philippines. He was appointed by President Nixon in 1970 to serve on the Third Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, where he sat for thirty-six years. He chaired the Flood Recovery Task Force during the 1972 Agnes Disaster. Honored and revered in life and in death, Max Rosenn was characterized as the ideal appellate judge by his peer on the court, Ruggero J. Aldisert.

[Dr. Stanley Dudrick](#) from Nanticoke is credited with saving millions of lives across the globe with his discovery that people could be nourished through an intravenous (IV) feeding system. His IV system has changed the care protocol for patients with a variety of illnesses, including cancer, gastrointestinal diseases, and trauma, as well as infants who are critically ill. He did not want to patent his invention so that it would be available to everyone.

## SPORTS

Baseball was still very popular. A number of semi-pro teams were active in the area. Probably the best known were the Wilkes-Barre Barons, who played exhibition games against professional teams like the World Champion Philadelphia Athletics. The Barons won that contest 10–1.

Other sports, too, had grown in popularity in the valley. Intense rivalries existed, particularly in high-school basketball and football. Boxing great Rocky Castellani, professional boxing rookie of the year in 1946, lost a fifteen-round decision for the world middleweight title in 1954. Mendy Rudolph became one of the most famous National Basketball Association (NBA) referees. Charley Trippi was Heisman Trophy runner-up in 1946 and went



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on to star for the Chicago Cardinals, ending in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Joe Pisarcik, born in Kingston, played in the NFL with the New York Giants and the Philadelphia Eagles for eight seasons. **Bob Duliba** from Glen Lyon pitched from 1959 through 1967 in the big leagues with the Cardinals, Angels, Red Sox, and Athletics. The “Babe Ruth of the West Coast” was born in Nanticoke. In 1956, according to the Times Leader, **Steve Bilko** “paced the Pacific Coast League in eight categories including home runs (55), batting average (.360), runs batted in (164), and slugging percentage (.683)” (*Times Leader Nanticoke Native*).

One diversion from the serious issues facing the country in this period occurred in January 1970. This was the championship

game between the NFL and the American Football League (AFL), which has become known as the Super Bowl. It



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matched the AFL champion New York Jets against the NFL champion Baltimore Colts. The game had even more interest for local fans as two brothers from Swoyersville were part of the game, but on opposite teams. Walt Michaels coached for the New York Jets, and his brother Lou played for the Baltimore



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Colts.

They were some of the many professional athletes to come from our area. Basketball, baseball, football, boxing, auto racing, and golf have all benefited from the contributions of hard-working Wyoming Valley natives.

## MUSIC

The national music scene was rocking in the decade with the Beatles, Rolling Stones, The Doors, and many more top acts. WARM radio was the place to tune in to listen to all this music. We were not without our own local stars, such as [Eddie Day and the Starfires](#), [Joe Nardone and the AllStars](#), the Great Rock Scare, The Eighth Street Bridge, [The Bouys](#) (with their national hit “Timothy”), and [Mel Wynn](#) and the Rhythm Aces.

Lee Vincent and his big band orchestra played with the famous singers of the time, including Perry Como, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Jr., The Temptations, Johnny Mathis, the Dorseys, and many more. Bobby Baird and his band played jazz and easy listening. The Trucksville native played for three presidents, performed on the Ed Sullivan Show, and worked with Skitch Henderson and Doc Severson. Many other music fans enjoyed the

stylings of square dancing to the calls of Carl Hanks, Red Jones, or great polka bands such as the Kryger Brothers and [Stanky and the Coal Miners](#).

## THE AGNES FLOOD



Packing sandbags. 24

The valley gained national attention in 1972, but not for its politics, sports, or arts. The [Agnes flood](#) ravaged the area in June of that year. Three days of rain and an estimated 14 trillion gallons of water caused the Susquehanna River to overflow its 36-foot-high dikes with more than 40 feet of water.

The Luzerne County Civil Defense director, Frank Townend, issued orders for the evacuation of healthcare facilities and residents in the low-lying areas unprotected by the dikes in the early morning hours of June 23 (Hanlon *Wyoming Valley* 171). Later,

80,000 people were evacuated, and more than 20,000 homes and 3,000 businesses were lost. Frank Carlucci, a graduate of Wyoming Seminary and then a special envoy from President Richard Nixon, teamed with U.S. Representative [Daniel Flood](#) to guide the valley residents through the tragedy. Flood pushed his fellow congress members for \$220 million to help the valley. Eventually, the total federal and state help would exceed one billion dollars.

Flood asked his friend, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, for help. Laird put his helicopter at Flood's disposal, along with alerting the "Army Reserves, Navy Reserves, and the National Guard" (Kashatus *Valley* 163).

After the flood of 1936, a levee system had been built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to protect the residents and businesses of the valley. By the 1960s, however, the levees had settled as much as sixty inches (*Kashatus Valley* 164).

Congressman Flood worked hard to obtain emergency funding to repair the system back to its protective barrier of 37 feet. Unfortunately, that would not be high enough to stop the water in 1972.

The rain came and stayed for several days. The river, at only four feet, didn't pose a threat in the beginning. As the rain continued, however, the ground became saturated, and the runoff went directly into the river. Water, too, was coming from New York. The tropical storm named Agnes seemed to leave and the valley breathed a sigh of relief—until it circled around again. As it did, dumping more precipitation on the valley, the river rose even higher. Volunteers were called out to sandbag the low-lying areas, but to no avail. The river continued to rise until it spilled over its banks and then over the levees, reaching a height of over forty feet. It was particularly bad near Wilkes University on the east side of



Forty Fort Cemetery during the Agnes Flood 25

the river. On the west side, the river gouged large chunks of earth out of the Forty Fort Cemetery, unearthing hundreds of caskets.

Over six miles wide in some places and running the length of the valley from West Pittston to Nanticoke, the river created millions of dollars of damage to property.



Hanlon said, *“In the recorded history of the Valley, no flood comparable to this had ever occurred; in the recorded history of the nation, no flood had ever destroyed so much property”* (172).

The devastation was enormous, but one person became the figurehead of the long and grueling recovery effort: Congressman Dan Flood. He was able to call in favors from both sides of the political aisle in Congress. The National Guard responded, as did the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which provided temporary housing for displaced persons. Food stamps were made available through the Department of Agriculture, and unemployment compensation was paid through the Department of Labor. Small-business loans carried a one percent interest rate and a \$5,000 forgiveness clause. Mortgages could be refinanced as well (Hanlon *Wyoming Valley* 173).

An estimated sixty-eight-thousand tons of debris was hauled out of the area. Volunteers from across the country came to help shovel the sticky mud out of valley residences and businesses. Cleanup and its aftermath would take years.

While many structures had to be razed, the construction would really begin underground with new utility lines. New streets and lighting would be added, too (Hanlon *Wyoming Valley* 174). Though the flood was devastating, it actually helped us to rebuild the area with an eye to even greater industrial diversification and better ethnic unity. Other questions, such as municipal unification, however, remain unanswered.

So, what do you think of now when you hear the name “Wyoming Valley”? This has been a quick look at just a sampling of the fascinating stories that lay all around us in the streets, cemeteries, churches, and grand old buildings in our area. Our past is rich with contributions of Native Americans, immigrant groups, and settlers. Forged in the crucible of trial, our people have been tested by war, floods, corruption, sweatshop labor, riots, and economic downturns. Yet we continue to work, play, build, and celebrate our lives here in the Wyoming Valley.