



HISTORY BYTES

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Rick Sedlisky, Editor

A Message from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Thanks for your support and continued interest. The last year brought us many challenges, but has also allowed us to explore new possibilities. In 2020, we completed a strategic plan to guide us through the next five years. The plan, "Looking Back & Moving Forward" (<https://online.fliphtml5.com/rztgj/ancs/>) placed a strong focus on how we could improve our online presence.

Of course that focus became an immediate need during the pandemic and we soon developed some excellent virtual programs including "Lackawanna Past Times" and the "Ghostly Gallery". This year, we continue our effort. Assistant Director Sarah Piccini has written a Social Media strategy to outline our plan to create new online fundraising opportunities, continue to reach new members virtually, and offer more local history content through social media.

To do this successfully, we need to hear from you. I invite you to contact me with any suggestions or comments you have about our online resources. In the next few months, we will be completely redesigning our website, so your input will be invaluable.

Thanks to everyone who is inspired by Lackawanna County's history!

Mary Ann

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Gene Brislin: A Legend in Women's Journalism

By Tina Lesher

Author's Note: I penned the following article in 1996, with the intent of using it as part of a newspaper project. Gene Brislin, with whom I had worked from 1966 to 1970 as assistant women's editor at The Scranton Tribune, died within months of my interviewing her and the piece was not published. After I retired from university teaching, I found the article among my files. –Tina Lesher

Introduction

After more than a half-century, Gene Brislin quietly remains a unique figure in American journalism. She has won scores of awards and has played an important role in securing salary parity for newspaperwomen in Scranton, where she served for decades as women's editor of the Scrantonian-Tribune and now, nearing 80, writes a regular column and features for The Scranton Times.

Gene's story reads like a novel: she often joined her Pulitzer Prize-winning spouse to get a story from the women's angle. With a cigarette hanging from a long holder, she worked long hours with one assistant to produce up to 50 society pages a week. Her Tribune writing extended from compelling, well-researched articles to Walter Winchell-like, neologism-filled colorful columns. She survived cancer only to write a riveting series on the disease and her own plight; the stories earned her national awards and a Pulitzer nomination.

And in the most poignant chapter of her life, Gene recalls clearly the day in 1990 when she arrived at work to discover that The Scrantonian-Tribune had been sold and the building was to be padlocked. So, on an emotion-packed day, Gene exited the paper after a stellar half-century career in its newsroom.

Gene, now married to violinist Florian ZaBach, is a living legend in northeastern Pennsylvania and an important figure in the history of women's journalism.

This biographical paper is based on hours of taped interviewing by the author and on conversations with Gene Brislin over the past 30 years.

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Gene Brislin arrived early to work on May 21, 1990. The previous night, local television stations had reported rumors that the Scranton Tribune and its Sunday paper, The Scrantonian, were about to be sold to the competing Scranton Times.

"A lot of us came early," Gene recalls, noting that she had told her husband, violinist Florian ZaBach, that "if it happens I want to be there."

Thus she stood in the dark, cluttered newsroom as editor Hal Lewis greeted her with words that still reverberate in her mind: "Gene, the paper's finished." He advised her and the other staffers to remove their personal belongings because the building would be padlocked by noon.

Gene cleaned out her tiny locker and her desk but failed to take her personal files.

"They had the names of sources, good leads, story ideas for rainy days. Those are things I wanted to keep, but I was so shook I didn't get them."

Throughout the building, the mood was funereal. "People were in tears, dumbstruck," Gene says. "Eddie Venesky in advertising---he was sick, upchucking. He had three kids. The whole thing was so sad."

As Gene Brislin exited the Tribune building, she left behind a half-century legacy in women's journalism, marked by a lifetime of honors, a reputation for compelling and lively writing, and a record of appealing for women's rights in the newsroom. Today, as a weekly columnist for The Scranton Times, she continues as one of the most widely-read by-liners of an American mid-sized paper.

Born in 1916, Gene O'Boyle was christened Genevieve. Almost from birth she was called Gene; the spelling, usually representing the name of a male, proved interesting in later years. In the 1960s, for example, she was invited to a special food writers' event in the Philadelphia area. She and the other reporters were assigned to double occupancy rooms; her assigned roommate was a newsman.

"You should have seen this guy's face," she laughs. "He couldn't switch his room fast enough."

At Blakely (Pa.) High School she became interested in journalism and worked on the school paper. After graduation in 1934, she entered the journalism program at Bucknell College in Lewisburg, Pa. One day, the diminutive Gene ("I'm four feet, eleven inches in heels") shopped in downtown Lewisburg and then hopped a bus to return to campus.

"I couldn't figure out why there were so many men on it. Then it hit me---they were prisoners from Lewisburg Penitentiary." With journalistic instincts intact, the curious Gene stayed on the bus---and penned a story about it for her journalism class. She loved Bucknell with its classic collegiate atmosphere and charming campus, but financial reality forced her to transfer to Scranton's Marywood College, one of the nation's largest Catholic institutions for women. As a commuter, she traveled 15 miles a day by bus from her Peckville home to the campus.

"I didn't learn to drive until I was in my 50s," she says, acknowledging that her early journalistic life was marked by a series of bus rides and transfers.

After her graduation in 1939, she worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Her professional newspaper career started in 1942 when she was hired as a lowly-paid

Midvalley correspondent for The Tribune. Most of the work centered on forwarding information about club meetings and municipal schedules; she occasionally covered governmental meetings in Blakely, Jermyn or other towns dotting the coal-scarred Midvalley.

She relished a chance to move into the Tribune newsroom. At the time the staff was almost exclusively male, with one or two women working on the society pages. The situation was mirrored at the rival Times, although the paper had a reporter, Elizabeth Lynett, who won the admiration of colleagues for her coverage of area sweatshops. But Liz Lynett had a different route to the newsroom---she was the daughter of the paper's founder/publisher, Edward Lynett, and she later became the paper's co-publisher.

After a brief time as a correspondent, Gene O'Boyle joined the Tribune newsroom ranks in 1942 and, true to the times, her work was restricted to the society pages. As assistant to women's editor Christine "Chrissie" Gibbons, Gene wrote weddings, birth announcements, and news about women's organizations. She and Chrissie also forged a friendship that continues to this day. In a decades-long span during which they worked as colleagues and later as competitors, the pair worked hard to change the status of females in the newsroom.

Soon after Gene's arrival at The Tribune, however, the exodus of male staffers to World War II service gave the women a chance to move into the general assignment ranks. While they retained their society page duties, they were called to fill in on the hard news side.

Gene's initial foray came on nothing less than an ongoing murder trial.

"It was a hot summer day and I had come to work with a sundress because I expected to be in the office all day writing weddings," she recalls.

So when managing editor B.B. Powell told her he needed her to cover the trial, she was more concerned about her "inappropriate" attire than she was about handling the reportorial assignment. She walked a block from The Tribune offices to the Lackawanna County Courthouse. She admits she knew "nothing---not even where to sit." Neil Whitney, a seasoned reporter for The Scranton Times, realized that the neophyte trial scribe needed assistance.

"He was great," says Gene. "He sat next to me and filled me in with all the background information and anything else I needed to know."

That kind of help represented the relationship between the competing papers. While reporters from the respective publications engaged in competition to get stories, they maintained a journalistic bond. As union colleagues and friends, reporters from The Tribune and The Times worked hard on behalf of each other in a quest for professional recognition from publishers.

Gene continued to work during World War II on the society pages, and her occasional moves to general assignment or the obit pages proved temporary.

“The minute the men came back, I was out,” sighs Gene.

In 1946, Gene married J. Harold Brislin, a heralded reporter for The Scranton Times. Harold’s adeptness at investigative reporting was matched by an outward brusqueness; underneath he was a sensitive being and an affectionate partner for a vulnerable Gene. The marriage sparked problems in the O’Boyle household. A few years before, Gene had quietly married an Army officer assigned to a Scranton defense plant; the union lasted only months and Gene says little about it. Just getting over their daughter’s annulment, the O’Boyles, a rigid Catholic family, now had to deal with Gene’s marriage to the divorced Harold Brislin. When Mrs. O’Boyle died unexpectedly a few weeks thereafter, Gene’s family blamed it on a broken heart.

Gene continued to work as Chrissie’s assistant, but when the latter left shortly before her first child was born in 1947, Gene took the reins as the Tribune’s women’s page editor.

“I didn’t want to do it,” says Gene, noting that she felt she would be mired forever in that post and never have a chance for fulltime general assignment.

But she knew that another woman, working as a correspondent, was waiting in the wings so she “reluctantly” took the advancement.

For Gene and an assistant, a typical work week meant putting out a total of 50-plus pages between the daily woman’s pages and the extensive section in the Sunday paper, The Scrantonian.

“We’d have two people on social---sports had five or six,” she says, acknowledging that the weekly workload was intensive.

Even writing weddings proved no easy task for social writers of the day. Whereas today’s wedding photos give general information and little detail about the ceremony, the standard Tribune weddings included lengthy descriptions of everything, from the bride’s gown to the flower arrangement to the attire worn by bridesmaids and mothers of the bride and groom. The work allowed little leeway for the writers. Occasionally, however, the wedding stories became news stories.

One of the scores of awards given over the years to Gene was for a poignant piece she wrote in the 1950s about a honeymoon tragedy. The Scrantonian’s weekly section featured a front page of 12 brides’ pictures prepared on a large engraved sheet. The paper had received a report from the nearby Poconos that a young man, on his honeymoon, had left a rented cabin to purchase some groceries at a store in the area. His car was involved in an accident and he was killed. Gene read the report and recognized the man’s name---his bride’s picture was among those to be featured in the upcoming Sunday picture spread. She immediately made plans to remove the picture

and substitute another from the inside section; the engraving changes would be costly, but Gene argued that the paper must take the action in deference to the young widow. Then Gene received a call from the bride, who pleaded with her to keep the picture on the page because, the woman said, “my husband would want it that way.”

Caught in a dilemma---either to respect the wishes of the bride or to open the paper up to criticism from readers---Gene agreed to run the photo only if she also could write a story about the couple and the reason why the picture was being published. The resulting piece represented the unique writing style of Gene Brislin---openly creative but always geared to telling the story. The award, from the Pennsylvania Press Association, remains one of Gene’s favorites among many.

As Gene continued to put years into her women’s editor post, she garnered a reputation for hard work. The dark, noisy, hot Tribune newsroom resembled a set out of “The Front Page.” In the corner of the noisy, small newsroom, Gene became a legend. With her high heels barely touching the floor and with a cigarette extended from a lengthy holder in her mouth, she would sit at a worn Royal typewriter and quickly churn out piece after piece of social copy. She would glue the pages together and often deliver them herself to the adjoining backshop, a bastion of International Typographic Union (ITU) members, many of whom became her friends. Her phone was always ringing, bringing requests for social pictures or a good placement for a wedding. When time permitted, Gene would fashion a feature story for her section. In effect, she and her assistant would work almost autonomously, without any editor touching their copy or questioning their decisions.

Despite college backgrounds and experience, Gene and her social page colleagues across town at The Times failed to secure the same salaries as their male counterparts. Even the arrival of the American Newspaper Guild (ANG) chapter in 1943 did nothing to bring parity to the newsroom. Though Gene and the other women staffers from The Tribune and Times argued that they were victims of discrimination, the male-dominated Guild could not convince management to provide equal salaries for women. But Herman Goodman, a Tribune co-publisher, did tell Chrissie Gibbons in the mid-1940s, that should the paper ever hire a woman news reporter, he’d have to give that person and the women’s page writers the same salaries being awarded to the men. Several years later, the Tribune hired Janet McCaulley as a night reporter. Reminded by ex-colleague Chrissie about the publisher’s promise, Gene demanded and receive parity. (McCaulley remained only for a year or two, and no woman was hired for a reporting slot for another quarter century). It was in the early 60s, however, before other women secured equal pay at the Scranton papers.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Gene took an active role in The Guild. She and Harold joined fellow local chapter members in picketing out-of-town papers struck by ANG members. But Gene and the other women members continued to be shut out of some events. They made their views known to colleagues, but unlike their predecessors, never demonstrated publicly for their rights. (In the mid-1930s, women’s page staffers picketed the annual all-male dinner sponsored by the ITU Newswriters’ division. Incensed that they were dues-paying members of the group but not allowed to

attend the event, Betty Reynolds of The Tribune and Emily Wilcox of The Times picketed outside the Hotel Jermyn during the dinner, which attracted men from throughout the area and featured famed speakers like Sinclair Lewis. The resulting publicity did nothing, however, to change their status: women never got to attend the annual dinners).

Despite working at competing newspapers, the Brislins maintained a happy marriage marked by travel and socializing. Gene's work brought her to every major social event in the area, and the couple made strong friendships with colleagues and others. While Gene built an award-winning food section as part of the women's page repertoire, she engaged in little formal cooking. ("I can cook spaghetti for two. If other people come, I'll make another pot," she smilingly told a colleague who wondered why Gene did not just double the recipe). Still she weaved award-winning food stories, and regularly attended national food editors' conclaves. For a brief period in the early 1980s, she added restaurant reviews to her workload.

Chrissie Gibbons Vanston, who returned to journalism in 1960 after her husband died and left her with three young sons, recalls one food conference where Gene typed a story but could not find anything with which to glue the pages together.

"So she sewed them together," laughs Chrissie, now 76. "It was so clever."

Always the creative one, Gene once shocked Harold with a unique birthday present. She purchased a new 1956 Thunderbird, the two-seater type that today is considered a collectors' item. She had the dealer wrap up the car and put it in the Brislins' garage. When Harold went the next morning to open the garage door, "he almost had a heart attack," Gene recalls, noting that she thinks he was pleased by the gift but upset by the extravagant spending on her part.

At the behest of The Tribune owners, Harold resigned from The Scranton Times in 1957 and joined The Tribune news staff. Already recognized as a hard-nosed newsgatherer, he set out to make his mark as a nationally recognized journalist. Few couples could match Gene and Harold Brislin in earning the respect of fellow journalists.

From the 1940s through the early 1970s, the Brislins' journalistic endeavors earned them a roomful of awards---literally. To this day, an office in Gene's home features walls bedecked with framed awards, equally divided between those for Harold's investigative pieces and for Gene's features and social reporting. Amidst the plaques and certificates is the nation's foremost journalistic award---the Pulitzer Prize, presented in 1959 to Harold for local reporting. The Pulitzer came after a years-long reporting effort in which he unearthed information about extensive illegal activities in area unions. His reporting on the story, which eventually resulted in the jailing of 10 people, brought him from the Tribune news enclave to the halls of the nation's capital and Senate hearings. Gene, too, got reportorial mileage out of the story. She and Harold became acquainted with Robert Kennedy, then a young Senate aide working on the hearings, and his wife, Ethel. Gene visited the couple's home and wrote about them for Tribune features.

"I got to write from the woman's angle," says Gene. "Rackets, Mafia---it was incredible."

At times, Harold's reportorial digging on the union stories meant that the couple needed security to ward off threats. Gene recalls having round-the-clock protection in 1958. When the time came for Pulitzer nominations, Gene assisted with preparing the Tribune's entry on behalf of her star-reporter spouse. Colleagues said the entry itself was a masterpiece worthy of an award.

Gene often accompanied Harold to out-of-town assignments.

"This was the agreement when Harold came to the paper," Gene remembers. "I could go with him on these trips and we'd also have the same vacations."

For decades, the Brislin's fielded offers to leave Scranton and work on major newspapers throughout the country. But as Gene says matter-of-factly, "why be a little frog in a big pond when you can be a big frog in a little pond?" And, even as Scranton area journalists, the Brislin's often wrote for national magazines or edited local newsletters for additional income.

In the late 1960s, on another of her spouse's assignments, Gene proved that her talents extended beyond the written word. Harold was sent to cover a New York court hearing. The case centered around a Scranton resident, Sam Sicherman, who had been charged with operating a pyramid-type financial scheme in which a lot of local investors had lost money. Gene sat in the courtroom and realized that, because photographers were not allowed in, the story would lack accompanying art. So she took out a pencil and paper and sketched the scene. Her work made the front page of the next day's paper, thus establishing her as a special commodity on the staff.

Gene's overall work won her professional recognition from across the state and the nation. In its fledgling days, the Pennsylvania Press Women elected her president, thus placing her on the board of the National Federation of Press Women. She was named "Food Editor of the Year" in 1964. She won state and national awards for layouts, features, travel writing, fashion pages, and special writing. Local women's groups honored her many times for her work. And while she decried being permanently relegated to the women's pages, she recognized that the autonomy of the job gave her opportunities for her own assignments, some of which brought her writing over to the news section. She points, for example, to an award-winning story about a mine cave-in near Pittston. "I went down there with Butch Olds (a Tribune photographer) and I talked to prospective widows waiting near the mine shafts." The story, replete with empathy and a genuine look at the women's feelings about being married to miners, was used on the front page.

Her favorite award, she contends, is the "first one" she received.

"I covered the Easter parade in 1946. I used a lot of adjectives to describe the cold day, like 'frosty filigree on the veils.' And the story also had great pictures. That award probably thrilled me the most."

Gene became known for weaving Walter Winchell-like neologisms into her columns. She often used words like “infanticipating” to describe an expectant mother or “middle-aisling it” for a couple getting married. Her features were characterized by leads ending with exclamation points. For hard news-type series, though, Gene returned to standard, compelling prose.

By the late 1960s, Scranton women’s page writers were getting equal pay and the bid for complete parity appeared over. But in 1968, an all-male negotiating union team agreed to raises for those handling copydesk-type work; women’s page staffers, who handled all the editing duties for the expansive society sections, were not included. An infuriated Gene learned about being slighted and informed her assistant women’s page editor, Tina Rodgers, a local native who joined the staff in 1966 fresh from the graduate journalism program at the University of Missouri. The pair quickly and quietly headed for the office of managing editor Al Williams, a former Guild member who expressed his own shock at the negotiating team’s stance. Tina and Gene threatened to quit and to acknowledge publicly why they were leaving. A quick phone call from Williams to the publishers ended with Gene and Tina being given double the editing pay of the others and with the two women’s page staffers chuckling all the way back to their desks.

It was not the first time that Tina had appealed to Williams. A year or so after she joined the paper, Tina asked him if she could start her own column. He said, “Sure.” The young staffer then returned to her desk and told Gene: “I’m starting a column.”

“Gene turned scarlet,” says Tina, who left The Tribune in 1970 to work at The Philadelphia Inquirer. “She’d been asking for a column for years. And here I simply ask and receive.” So Gene marched into the managing editor’s office and also demanded a column. The managing editor declared that the two women could start a column together, but it had to be about social events. Shortly thereafter the Tribune unveiled “Noonbeams and Nightcaps,” featuring short items about social events and people. (Example: “Harold Miller looked dapper in a sharkskin suit as he walked along North Washington Avenue on the way to his court officer’s post). When a large society event took place, a “Noonbeams” by-liner would attend and describe the activities, the food, and the fashion.

While Gene would have preferred a column about women’s issues, she was delighted that “Noonbeams” quickly became a hit; subscribers loved reading about the social scene, and those connected to society yearned to have their names inserted in the then twice-weekly piece. More than a quarter of a century later, Gene Brislin’s byline still rests atop “Noonbeams” but now the column is published in The Scranton Times.

For Gene, the toughest of her workdays came every Saturday as she readied the final pages for The Scrantonian social section, which often ran 35 to 40 pages on Sunday; on many pages large ads translated to a small news hole. Gene would arrive early and often had to wait until 11 a.m. to get the layout pages. In the meantime, she would measure the length of proofread social copy that she had typed throughout the previous few days and try to match up the space with the proofs.

"They'd be selling ads up until noon," she says, "and I'd keep asking for the 'dummys.' I never knew how many pages I had." When she got the pages showing the ad space and the remaining news hole, she would spread them out on a table and try to match up the space with the proofs. Then she would lay out the pages on the dummy sheets. As on weekdays, she would call the area hospitals for a list of births, and would add that copy to the Sunday section. Then she handled writing headlines for all of the articles. By late afternoon, the tired women's editor would head for home and, more often than not, get ready for one of Scranton's social events. On Sundays, she and Harold would relax with their "family"---a dog named Typo. ("That's for typographical error," Gene would tell inquisitive friends). When Typo died, the Brislin's gave him a special burial---in a marked grave in their backyard.

The couple also traveled extensively. Gene would use those trips not only for vacation but to write colorful food or travel pieces for Scranton readers.

While her journalistic endeavors were recognized, few even of her closest friends knew about Gene Brislin's strong religious bent. Almost every day she would trade her lunch hour for a visit to St. Peter's Cathedral in downtown Scranton. Her out-of-the-church wedding to the divorced Harold presented Gene from receiving the sacraments, but not from spending time praying in church or donating to her church's major fundraising efforts. Once, when Harold balked at giving a large donation to a diocesan drive, Gene vowed not to talk to her spouse until he responded to the request. He pledged a donation quickly.

The onset of the computerized age failed to make Gene a modern-day journalist. In the late 1970s, the Tribune purchased video display terminals (VDTs) for the newsroom, but Gene wanted no part of the machines. She didn't want to give up her typewriter because, she says, "it was perfect for my fingers. I had worn it down to where it was just right for me. Why should I use one of those computers?" She eventually yielded to technology, but refused to remove the typewriter, which stayed in the women's section until the paper's demise.

The newsroom's physical appearance remained the same for decades. Even in the 1970s, the dirt-laden room still had a salt pill dispenser on the wall (relic of the days before air conditioning). The air conditioning unit itself was a topic of conversation; it had been installed backwards in the 1960s and no one bothered to change it for awhile.

But other differences were beginning to take place at the Tribune. The oversized linotype machines were being replaced and offset printing was coming to the fore. And the paper now had one, often two, women working on the news side. While Gene still harbored a desire to work general assignment, she made no bid to do so.

Her thoughts were elsewhere when, in 1972, Harold was diagnosed with lung cancer. Gene took a leave of absence and nursed him until his death in late 1973. Then, always the journalistic trouper, she returned to work. Just getting there became a problem: she didn't drive. Thus, in her late 50s, she learned to drive and bought a small, sports-like car that seemed to fit her fun-loving personality perfectly.

Several years after Harold's death, Gene also was struck with cancer and underwent surgery and follow-up treatment. She took her experience and her extensive knowledge about the disease and wrote a mesmerizing series that captivated readers in the Scranton area. The stories brought more recognition to the oft-honored journalist, including awards from professional associations and the American Cancer Society; the series also was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Gene's personal life also took an upturn. As when Harold was alive, Gene traveled worldwide during vacation periods. One on of her trips in the late 70s, she met Florian ZaBach, a renowned violinist who had his own show in the early days of television. Florian often visited Gene's home in suburban Glenburn and even helped Gene when she was ill; the pair married a decade ago.

Today, as she nears her 80th birthday, Gene is a familiar figure at Scranton area social events and continues to write "Noonbeams and Nightcaps." Her move to the Scranton Times allows her to write the column and other features from her home.

Still, as she remains a popular voice in the Scranton journalism community, Gene sadly recalls the shutdown of The Scrantonian-Tribune six years ago. The family-owned papers had been sold two years earlier to an out-of-town group headed by New Jerseyan John Buzzetta. His track record indicated that the purchase really was a ticket to a profitable sale, normally to a competing paper. So when the Scrantonian-Tribune folded, few in the area expressed surprise, but many could not understand why staffers were shut out of the process and simply told to leave the building. The events surrounding the closing still puzzle Gene.

On the day of the shutdown, the employees walked to Farley's, a downtown bar, and lamented what happened. A printer invited them to a meeting in his backyard, where they decided to strike The Scranton Times. Gene could not believe it.

"They weren't ready to make decisions," says Gene about the emotional get-together. "Why should we strike the Times?"

The next morning they picketed peacefully and Gene reluctantly joined in.

"How could I not? I had worked with them."

A few days later, she and Florian left for a long-scheduled trip overseas; by the time they returned The Times had left five messages on her answering machine and she began negotiations to join the paper's staff. A few other colleagues were offered jobs there too, and some ex-Tribune staffers started their own paper, The Sun, which had a brief lifetime.

When The Tribune closed, Guild members were owed seven months of back pay-raise monies. So, one day a few weeks after the closing, Gene and the others had to report to a union official for vouchers to be used for reimbursement at a local bank. Outside the Tribune offices, where the Guild representative was stationed, some disgruntled ex-

employees built a casket. As former staffers came to the building, they would hammer nails into the casket.

Gene was “embarrassed” by the scene and remembers hiding in a small tailor shop nearby. For her, it was not a fitting conclusion to a lifetime of employment. And, when she went later that day to the bank to receive her sizable check, the embarrassment level continued: the bank had run out of cash.

In Gene’s estimation, the most upsetting factor centered squarely on the failure of the owners to put out a final edition.

“That was the part that hurt most,” she says. “They never gave us a chance to put out a last issue. They just shut us down and padlocked the door.”

As she sits these days in “well-appointed” home (a term she often uses in her columns to describe houses), Gene’s looks and her youngish attire belie her age. She vows to continue writing “until I die” and she continually fields calls from her legion of friends and colleagues. In the Scranton area, Gene’s name evokes recognition from everyone; she is considered a living legend. Few other American women’s page writers can boast of winning so many awards, of playing a central part in pursuing equal rights for newspaperwomen, or of still being in the business for 54 years. Add in her marriages to a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter AND to a famous musician, and Gene Brislin truly is unique.

For, with a lifetime of bylines to her credit, Gene represents the quintessential women’s page reporter who survived the changes of the decades and whose own story makes for good copy.

(Ed. Note: On March 26, in her *Beyond the Society Page* presentation for *Lackawanna Past Times*, Tina Leshar, Ed. D., shares some stories about her experience as a woman working for newspapers in Scranton in the 1960s. See P 14 for a complete list of *Past Times* programs.)

Meet the Author

Tina Leshar is professor emerita at William Paterson of New Jersey, where she served as a professor of journalism and former chairman of the Department of Communication. She is an alumna of Wheeling Jesuit University, from which she received a degree in history. She was awarded her master’s degree from the University of Missouri School of Journalism and a doctorate in English education from Rutgers University.

Dr. Leshar was a 2006-07 Fulbright Scholar to the United Arab Emirates, where her research focused on interviews about changes in the lives of women in that oil-rich country. Her novel, “The Abaya Chronicles,” is a fictionalized account about a UAE family. The book was named winner of the 2011 Best Fiction prize from the National Federation of Press Women.

In 2010 Dr. Leshar was one of a small number of ex-Fulbright Scholars chosen as Fulbright Ambassadors to promote the international program over a two-year period.

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She began her newspaper career as assistant women's editor of The Scranton Tribune, and worked as a copy editor at The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Hartford Courant. As a freelance writer, she has written columns for several papers. She also established a small public relations practice that specialized in promoting nonprofit organizations. Her book, Club '43, published in 2006, focuses on the lives of 12 Westfield, NJ, women, all born in 1943.

Dr. Leshner and her husband, John, reside in Westfield, NJ, and are the parents of three adult children,

LHS 2021 Membership Information

About Membership: Membership privileges include unlimited access to the Society library, 10% discount in our bookstore, advance notice, special discounts and invitations to all Society activities, members-only programs, the quarterly newsletter and the bi-monthly e-newsletter.

Attached is a membership form you can use to renew your membership or give to a friend who is interested in joining. Please return it to:

The Lackawanna Historical Society, 232 Monroe Ave., Scranton, PA 18510.

Lackawanna Historical Society Membership Form

// Student	\$10	Name _____
// Individual	\$35	
// Family	\$45	Address _____
// Contributing	\$75	_____
// Sustaining	\$150	
// Silver Corporate	\$250	Telephone _____
// Gold Corporate	\$500	Email _____

Following is a link to complete for membership payment if you chose to use it.

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSep8tRxXJUut7McTh4g4StczVjC4HRJAXMDE-ztxEDCzLncvA/viewform>

lackawannahistory@gmail.com

Lackawanna Past Times Zoom Meetings Bi-Monthly Presentations, Fridays at 2 pm

March 26: *Beyond the Society Page*: Tina Leshner, Ed. D. shares some stories about her experience as a woman working for newspapers in Scranton in the 1960s.

April 9: *Early Jermyrn*: Former borough Mayor Bruce Smallacombe delves into the early history of Jermyrn.

April 23: *Jefferson Township*: LHS member Ted Baird discusses the history of his hometown

May 7: *An Afternoon with the First Ladies* Local historian Laurence Cooks presents a program about some of his favorite President's wives and their families.

May 21: *Mine Subsidence*: A talk about mine subsidence hosted by Bill Conlogue

For an invitation with program link, please email lackawannahistory@gmail.com

If you miss any of our lectures, or want to see previous programs, videos can be found on our YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/user/lackawannahistory/videos>.

The Catlin House continues to be open by appointment only, Tuesday - Friday, 11 a.m.- 4 p.m. Contact us to schedule a tour of our historic house, an appointment to do research on family genealogy and local history, or a visit to purchase something from our Bookstore.

Genealogy Forum Second Wednesday of the Month at 1 pm via Zoom

Local genealogists are invited to share ideas, research tips, and local resources. Please call or email to register.

April 14: *Navigating through Immigration and Naturalization Records* with Barbara Spellman Shuta and Tom Price

May 12: *Finding Military Records* with Barbara Spellman Shuta and Tom Price

To register, please email lackawannahistory@gmail.com or call 570-344-3841.

Ghostly Gallery Link: <http://www.lackawannahistory.org/ghostlygallery.html>

lackawannahistory@gmail.com

Dine Lackawanna

Dine at these restaurants on the following dates to support the LHS:

April 21: AV Restaurant

June 16: 3 Jacks Burgers

Please continue to support local restaurants by ordering take out or dining in if permitted, especially these Dine Lackawanna venues who have supported LHS.

Abingtons

Chinchilla

Armetta's Restaurant & Pizza, 329 Northern Blvd. 570-586-5492

Clarks Summit

Camelot Restaurant and Inn, 17 Johnson Rd. 570-585-1430

Formosa, 727 S State St. 570-585-1902

State Street Grill, 114 S State St. 570-585-5590

The New Cafe at Greystone Gardens, 829 Old State Rd. 570-319-9111

Up Valley

Carbondale

Kol Steakhouse at Hotel Anthracite, 25 S Main St. 570-536-6020

Eynon

Pasquale's Pizzeria and Family Restaurant, 485 Main St. 570-521-4671

Tiffany's Tap & Grill, 291 Main St. 570-876-0710

Jermyn

JW's Pub & Eatery, Heart Lake Rd. 570-254-9419

Simpson

Frank's Place, 57 Jefferson St. 570-282-0159

Mid Valley

Dickson City

Texas Roundhouse, 1255 Commerce Blvd. 570-383-5358

Jessup

Café Colarusso, 233 Bridge St. 570-489-2456

Scranton

Ale Mary's at the Bittenbender, 126 Franklin Ave. 570-955-0176

AV Restaurant, 320 Penn Ave. 570-457-5800

Back Yard Ale House, 523 Linden St. 570-955-0192

Cafe Classico, 1416 Mulberry St. 570-346-9306

Carmen's 2.0, Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel (Trax Bar/Kitchen) 570-558-3929

Mansour's Market, 969 Prescott Ave. 570-341-6673

Market Street Bar & Grill, 223 W Market St. 570-507-9560

Pizza by Pappas, 303 N Washington Ave. 570-346-2290

lackawannahistory@gmail.com

Posh at the Scranton Club, 404 N Washington Ave. 570-955-5890
Sidel's Restaurant, 1202 N Main Ave. 570-343-6544
Stirna's Restaurant, 120 W Market St. 570-343-5742

Downvalley

Moosic

Harvest Seasonal Bar and Grill at Montage, 7011 Shoppes Blvd. 570-342-3330

Old Forge

Dooley's Pub & Eatery, 120 Oak St. 570-457-7922

Dunmore/North Pocono

Dunmore

3 Jacks Burger Bar, 233 E Drinker St. 570-955-5137

La Cucina, 600 S Blakely St. 570-341-8747

Spring Brook

Olde Brook Inn, 1035 PA-307 570-843-6548

In The Mines

The Daily Diaries of Thomas J. Gobllick Anthracite Coal Mine Motorman

By Carl Orechovsky

Thomas J. Gobllick worked in the mines as a motorman. A motorman operates an electric or battery-powered mine motorcar to haul trips (trains) of cars, loaded with timbers, rails, explosives and other supplies, into a mine.

Mr. Gobllick lived in the Austin Heights section of Old Forge. A friend was removing items from Mr. Gobllick's house and came upon his work diaries that cover six years, extending from 1938 to 1944. The owner of the house didn't want the diaries.

As one who documents Old Forge history, I accepted the diaries that are smaller sized, spiral bound notebooks. After enlarging the notebooks through scanning, they were re-typed. The correct spellings of names included in the entries can now be confirmed by descendants of the miners who live in Austin Heights.

The enlargements were assembled into standard sized notebooks. The originals and standard sized notebooks were subsequently donated to the Old Forge Historical Society. Most entries pertain to Old Forge and I have permission to share the contents.

In this issue, we begin with the first three months of 1940.

January 1940

Russell Mining Co. Old Forge, 1940: Kelmars Road. Gordon Patterson Fire Boss.

January 1. Colliery Idle. New Year's Day. Cold.

January 2. Cold. Very bad road up the shaft.

January 3. Joe Solvader sick 229.

January 4. Joe Solvader sick 229. Big Hellen Movies, Nellie.

January 5. Joe Solvader sick 229.

January 6. 1 place done. Russian Christmas Eve.

January 7. Sunday. Russian Christmas.

January 8. Jerry and Shrik loaded 7 cars coal.

January 9. Ruined motor in mud run. Pouil smashed ear.

January 10. Pulled coal from e places on hill.

January 11. 500 feet of new cable.

January 12. Warm.

January 13. Fair nighty at work.

January 14. Sunday.

January 15. Pay Day, Very cold morning. 84 hrs, \$65.52.

January 16. Below Zero. Road broke at 260.

January 17. Very cold. Short of cars.

January 18. Snowing, short of cars.

January 19 - 20. Very cold, short of cars.

January 21. Sunday.

January 22. Heavy frost, 4 places short of cars.

January 23. Anni Romanchich visited from N.Y.

January 24. Cold, snowing.

January 25. Cold.

January 26. Below zero.

January 27. Joe Stefanko left leg broke, 229 lad.

January 28. Sunday. Took pa to work. Brought bay bug.

January 29. Short of cars.

January 30. Frosty morning, plenty of cars.

January 31. Colliery idle. Pay Day. 91 hrs. \$136.50 \$70.98

February 1940

Russell Mining Co. Old Forge, 1940: Kelmars Road.

February 1. Sore eye.

February 2. Shaft Road finished.

February 3 Sore eye. George Barmus died.

February 4. Sunday.

February 5. John Bermas started as Motorman in mud run.

February 6. Rain.

February 7. Colliery Idle. Started to dig for water.

February 8. Colliery Idle. Digging for water.

February 9. Digging for water.

February 10. Colliery Idle. Rain, lightning and thundering.

February 11. Sunday. Car timed and fixed.

February 12. Removed coal from 3 places.

February 13. (NA)

February 14. Stayed home.

February 15. Colliery Idle. Pay Day. 42 hrs. \$169.26

February 16. Colliery Idle. Snow drifts.

February 17. Herbie started mining on my road.

February 18. Sunday.

February 19. Ted Tansley on engine outside.

February 20. Chilly morning.

February 21. Colliery Idle.

February 22. Washington's Birthday.

February 23. 28 cars of coal from Kelmars.
February 24. Colliery Idle. Snowing.
February 25. Sunday.
February 26. Short of empties.
February 27. Plenty of cars.
February 28. Colliery Idle. Warmer.
February 29. Colliery Idle. Pay Day. 49 hrs. \$38.22.

March 1940

Russell Mining Co. Old Forge, 1940: Kelmars Road.

March 1. Snowing.
March 2. Colliery Idle.
March 3. Sunday. Rain.
March 4. Snowing, short of cars.
March 5. Snowing, plenty of cars.
March 6. Steve Lozinski bruised in back of head.
March 7. Finkley in Harry Houston's place.
March 8 - 9. Colliery Idle.
March 10. Sunday.
March 11. F. Cichy loaded 3 coal with Sandy.
March 12. Plenty of cars.
March 13. Colliery Idle.
March 14. Colliery Idle. Rain.
March 15. 228 Cobb ok. 249 2 timbers. 63 hrs. \$49.14
March 16. Colliery Idle.
March 17. Sunday.
March 18. Plenty of cars.
March 19 - 20. Colliery Idle.

March 21. Bad squeeze by Jacks place.
March 22 - 23. Colliery Idle.
March 24. Easter Sunday.
March 25. Easter Monday.
March 26. Heavy snow. Short of cars.
March. 27 – 28 - 29. Plenty of cars, full of coal.
March 30. Pay day. Colliery Idle. 49hrs. \$38.22.
March 31. Sunday. Flood in Wilkes Barre.

Notes

March 31: Flood in Wilkes-Barre- Flooding extended for 200 miles from New York State to southern Pennsylvania and continued into April 2. The Susquehanna River at Wilkes-Barre crested at 31.6 feet. Hardest hit were Wilkes-Barre, Kingston, Plymouth and Sunbury. The center of the bridge connecting to Plymouth was swept away by the 15 mph current. Most of Plymouth was under water, including the home of Gov. Arthur H. James.

Pay Rate- Over the first three months of 1940, Mr. Goblick's hourly pay rate was \$0.78. Adjusted for an annual inflation of 3.68% for the period, his 2021 hourly pay rate is \$14.51. A few hourly amounts varied. Those amount may vary with either the overtime worked or company incentives.

Mining Terms

Squeeze- A squeeze, weight or pinching was settling of the strata over a worked out area, resulting in lowering of the roof. A squeeze also pertains to the ribs (side walls) which can push out into the gangway or chamber with explosive force.

Carl Orechovsky, in addition to being treasurer of the Old Forge Historical Society, scans information for the Society's archives and conducted video interviews for the "Old Forge, Our Town Project".

During the winter season, Mr. Orechovsky works with the No. 9 Coal Mine Tour in Landsford, PA as a track man.

Remembering Pancoast April 7, 1911

The Pancoast Mine, also known as Price-Pancoast, was Northeast Pennsylvania's third major anthracite mining disaster in terms of lives lost (1911; 74 dead) that took its place with Avondale (1869; 110 dead) and Baltimore Tunnel (1919; 92 dead).

Located in Throop, operations began in 1881. The majority of the Pancoast miners were immigrants, mostly from Hungary and Poland. The operation was served mainly by the New York, Ontario & Western Railway and the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad, and to a lesser degree by the Delaware & Hudson Railway.

The fire began around 8:30 am on April 7 in the mine's engine house that was not constructed of non-combustible materials, but of wood supported by a flooring made of yellow pine plank. The fire was initially considered to be a nuisance and it wasn't until two hours later that the men were told to evacuate. It was too late.



**Pancoast Breaker
John Stellwagen Collection
Photo courtesy of Frank P. Adams**

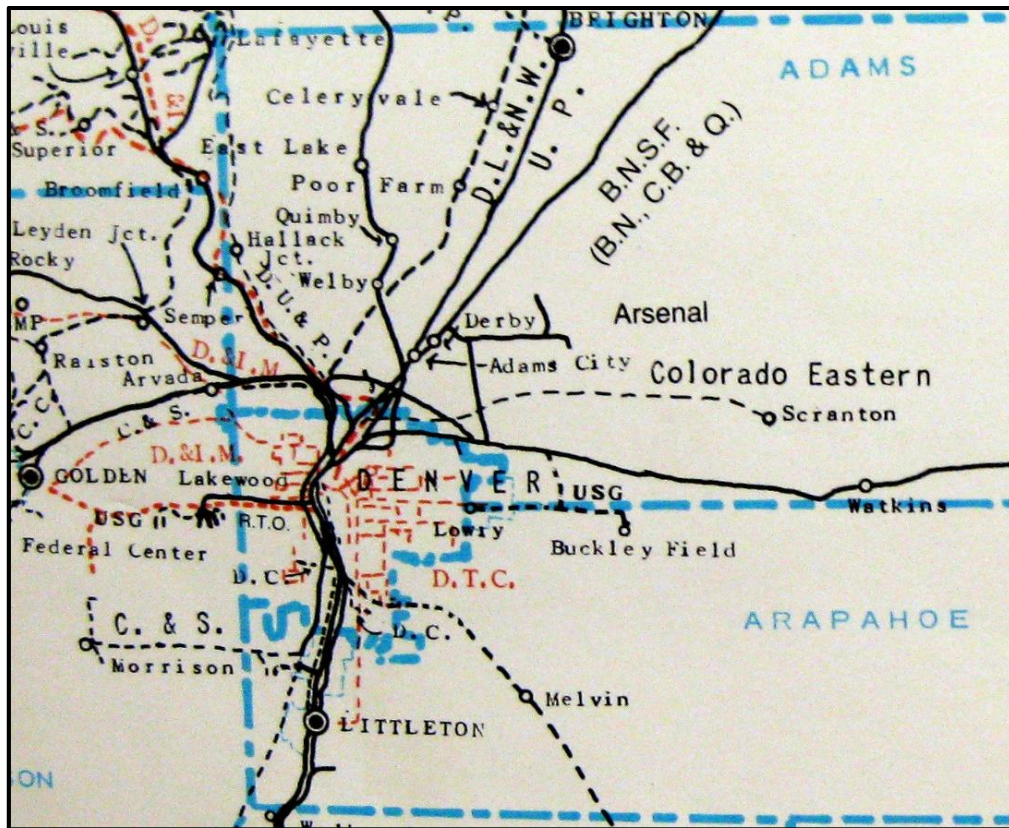
According to newspaper reports, one can only imagine the cries of 5,000 family members and friends crowded along the security ropes as the men's bodies were brought to the surface. Church bells rang for days as all 74, including two non-mine workers, were laid to rest.

A visual remembrance of Pancoast is a Commonwealth road sign, located on Olyphant Avenue near Sanderson Street, not far from the mine site. Although it was one of the region's smaller operations, Pancoast takes its place in Northeast Pennsylvania's anthracite legacy. Those who worked Pancoast and those who lost loved ones and friends are recognized as all are remembered in 2021.

What's in a Name?

By Frank Adams

It's a sunny summer's day in 1886 along Colorado's Front Range as the former Denver and Rio Grande locomotive, Ute, now proudly sporting the number 6, pulls into the Omaha and Grant smelter in Globeville¹. The locomotive has traveled 17 miles with the first shipment of bituminous coal² by the Colorado Eastern Railroad³ from its mine at Scranton. Daily (except on Sunday) shipments would continue for only two years because the large gold and silver smelter grew tired of having to mix the Scranton coal with straw just to get it to burn. After the loss of their only customer, the Colorado Eastern would continue to operate the train for a while for passenger and mail service before the company changed its name and successfully turned to land speculation.



¹ Today a neighborhood in north Denver.

² The coal was most likely not Bituminous but Lignite, often referred to as brown coal. It is considered the lowest rank of coal due to its relatively low heat content.

³ For more information on what the New York Times called in 1902 the "Most Remarkable Railroad in America" please see *Narrow Gauge East from Denver: The Colorado Eastern Railroad* by P. R. Griswold and John C. Newell Pruett Publishing Co, Boulder (1982)

Scranton, Colorado, today buried under the sprawling Denver International Airport complex, had a post office during the few years the coal mine was in operation, but the town was never platted or incorporated. "Scranton" is a family name, the city in Northeastern Pennsylvania famous for anthracite coal mining having been named for the brothers Selden T. and George W. Scranton in 1856. As a native of Scranton, PA, the author was curious why (other than the obvious coal mining connection) that name was chosen for this short-lived Colorado patch town.

Most residents agree that the author's boyhood home, Moscow, PA was named for the capital city of Russia. In 1851, Leander L. Griffin opened the first general store in Moscow. On a trip to Philadelphia to buy merchandise, when Griffin was asked for his address for the delivery, he replied that his business was at a crossroads on the Philadelphia and Great Bend Turnpike, but the settlement did not have a name. The clerk suggested he ask his postmaster. Griffin replied that he was the postmaster. The clerk said well then, it's up to you to call the place something and quickly offered a suggestion. Why not name it after the city with that great bell? The clerk was referring to Moscow, Russia, where the largest bell ever cast, the 200-ton "Tsar Bell," had just been recovered and placed on display. While the bell was cooling from its 1737 casting, a fire broke out in the Kremlin. Cold water intended to douse the fire cracked the bell causing a 12-ton piece to fall off. Then when the supporting scaffolding burned, the entire bell fell back down into the casting pit where it would remain for 99 years. Napoleon Bonaparte, during his occupation of Moscow in 1812, considered taking it as a trophy, but his men were unable get it out of the hole. The broken bell is still on display at the Kremlin. Old timers believe that on Judgment Day, it will be miraculously repaired and lifted up to heaven, where it will ring the blagovest (Russian Orthodox call to prayer).

Strange as it may sound, digging the world's largest bell out of a hole in the ground was big news and naming your town was one way of participating in the excitement. In fact, Smith Falls, Vermont, changed its name to Moscow in honor of the event. Twenty years later in 1871, a native of Moscow, PA, Samuel Neff moved west and having become the settlements first postmaster settled a dispute by naming the place after his hometown. Today, Neff's Moscow is home to the University of Idaho.

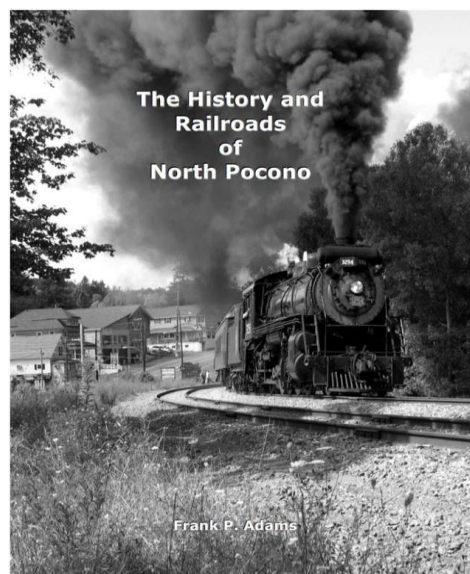
Could something similar be responsible for Scranton, Colorado? Fortunately for research, the Colorado Eastern Railroad was involved in a number of legal proceedings. Legal records are notoriously long lived. The author is reminded of eavesdropping on a conversation between the archivist and a visitor while reviewing material at the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg. A woman was researching her family genealogy and mentioned that an uncle had once been incarcerated at the Eastern State Penitentiary. The archivist said, "That's great!" and the lady quickly replied that the family didn't exactly share his sentiment. The archivist went on to explain that if you do nothing in your life there's few written records to find, but once you're involved in a legal proceeding that "permanent record" your teachers threatened lives forever! One name in an 1890 lawsuit between the Colorado Eastern and the Union Pacific over crossing the former Denver Pacific route out of Denver caught the author's eye. That name was Mattes.

Philip V. Mattes was a Scranton, PA attorney famous for advocating for the rights of surface landowners against mine subsidence induced by the coal companies. Fifty years earlier, Philip's uncle Edward C. Mattes had been instrumental in saving the Mayor of Scranton from a violent mob of striking coal miners. The Scranton general strike was a widespread work stoppage in 1877, which took place as part of the Great Railroad Strike. The strike began in late July when railroad workers walked off the job in protest of recent wage cuts, and within three days it grew to include perhaps thousands of workers from a variety of industries. Violence erupted on August 1 after a mob attacked the town's mayor, and then clashed with local militia, leaving four dead and many more wounded. State and federal troops were called and imposed martial law.

When Edward Mattes contracted tuberculosis later that year, he moved to Pueblo, Colorado where the abundant sunlight and dry high plains air helped him to recover. In addition to owning 160 acres of land that would later become part of Fort Carson during World War 2, Edward Mattes name appears as a Colorado Eastern corporate officer on that 1890 lawsuit. The savior of the Mayor of Scranton, PA was involved with the Scranton, CO coal mine!

So, as in the case of Samuel Neff in Moscow, Idaho, was Edward Mattes responsible for naming the unsuccessful coal mine in Colorado after his hometown of Scranton, PA? While no one may ever know for certain, this is just one of the thousands of stories from the Pennsylvania anthracite coal mining era. To facilitate research and historical storytelling such as this, in 2010 the author, with help from *History Bytes* editor Rick Sedlisky, established a website covering the northern most of the three major anthracite coal fields in Pennsylvania. www.northernfield.info is available free of charge to any interested researcher.

Frank Adams is a Scranton native who now resides in Colorado Springs, CO. He is the author of "The History and Railroads of North Pocono", which is available from the Lackawanna & Wyoming Valley RHS at lwvrhs.org



From Coal Miner to Cornhusker: Scranton Irish on the Nebraska Prairie

By Willis M. Conover
Professor Emeritus of History
The University of Scranton



O'Neill, NE Welcome Sign
Photo courtesy of Willis M. Conover

The small town of O'Neill greets travelers along U. S. Route 20 in northern Nebraska with a sign welcoming them to "Nebraska's Irish Capital." Right now, the townsfolk are preparing for their annual St. Patrick's Day celebration which includes a parade and a routine by Irish step dancers on a huge shamrock painted on the street at the center of town.

The community's nearly 4,000 residents (about 20% claiming Irish ancestry) welcome thousands of visitors who show up for the fun, and to be Irish for the four-day event. (Sound familiar?)

Why would readers in Northeast Pennsylvania be interested in what happens 1,300 miles away on this part of the Great Plains on March 17, especially when Scranton's St. Patrick's Day production surpasses most other Irish-wanna-be communities except New York or Boston (in any normal year)?

The answer? O'Neill and Scranton are linked in history from events that took place a century and a half ago.

O'Neill claims its Irish connection from settlers who homesteaded in the Elkhorn River Valley in the 1870s, many of whom were Irish immigrants. And the Scranton connection was forged because many of those Irish arrived in Northern Nebraska after living for a time in Northeast Pennsylvania where they had found work in the area's mines and mills upon arriving in America.

But what induced them to leave the Lackawanna and Wyoming Valleys and head west? The main proponent of such a move was a fellow Irish immigrant, John O'Neill. (And you now know the origin of the name of the town that is officially Nebraska's Irish Capital).

O'Neill (1834-1878) emigrated from County Monaghan in 1848. After nine years of working at a variety of unsatisfying jobs in a number of East Coast cities, O'Neill joined the U.S. Cavalry and fought in the so-called "Mormon War" in Utah Territory in 1857. Unhappy with the conduct of that conflict, he deserted and went to San Francisco where he felt kinship with many of the Irish who had settled there during the Gold Rush period. In 1861, he reenlisted in the U.S. Army and saw action in several Civil War battles, mainly in the Confederate South. Although he was cited for bravery, injuries forced him to leave the service.



John O'Neill
Photo courtesy of
Willis M. Conover

O'Neill then turned to his great passion: Irish freedom from British rule. After settling in Nashville in 1864 he joined the Fenian movement and schemed to lead an Irish American army in an invasion of British Canada. Not surprisingly, the 1866 attacks failed when the Fenian forces retreated because of the lack of support from the U.S. government. Two more unsuccessful attacks in 1870-71 ended the effort.

O'Neill then turned his attention to a second passion, resettlement of Irish immigrant families from Eastern cities to the Great Plains. After determining that northern Nebraska would be an ideal place to establish an Irish colony, he prepared detailed pamphlets and toured the East, delivering over 100 lectures to Irish working class folks, urging them to look to the American West that promised them land and a home of their own, and an escape from the economic hardships of the mines and shops. His speaking tour brought him to Scranton and other Northeast Pennsylvania communities multiple times in the 1870s where he won converts at a time of economic downturn in the mines. Local newspapers covered his lectures.

According to a history of O'Neill's founding and naming, "General" O'Neill was the first settler along the Elkhorn River in the area where he planned to organized the Irish colony. The original town site of O'Neill was platted in May 1874 with an addition in

1875 by O'Neill "who brought a colony of Irishmen from Scranton, Pennsylvania." This unconstructed and uninhabited town was named in his honor. Eventually it would thrive and become the seat of the newly-formed Holt County.

More colonists arrived in 1875 and 1876, mostly men and a few families. And the General traveled back East to continue his lectures. In January 1877 the *Scranton Weekly Republican* noted that O'Neill's "interests in Irish colonization to the West have been singularly successful," reporting that 100 families had pledged to follow him to Nebraska. In the same month, O'Neill spoke to large audiences at Carbondale, Archbald, Olyphant, and Dunmore, and followed up with talks at Wilkes-Barre, Pittston, Mill Creek, Miners, Parsons, and Providence as he gained more press attention, and presumably more homesteaders, eager to take advantage of the 160 acres available through the Homestead Act or to purchase lands held by the railroads.

But many listeners were skeptical, especially after hearing stories of Indian problems, drought, crop-eating grasshoppers, and treeless plains. But O'Neill pressed on and provided letters and confirmations from contented settlers who voiced satisfaction at having broken away from their miserable conditions in the Eastern cities. Support also came from the Catholic Church leadership in Nebraska. As *The Luzerne Union* (Wilkes-Barre) noted, O'Neill told crowds that "They must become farmers and their own employers to become independent and prosperous." He asserted that the Irish were "at the mercy of capitalists and panics. They must go out upon the broad acres and be free." By the spring of 1877, newspapers were reporting that 500-600 families would be leaving with O'Neill (likely not just from the Scranton area).

Later reports scaled down the numbers of emigrants from Northeast Pennsylvania, and Scranton specifically. One news story confirmed a migration led by O'Neill in 1877 included 54 colonists from Scranton, Carbondale, Pittston, Jermy, and Minooka. This group received a big send-off. A crowd estimated at 5,000 gathered at the Lackawanna Station to bid them farewell. There was a dinner at St. Charles Hotel on Penn Avenue before the train pulled out. The procession to the station was led by the Providence Band. A second group, which left later, included several Dunmoreans, one of whom was Tim Biglin who would become a mayor of O'Neill. (O. F. Biglin, records show, opened a mortuary in O'Neill and would serve as mayor three times in the late 1890s and early 1900s.).

General O'Neill died in Omaha in January 1878, ending the passion to which he gave so much energy. Most Nebraska papers praised his efforts, not doubting his sincerity in helping his fellow Irish immigrants. His town grew and his name and legacy continue.



A Street in O'Neill, NE
Photo courtesy of Willis M. Conover

Confirmation of the personal decisions made by hundreds of people rests in land records and in obituaries published in local newspapers in the Holt County region. There are no solid figures to confirm the scale of success of O'Neill's plans. Undoubtedly some homesteaders arrived without any contact with him. As for the number of Irish from Northeast Pennsylvania making the move, again, there are no exact figures. Likely there were hundreds given the evidence remaining. Further research could refine any estimates. Anecdotal evidence of the colonies can be cited from the Nebraska Genealogy Project collection of obituaries of Holt County pioneer families that feature many Irish surnames and references to birthplaces in Scranton and other Northeast Pennsylvania communities. Thus, there is a link between O'Neill and Scranton forged particularly in the late 1870s and beyond when perhaps hundreds made the move from mines to homesteads, with some looking to start businesses in the new towns.

A review of the lives of some of those pioneers from Pennsylvania to Nebraska gives a human face to the linkage (and their surnames look like they were drawn from the lists of Scranton Irish attending the annual Friendly Sons or Society of Irish Women events).

Some examples of these pioneers provide the human connections:

Michael Flannery (1869-1942) was born in Scranton to Irish immigrants John and Bridget Casey Flannery. In 1876 the Flannery family headed west to Holt County. Their first home was a "soddie" (sod house). In 1893 Michael took part in the great Cherokee Strip land rush in Oklahoma Territory but failed to stake a claim. He returned to Holt and married, raised a family with his wife, Margaret Torpy Flannery, and worked a farm on the Elkhorn River until 1941.

James Francis O'Connor (1874-1956), born in Scranton, was the son of Charles and Mary Phillips O'Connor who traveled to Holt County in a covered wagon. It was 1877 when they homesteaded on land just west of O'Neill, near Emmet. James returned to his hometown as a young man and spent five years as a streetcar operator in Scranton, and later held similar positions in Butte, Montana and Salt Lake City.

Returning to Emmet in 1912, James opened a pool hall, then a barber shop and a tavern by 1936. Not all Scranton Irish took to farming.

Mary Loretta Wynn McNichols (1866-1923), born in Scranton, came to Nebraska in 1878 with her parents James and Bridget Jennings Wynn (or Winne) who had emigrated from County Sligo. They settled in western Holt County, near Atkinson. In 1886 Mary married John Patrick McNichols (1857-1930) who was a Holt County farmer. Together they raised seven children. At her death in 1923, the local newspaper described her: "Of a quiet and unassuming nature, gentle and kindly in manner, always faithful to home and church."

James Malloy (1873-1940), was born in Scranton, one of six children of Irish immigrants James and Margaret McNally Malloy. In 1879 the family arrived in Holt County, setting up a farm southwest of O'Neill. The elder James had been a school teacher in Scranton before their departure. Sadly, just four years after moving on to the farm, James, Sr. died. As reported in a local newspaper, he "froze to death in a blizzard while on his way home from a trading trip to O'Neill." James, Jr., only 10, now had to help his widowed mother provide for the family, numbering seven. Ironically, the funeral of James, Jr. was delayed for two days in 1940 because of a severe blizzard at Atkinson.

Patrick P. Barrett (1841-1932) was born in County Mayo. When he was 18, his family came to America, first settling in Boston. They then found their way to Wilkes-Barre. In 1872 Patrick married Anna Finnegan. Two children were born as they made their life in Northeast Pennsylvania. In 1877, after hearing General O'Neill's call, the family decided to go west, although they had no farming experience. In 1877 they arrived in western Holt County and set to the hard work of providing for a growing family (eventually reaching 8 children). Living in a trapper's log shanty, they first invested in a churn and some cows. When Patrick died in 1932, he still owned their original homestead.

Bridget O'Malley Menish (1849-1948). Born in Carbondale to Irish immigrants, she married William Menish (1836-1907) from New Jersey. In 1878 the couple, with four small children, came to the O'Neill area to take up a homestead. Eventually there would be six children on the farm. In her later years, "Grandma" Menish, as she was affectionately known, lived with a widowed son. She shared stories from her youth, including the excitement of seeing Abraham Lincoln walking into the old Wyoming Hotel in Scranton when he was campaigning for the presidency. At 99, Mrs. Menish died from exposure when she wandered into the freezing night in December 1948. She and her husband were buried in O'Neill. (The current mayor of O'Neill is Scott Menish.)

Mayme O'Connor (1873-1929) moved to Holt County in 1880 with her parents, Patrick and Mary O'Connor who lived in Scranton, where Mayme was born. The family lived on a farm west of Atkinson. After high school in O'Neill, Mayme taught in a rural school house on the prairie seven miles southwest of Atkinson. She met Gilbert Davis and they were married in 1896 and went to homesteading. They raised nine children on the farm.

Mary Grace Duffy Greig (1876-1964) was born to Joseph J. and Mary Tighe Duffy at Scranton. When she was two years old she moved with the family to Holt County where they lived for a time in a sod house. When Mary Grace was 24, she married Charles Greig and moved to a farm they homesteaded together, eventually welcoming two daughters to the family.

Martin Farrell (1846-1900) was born in Ireland but resided most of his life in Scranton, best known for his draying business. According to a notation in *The Scranton Republican* at his death in 1900, he had

come to the city when he was a boy and lived there continuously “with the exception of twelve years that he spent at O’Neill City, Nebraska.” Here is an example of one of General O’Neill’s converts who, it appears, gave up life on the prairie and returned to a more familiar environment.

Afterthoughts

Some readers might wonder if the naming of the Nebraska section of Archbald has a connection to the O’Neill story. The link is not clear, with some sources suggesting the neighborhood got its name because a large number of Irish lived there before going west. Others contend that the section is where returning Scrantonians settled after failing to find the General’s promises fulfilled. Either way, there appears to be a connection. O’Neill city streets include Adams, Harrison, Jefferson, Clay, Cedar, Birch and Ash, but also Kildare, Mayo, Donegal, Tipperary, and Londonderry. Construction of St. Patrick’s Catholic Church, on East Benton Street, was completed in 1877.

The City of O’Neill not only has what it claims is the largest shamrock in the world painted on the street in the center of town, but also a 5-foot version of a Blarney Stone.

Soon O’Neill will practice fulfilling its official designation. The city’s 2021 St. Patrick’s Day events will take place on March 17-20. Most activities in 2020 were canceled.



O’Neill, NE Shamrock
Photo courtesy of Willis M. Conover

NEPA Notables

The list of Northeast Pennsylvania Notables continues to grow with the addition of 10 personalities who became famous for contributions to American culture. Our thanks to Mike Chmiola for the following:

Edie Adams (Kingston) - Comedienne, actress, singer, businesswoman. Born Edith Elizabeth Enke, Adams was well known for her impersonations of sexy stars on stage and television, especially Marilyn Monroe. She was also a Tony Award winner and an Emmy Award nominee. Adams was a frequent guest on her husband's (Ernie Kovacs) television program.

Nick Adams (Nanticoke) – Actor. Adams was born Nicholas Aloysius Adamshock. He was a movie and television actor, as well as a screenwriter. He appeared in a number of Hollywood films and had the starring role in the 1959 ABC television series, *The Rebel*.

Lillian Cahn (Wilkes-Barre) – Inventor. She was an inventor and the founder of the women's *Coach* Handbags. Cahn developed the iconic handbag line from the design of a paper bag she used to deliver noodles from her parents' store that was located near the Stegmaier Brewery in Wilkes-Barre. Her husband produced the bags at his leather business in New York City.

Stanley J. Dudrick (Nanticoke) – Researcher. Dr. Dudrick's research of hospital nutrition resulted in the development of parenteral nutrition (TPN). His invention, better known as the feeding tube, helped save millions of malnourished and critically ill patients, including starving infants and adults who are unable to eat normally after undergoing major surgeries.

Pete Gray (Nanticoke) – Major league baseball player. Born Peter James Wyshner, Gray was known in baseball as the "One arm wonder", having lost his right arm in a childhood accident. He played with the St. Louis Browns as an outfielder.

Mickey Haslin (Wilkes-Barre) – Major league baseball player. He was born Michael Joseph Hazlinsky and was a Jewish ball player whose career spanned 13 seasons. He began as a shortstop with the Philadelphia Phillies and subsequently played with the Boston Bees and New York Giants. He played in baseball's first night game that was held at Crosley Field, Cincinnati, OH.

Marion Lorne (West Pittston) – Stage, film and television actress. Born Marion McDougal (or MacDougall), her theatre career was in New York City and London. Her first film was in 1951. She mainly played smaller roles in movies and on television, and is probably best known as Aunt Clara on television's 1960s *Bewitched* series.

Rose O'Neill (Wilkes-Barre) – Cartoonist, artist, illustrator, writer. O'Neill had a successful career as a magazine and book illustrator that began in New York City at age 15. At a time, she was the highest-paid female illustrator in the world. Her *Kewpie* cartoons, which appeared in a 1909 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, paved the way for

the creation of the *Kewpie Doll*. The doll made its debut in 1912 and is considered to be one of the first mass-marketed toys in the United States. It brought O'Neill a fortune, as well as international recognition. She also wrote novels and books of poetry and was involved in the women's suffrage movement. O'Neill was inducted into the *National Women's Hall of Fame*.

Amedeo Obici (Scranton; Wilkes-Barre) – Founder of Planters Peanuts. Obici was an Italian immigrant who operated an eatery in downtown Wilkes-Barre that served oyster stew and roasted peanuts. He partnered with Mario Peruzzi and in 1908 incorporated Planters Peanut and Chocolate Company. Obici's new method of skinning and blanching peanuts was a success and the rest is, as they say, peanut history.

Olga Treskoff aka Trocki, Trotsky, Treskonva (Glen Lyon) – Broadway actress. The actress and her boyfriend/business partner, Russell Janney, co-produced a number of plays on Broadway and in London. Following Treskoff's death from cancer in 1938, Janney wrote a fictional book in her memory entitled, *The Miracle of the Bells*. The story was turned into an RKO movie that was partially filmed in Glen Lyon. It was released in 1948 to mediocre reviews. The film became successful in the mid-1950s when it was aired on television in southern California during the Christmas season.

If you know of any Northeast Pennsylvania notables not included on our list, please contact us at lackawannahistory@gmail.com and place **Notables** in the subject matter. Their names will be included in the next issue of History Bytes.

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March 2021 marks four years since the first issue of History Bytes was published. A sincere *Thank You* to all who research and write articles, offer suggestions for stories, write expanded stand-alone pieces for special editions, submit photographs, and write books about our region. Your contributions are greatly appreciated.

History Bytes continues to offer a look at our past, as well as a look at Lackawanna and Northeast Pennsylvania in the 21st Century. Who are we now? How do we embrace those who came before us and those who are newly arrived?

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If you have any Northeast Pennsylvania-related stories to include in History Bytes, please contact the Society at the above email address. Please include your name, email address and a brief description of your story.

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- [Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority](#)
- [Steamtown National Historic Site](#)
- [Anthracite Museum and Iron Furnaces](#)
- [Electric City Trolley Museum](#)
- [Lackawanna Coal Mine Tour](#)
- G.A.R. Memorial Association Museum: Contact Joseph Long, Jr. 570-457-8438

Cultural Partners

- [Albright Memorial Library](#) and the Lackawanna County Library System
- [The Everhart Museum](#)
- [Scranton Cultural Center](#) at the Masonic Temple
- Scranton's Annual [Civil War Weekend](#) Events
- Scranton Times-Tribune's [Pages from the Past](#)
- [Pocono Arts: Where Culture Builds Community](#)

Anthracite Research

- [Pennsylvania's Northern Anthracite Coal Field](http://www.northernfield.info/) <http://www.northernfield.info/>

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The Lackawanna Historical Society 2021

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The Lackawanna Historical Society is a 501 (C) (3) non-profit organization, which is dedicated to keeping vital the history of Lackawanna County. The society is supported in part by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the Catlin House Memorial Trust, Lackawanna County and membership dues.