



Winter 1996

## Pennsylvania Folklife Vol. 45, No. 2

Thomas E. Gallagher Jr.  
*Ursinus College*

Robert Troy Boyer


Amos Long Jr.

Christine M. Mueseler

Catherine Anne Jacobs

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pafolklifemag>

 Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), [American Material Culture Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), [Genealogy Commons](#), [German Language and Literature Commons](#), [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

**Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

### Recommended Citation

Gallagher, Thomas E. Jr.; Boyer, Robert Troy; Long, Amos Jr.; Mueseler, Christine M.; Jacobs, Catherine Anne; and Freund, Hugo A., "Pennsylvania Folklife Vol. 45, No. 2" (1996). *Pennsylvania Folklife Magazine*. 146.  
<https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pafolklifemag/146>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Pennsylvania Folklife Society Collection at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pennsylvania Folklife Magazine by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact [aprock@ursinus.edu](mailto:aprock@ursinus.edu).

---

**Authors**

Thomas E. Gallagher Jr., Robert Troy Boyer, Amos Long Jr., Christine M. Mueseler, Catherine Anne Jacobs, and Hugo A. Freund

Winter

# PENNSYLVANIA FOLKLIFE

1995-96



**OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE**



# Contributors

ROBERT TROY BOYER, an archivist, received his B.A. in English from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and his M.A. from the University of Virginia. He and his wife, Candace, live and work at Montpelier, the 272-year-old Virginia plantation community that was home to James Madison, fourth president of the United States. A native of Lancaster County, he is proud of his Pennsylvania German ancestors, including his grandfather, G. Atlee Crouse.

HUGO A. FREUND, who received his Ph.D. in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania in 1991, is currently a full-time instructor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at West Chester University. His research interests include festivity and celebration, the American holiday of Thanksgiving, food and society, the family, material culture and folk chairs, the history of the anthropological discipline, and the African American experience.

THOMAS E. GALLAGHER, who received his Ph.D. in anthropology from Temple University, is editor of *Pennsylvania Folklife* and assistant professor of anthropology at Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pa. He has been engaged in fieldwork among the Amish since 1976, and has worked both in the Lancaster County, Pa., and Dover, Delaware, Amish communities.

CATHERINE ANNE JACOBS, a graduate of the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture and recipient of a B.A. in American Studies from Bryn Mawr College, was coordinator for the Urban Crafts Survey at the Folklife Center of the International House of Philadelphia. As a freelance folklorist she has worked with the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies to conduct research and documentation about Hmong and Amish quilters in Lancaster County, Pa., as well as with a National Park Service team to develop guidelines for the identification of cultural criteria for the nomination of byways in the National Scenic Byways Program. Recently she was the folklife specialist for a year-long Folklife Resources Survey of the Lackawanna Valley, final reports and project documentation from which are available through the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority (717/876-6188).

AMOS W. LONG, JR., a retired teacher and farmer who holds degrees from Lebanon Valley College and Temple University, is a tenth-generation Pennsylvania German who speaks the dialect and who has studied German culture and farmsteads in the Palatinate. Author of *The Pennsylvania German Family Farm* and *Farmsteads and Their Buildings*, he is a longtime contributor to *Pennsylvania Folklife*; the article in this issue was adapted from a lecture given at the Museum of American Frontier Culture in Staunton, Virginia, in early 1994.

CHRISTINE M. MUESELER is director of the Folklife Documentation Center for Gender Studies at Seton Hill College, one of five centers located in the nine-county region of Southwestern Pennsylvania, all of which are funded by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission. With oral history projects and ethnographic work, the centers document, preserve, and interpret the experiences and contributions of the people of the region in relation to the industrial heritage. The Gender Studies Center, whose task has been to raise the representation of women in the project, produces public programming in the form of lectures, discussions, films, and exhibits for the education, enjoyment, and enrichment of present and future generations.



Winter 1995-96

# PENNSYLVANIA FOLKLIFE

EDITOR:

Thomas E. Gallagher, Jr.

MANAGING EDITOR:

Nancy K. Gaugler

EDITORIAL ADVISORS:

Simon J. Bronner	Hilda Adam Krings
Earl C. Haag	Monica Mutzbauer
David J. Hufford	John W. Roberts
Terry G. Jordan	Evan Snyder
Susan Kalčík	Kenneth Thigpen
Donald B. Kraybill	Don Yoder

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

Nancy K. Gaugler

PENNSYLVANIA FOLKLIFE,

Winter 1995-96, Vol. 45, No. 2,  
published three times a year by  
Pennsylvania Folklife Society, Inc.,  
P.O. Box 92, Collegeville, Pa.  
19426. \$5.00 for single copies,  
Autumn, Winter & Spring. Yearly  
subscription \$15.00. Back issues  
(v. 21-41), \$5.00 each; other prices  
on request.

MSS AND PHOTOGRAPHS:

The Editor will be glad to consider  
MSS and photographs sent with a  
view to publication. When unsuit-  
able, and if accompanied by return  
postage, care will be taken for their  
return, although no responsibility for  
their safety is assumed.

Editorial correspondence:

Nancy K. Gaugler  
P.O. BOX 92,  
Collegeville, Pennsylvania 19426

Subscription, business correspondence:

P.O. BOX 92,  
Collegeville, Pennsylvania 19426

Folk Festival correspondence:

Festival Associates  
461 Vine Lane  
Kutztown, PA 19530  
Phone: 610/ 683-8707

Copyright 1996

Entered as third class matter at Collegeville, PA.

ISSN 0031-4498

WINTER 1995-96, VOL. 45, NO. 2

## CONTENTS

- 50 Occupational Folklife  
THOMAS E. GALLAGHER
- 54 A Fine-Tooth Comb: Atlee Crouse  
Carries on a Family Tradition  
R. TROY BOYER
- 64 "Lime and Manure": Agricultural  
Practices Among the Pennsylvania Germans  
AMOS W. LONG, JR.
- 73 Alcoa, New Kensington: "It Was More Than  
a Job . . . It Was a Way of Life"  
CHRISTINE M. MUESELER
- 83 Women's Work: Textile Manufacturing  
in the Lackawanna Valley  
CATHERINE ANNE JACOBS
- 91 Working the Seams: African American  
Professional Performers Moving Between  
White Public Culture and African American  
Private Culture  
HUGO A. FREUND

## CONTRIBUTORS

(Inside front cover)

Layout and Special Photography

WILLIAM K. MUNRO

## COVER:

*G. Atlee Crouse is the only person in the United States still making combs from cattle horns. The fifth generation of the family to do so, he may also be the last. Around the turn of the century, H. Winslow Fegley documented Crouse family comb making. Here, William M. Crouse, grandfather of Atlee, is shown grailing combs by hand.*



# OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE

by Thomas E. Gallagher

Occupational folklife is a topic which *Pennsylvania Folklife* has visited and revisited on a number of occasions. The traditional way in which folklorists looked at work was to analyze the work by itself without considering the lives of the people involved. Over the years, our journal has been very influential in folklore circles in integrating the life of the community with the work of the community. In that vein, the articles that comprise this issue examine work in the factory, on the farm, and in the home. We look at the work of women and men; at the work of various ethnic and racial communities; and at communities which are defined and unified by the work they do. Most importantly, we look at work from the perspective of occupational folklife which sees work as not isolated and removed from the rest of a person's life, but as a vital component of that life. We explore the way in which work influences people's lives, and the way in which people's lives influence their work. In short, we take a holistic view, placing work into the broader context of people's lives.

Occupational folklife is one of the younger branches of the discipline of folklore. Work and occupation were often ignored because folklorists saw their calling as collecting songs and stories which did not need to be part of a work context, and also because there was a prejudice among them that the only valid sites for research were rural communities.<sup>1</sup> It was believed that in such communities, songs and stories were handed down through the generations with fewer changes than in urban areas. As folklorists became aware that their true interest was not in rural communities but rather in the lore of common people, their focus widened to include urban communities. These communities were often defined by their jobs; indeed, some of the earliest work in the area of occupational folklore resulted from the collecting of songs and stories of people whose common bond was not ethnicity, but work.<sup>2</sup> Today, occupational folklife is an important component of folkloristic studies and, as already mentioned, along with the rest of folklorists, those involved in occupational folklife place the traditions of work within the broader context of people's lives.

The field of folklore studies is evolving and far from static. If we look at the origins and progression of folklore studies, we see that while many of the original assumptions about why the knowledge and beliefs of ordinary people are important would no longer be accepted, there is still a basic thread which remains. We still see the importance of looking at the lives of ordinary people rather than those of the elites.

\* \* \*

The roots of folklore studies can be traced back to the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. At that time a number of scholars from such diverse fields as philology and antiquities became interested in collecting the traditions of common people rather than those of the aristocrats. Their purposes were varied, and many of their assumptions would not be accepted by folklorists today, yet their initial forays into the collecting of the traditions of ordinary people helped carve a scholarly niche for the discipline. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, for example, the goal of scholars who studied "popular antiquities" or "survivals"—names which were used before the term folklore was coined—was to discover how people thought in earlier times. The belief was that ordinary people, because their thoughts and ideas were static, retained earlier ways of thinking which had been lost by the elites.<sup>3</sup> It was thought, for instance, that while writing styles and music evolved among the educated, among the common people they were static and so earlier styles were retained.

Quite influential in framing these early endeavors was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a German writer, critic, and philosopher, who wanted to free German prose and poetry from the French influence which had crept in during the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> His goal was to develop a literary nationalism which would emerge from the poetry of the common people, for he believed they retained an uncorrupted early-German tradition. He sent out a call for volunteers to collect the songs of the people which, more often than





*George Korson (1899-1967), a pioneer in the subfield of occupational folklore. (Courtesy of the George Korson Folklore Archive, King's College Library, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.)*

not, were full of energy but lacking in style.

Two brothers—Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm—took Herder's call to heart although they did not follow it accurately, collecting folk narratives rather than songs.<sup>5</sup> The Grimm brothers published two collections of folk tales (1812 and 1815), and Jacob also produced *The German Grammar* (1819-1837). Known for their excellent work in philology and linguistics, the brothers collaborated on the *German Dictionary* which they began in 1838 and worked on until their deaths; it was not completed until the mid-1900s.<sup>6</sup> During the 19th century, work similar to theirs was also being done in Scandinavia, Russia, Japan, the United States and Great Britain, but it was not holistic.<sup>7</sup>

During the early 1800s, a number of terms were used to refer to this new field of endeavor which was becoming more and more fashionable. Some referred to it as studies of bygones, or popular antiquities, or survivals.<sup>8</sup> The term

“folklore” was introduced by the English scholar, W. J. Thoms, in a letter to the *Athenaeum* (1846), to replace the term “popular antiquities” which he believed was cumbersome.<sup>9</sup> (There is no indication that he thought the term inaccurate, he simply thought it awkward.) The new term caught on, but has its disadvantages as well: “To the layman, and to the academic man too, folklore suggests falsity, wrongness, fantasy, and distortion. Or it may conjure up pictures of granny women spinning traditional tales in mountain cabins or gaily costumed peasants performing seasonal dances.”<sup>10</sup>

\* \* \*

In the United States, folklore has always been a multidisciplinary study. At times all this meant was that folklore attracted scholars from a variety of fields, each exploring his or her own personal interest in his or her



own personal style. At other times, however, it has meant that folklorists from different specialties worked together in their research. And always, folklorists were willing to borrow theories and methods from other disciplines. Fortunately, there has often been a great deal of cooperation among folklorists, but at times the field has been dominated by a few strong personalities who as often as not saw their own discipline as fundamental to folklore. This was especially true after the formation of the American Folklore Society (AFS), formed in 1888 largely through the efforts of William Wells Newell who sent a circle letter to scholars he thought would be interested in a society dedicated to the study of folklore. Newell was successful, and at an organizational meeting at Harvard University in January, 1888, the first president of the society, Francis James Childs, was selected.<sup>11</sup> Childs, whose training was in literature and whose interest in folklore concentrated on the literary, inspired a number of his students to follow in his footsteps and they in turn motivated their own students.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after Childs was selected as president of the AFS, anthropology emerged as the dominant force in the organization. At the first meeting, Newell was named editor of the new *Journal of American Folklore*, serving in that position for twelve years. A clergyman by profession, Newell's interest in folklore was clearly in the direction of anthropology rather than aesthetics and literature. Newell collaborated closely with Franz Boas, founder of the first university department of anthropology in America, and each of the next four editors (including Boas himself) were anthropologists; collectively their tenures as editor covered forty years.<sup>13</sup> Linguistics, another important force within folklore and the AFS, was also originally influenced by Franz Boas, who had an interest in collecting texts in native languages. Boas's student, Edward Sapir, argued that language (and by extension the tales and stories collected by folklorists) must be studied within its cultural context.<sup>14</sup>

Even though many folklorists recognized the historical nature of folklore, historians were not active in the field until the 1950s. Those who encourage the incorporation of history into folklore studies believe that the traditions of ordinary people can only be understood in their historical context. One of the earliest and best known historians to become involved in folklore studies was Richard M. Dorson, who not only contributed scholarly research but also served as president of the AFS and as editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*.<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \*

The subfield of occupational folklore emerged late in the 19th century and developed slowly until the 1920s when, through the seminal work of George Korson, it became a vital aspect of folklore studies. Robert McCarl, in his article "The Folk as Occupation Group," states that the first article in the *Journal of American Folklore* which is clearly concerned with occupational folklore was one

by Major Wild, a study on the jargon of professional thieves in 1889.<sup>16</sup> The tendency at this time was to present long lists of words that were used by people in different occupations. These lists did not provide a social context, but emphasized the verbal elements so important in folklore since its inception. Then in 1910, John Avery Lomax published *Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads*, a work which foreshadowed the need of occupational folklorists to document not only the words, but the work skills that shape the particular subculture being studied.<sup>17</sup>

As already noted, George Korson was a pioneer in the field, and he changed the face of occupational folklore studies dramatically, being influential in transforming occupational folklore into occupational folklife. Korson was born in the Ukraine in 1899, the son of poor parents who decided to emigrate to the United States when he was seven years old. The Korsons settled in Brooklyn, New York, but unhappy with the crowded conditions and fast pace of life there were easily persuaded by friends to move to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, when George was thirteen. At least in part because his parents were poor, George Korson's formal education ended when he earned his high school diploma; he continued to read and study, however, throughout his life.<sup>18</sup>

Korson's lack of formal education can be viewed as either an asset or a detriment, but his biographer, Angus Gillespie, has argued that overall it seems to have been an asset in his study of occupational folklore: Unaware of the conventional belief that the focus of folklorists should be rural areas, Korson began to study coal miners in northeast Pennsylvania;<sup>19</sup> in addition, his lack of formal training allowed him to conclude on his own that folklore would best be presented within the context of the community rather than isolated from it.<sup>20</sup>

\* \* \*

By the 1950s the term "folklife" had been coined to reflect the developing holistic approach to folklore. Folklore had been criticized for being tied to oral texts, for forgetting about the artifacts produced by people, and for failing to look at the cultural context of the people who were producing the texts.<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, "folklorists generally associate five qualities with true folklore: 1) it is oral [although the notion of oral has been expanded to go beyond the verbal to the transmission of music, and even to learning through imitation such as a dance or a craft]; 2) it is traditional [in that it is relayed in a relatively standard form among the members of a group]; 3) it exists in different versions [and these versions tend to be readily accepted despite the variation]; 4) it is usually anonymous; [and] 5) it tends to become formularized."<sup>22</sup> Despite the clarification of concepts such as oral to include not only verbal information but also music, dance, and crafts, the theme had still been to look at the transmission of a particular tradition without a social context. Folklife, on



the other hand, looks at the way of life of the people whose traditions are being collected and analyzed. It should be noted too, that today the term "folklore" has been broadened to become virtually synonymous with folklife. Once again what we are seeing is the evolution of the discipline.

\* \* \*

In this issue of *Pennsylvania Folklife* we are presenting several studies in occupational folklife, each incorporating not only the text but the context as well. Hugo Freund analyzes African American performers in Pittsburgh between World War I and World War II, looking not only at performers and performances, but at life in a community clouded by racial discrimination which prevented African Americans from entering the theaters where other African Americans were performing. He concludes that "an understanding of African American expressive culture requires that one confront the social and political reality of the African American experience in the United States."

R. Troy Boyer presents a sensitive look at his family's tradition of making combs from cattle horns, describing not only the manufacturing process, but also providing the context in which his family became involved in the business as well as their ties to the Pennsylvania German

tradition. Mr. Boyer's family was involved in farming as well as in horn-comb making, and Amos W. Long, Jr., himself a Pennsylvania German, documents that culture's strong farming tradition, noting its impact on the Pennsylvania German community as well as its contribution to the larger society.

Christine M. Mueseler takes us into the lives of workers in an aluminum factory as the relationship between the company and the workers changed. She discusses the separation of work into men's work and women's work and the breakdown of this distinction as a result of World War I. She also follows the efforts to unionize the workers, and the decline of the plant in the 1960s and 1970s until it was finally shut down. Catherine Jacobs presents a look at another dying industry, textile manufacturing in the Lackawanna Valley. She recounts the changes in women's work over the years: In the 1920s when women married they would quit the factory and help support their families by a series of domestic economies; by the 1970s, married women, even those with young families, often needed to continue working. At the same time, the garment industry was disappearing, due, in large measure to overseas competition. Each of these articles presents occupational folklife in the intricate web of work and social context.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Angus K. Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields: George Korson's Life and Work* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p. xvi.

<sup>2</sup>Robert McCarl, "The Folk as Occupational Group: From the Cow Camp to the Shop Floor," in *100 Years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History*, ed., William M. Clements (Washington, DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore. Essays toward a Discipline of Folk Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.33.

<sup>4</sup>Gottfried F. Merkel, "Johann Gottfried von Herder," in *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago, IL: World Book, Inc., 1988), vol. 9, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup>Dorson, p.34.

<sup>6</sup>James McGlathery, "Grimm," in *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago, IL: World Book, Inc., 1988), vol. 8, p. 418.

<sup>7</sup>Dorson, pp.33-45. <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup>Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968), p. 2; and Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Dorson, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, "On the Founding of the American Folklore Society and the *Journal of American Folklore*," in *100 Years of American*

*Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History*, ed., William M. Clements (Washington, DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>Ronald L. Baker, "The Folklorist in the Academy," in *100 Years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History*, ed., William M. Clements (Washington, DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), p. 65; and Carl Lindahl, "The Folklorist and Literature: Child and Others," in *100 Years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History*, ed., William M. Clements (Washington, DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), p. 52.

<sup>13</sup>W. K. McNeil, "The Folklorist and Anthropology: The Boasian Influence," in *100 years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History*, ed., William M. Clements (Washington, DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), p. 65.

<sup>14</sup>Claire R. Farrer, "The Folklorist and Linguistics: From Boas to Hymes," in *100 years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History*, ed., William M. Clements (Washington, DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), p. 65.

<sup>15</sup>Lynwood Montell and Barbara Allen, "The Folklorist and History: Three Approaches," in *100 years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History*, ed., William M. Clements (Washington, DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), p. 65.

<sup>17</sup>McCarl, p. 40. <sup>18</sup>Gillespie, pp. 15-23. <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xvi. <sup>21</sup>Dorson, p. 498. <sup>22</sup>Brunvand, pp. 4-6.



# A FINE-TOOTH COMB: ATLEE CROUSE CARRIES ON A FAMILY TRADITION

by R.Troy Boyer



*G. Atlee Crouse of Reinholds, the only remaining horn comb maker in the United States. (All photographs by Candace Boyer unless otherwise credited.)*

At one time hair combs fashioned from the horns of certain cattle were to be found on the dressing tables of everyone concerned with personal grooming and hygiene. Indeed, demand for horn combs was such that during the industrial revolution of the 19th century, several factories were established on the east coast of the United States to produce them. With the large-scale introduction of plastic products at the turn of the century, however, this once-thriving industry began to lose ground, and in the 1990s making combs from horn has become the stuff of folk craft.

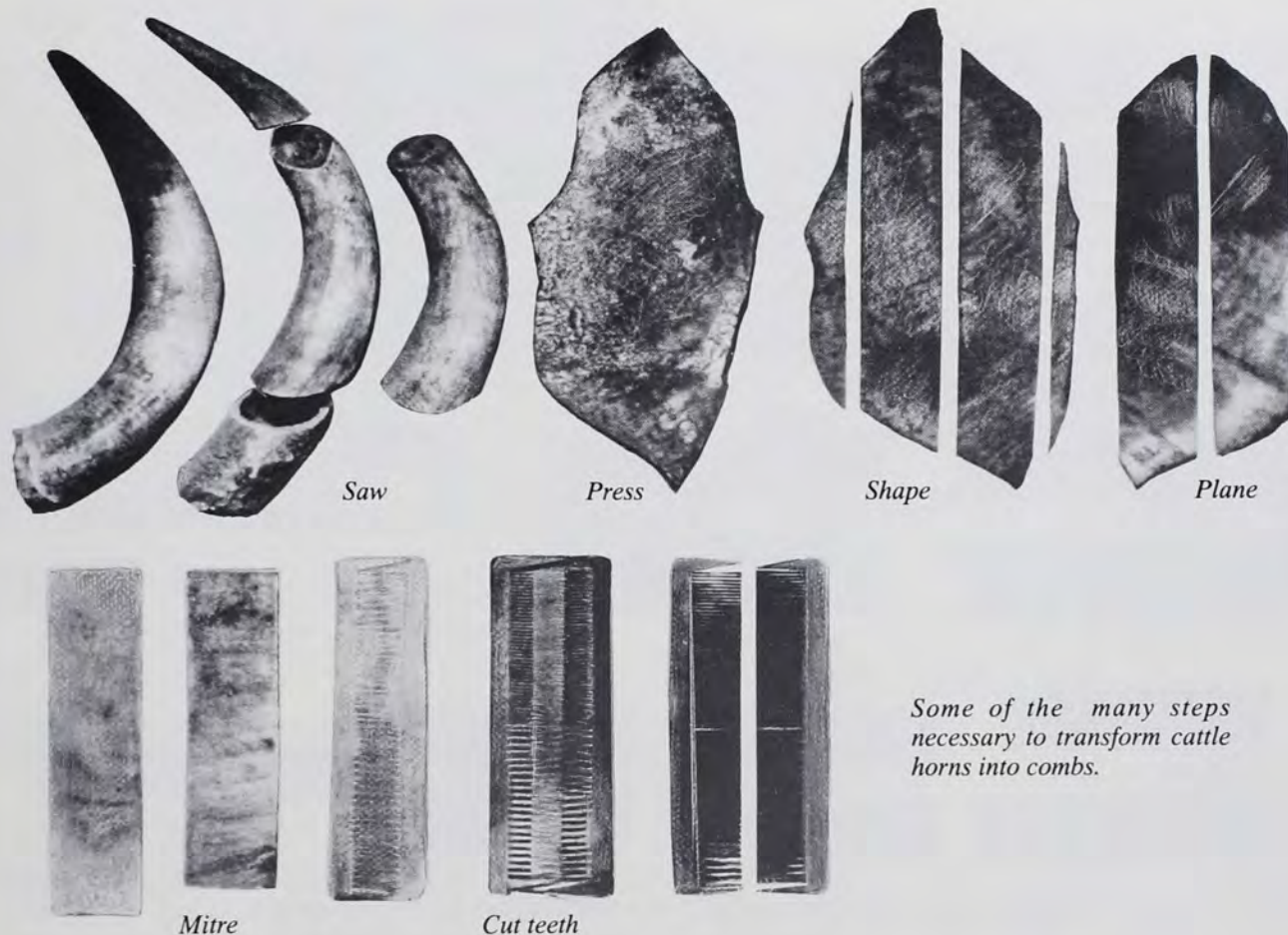
In fact, in the United States at least, this age-old craft continues only in the tradition of one family; a family living in Reinholds, Pennsylvania, in the heart of the so-called "Pennsylvania Dutch" country. There, following in the footsteps of his great-great-grandfather, eighty-one-year-old G. Atlee Crouse is the only person in the United States still making combs from horns. The fifth generation of the family to do so, he may also be the last. Therefore it is with some sense of urgency that the author set about documenting the processes and the history of this now unique family folk craft.<sup>1</sup>

## THE COMB-MAKING PROCESS

The first step in creating a horn comb is, of course, obtaining and selecting the right horn for the job. Atlee Crouse's father, George, was able to get fairly sturdy, fully developed horn from ranchers raising Texas longhorn cattle or from certain breeds of water buffalo. But the contemporary domestic market for horns is virtually nil; steer ranchers today, working in more enclosed areas, clip horns early to protect animals from injuring each other or use "advanced" feeding methods that fatten cattle for slaughter before horns are fully grown. And since slaughterhouses that do receive cattle with horns find it cheaper to discard the horns than to sell them, Atlee Crouse is currently working with horns from Mexico and Panama which are of lesser quality but which are the only ones available.<sup>2</sup> These are allowed to age and dry in a holding area where, hopefully, they will be safe from the threat of being eaten by moths.

When the aging and drying process is completed, Atlee Crouse begins the comb-making procedure by selecting the





*Some of the many steps necessary to transform cattle horns into combs.*

“raw” horn, knocking out and discarding its membranous material, and giving it a preliminary scraping and polishing. Then the first sawing is done: The solid tip of the horn is cut off with a power saw and, beginning at the wide base of the horn, a spiral cut is made up the side. (The horn is cut spirally so that its grain—similar to wood grain—will end up parallel to the teeth on the finished comb; it also results in less waste and a stronger comb.) To soften the horn for pressing and shaping it is now placed in a washtub filled with beef or mutton tallow or some other kind of oil and allowed to soak for several days to a week in the warm bath. (In order to speed up the process, when production was high George Crouse would dip the horn for a minute and a half in tallow heated to 340° F: Atlee prefers the soaking method, although recently he finds his father’s faster procedure better suited to his production needs.)

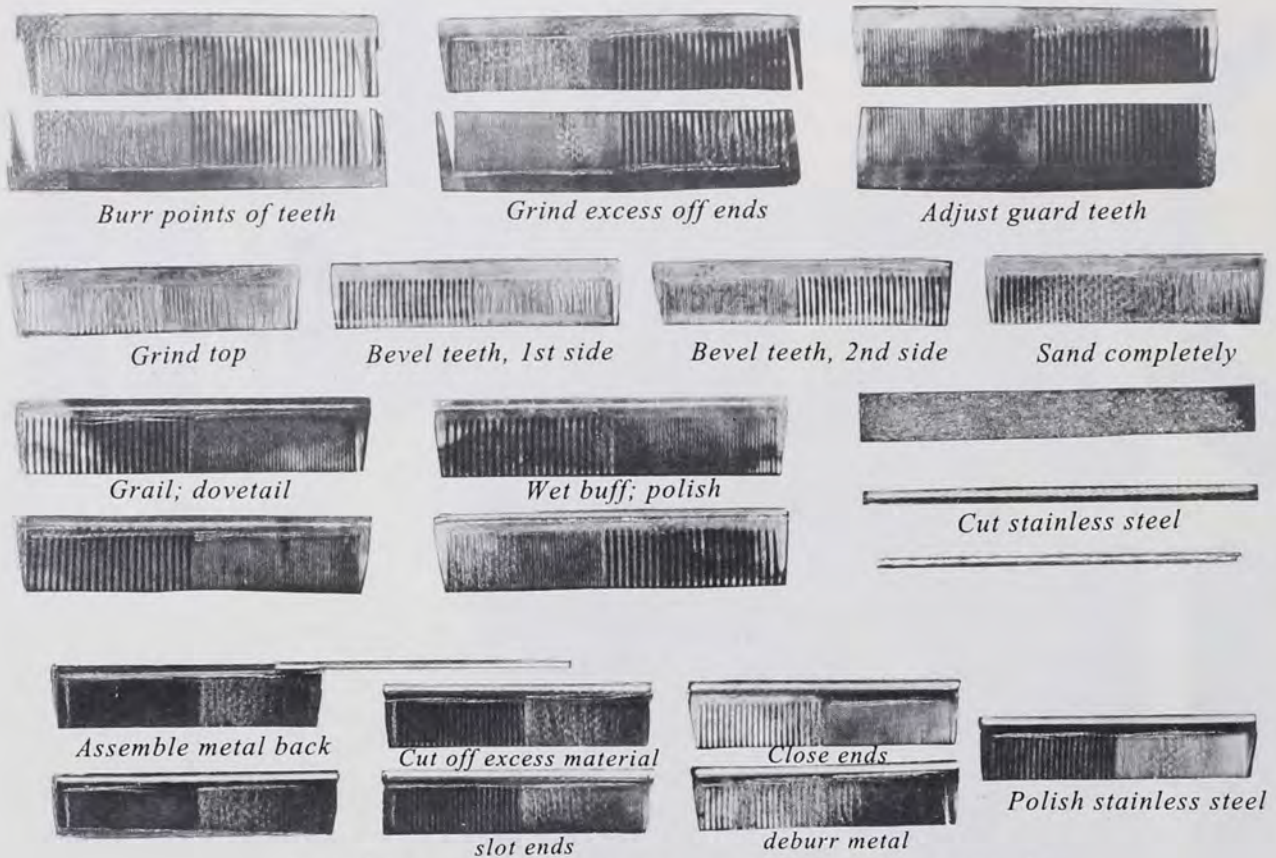
After it is removed from the bath the horn is heated some more, pressed tightly, and afterward dipped in water so that it can be handled. Then, using an old leather splitter purchased from a shoe factory and adapted for the purpose, Atlee Crouse presses the horn through rollers; it emerges in a flat slab shaped like a lazy letter “S” which another saw cuts diagonally. This piece—called a blank—is cut to

the length of the planned completed comb but has the width of two combs or, rather, the width of the backs of two combs and the teeth of one, for the spaces on one comb will actually be the teeth on the other. The newly cut blank is first planed to a uniform thickness, than mitered to prepare for the cutting of the teeth, and pressed again.

Before the teeth can be cut, however, the horn must be dried and hardened one more time, and this takes anywhere from three to twelve months. (In this operation, too, Atlee Crouse prefers patience and will usually leave the blanks in storage for a year.) The combs-to-be are stored flat, tightly packed in boxes so they will not warp. When the drying-and-hardening process is complete the blank is ready to have teeth cut into it, and this is done on a machine with knives that can be adjusted depending on the style of comb being produced. Using this machine, two combs are cut from one blank in a process called “twinning.” The term is somewhat misleading for, as Atlee Crouse explains, “no two combs are exactly alike”: While the machine does make a symmetrical cut that ensures the same dimensions for each comb of the pair, combs cut from the same blank will have different coloration and the guard—or end—teeth will also be different.

The newly formed combs are gently separated and then





*Some of the many steps necessary to transform cattle horns into combs.*

refitted to check the quality of the cut. Because of the tendency of horn—like all things—to return to its natural form, the refitted combs are put through the press once more. Removed and again separated, they are now ready to be worked on individually. Since there is a large gap in the spacing at the end of the comb where the guard tooth of its “twin” had been, the next step is heating this end to soften it for the folding in of the guard tooth. When this has been done the combs are ready for polishing and the finishing touches. These include sanding to remove any roughness; buffing to give a shiny finish; beveling to finish the edges; and “grailing”—the operation in which the teeth are given their proper taper and point. (Atlee Crouse developed a machine which does this; his father used hand files.)

The next step is perhaps one of the most fascinating parts of the entire procedure: The comb is put in a mixture of pumice and water and placed underneath a polishing wheel fitted with corn husk blades; these get between the comb’s teeth and polish their edges. (This step has changed slightly, as Atlee Crouse now covers his polishing wheel with strips of carpet material.) Another round of washing, drying, and polishing gives the combs a smooth, shiny look and texture; it is followed by a final polishing on a cloth rouge wheel which completes the manufacturing process

for some products. (The side comb often worn by women, for example, needs no further work.) Other combs, however, need the added support of a metal back, so a groove is cut to receive a stainless steel strip. This strip is rounded and shaped to fit on the horn comb by a combination backer-and-beveling machine developed by Atlee Crouse that performs both functions at the same time. It is, finally, the end of the lengthy production process; the comb is now ready for use or sale.

\*\*\*

While the entire horn comb-making process can take many months, the latter stages of the work can be completed quickly (in as few as five minutes from the time the teeth are cut until the metal back is applied), and this was a key factor in making large-scale manufacturing possible. Moreover, while it may not be immediately apparent from the above account, Atlee Crouse’s workshop is fully mechanized. Employing power-driven machinery in production, then, was another factor in the transformation of a more or less traditional, semi-commercial trade into a fully industrialized enterprise by the mid-1800s. It was an industry with a relatively brief life, however, and a look at the history of horn comb making in the Crouse family shows how this traditional handicraft became a





Built in 1824, the Crouse Comb Factory in Reinholds operated continuously until it was destroyed by fire in 1954. (Courtesy of the Schwenkfelder Library, Pennsburg, Pa.)

thriving commercial venture and then returned to “folk” status.

#### THE CROUSE FAMILY HISTORY

As did many others from the early to mid-1700s, Charles Michael Crouse fled the German Palatinate to settle in Pennsylvania. Born in Worms, he left Germany at mid-century and lived for a time in Philadelphia before moving to an area near Reading that would become known as Pennsylvania German (or, more popularly, “Pennsylvania Dutch”) country. Described as a surgeon and physician, Michael Crouse was probably best qualified to work on animals. Whatever the case, it did not take him long to turn to comb making, a craft he probably learned in Germany. Michael Crouse served as a captain in the Berks County Militia in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, and records show that he was in charge of Hessian prisoners at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-78, probably because he could speak their language.<sup>3</sup> Family legend has it that in his spare time in camp during that harsh winter, Michael Crouse made combs for the troops from the horns of cattle used for food. Atlee Crouse wonders if perhaps his great-great-grandfather may not have performed some emergency surgeries on the wounded men and then turned his saw to animal horns.

However it was that Michael Crouse began producing horn combs, it is clear that by the time his son William reached adulthood the craft was closely associated with the Crouse family—William learned it while growing up in Reading (Berks County). After spending some time in Adamstown (Lancaster County), in 1812 William Crouse settled near Reinholds, just inside the Lancaster County line where it borders Berks.<sup>4</sup> Establishing the present-day Crouse homestead there, it seems likely that for many years



Michael and William Crouse used these hand tools to make combs from cattle horns. (Collection of the Mercer Museum of the Bucks County Historical Society)

thereafter he spent most of his time making the property a workable farm and very little time making combs. In 1824, however, he built a shop just for that purpose, moving his business from the family hearth.

Working before the advent of power-driven machinery, Michael and William Crouse knew a slightly different process for the production of horn combs than that described above. Using hand tools which are now on display in the Mercer Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, the early Crouse practitioners of the craft probably worked in a manner similar to that of the comb maker described in an anonymous 1807 survey called *The Book of Trades, or Library of the Useful Arts*. It documents nicely the early manufacture of combs from “bullocks’ horns”:

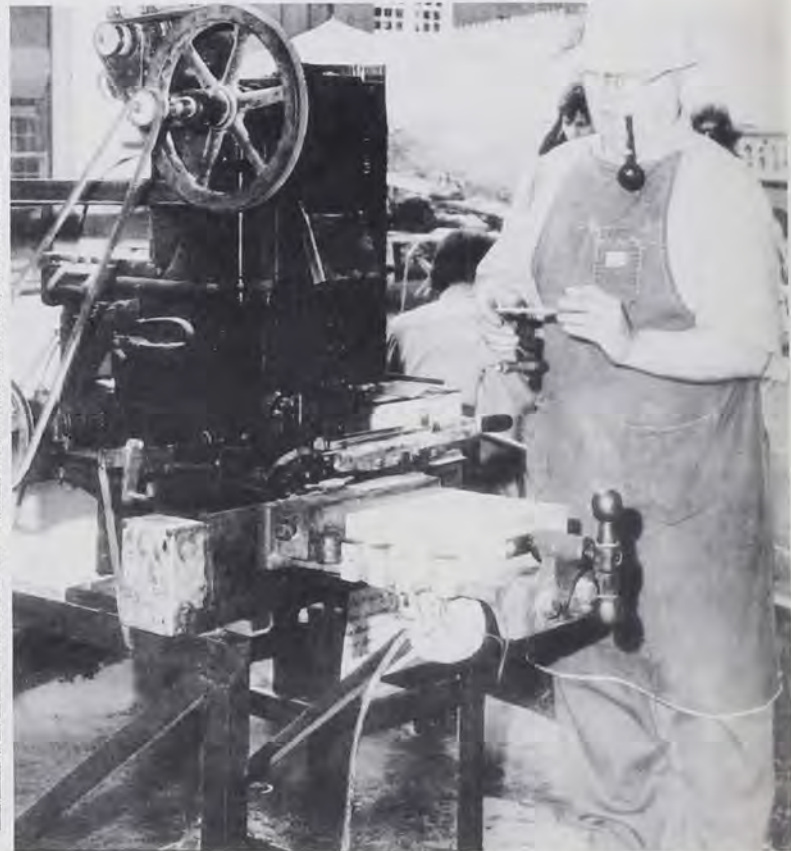
The tips are first sawn off: they are then held in the flame of a wood fire; this is called roasting, by which they become nearly as soft as leather. While in that state they are slit open on one side, and pressed in a machine between two iron plates; they are then plunged into a trough of water, from which they come out hard and flat.

The comb-maker now saws them into lengths according to the sized combs he wants. To cut the teeth each piece is fixed in a tool called a clam. . . . The teeth are cut with a fine saw, or rather a pair of saws, and they are finished with a file. A coarser file, called a rasp . . . is used to reduce the horn to a proper thickness; and when the combs are made, they are polished with charcoal and water, and receive their last finish with powder of rotten-stone.<sup>5</sup>





A plate from the 1807 *Book of Trades, or Library of the Useful Arts* (courtesy of the Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library) shows a workshop that may have looked familiar to Michael Crouse and his son William.



Atlee Crouse demonstrates the cutting of teeth on his 1878 twinning machine, the invention of which revolutionized horn comb making. (Photograph by Sharon Schaeztle: courtesy of the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen)

Comparing this early 19th-century procedure for comb making to Atlee Crouse's current method, we can see that except for the introduction of mechanized tools, the craft remains largely the same.

\* \* \*

William Crouse's son, William M., divided his time between farming and the comb-making business just as his father had done. A "stanch [sic] Republican"<sup>6</sup> (the "Party of Lincoln" had just been formed), William M. Crouse was innovative in his business life as well as in his political life. He was the first in the family to employ any kind of mechanization, using pedal power to operate sanding and polishing machines. A major advance in technological progress, however, would have to wait until his son, George Washington Crouse, took control of the business.

One of George Washington Crouse's first and most important steps toward modernization was the acquisition

of a twinning machine to replace the old hand saws for making teeth. Such machines had been available for almost one hundred years: *The Book of Trades* mentions a cutting machine developed around 1796 by a Mr. Bundy of Camden Town in England.<sup>7</sup> It could cut the teeth of two combs in three minutes and was undoubtedly the most important advance in comb-making technology. With the addition of this labor saving machine the next step in modernization for the Crouses was the mechanization of the entire process: Shortly after the turn of the century the shop was made fully steam operated, and the Crouse comb factory was off and running. At the height of production in 1933, twelve men, including George Washington Crouse's twenty-year-old son, Atlee, manufactured more than seven hundred dozen combs a week. With each man making a gross of combs a day, "Old George" Crouse, as he was known locally, had advanced the traditional family craft to a height undreamed of by previous generations.



*William M. and Anna Crouse surrounded by twelve of their children. Front row, l. to r.: Annie, Amy, Bessie, William M., Anna, John, Moses, William E. Rear, l. to r.: Kate, Mary, Bertha, Abraham, Henry, George W. (Collection of Shirley Crouse Gensemer)*



## THE HORN COMB INDUSTRY

Ironically, at the same time comb making was becoming a profitable commercial enterprise for the Crouse family, the industry as a whole was beginning to decline. Tench Coxe, who compiled the first census of manufactures ever undertaken in the United States in 1810, reported that 56,945 dozen combs valued at \$210,392 had been produced in the country, primarily in small shops by those who had learned the craft as apprentices.<sup>8</sup> After the introduction of the twinning machine in America (at about the time of Coxe's report), the craft expanded rapidly into a mass-production industry: By the 1850 census there were 151 comb-making businesses reported, employing 1788 workers (1426 males and 362 females)<sup>9</sup> and netting \$1.6 million. Most made combs from steer horn, although a few also worked with ivory and tortoise shell. As Bernard W. Doyle documents in *Comb Making in America*, (the only book-length study of the subject), Leominster, Massachusetts, was at the center of this switch to full-scale enterprise. Indeed with sixty-three comb-making businesses, Massachusetts led the nation in comb production: Leominster itself, with nearly half of all the comb manufacturers in the state, produced over \$270,000 worth. The next largest comb-making states were Connecticut with twenty-seven manufacturers and Pennsylvania, with twenty-two.<sup>10</sup>

After the first machines to make rubber combs were patented in the 1860s, there was a slight dip in the production of horn combs, yet they still remained the most popular grooming devices on the market for many years. But then came World War I and with it improvements in the method for making plastics. When it became possible to easily and quickly inject plastic into molds, the long process of heating, pressing, cutting, and polishing horn soon became obsolete. It was the end of an era as the great horn-comb producing companies expired because they were unable to convert to the use of plastic—none of the heavy

old machines they had invested in were serviceable with this new material.<sup>11</sup> In 1914, over two thousand laborers were still employed in making "combs and hairpins not made from metal or rubber," a census category which now included the production of nonpetroleum and nonrubber based plastics such as celluloid.<sup>12</sup> By 1935 that category consisted almost exclusively of items made of celluloid, and the value of the industry dropped below half a million dollars; in 1937 it was abandoned as an industrial category for the census.<sup>13</sup>

As a result of these changes, in 1933, at the high point of its operation, the Crouse factory was the last of its kind in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Once just a local supplier of horn combs to small stores, barber shops, and hospitals (which used them because of their ability to withstand the extreme heat of the sterilization process), George Washington Crouse now found himself alone in the business. But as it became ever more difficult to obtain horns domestically, he too quickly lost out, and the factory moved toward its demise. In fact, when the building housing his shop burned down in 1954, Old George, now an octogenarian, was the only one put out of work — he had no employees. Son Atlee would not make combs again — except as a pastime — until 1974.

## THE CROUSE FAMILY AND THE STRENGTH OF TRADITION

A strong family tradition kept the Crouses making horn combs (and other horn products) long after they were abandoned by the major industrial producers. Although that tradition had undergone great technological changes, spiritual and family values, as well as attitudes about craftsmanship and the social role of the artisan had not changed. While Massachusetts families such as the Noyeses (whose forebear, Enoch Noyes, founded the comb-making industry in America) were removing themselves from actual hands-on production and building mini-empires by expanding





*William and Anna Crouse polishing combs on felt cylinders: although Crouse women rarely learned the complete comb-making process, they did participate in certain aspects of the job. (Courtesy of the Schwenkfelder Library)*

their interests into banking and finance, the Crouses remained at home, working on the farm and in the factory with little outside help. During the time they were making commercial progress there was very little change in their lifestyle: Tax records show that in 1858 they obtained a "pleasure carriage" to add to their estate of three cows, one horse, and one house; after taking over the business, William M. Crouse added another house to the property in 1863; and George W. Crouse was able to add thirty-three acres to the farm in 1910. There was no social climbing and no financial expansion; in fact, from 1850 to 1933 Crouse family property values only increased from \$500 to \$1200 to \$1700.<sup>15</sup> Even when comb making ceased to be a profitable commercial venture they continued in the trade, largely unaffected. As long as there was enough money for comfortable living there was no desire to do otherwise. In the Crouse family, one was apprenticed to the craft first and to the business later. It was simply what one member of a generation of Crouse men would do—inheriting the farm and making horn combs.<sup>16</sup>

\* \* \*

Any discussion of a family's beliefs and practices leads to a desire to know if and how they fit into a larger tradition. In the case of the comb-making Crouse family we can begin by examining the aesthetic qualities of the finished product. Considering the horn combs "artistically," we find their coloring to be their most striking feature. They display a fascinating array of colors—from all black to reddish-brown to all white to almost transparent, with all sorts of variations in between; colors one would not



*George Washington Crouse displaying the many different kinds of horn combs made in his factory. (Rollin C. Steinmetz and Charles S. Rice, *Vanishing Crafts and Their Craftsmen*, copyright 1959 by Rutgers, The State University. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press)*

necessarily expect to find in objects made from cattle horns. Perhaps the most beautiful, though, are those combs in which dark, white, and translucent areas mingle to form variegated patches; patches with the appearance of whirling space which is only able to be contained by the shiny stainless-steel back.

We must exercise caution, however, when discussing the aesthetics of comb making, for the craftsman's meticulous work merely reveals the beauty inherent in the raw material. To be sure, Atlee Crouse attempts to choose horns that he thinks will make attractive combs, and he polishes them extensively during the production process, but his main concern is making the sturdiest and longest-lasting comb that he can. In short, while each comb is unique and has a noticeably handsome grain, and while each has a different and striking coloration, these qualities are dictated more by nature than by any cultural standards of aesthetic taste.

Although aesthetic tradition has not directly affected the Crouse family's work, ethnic tradition has. As part of the area's Pennsylvania German community, Atlee Crouse grew up speaking the Pennsylvania German dialect and following many traditions that he shares with his neighbors. For one hundred and eighty years the family has carried on its craft in Reinholds, located in "the area lying at the juncture of Lancaster, Lebanon, and Berks counties [that] must be considered the epicenter of Pennsylvania German folk culture."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, William Crouse established his shop in 1824, during what has been called the era (1770-1840) of the flowering of Pennsylvania German arts and crafts.<sup>18</sup>





*Anna Crouse polishing combs on a cornhusk wheel. (Courtesy of the Schwenkfelder Library)*

Despite these links to local tradition, horn-comb making was not exclusive to Pennsylvania German culture as has already been made clear. Certainly Pennsylvania was one of the leading producers of horn goods, but more horn combs were manufactured in Leominster alone than in the entire Keystone State.<sup>19</sup> Nor is it likely that the craft originated in Germany, despite the fact that Michael Crouse probably learned it before he emigrated.<sup>20</sup> Rather, horn comb making most likely became an industry at those places linked to cattle-raising societies. Work on horns continues in Kendal, England, for example, near old cattle trails, as well as in some small Latin American cattle-raising cultures and in Southeast Asia.

Acknowledging that horn comb making was not a distinct outgrowth of Pennsylvania German culture is not to suggest that that culture had no influence on the Crouse family tradition as it related to the craft. Evident, for instance, is the Pennsylvania German emphasis on thriftiness and never wasting anything: the tip of the horn, cut off at the beginning of comb-making process, is later made into buttons or left intact and polished for use as a pendant; and large quantities of horn shavings, high in nitrogen content, are swept from every corner of the shop and given to local farmers who use them for fertilizer. Then too, the fact that it took the family nearly one hundred years to acquire a twinning machine is probably indicative of another Pennsylvania German trait, a reluctance to accept change (in this case new technology), rather than to a lack of money. In this vein, Atlee tells how his father continued to use his old steam generator even after the shop was wired for electrical power.

Interesting also is the Crouse family's connection with the Pennsylvania German culture region's play with symmetry in its arts and crafts. The thirteen styles of combs they have made in sizes and forms numbering well into the triple digits are ample evidence of their creativity while working within the bounds of the enforced symmetry of the form. Another strong ethnic influence was the growing awareness among Pennsylvania Germans that their customs were valuable and perhaps endangered. Living and working as they did in a region dense with a culture that emphasized thrift and tradition and yet was not far removed from large urban areas and financial centers, the Crouses' efforts to keep the craft alive were sustained spiritually and, for a long time, financially by these concerns.

Moving from a discussion of the effect of their Pennsylvania German heritage on the Crouse family's comb-making tradition to an examination of the business as a whole, we find evidence of a folk aesthetic which differentiates them from the large industrial producers. As stated earlier, there were several large manufacturers in the eastern United States, so it is not surprising that there appears to have been an industry-wide, uniform process for shaping and forming combs. While different lengths and styles were made, the nature of their use demanded a universal form, and in this sense the Crouse tradition merged with that of the commercial producers. There is, however, a place where those traditions diverged. The Crouses' work was characterized by utilitarianism; even during their industrial phase they never worked with any material other than horn and they always advertised it as such. That they have continuously and only made the strongest and best-finished horn combs possible is probably due to the strictly utilitarian nature of local demand.

On the other hand, the major industrial producers, who had a larger and more diverse market, often made at least one style of ivory comb or developed dyes and special polishing techniques to make horn look like tortoise shell. Many Massachusetts comb makers also experimented with the "clarification" of horn, a process which made dark-colored combs turn lighter, almost transparent. As status symbols, ivory, tortoise shell, and clarified-horn combs outranked the common horn comb, so the big companies were forced to deal at least a little bit in these more highly regarded, exotic, and expensive materials and techniques. Major manufacturers such as William H. Noyes & Brother (whose 1892 price list is a fifty-six page, illustrated hard-bound book) found it necessary as well to employ more elaborate marketing strategies than did the Crouses (whose usual price list was a four-page brochure without illustrations). In summary, during the Crouse family's long journey from traditional craftsmen to industrial producers and back, no other consideration has ever outweighed—or even come close to outweighing—that of utility. This is probably the most important point to make when speaking of a traditional influence or aesthetic for Crouse comb making and for a Pennsylvania German "core aesthetic"<sup>21</sup> at work within the family tradition.





*"Waste not, want not": Every part of the horn is used to make items as practical as buttons or as fancy as earrings and necklaces.*

### THE ROLE OF MACHINERY

Combs are not the only items made from cattle horns. Although they have now largely disappeared, until recently there were a few horn carvers and button and bead makers (who used the tips of horns left over from the comb-maker's operations) still working. It was always easier to carve buttons and beads than to make them with the comb maker's saws and, later, heavy machinery. That changed when Atlee Crouse developed a special lathe to turn them; in fact, Mr. Crouse claims that he was the first to use a machine to make perfectly rounded horn beads. Over the years the Crouses have made various other horn objects; Atlee Crouse himself has made belt buckles, decorative fish, ash trays, vases, cups, containers, cigarette boxes, buttons, candelabra, salters, spoons, shoehorns, tableware, eyeglass frames, whetstone holders, earrings, pendants, beads, powder horns, and bugles.<sup>22</sup> Many of these were machine made for the first time by him.

The use of machines by traditional craftspeople is an important point for examination. When considering the many and varied crafts labeled "folk," we tend to think of them as being fashioned with hand-held or unmechanized tools, or as pursuits whose methods have remained static, resisting all technological advances. But the machines used by Atlee Crouse—relics of the Industrial Revolution that transformed the craft though they be—are as much a part of the family comb-making tradition as the combs themselves. Taught to run those machines by his father, Atlee Crouse carries on the work in the spirit of those forebears who used only hand tools. Indeed, seeing Mr. Crouse working at his craft gives the viewer a look at a dignified human relationship with machine technology that the rise of industrialism promised. For, no matter what kind of tools are used, "only a craftsman's hands can exercise skillful manipulation."<sup>23</sup> This is why, despite later innovations, horn comb making can be considered alongside other manifestations of occupational folklore and material folk culture.



*A partial view of Atlee Crouse's current workshop, located across the road from the old Crouse Comb Company factory.*



*Atlee Crouse polishes his combs several times using various machines, including a wheel fitted with cornhusk blades or strips of carpet material.*

To understand how important machinery is to the Crouse family's comb-making tradition, we need only consider the conditions under which that tradition can be preserved. Atlee Crouse, who worked for almost forty years in a machine shop in Reading, says that "only a good machinist will be able to carry on the craft," because there is simply



no one left who knows how to service or adjust comb-making machines. Complicating the situation is the fact that after the fire that destroyed the Crouse factory in 1954, Mr. Crouse not only rebuilt most of the machines from the ground up, he also converted several machines from other industries and invented several machines and horn-working operations as well.<sup>24</sup> Because of the idiosyncrasies of many of his unpatented inventions and the singularity of the old machines, it would be difficult for a nonmachinist to understand their workings. Atlee Crouse himself says it would take months—or years—of close apprenticeship to learn how to set up the machinery and make all the necessary adjustments for different enterprises. Lacking time and resources, younger family members simply cannot afford such a commitment.<sup>25</sup>

It may well be, then, that the same machines that once saved the family business will be the cause of its demise when Atlee Crouse, who will be eighty-two in July, passes. Considered wonderfully innovative only a little over a century ago, they quickly became obsolete when new machines and new materials came along. The rapid decline and death of the horn comb-making industry may explain why scholars have largely ignored it; folklorists would not have been interested when horn combs were popular and readily available, and when their day passed, all traces of the craft disappeared from view. It is my hope that this essay will help remedy this neglect by telling the story of a fascinating family tradition.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted below, the information on comb making in this essay is drawn partly from interviews with G. Atlee Crouse and partly from personal participation — Mr. Crouse is my grandfather. Also, please note that the number of steps in the comb-making operation is usually given as somewhere between 23 and 31. The account of these given under “The Comb-Making Process” combines some steps or omits very minor ones.

<sup>2</sup>Just recently, however, a friend of Atlee’s who does work on powder horns told him of a slaughterhouse in San Antonio that has decided to keep and clean horns. Unfortunately, most of what is available is cow horn, which is less useful for comb making.

<sup>3</sup>*Biographical Annals of Lancaster County Pennsylvania* (Lancaster: J. H. Beers, 1903), unpaginated.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*The Book of Trades, or Library of the Useful Arts* (1807 rpt; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992), pp.27-28.

<sup>6</sup>*Biographical Annals.*

<sup>7</sup>*The Book of Trades*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>8</sup>Tench Coxe, *A Statement of the Arts and Manufactures of the United States of America, for the Year, 1810* (Philadelphia: A. Cornman, 1814). This was the first census of manufactures taken in the U. S. As part of the general census, the census of manufactures was recorded decennially until 1899, then quinquennially until 1919 when biennial reports on manufactures were undertaken by the Commerce Department and the U. S. Census Bureau. The statistics that follow are drawn from these reports for the years ranging from 1810 to 1940.

<sup>9</sup>In *Comb Making in America* (Boston: Perry Walton, 1925), Bernard W. Doyle describes the life-styles of these workers: “The average comb-maker received one dollar for a ten-hour day, but the more expert, by spending from twelve to fifteen hours on piecework, often doubled that sum. Women were allowed three dollars a week. Both men and women paid board out of their wages; the men, \$2.25 weekly, and the women, \$1.50.” pp.118, 120.

<sup>10</sup>United States Census Bureau, 7th Census of the United States, 1850, *Census of Manufactures* (Washington, 1859); Bernard W. Doyle, *Comb Making in America*, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup>Some companies in Leominster did manage to make the switch to plastics and contributed to the town’s becoming one of the U. S.’s largest plastics manufacturing sites.

<sup>12</sup>United States Census Bureau and U.S. Commerce Department, *Census of Manufactures, 1860-1929*

<sup>13</sup>Census of Manufactures 1933-1939. (Horn and tortoise-shell items continue to show up in the reports after this time, but only in the production of buttons.)

<sup>14</sup>Census of Manufactures, 1933-1939.

<sup>15</sup>Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Tax Records, Schedules for West Cocalico Township, 1820-1935.

<sup>16</sup>It should be noted here that the Crouses pose an interesting study in family folklore transference patterns. The shop was a largely masculine domain. Although the women sometimes helped in certain processes (e. g., packaging and shipping), their role in tradition bearing was felt mainly in the domestic support that allowed the men to carry on the craft outside the home. All of the boys in the family received at least a rudimentary training in comb making, but it seems that only the one boy in each generation who acquired the farm would pursue the craft as an occupation. Samuel, a son of William, is the only male family member (out of perhaps fifteen boys who survived long enough to learn the craft and enter the job market) other than the owner of the estate in Reinholds, to list comb making as his occupation. Another somewhat surprising point is that twice in the history of the family in America it was not the oldest son who inherited the property, though he was still alive and knowledgeable about the craft. George, for instance, was the third of William M.’s seven sons.

<sup>17</sup>Scott T. Swank, ed., *Arts of the Pennsylvania Germans* (New York: Norton, 1983), p. viii.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>The largest horn-comb operations in the United States during the 19th century were the Anglo-American owned Noyes Comb Co. of Mass. and N.Y. and the Noyes-Walton Co. of Newburyport, Mass. which closed in 1933. The only other 20th-century comb maker in Penna. was the J. W. Walton Sons’ Horn Comb Co. of Philadelphia.

<sup>20</sup>Evidence suggesting that comb making was known in Germany comes from Jost Amman’s engraving and *Meistersinger* Hans Sachs’s poem of *Der Kammacher* in their *Standebuch* and from Doyle’s account (p. 15) of how Enoch Noyes founded the comb industry in America: “As [Noyes] sat absorbed in his work one day [in the late 1780s] he heard a footstep and looking up saw a stranger [a Hessian soldier from Burgoyne’s army].... He asked Noyes for employment and opened a dusty and grimy knapsack from which he brought forth the curious tools which he as a comb-maker had used in Germany.... He not only taught Noyes how combs were made in Europe but gave him tools which he had brought with him from Germany. Together, they evolved the first comb, called a ‘case comb,’ made in this country. So it happened that although a Hessian did not make the first comb in America, he made possible the rapid development of the comb industry.”

<sup>21</sup>For the importance of the notion of a “core aesthetic,” see Charles L. Perdue, “‘What Made Little Sister Die?’: The Core Aesthetic and Personal Culture of a Traditional Singer,” *Western Folklore*, 54:2, April 1995, pp. 141-163.

<sup>22</sup>Though Atlee’s father also made a wide variety of products from horn, he was not forced to expand his business to include anything except comb making. A combination of creativity, artistry and demand made Atlee into a versatile hornsmith as well as comb maker.

<sup>23</sup>James Arnold, *The Shell Book of Country Crafts* (London: John Bakers 1968), p. 272.

<sup>24</sup>On his specially rigged lathe, Mr. Crouse developed new turning operations for buttons, beads, and cups, which must go through a series of seven different lathe processes. Inventing a process for shrinking a horn bottom into the cup, he replaced the old method of gluing a separate piece, often of wood, onto the cup. Mr. Crouse was also the first person to use a machine to hole buttons with a specially designed four-spindle drill. His combination backer-and-beveler, used for placement of metal backs on the combs, and the special tumblers for polishing buttons and beads are two of his other inventions for horn breaking, or hornsmithing.

<sup>25</sup>As Atlee points out, there are family members who know how to make combs well enough, including his son Herman and his son-in-law Robert S. Boyer, but their unfamiliarity with machine adjustments precludes their taking up the occupation. The hornsmith, Sam Blood, has also apprenticed with Atlee in comb making and now that horns are again available domestically, he may be able to prolong the life of the craft; unfortunately, lost will be the family folklore aesthetic that drove its survival for so long.



# "LIME AND MANURE": Agricultural Practices Among the Pennsylvania Germans

by Amos W. Long, Jr.

Most of the Germans who began migrating to America in late 17th century were farmers; starting in 1683 they came to Pennsylvania largely from the region known as the Palatinate, located in the area of the Rhine and Neckar Rivers. At the invitation of William Penn they came to the New World—and particularly Pennsylvania—because of the opportunity to acquire land and in order to escape religious persecution, feudal control, and continuous warfare in Europe. Those who arrived in Penn's colony before the American Revolution and their descendants became known as the Pennsylvania Germans or the Pennsylvania "Dutch," a misnomer for *Deutsch* (German). Entering through the port of Philadelphia, some eventually found their way into other areas of Pennsylvania, particularly the southeastern and south-central part of the state, and through the Cumberland and Shenandoah Valleys southward into Georgia, westward into Ohio and beyond, and northward into Ontario, Canada.

The area the emigrants left was known as the garden region of Europe, and the newcomers were recognized for their efficient farming methods. They came from a tradition of walled agricultural villages where dwelling house and livestock quarters were under the same roof and enclosed within a walled courtyard, and where cropland was scattered around the community. In Pennsylvania they found the productivity of the soil and the topography similar to that of their homeland, but now the farmer lived and worked on his own land, and house and barn were separate and usually located some distance from another settlement. Generally conservative, Pennsylvania Germans tended to live among themselves and to marry within their group (many were pacifists), retaining many of their own customs, traditions, and superstitions, as well as their native language, a dialect which persists to this day, particularly among older members of the community and among the Plain religious sects. Some of the farm and land-use practices described herein were also employed by other ethnic groups, but many were attributed first to these frugal, dependable, and hardworking early German settlers.

## CLEARING THE LAND

After a site was selected and the title of ownership assured, the early Pennsylvania German settler's first priority was to clear the land of trees, brush, and stones. Clearing the forest proved to be very dangerous work, and many men were injured or killed by falling trees. The German practice of cutting trees, rather than girdling them as did the English and Scots-Irish, allowed them to put the land to the best possible use in the shortest possible

time. With a team of horses or oxen and using axes, cant and brush hooks, chains, brush scythes, and perhaps a saw, the trees were felled, their branches cut off, and their trunks cut into lengths that could be handled. The wood was used for various building purposes or for fuel. There was little or no market for timber, but since the bark of the hemlock and certain other trees was used for tanning there was some demand for it, and it was peeled off with a chisel-like tool called a spud.

The brush, the smaller trees, the tree limbs, and any unsuitable logs (known collectively as "slashing") were piled up and allowed to dry. Then, when weather conditions were suitable and enough family members available to control the fire and keep it from spreading, the piles were burned. (The ashes from such fires proved invaluable in improving the productivity of the soil.) The next job was removing the tree stumps, and this was done by chopping, grubbing, and burning—hard, grueling work. Teams of horses or oxen were also used to pull stumps, and even dynamite was used in extreme cases. In later years there were many different kinds of stump extractors used, some operated manually, others by horsepower or steam engine. Stumps which were not removed deteriorated very slowly, many lasting from ten to fifty years or more.

Even after the ground had been cleared of trees, brush, and stumps there were still roots, stones, knolls, and hollows with which to contend, and many years were required to level off such areas and make them suitable for easy and proper cultivation. Referred to as "new ground," these acres of virgin forest cleared for cultivation would soon be reforested if not used for farming or grazing. This ground-clearing process was an extremely important one; the more farmland available, the more crops that could be grown and the more animals that could be kept to produce the fertilizer that made that farmland even more productive.

In addition to providing the early settlers with building materials and fuel as it was cleared for farming, the forest was also the source of meat, fur, fruit, nuts, and maple syrup, as well as many different kinds of leaves, barks, and plants which were gathered in season and used for teas and for medicinal purposes. Even today the woodlot continues to be an important consideration when buying or selling a farm. Except in some areas of intensive cultivation, almost every farm has one on or adjacent to the property or on mountain land nearby. The amount of woodland varies from farm to farm depending on location and size, ranging from one to many acres. Properly managed, such woodlots continue to provide logs for structural timber, fencing, and fuel.





*Located on a farm near Bellegrove in Lebanon County, this pond has an ice house at the far end. (All photographs by the author)*



*Early pump in a Lancaster County stream used for irrigation and other farm purposes.*



*Farm meadow and stream with masses of water-cress; located in Franklin County.*

## MEADOWS

On the Pennsylvania German farm a piece of lightly forested lowland with a stream running through it was set aside for use as a meadow. Such streams, and the spring or springs from which they flowed, were important assets since they supplied the farmer's family and livestock with much needed clean fresh water. In fact, they often helped determine the location of the first dwelling, but if such sources were not immediately at hand other measures were necessary. If the source of water was at a higher elevation than the place where it was to be used, it could of course be delivered through a pipe by gravity flow. If, however, it needed to be lifted from a lower to a higher elevation, a hydraulic ram was used, its power and efficiency determined by the fall of water where it was located: The greater the volume of water, the greater the amount of water the ram could lift, and the greater the height it could lift it.

German farmers were among the first to both drain and irrigate meadowland. While the roots of meadow grasses

needed an adequate supply of water, if too much of the plant was covered crop loss resulted, so excess water was carried away in drainage ditches. For irrigation purposes, water was diverted from springs, streams, or ponds in narrow channels during the driest months of summer. (This sometimes led to problems when the stream flowed through more than one farm and the water had to be shared.) These channels—or ditches—varied in width and depth depending on the volume of water that needed to be moved through them; sliding wooden gates called sluices were used to control the flow. If the meadow was kept free of livestock (which would not only eat the grass but would also damage the ditches) such an irrigation system would allow the farmer to scythe the meadow two or three times a year, afterward raking the grass into small piles to dry. In the 19th century meadow irrigation was increasingly neglected and then discontinued, due in part to the time and labor involved in cleaning, maintaining, and repairing the ditches (muskrats did damage to them), and due in part also to the introduction of grasses such as timothy and red clover and the establishment of permanent pastures.

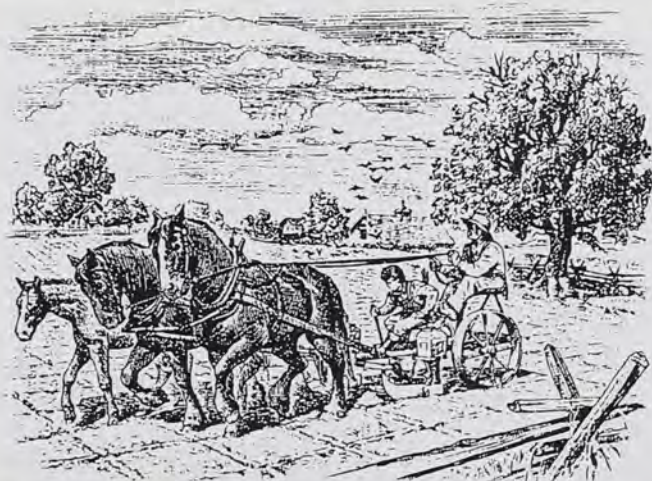




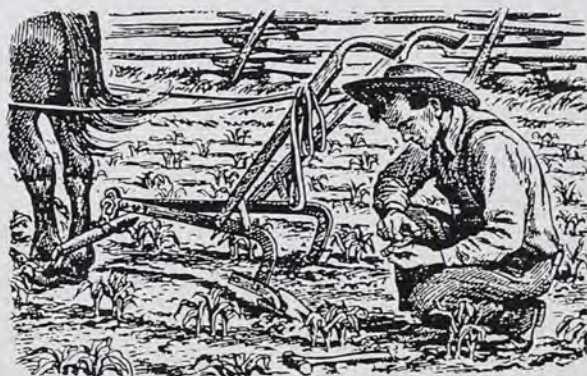
The sulky plow, which could be ridden, turned more soil in less time than did earlier plows.



The manure spreader saved time and labor and distributed its contents fairly evenly. (All illustrations by Walter Calvert; reprinted by special permission from the *Farm Journal*. Copyright held by the *Farm Journal*.)



The grain planter allowed for more even sowing which meant better crop yields with less effort than had previously been necessary.



The corn cultivator replaced the hoe for loosening the ground and killing the weeds around the plants.

### CULTIVATING THE LAND

If newly cleared land was not used for grazing a grain crop was usually grown on it. Very early farmers loosened the ground by digging and hoeing; later a spiral-shaped shovel plow was used to make a continuous furrow. On newly cleared land plowing was a difficult task limited to about an acre a day; each year it became easier since there were fewer roots due to destruction and decay. The plowed ground had to be leveled and smoothed, and in the early days this was done by dragging a bundle of limbs and brush which had been fastened together across it; later a wooden frame fitted with wood pins or iron or steel spikes was used. The field was then sown by hand with a grain—usually oats—in May and harvested in August; in September it was planted again, this time with wheat.

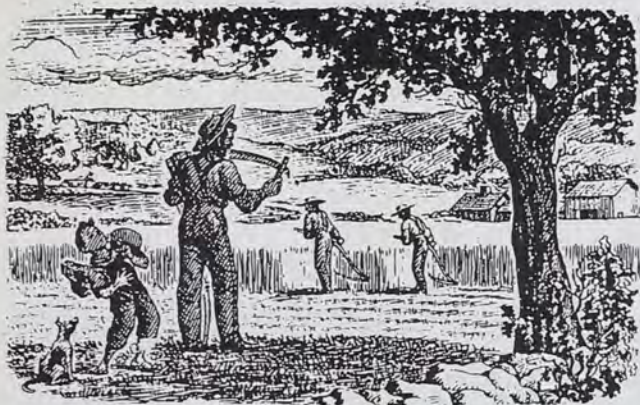
For cultivating, the shovel plow was replaced by a plowshare, which was superseded by a moldboard plow whose curved surface caused the soil to be thrown to the right and left of the furrow; it was replaced by other plows, among them the riding disc and gang plow. The spring-tooth harrow took the place of earlier smoothing devices;

the riding cultivator was used instead of a hoe to loosen the ground and kill the weeds around corn plants that, when mature, were now cut by a corn binder rather than by hand. For making hay the scythe and hand rake were replaced by the mowing machine, side-delivery rake, and hay loader. The grain cradle and hand rake were eliminated by a grain binder which cut the grain and tied it into sheaves which were stacked and later run through a grain combine.

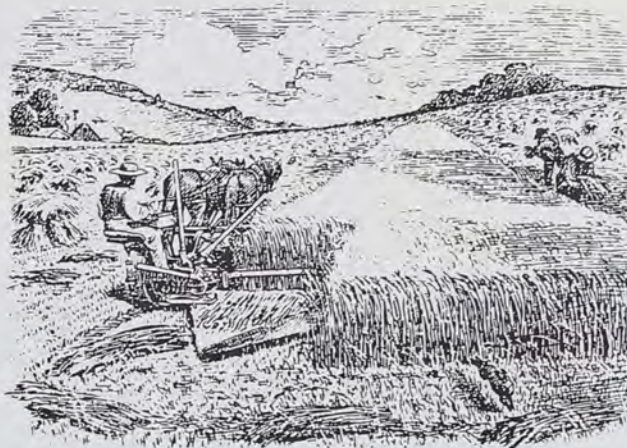
\* \* \*

Among German farmers in Europe the traditional method used to improve the soil was known as the *drei Felder wirtschaft*—the three-field management system.<sup>1</sup> In this system, after a field had been used for a certain length of time (usually three years but possibly as long as seven) it was allowed to lie fallow for a year. This rest helped to restore lost nutrients and increase future yields, but it also reduced the amount of livestock feed produced, and this in turn reduced the number of animals that could be kept. German farmers in Pennsylvania, however, did not let their land lie idle, but rather sowed it with clover, a plant which increases soil fertility and crop yield. Clover's

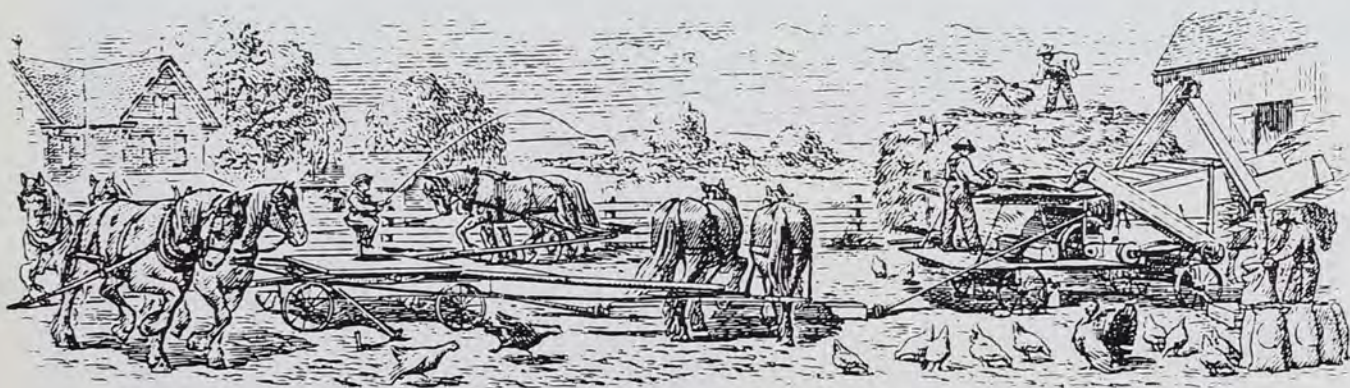




*Cutting grain with a scythe was a laborious and time-consuming job.*



*The mower-reaper meant no more cutting and binding grain by hand.*



*The horse-powered threshing machine greatly speeded up the threshing process.*

deep, clinging roots bring moisture, nitrogen, and other elements to the surface to nourish the soil and, when plowed under, provide additional nourishment to the upper layer of earth. Because of its importance to them, Pennsylvania Germans adopted the red clover as their “national flower.”

Equally as important to them as “green manure” (plowed under clover and grasses) and animal manure in maintaining soil fertility, was lime. Indeed, “lime and manure” was a common slogan among the Pennsylvania Germans,<sup>2</sup> who were among the first to burn and use lime as a soil amendment.<sup>3</sup> Regular and careful application of lime helps neutralize the acid condition of neglected and depleted soil; its use was a contributing factor in the transformation of agriculture in early Pennsylvania. When possible, German settlers laid claim to land that had already been cleared and cultivated; land on which previous owners, usually English or Scots-Irish, could not survive because of soil depletion but which they were able to make productive and profitable.

German-American farmers were also among the first to practice strip plowing, planting each strip with a different crop (usually grass or grain between a root crop). Later, fields were plowed following the contour of the land, with each contour strip planted with an appropriate crop. Pennsylvania Germans also learned the value of rotating crops. The order of crop rotation varied, but generally a grain was planted, then grass which was plowed under, and then corn. The grass was sown with a grain in the spring and allowed to take over after the grain was harvested; it was ready for cutting the next season. All of these practices—strip and contour plowing and crop rotation—helped prevent soil erosion and depletion.

The size of farm fields was largely determined by such factors as acreage, topography, layout, roadways, and the purpose for which the land was to be used. In later years the average varied between four and six acres. Fields were frequently referred to by location (front, back, end, middle, hill, and so forth) and were so situated that it was not necessary to drive through one in order to get to another.





*Early Lancaster County formal garden divided into four equal areas with a circle in the center.*



*Berks County farm garden with remains of a main center path; note picket and hedge fence enclosures.*

## GARDENS, ORCHARDS, AND YARDS

Pennsylvania Germans were known for establishing gardens and orchards soon after settlement. Except, perhaps, for the heavier work of digging or plowing, the garden was the responsibility of the women in the family, and they were always eager to give visitors a tour of it, in much the same way their menfolk were desirous of showing off their animals. While engaged in working the soil or in sowing, planting, or harvesting or in a host of other agricultural and household activities, members of these immigrant families (and their descendants) relied considerably upon and were much influenced by religious beliefs, astrological signs and symbols, almanac information, and superstitions. Concerning the last named, "virtually all the superstition had been imported from the homeland where it had been handed down from one

generation to another by word of mouth."<sup>4</sup> For example, "it was believed that if a man ate . . . (potatoes) every day for several days he would not live seven days more";<sup>5</sup> and that one should never "take an old broom into a new house, as bad luck was sure to follow. It must be a new broom and first carried across the meadow, to avert any evil consequences."<sup>6</sup>

Agricultural practices were governed by such lore as the injunction against gardening "between Good Friday and Easter or on Ascension Day,"<sup>7</sup> and by the belief that "beans and peas should be planted in the sign of the twins,"<sup>8</sup> and that one should "plant cabbage and tobacco plants on the hundredth day."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, crops which were harvested above ground were to be planted when the horns of the moon pointed upward (between new moon and full moon), while those harvested beneath the ground were to be planted when the horns of the moon pointed downward (between full moon and new moon).





*Board-enclosed garden pathway on a farm in Lebanon County.*

There is a near-endless list of such beliefs, but they were not the only considerations when Pennsylvania Germans planned and laid out a household garden. Factors such as soil conditions, topography, drainage, and exposure were concerns when deciding on a site; the usual location was to the rear or on the warm side of the house. Most of these gardens were square or rectangular in shape and had four to six beds. There was a path around the entire garden and paths intersecting the beds to eliminate the necessity of walking on cultivated ground. Movable boards placed flat on the ground in the garden area between the paths were used to stand or kneel on while seeding, planting, weeding or cultivating. Only hand tools were used to prepare the garden for planting, and wood ashes as well as manure were used to enhance the soil; birds were a problem so scarecrows were a familiar sight.

More formal gardens were divided into four equal areas with a circular area in the center. The circle usually had a large yucca plant or a boxwood or similar shrub surrounded by herbs and flowering plants; the main beds were used to grow vegetables. There was a path around the circular bed and around each of the four other beds; small fruits, herbs, flowers, and ornamental plants were frequently planted on the outside of these walkways. The garden on the property where I grew up was divided into six beds by two paths which intersected a lengthwise path through the middle. Such paths, approximately two feet wide, were dug down about twelve inches and slanted at the sides to prevent erosion. In some gardens the soil was retained in the beds by wide boards fastened horizontally to stakes dug into the ground on the edge of the path. Some

walkways had a layer of sand, sawdust, bark, or sod to help eliminate weeds and keep the surface dry by providing better drainage. Now largely eliminated because of changed methods of cultivation, garden paths required much time and labor to maintain.

The size of the household garden was determined to some extent by the size and needs of the family, and so too was the size of the orchard. As soon as possible after a shelter had been built and a garden established, an area nearby was planted with fruit trees. Most were apple trees, although pear, cherry, peach, and quince trees might be interspersed throughout the orchard or in the yard surrounding the house. Many times there were also beehives in the area. The trees required little attention—insects were not as numerous as they are nowadays and birds and other insect enemies were more plentiful.

Most orchards bordered directly upon the yard, which was the area immediately surrounding the house and garden. In the yard were the outbuildings connected with household tasks (as, for example, the bakehouse); shade trees; grape arbors; and many kinds of ornamental and flowering plants. The barnyard was the area around the barn and the buildings related to it which housed livestock, crops, and equipment. Immediately in front of the stable was a stone wall or rail fence enclosure where animals could get fresh air and exercise during the months they were not put out to pasture. This enclosure had a large watering trough and, when the threshing was finished, oftentimes a large pile of straw; used for animal bedding throughout the year, by spring the straw would be replaced by a large pile of manure which would later be spread on the fields.





*Portion of a Lycoming County stump fence*



*Lebanon County hedge fence*

## FENCES

Since “*Zaum*,” the German word for “fence” has other meanings as well, Pennsylvania Germans made “*die Fens*” a part of the dialect.<sup>10</sup> Fences were used not only to keep livestock in and wild animals out, but also to subdivide fields and mark boundary lines. Some of the first fences then were temporary ones, built around the perimeter of a field with materials being cleared from the forest. The stone pile fence (*die Schteehaufefens*), for example, was a continuous pile of stones dumped along the edge of a clearing or field; the stump fence (*die Shtumbefens*) was a row of stumps piled close to and on top of one another, their roots facing upward; and the log fence (*die Bluckafens*)

was constructed of logs set vertically into the ground or laid one on top of the other with upright supports at the ends or at intervals.

Another early type of enclosure was the brush or hedge fence (*die Heckefens*), although it was not as common in America as it was in Germany and throughout Europe. Brush and hedge (Osage orange and the multiflora rose were generally used in Pennsylvania) fences not only restrained animals, they acted as windbreaks and snow fences, promoted soil and game conservation, and enhanced the natural beauty of the land. Ditches, too, could be used to make an enclosure; usually four to six feet deep and nearly as wide, the ground from them was thrown on the outside edge and this was hard work. Among Pennsylvania Germans this was the least-used type of barrier.





*Early stone drywall in Lebanon County*



*Post-and-rail fence along a farm lane in Lebanon County; many such fences were four or five rails high.*



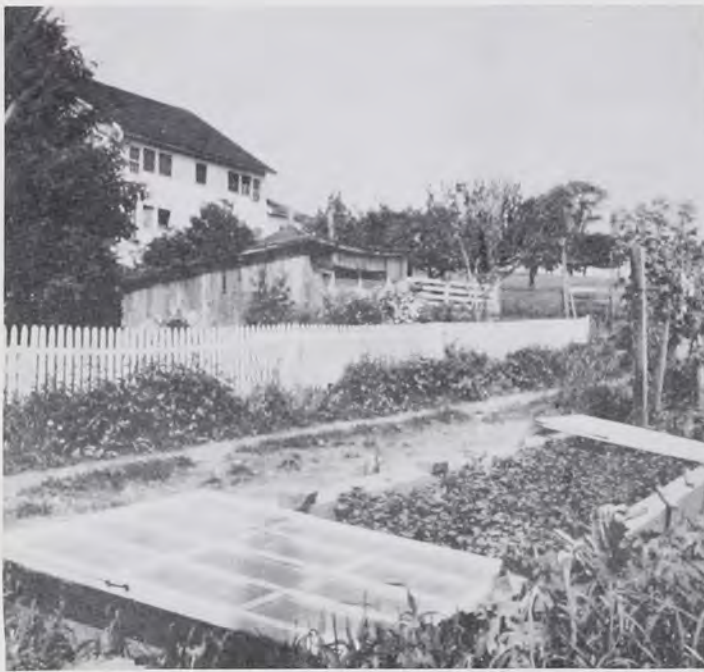
*Berks County stake-and-rider (zigzag) fence*

A retaining wall as well as a fence, the stone wall (*die Schteemauer*) was the most durable of all barriers. Approximately two feet wide and several feet high, these early walls were set up without mortar and required little or no maintenance when properly constructed. As stones were removed from the ground they were loaded onto a stone boat—a horse-drawn sled or drag consisting of a rough board platform on low runners—and then hauled to the work site. Most commonly limestones or sandstones, they were laid in two parallel rows with the largest near the bottom;

the center and open spaces were filled with smaller stones. Using few or no tools the stones were fitted in a way that bound them tightly and insured a rigid, well-balanced structure. Sometimes a miniature board or shingle coping covered the top as protection against the elements when the wall enclosed a special area such as a family burial plot.

Probably the most picturesque of all the early fences was the stake-and-rider or zigzag fence (*der Schtaakefens*). Varying in height from three to as many as eight rails,





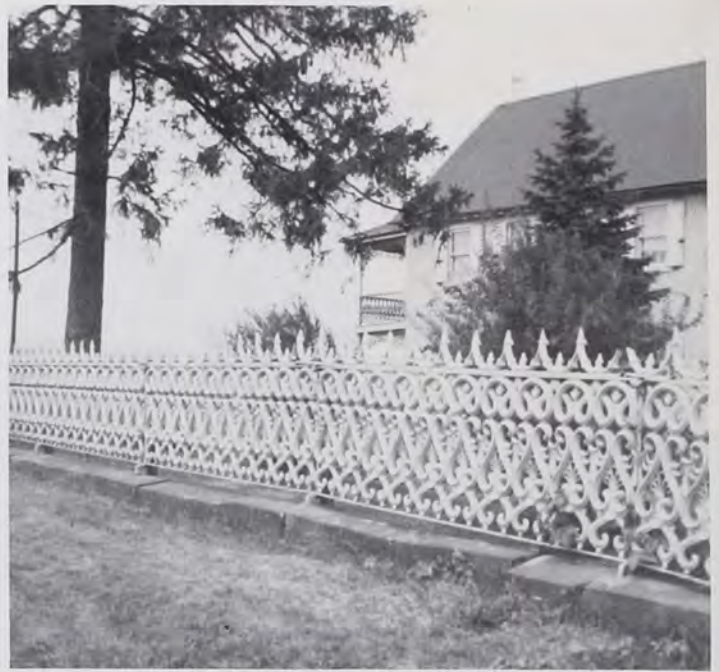
A picket fence separates the yard and garden on this Lebanon County farm.

the end of the lowest rail in each section or panel rested on a flat stone or on a piece of heavy, flat timber; the remaining rails were laid alternately at right angles, one on top of another. The sections were supported by two rails six or seven feet long set at an angle to form an "X." The design was easily adapted to different uses: if built to restrain sheep, pigs, or geese rather than horses or cattle, for example, the rails would be closer together and the fence not as high. The worm fence (*die Warremfens*) or snake fence (*die Schlangefens*) was closely related to the stake-and-rider fence but was built closer to the ground and the rails were thinner; it was used mostly to confine small animals.

Since they required a great deal of timber and wasted much potential farmland, these zigzag-type fences were only practical to build when wood was readily available and land plentiful and relatively cheap. When that was no longer the case they were replaced by the post-and-rail fence (*die Poscht und Riggelfens*) which was sturdier, required less space and less timber, and was easier to keep clear of brush and weeds. Another wood fence, the pale or picket fence (*die Glabbordfens*), used to enclose house, garden, and lawn areas, was generally whitewashed to make it more attractive. In later years more successful Pennsylvania German farmers used wrought iron fences of various and elaborate designs.

\* \* \*

German settlers in America—and their descendants—were mindful of and careful to abide by the Biblical injunction to be good stewards of that which had been given to them. This awareness, and the sense of obligation it imposed, was reflected in their efforts to clear the land



This Lebanon County iron fence is set in red sandstone blocks.

and make it productive; in their constant striving to maintain and increase the fertility of the soil; and in the orderliness and cleanliness of their land and buildings. Buildings and fences were kept in repair and brush and weeds were kept under control. The energies and skills of several generations were often required to construct the sturdy and convenient buildings that housed their families and their livestock,<sup>11</sup> yet there was great satisfaction in knowing that after years of toil and sacrifice a much improved farm would be passed on to succeeding generations. And that has indeed been the case, for a number of such farms are still occupied and worked by descendants of these early settlers.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>David G. Williams, "Lime Kilns in the Lower Jordan Valley," *Lehigh County Historical Society Proceedings* (Allentown 1952), Vol. XIX, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 1640-1840* (Harrisburg, 1950), p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 504.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>6</sup>W. J. Hoffman, "Folk Lore of the Pennsylvania Germans," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. II (Boston and New York, 1889), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>Edwin Miller Fogel, *Beliefs and Superstitions of the Pennsylvania Germans* (Phila., 1915), p. 198 No. 972 and p. 248 No. 1287.

<sup>8</sup>Cyrus H. Eshleman, "The Moon's Signs in Almanacs," "S Pennsylvaniafawnisch Deitsch Eck," *The Morning Call*, (Allentown, March 26, 1938).

<sup>9</sup>Preston A. Barba, ed., "S-Pennsylvaniafawnisch Deitsch Eck," *The Morning Call*, (Allentown, April 4, 1936).

<sup>10</sup>For a more complete discussion, see Amos W. Long, Jr., "Fences in Rural Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Folklife*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 30-35.

<sup>11</sup>For information on Pennsylvania German bank buildings see Amos W. Long, Jr., "Bank (Multi-Level) Structures in Rural Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Folklife*, Vol. 2, pp. 31-39, also *The Pennsylvania German Family Farm*, (Breinigsville, Pa., 1972).



# ALCOA, NEW KENSINGTON: "IT WAS MORE THAN A JOB . . . IT WAS A WAY OF LIFE"

by Christine M. Mueseler



*Chemist Henry Ryba, a fifty-year veteran at Alcoa, displays one of the shop flags used by different company departments in New Kensington parades. (All photographs courtesy of the*

*Folklife Documentation Center for Gender Studies, Seton Hill College, Greensburg, Pa.)*

Since aluminum, first isolated in 1825, is not obtained by the smelting of its ores as are many common metals, another method had to be found to produce it. That method—the electrolytic fission of aluminum oxide—was discovered by twenty-two-year-old Charles Martin Hall in 1886. Hall's discovery, an inexpensive way of processing the metal, launched the aluminum industry in the United States.<sup>1</sup> That industry became a part of America's "second industrial revolution" which was characterized by capital-intensive, technology-base enterprises.

## **NEW KENSINGTON: "THE ALUMINUM CITY"**

Hall's electrolytic smelting process was first introduced in Pittsburgh when metallurgist Alfred E. Hunt and a group

of investors from the city raised \$20,000 to finance the Pittsburgh Reduction Company, predecessor of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) in 1888.<sup>2</sup> Stock-book records show that Andrew W. and Richard B. Mellon also became directors of the business when they acquired stock in the company in January, 1890. The Mellons' first connection with Pittsburgh Reduction was in their capacity as bankers: When the company's officers needed \$4,000 to meet an overdue note at another bank, the Mellons toured the plant (located on Smallman Street in the city's Strip District) and made a quick decision to grant a loan sufficient to pay off the debt and provide working capital.

Three years later it was obvious that the Smallman Street plant was inadequate, since production had increased from fifty pounds of aluminum a day to ten times that



amount. Consequently, in 1891 the Burrell Improvement Company, a real estate firm in which the Mellons had an interest, offered Pittsburgh Reduction a \$10,000 cash bonus if the company would relocate to New Kensington, Pennsylvania, twenty miles northeast of Pittsburgh on the Allegheny River.<sup>3</sup> According to Charles Martin Hall, other incentives included the offer of free land, the availability of cheap coal, and no taxes. The Burrell Company apparently owned land in New Kensington, which did not have a single heavy industry at the time,<sup>4</sup> and the Mellons believed the plant would spark interest in residential real estate there.<sup>5</sup>

The New Kensington Works was situated on a riverside strip of land which was bounded on the east by the Indian Run branch of the Allegheny Valley Railroad and which extended down from the Brownsville Plate Glass Company on the south to Eleventh Street on the north; a three-and-a-half acre tract. The business quickly contributed to the substantial economic and social growth of the community, and only five years after Charles Martin Hall discovered the electrolytic process, the town became the cradle of the aluminum industry in America: "When you came across the river on the New Kensington bridge, there was a big sign on the side of the building that said, 'Welcome to New Kensington, the Aluminum City.'" <sup>6</sup>

After building a larger plant in Niagara Falls, New York, in 1896, the company stopped the production of aluminum in New Kensington. Even so the plant continued to expand, and in 1901 the United States Aluminum Company was incorporated for the manufacture of cooking vessels, with the Aluminum Cooking Utensil Company being commissioned to distribute the merchandise. In 1902 the New Kensington Works covered fifteen acres and its many buildings comprised 173,000 square feet of work space where 300 employees made special alloys and ingots, castings, sheet rod and bar, wire, tube, rivets, and cooking utensils.<sup>7</sup> By the time its controlling patents expired in 1909, Alcoa had achieved an unrivaled position in the industry, reducing the production price of aluminum from the 1886 price of eight dollars a pound to thirty-three cents a pound.

Through technical progress and sales efforts, Alcoa created an exceptional demand for aluminum. A number of new products were developed and the company entered a period of rapid growth:<sup>8</sup> In 1915 an impressive building was erected to house the Aluminum Cooking Utensil Company; in that year, too, a foil mill, a tube mill, and an extrusion plant were completed on a twenty-six-acre site that had been purchased in nearby Arnold; land was acquired on Freeport Road for the Aluminum Club House, a residence for unmarried male technical and professional employees; and, in 1919, the Research Bureau was formally organized under the direction of Dr. Francis C. Frary.<sup>9</sup> The New Kensington Works also began producing aluminum bronze powder, used primarily for explosives,

and production quickly accelerated to meet the demand created by World War I.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1920s, the New Kensington Works covered seventy-five acres, had over one million square feet of manufacturing floor space, and more than three thousand employees;<sup>11</sup> it continued to expand throughout the decade.

### ALCOA'S DECLINE IN NEW KENSINGTON

Because of vigorous antitrust legislation, Alcoa was under close government scrutiny almost from its inception. In 1912 the Department of Justice felt the Company had violated the Sherman Act, but that dispute ended quickly when Alcoa agreed to discontinue certain practices.<sup>12</sup> In 1937, however, the Justice Department filed another antitrust suit, and this court case lasted more than thirteen years. Ultimately the government ruled that Alcoa had monopolized the aluminum ingot market,<sup>13</sup> and the Company was forced to give up some major holdings which later became the foundation of Alcan, the British Aluminum Company, Reynolds Metals Company, Kaiser Aluminum, and other United States aluminum companies as well: "The big plants [which] had been developed [by Alcoa] to handle material requirements during World War II . . . some of them were given lock, stock, and barrel essentially to the new competitors."<sup>14</sup>

The years between 1946 and 1950 were difficult for Alcoa as the company learned to cope with its competitors and with the threat of market loss posed by alternative materials such as plastics, stainless steel, nickel alloys, and magnesium. The Company responded with a strategy of expansion and high-volume production, announcing in 1947 the relocation of some of its plants to Chillicothe, Ohio. Then, in 1949, a new smelting plant was opened in Point Comfort, Texas; new fabricating facilities for sheet and plate were built in Davenport, Iowa; and a plant to manufacture rod, wire, and cable was constructed in Vancouver, Washington.<sup>15</sup> Despite this aggressive strategy—which marked the beginning of the migration of the aluminum industry from New Kensington—production fell steadily, from more than eighty-two million pounds in 1956 to less than thirty-four million pounds in 1960.<sup>16</sup>

By the early 1960s aluminum prices had softened and profit margins on existing products had narrowed. Business was still brisk, but since it was becoming more difficult to make money, Alcoa decided to concentrate on research and development in order to create new products and new markets. Ground was broken for the Alcoa Technical Center in 1962: With more than twelve hundred scientists, engineers, and technicians at work in nine buildings (each accommodating a different facet of research) there, it remains the largest and most productive light-metal research-and-development facility in the world.<sup>17</sup>

The Technical Center was of little benefit to Alcoa's union workforce in New Kensington, however, as their



plant continued to deteriorate. One observer recalls that in 1968, just prior to the closing of the fabricating-and-processing mill, the New Kensington Works “. . . was making a little bit of everything. [The workers] were making and assembling telephone booths, Wearever cookware, large industrial colanders, and rocket and missile parts. It was a conglomerate of all sorts of processes and products. The number of employees who were actually working here had dwindle down to around a few hundred people.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, by 1970 most of Alcoa's manufacturing operations had been relocated to other sites throughout the United States and Canada. John Kane recalled the situation faced by the company: “[The plant] was very old and the labor pool was becoming very expensive. The company felt it could do a lot of the work at other plants for a lot cheaper labor rate. It was the Union as well as the obsolescence of the plant [which brought about the relocation].”<sup>19</sup> Stanley Pelczarski, a thirty-seven-year veteran in the mill, agrees that labor costs played a large part in the decision to close the facility: “They shut down the plant I think because of wages. When they turned around and started taking CU [cooking utensil unit] to Davenport, they came up and said it's because of cheaper wages up there.”<sup>20</sup> That was undoubtedly true: Of all of Alcoa's plants, only New Kensington had an essentially urban work force; most of the company's plants were located in rural areas where union activities and urban pressures were weak and where agricultural wages made the relatively high pay of industrial employment seem lavish.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1960s and the 1970s the entire New Kensington area was hard pressed. The Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation's conduit division closed and in Arnold a large glass works, American Saint Gobain, discontinued operations.<sup>22</sup> Deindustrialization was upon New Kensington, but while many residents connected the economic depression in the community directly to the relocation of the Alcoa plant, for the most part residents continued to see the Company in a positive light. This dichotomy is best explained by Phillip Morton: “You had Alcoa making a business decision that ripped a very tightly knit social fabric that they [Alcoa] had really contributed to weaving. Anger is not the right word; disappointment, disillusionment, are better. Intellectually, most people understood that you built a plant with a life span. The plant was here for eighty years, and it just got old and worn out, and it was shut down.” But he goes on to add that, “its the emotional side that is hard for people to live with. When you get into the fact of why people are angry it has nothing to do with closing the plant; it has to do with the fact that their kids can no longer live on the next block. For the older people their whole way of life was built on the assumption ‘that my family will stay in this area because they can work for Alcoa.’”<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, Alcoa workers made a lifetime commitment to the Company, and their years of devoted service were

rewarded with increased pensions and health insurance. The lack of resentment and the air of civility which characterized the closing were due in part to these financial rewards and to the fact that the shutdown of the New Kensington Works was a gradual one: Older workers were offered incentives to take early retirement, and as workers retired they were not replaced.<sup>25</sup> As Gino Marotto pointed out: “When Alcoa closed the plant in the 1970s, most people had enough time in that they just got phased out. The company gave them extra money and they got their social security and they just retired, most of them. The ones that were younger just got jobs elsewhere.”<sup>26</sup>

Since Alcoa was the dominant industry in New Kensington (at one time employing more than twenty-five percent of its residents) for almost seventy-five years, it is not surprising that the plant closure affected so many living there and in neighboring Arnold, Lower Burrell, and other surrounding communities. The company had provided several generations with employment, and it is virtually impossible to find residents who were not affected in some way by the relocation of the plant. Mr. Marotto, for example, talked about the once-bustling downtowns of Arnold and New Kensington, recalling that at one time “. . . you couldn't walk along the sidewalk on a Saturday night. . . it was really a chore. . . because you couldn't get anywhere, you were just in a crowd all the time. [The population of] New Kensington was about 25,000 at its peak and [almost] 12,000 in Arnold, so that's like 37,000 people. I'll bet the towns together [today] aren't as big [as New Kensington was then].”<sup>27</sup>

With the shutdown of Alcoa's fabrication and processing plants came the closing of many local stores and shops. Sister Lois Sculco described the change: “When the Alcoa plant closed . . . what I saw . . . was a lot of poverty in New Kensington, a lot of unemployment. The downtown, like lots of downtowns in small towns, is basically gone in terms of businesses.”<sup>28</sup> In summary, a loss of factory jobs; a loss of business for downtown merchants which resulted in many store closings; and migration from the area as younger people left to find work; these are some of the results of the closing of the Alcoa Works and the shutdown of other manufacturing plants in the region.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COMPANY, THE WORKFORCE, AND THE COMMUNITY

Perhaps the most notable feature of Alcoa's long association with the New Kensington area was the close-knit relationship which developed between the company, its employees, and the community, largely because almost every family living in the area had one or two members working there. John Kane, for example, remembers that when he was a young boy, all his “friends' fathers worked for Alcoa. We didn't think that anybody in the world worked for anybody else. Either you worked for Alcoa or



*Almost every family in New Kensington had one or more family members working at Alcoa. James Mazzotta, now 103 years old, began working for Alcoa in 1907 and retired in 1957; each of his eight children worked for the Company at one time or another.*



you operated a grocery store that helped support the people who worked for Alcoa. . . . In my case I had my father, three uncles and when my sister graduated from high school, she also went to work for Alcoa.”<sup>29</sup>

In the Mazzotta family the situation was much the same. James Mazzotta, who began working as a polisher in the cooking utensil plant in 1907, retired from Alcoa in 1957, after fifty years of service. Each of his eight children worked for the company at one time or another with two, sons Bob and Vic, pursuing careers with Alcoa and having twenty-eight and twenty-seven years of service respectively.<sup>30</sup> The experiences of the Kane and Mazzotta families are typical of many in the region, and this process of one generation following another into the works established continuity and created strong bonds within the company and between the company and the community.

As a result of these strong ties, workers identified with the company on a deep emotional level and with an ardent loyalty—expressed throughout the community—akin to allegiance to one’s country or devotion to one’s family: “People would tell you that they were from New Kensington and

in the next breath they would say, ‘And I work for Alcoa.’ They called themselves ‘Alcoans,’ giving themselves a citizenship title.”

One explanation for this fervent devotion can be found in an examination of the Company’s history. It had always been company policy to forestall labor problems by seeking to meet workers’ needs through modest programs such as the voluntary “employment fund ” established in 1908. Alcoa contributed a sum equal to two-and-a-half percent of an employees wages to this fund, which could be drawn on after two years of service. Another such program was the “sick fund,” established to provide financial assistance at the discretion of company committees to “deserving employees” during times of illness.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, since Alcoa routinely granted concessions in wages and working conditions in order to attract workers to dirty jobs in the aluminum mill, the income of workers in the industry has consistently been above the national average for all manufacturing jobs in the United States.<sup>33</sup> Metallurgist Fred Billman, at present a twenty-six veteran with the Company says, “Alcoa has always been up near



the top of the [pay scale of] major U. S. companies, both for salaried and hourly employees. [And] Alcoa, by its own publicity and also by its employees' beliefs, always had one of the better benefit packages."<sup>34</sup>

It was not only Alcoa employees who reaped the benefits of a prosperous institution, all of the community's residents benefited from the relationship with Alcoa. It was the Company and its employees who were putting dollars into the cash registers of local businesses and markets, and it was the Company's middle managers who augmented city government. In the opinion of Elizabeth Blissell, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce for more than thirty-five years, it was they who furnished the support system needed to execute community plans: "They were a real asset in the community because they could go out and raise the money. They were respected. They represented a respected institution. All of the plus factors were in their favor when they went out to do something for the good of the community." She went on to say that "while everybody was lamenting the closing down of the aluminum works, nobody ever said a thing about the thing I was worried about . . . that was that we lost the leadership of that middle management. . . . I felt we could recoup things on the nuts and bolts level, but losing that leadership . . . was a very sad thing as far as I was concerned."<sup>36</sup>

Religious institutions, too, were affected as some church pastors consorted (directly or indirectly) with the Company because the majority of their members were laborers in the plant. One, the well-known Italian Catholic Monsignor Fusco, was even able to obtain the materials necessary to build a new church from Company owners. As one community member explained, "the owners of Alcoa were not Catholic, but I can tell you that the Mellons were on a first-name basis with Monsignor Fusco, to the point that he built his church from their estate."<sup>37</sup> Sr. Lois Sculco's father, an assistant district attorney, procured the land for the new church and she remembers that time well: "In 1942, they began the building of the new church which was close to the site of the old church. That is a very interesting site because they, the Italian construction workers and members of that parish, really built that church. They got the materials from the Mellon Mansion in Pittsburgh and transported them to New Kensington, the stone and the marble and everything."<sup>38</sup> Elated, the Monsignor declared: "Michelangelo had the marble quarries of Italy to build the Sistine Chapel, we had the Mellon Mansion to build Mount St. Peter's."<sup>39</sup>

New Kensington had a large ethnic population, with Italians, Poles, and Syrians predominating, and while employment at Alcoa would ultimately prove to be a unifying factor in the community, the early years were often difficult for immigrants. "Foreigners" would find younger "Americans" being promoted ahead of them, for example.<sup>40</sup> And speaking of promotions, Floyd Greco, the first Italian worker to become part of Alcoa's management,

appreciated the significance of the event and felt a tremendous responsibility to represent the Italian community well. Recognizing the promotion at Sunday services, Monsignor Fusco asked to have a word with Mr. Greco: ". . . he said, 'I understand you are going to be a part of management now. That's nice. I'm proud of you. Don't go monkeying around now. you understand? I don't want you to make mistakes because it is very difficult to get our people a chance.'"<sup>41</sup>

## WOMEN AT ALCOA

Documentation of women's employment in the aluminum industry dates back to 1905. Honoring Frances McSherry, who started with the Cooking Utensil Company in the mailing department on January 3, 1905, the *Alcoa News* described her as "the only girl who has completed a continuous service record of twenty-five years in the employment of the United States Cooking Utensil Company."<sup>42</sup> Lucy Polcyn and Margaret Heidelmeier were drawbench operators in the tube mill who, in 1944, were credited with twenty-two and twenty years of service, respectively.<sup>43</sup>

Over the years women held a wide variety of jobs at the New Kensington Works. A large percentage worked in the seal mill, the foil mill, the tube mill, the extrusion department and the cooking utensil unit. They ran presses, packed and inspected products, made pipes and did laundry, among other jobs. Himself an employee of the Company, Henry Ryba talked about the work his sister did running a machine in the extrusion department: "People thought women just started working lately in factories, but my oldest sister worked in the aluminum company in the 1920s. She worked in extrusions where they take ingot and they make a pipe then keep reducing it."<sup>44</sup>

As a young man in the 1920s, Mr. Ryba sat on the fence across from the plant to watch as workers left the mill; he estimates that at that time "about twenty-five percent of the work force was women."<sup>45</sup> In the 1930s he got a job at the New Kensington plant as a direct result of Alcoa's policy concerning women: "Women were only allowed to work from six in the morning until nine at night. So when the economy got a little better and they wanted to work the seal unit around the clock. . . . men were hired because they needed someone to work at night. So we worked steady from 9 p.m. to 5:30 in the morning to get our eight hours in, then at 5 a.m. the girls would come in. So what we did was the jobs the girls did."<sup>46</sup>

Stanley Pelczarski talks about his sister Mary who worked at the plant from 1932 until the shutdown in 1971: "My sister worked at Alcoa longer than I did. I had thirty-seven years, she had thirty-nine years. She used to work in CU [cooking utensil unit]. She was a wrapper and inspector and all of that. She was everything. During the war she made the noses for the airplanes."<sup>47</sup> He also remembers





*Women working in Alcoa's cooking utensil department. The first woman hired by the Company began work on January 3, 1905.*



*A woman performs a hardness test at Alcoa where, as in most factories, men were paid more than women doing the same job.*

that in the 1920s the woman who lived next door worked at Alcoa: "She worked the 'labor gang' in the laundry room. They had men working in there too, but women took care of all the wash."<sup>48</sup>

In 1932 Ann Ryba Pelczarski began working in the foil mill, but eventually spent the majority of her nine years at Alcoa in the cooking utensil unit where, she remembers, "they didn't train anybody, they just showed you and then they put you on it and if you got hurt then you got hurt. I worked 'single action' where each one had their own press. . . . The presses went real fast and we got paid by the piece. Everybody did."<sup>49</sup>

A good number of the women employed by the Company worked as secretaries. One, Garnet Marotta, was hired by Alcoa directly out of high school in 1950; she began in the mailroom and later became a secretary. Another, Loretto Gatto, hired in 1956, spoke about the high school cooperative program sponsored by Alcoa: ". . . representatives from Alcoa went to the commercial departments at the high school and they would talk to the teachers. The teachers would start at the top of the senior class and send girls for interviews. We would be hired if we passed an extremely difficult test. I was scared because it was my first experience with that kind of thing, plus I was only sixteen. I went down for my interview and I passed. I would go to school in the morning and work at Alcoa in the afternoon."<sup>50</sup>

As was true in most industries in peacetime, there was a clear differentiation between "men's work" and "women's work." Thus, while women were able to work in the seal,

foil, and tube mills and in the extrusion department and cooking utensil unit, jobs in the foundry, sheet mill, powder plant, melting room, and machine shop thirty-two were considered "unsuitable" for them. Henry Ryba worked in almost every part of the New Kensington plant in the 1930s, and he confirmed that certain jobs were deemed inappropriate for women: "When I worked in the sheet mill I don't recall any women; or in the foundry or melting room [either]. That was all heavy, dirty work there."<sup>51</sup>

The situation was different in wartime, however. A number of women entered the workforce during World War I, and many of the unmarried ones kept their jobs when the war ended. In early 1942, when it became clear that the draft would decimate the ranks of male production workers at Alcoa, a number of women flocked to the plant. The 1943 issue of the *Alcoa Warrior* reported that, "the novelty of the present employment of women lies in the increasing number of 'men's jobs' women are taking."<sup>52</sup> The first all-male bastion invaded by them was machine shop thirty-two, where six women began running lathes, drill presses, and various other machines. In the job shop they handled a wide variety of work ranging from the production of utensils for army canteens to the manufacturing of highly specialized aircraft parts. In the powder works at Logans Ferry, described as a "no-women's land" until World War II, women did "men's jobs," unloading aluminum ingots in the receiving and stores department.<sup>53</sup> An increasing number of women also worked as estimators, delineators, and machine tool operators.

The staff of the *Alcoa Warrior* was so impressed with





*Until 1963 married women were barred from working at Alcoa, where this woman is shown assembling and pasting core parts together.*



*During World War II many women took jobs that had traditionally been considered "men's work"; this woman is boring tong-holds in freshly cut aluminum alloy stock for making forgings.*

their accomplishments they dedicated their 1943-44 issue to "Women In Industry," noting: "It is becoming increasingly evident that . . . women can capably and competently carry on many of the activities and functions previously considered exclusive of men."<sup>54</sup> When Alcoa "soldiers" were selected to receive service production medals in 1943, five women were among the honorees: Wilda Waugaman, Alberta Sarver, Margaret Ann Mears, Lucy Polcyn and Margaret Heidelmeier were presented with Army-Navy "E" buttons by a Navy captain during his tour of the New Kensington Works.<sup>55</sup>

Although Alcoa managers had praised the performance of women workers during the war and had taken advantage of their presence to maintain production and delivery schedules, this shift in the labor force was not permanent. The war had not challenged basic assumptions about women's role in society, and when it was over the women employed at the New Kensington Works willingly returned to their traditional role as wives and mothers, viewing their employment in male-dominated occupations as responsive to the needs of a wartime economy. Some single women and widows did retain their positions in the plant, but they were a minority.<sup>65</sup>

Women workers faced a number of discriminatory practices at Alcoa where, as in most factories, the wage differential for men and women was a factor. For example, in the aluminum industry in the 1930s, northern male laborers working in smelting and fabrication made five

cents an hour more than northern women doing the same job.<sup>57</sup> But the usual justification for the difference in wages was the fact that men and women generally had different jobs. Ann Pleczarski and her husband Stanley both worked at Alcoa in the 1930s; she was hired first: "I got twenty-two cents an hour in 1932. Stan started one year later, in 1933, at thirty-five cents an hour. Men got paid more than women did . . . because men could do heavier work. They didn't have the women doing nothing heavy, except . . . when they worked on those great big presses."<sup>58</sup> For the most part, women were systematically placed in the least desirable jobs and given tedious and repetitive work usually considered unskilled labor. Their work tended to be undervalued (even by themselves), and this too was a factor in sustaining wage disparity.

Women entering the plant frequently lacked appreciation for shop-floor culture. Unfamiliar with informal work rules, they tended to exhaust themselves in rapid bursts of work and to work without breaks. This could lead to conflict with fellow workers or dissension with union officials as office worker Loretto Gatto (a salaried union employee) discovered when she and another "girl" were sent to the shop floor to type orders on a busy shipping day: "We would be typing like crazy as the boxes came down the line. As I was working I was told by one of the union representatives to make sure that I took my break, because he had been told that I wasn't taking my ten-minute break in the morning. I said, 'I just want to get



caught up.' And he said, 'You take your break; you're keeping someone else from having a job!'"<sup>59</sup>

There were often complaints, too, that women "spoiled the job" or "broke the morale of the plant." Ann Pelczarski tells of dissension that developed in the cooking utensil unit over one woman's speed on the job: "She was a regular 'job killer.' Say we would run one hundred plates for so many hours during the day, she would have about five hundred more. Then when the company timer would come and time you, they would always go to her. She'd go fast. We would all go slow to get a better rate. That's what they used to do—they'd rate you. Half the time we couldn't even go as fast as her, no way."<sup>60</sup>

Another complaint was that some women teamed up to earn better piece-work pay. This was a practice Stanley Pelczarski ran into in the wintertime when demand was slack and he was moved from his regular job working on telephone booths to a job putting trademarks on pie plates. He says of the job: "You wouldn't believe how many pie plates you had to run an hour in order to make piece [rate] pay . . . over two thousand an hour! And how the women made out on it. . . they had women friends who had good jobs and they'd get their breaks every hour, fifteen or twenty minute breaks every hour. They'd come and help the women working piece [rate]. They'd take them out of the crate and put them on the table, or they'd pack them. And you had to do that all yourself, and they helped them out."<sup>61</sup>

While these women often made more money than Mr. Pelczarski, as already noted, they were the exception.<sup>62</sup> For not only were women typically paid less, they were not upgraded or promoted as quickly as men were, and for the most part they were excluded from salaried supervisory positions. Loretto Gatto spoke about Alcoa's policy in the 1950s: "It took me quite a while to realize this, but there were no women supervisors in my department at that time. In the cooking utensil division almost all the women were packers and I don't remember any men who worked as packers. [But] the supervisors were men."<sup>63</sup>

Another discriminatory policy, enforced for more than seventy-five years, was the company's refusal to employ married women. (The only exception was during World War II, when women whose husbands were overseas were allowed to retain their jobs.<sup>64</sup>) If a woman already employed got married, the only way she could keep her job was by concealing the truth, and this did happen. Loretto Gatto says that when her girlfriend eloped, "we kept it a secret because she couldn't afford to lose her job, since Alcoa did pay well. When she finally told them, she was let go. But they allowed her to collect unemployment."<sup>65</sup>

For the most part, though, women supported the policy and left their jobs willingly when they married. Typical is the opinion of Garnet Marotta, who remained single during her more than thirty years of employment at Alcoa: "I think it was better for society because those women were home to raise their children. And it gave people coming

out of school a chance for jobs."<sup>66</sup> The latter belief was echoed throughout the community (perhaps in part because of the age of the interviewees): "In those days there were always openings because that was the way the system was set up. If somebody married they had to leave. That way jobs were always opened up. . . Women were more or less trained from high school [for] what they had to do there. So they really weren't losing a trained work force."<sup>67</sup>

This rule barring married women from work at Alcoa was a major reason most women never earned the ten years of service required to receive pension benefits. The policy was changed in 1963, but since the plant closed in 1971, this—and other reforms made as a result of the onset of the women's movement in the 1960s—was of little benefit to women in the New Kensington area.

### LABOR RELATIONS AT ALCOA

The first union was formed in New Kensington when the American Federation of Labor (AFL) organized the wire mill workers in early 1900. On March 27 of that year, thirty-seven workers walked off the job in the wire mill department of the New Kensington Works; by April 4th the strikers had received a twelve percent increase in salary and a reduction in Sunday work. One hundred men joined the permanent union, the Aluminum Workers Union, AFL Local 8261. But in 1908, when Alcoa issued an ultimatum—"accept an open-shop plan or be fired"—Local 8261 surrendered its charter. Staunchly resisting unions of any kind, Alcoa management concentrated on maintaining control over labor through a series of paternalistic gestures toward plant workers.<sup>68</sup>

There were still problems, however, and, according to the local press, in 1913 it was the "foreign element" that yielded to the appeals of an organizer from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who allegedly encouraged a strike in Alcoa's polishing department which led to a walkout of one hundred men. The organizer was apprehended and fined, and the strike collapsed within a week.<sup>69</sup> Three years later Alcoa machinists struck, seeking an eight-hour day with pay for ten hours; time and a half for overtime; double pay for Sunday work; an end to the bonus system; and better ventilation in company shops. Nearly three thousand men and women joined the strikers. The burgess of New Kensington intervened, promising the strikers fair treatment and asserting that the company would proceed with its policy of frequently adjusting hourly wages. The strike ended after two weeks; subsequently, almost two decades of labor peace ensued.<sup>70</sup>

By the 1930s conditions were such that organizers were able to have the AFL charter the Aluminum Workers Union Local 18356 in August of 1933. The overwhelming (2897-831) vote for unionization was primarily due to unhealthy and dangerous working conditions and concern over Alcoa's hiring practices which at that time were not formalized. This meant workers were hired and fired on a solely arbitrary basis; it also meant that sometimes youngsters not



of legal age were hired. As Stanley Pelczarski recalled, his "oldest brother started to work for Alcoa when he was only twelve or thirteen years old."<sup>71</sup> His wife, Anne, remembers that "you were supposed to be eighteen, but you could lie about your age; my sister was only sixteen when she went to work there. They never asked you for school papers or anything. . . . kids got jobs at fourteen or fifteen years old."<sup>72</sup>

In the aluminum plants of the 1930s, working conditions were often as hazardous as they were dirty. Workers were exposed to chemical agents (especially fluorides and carcinogens) and, to a lesser degree, airborne alumina dusts and asbestos on a daily basis.<sup>73</sup> Stanley Pelczarski worked in the polishing department where, after the aluminum was polished on a wheel it was put, still hot, in benzine and then dried off in sawdust. "That was miserable because then you inhaled the fumes."<sup>74</sup> He also worked in the dip shop: "You would use rubber gloves, but every now and then the benzine would spill right into the glove."<sup>75</sup> He worked there until he "got some kind of rash from the fumes . . . [and] had to go down into the cheapest job there was."<sup>76</sup>

Some jobs were especially dirty. Henry Ryba says: "I thought the melting room was a dirty place. . . . [until] I decided to give the foundry a try. The reason new people started working at 4 p.m. is because all day long the guys were making molds, pouring metal. At four o'clock the 'shake out crew' comes in and you have to get the sand off of everything. When I walked in there at four o'clock the guy opened the door [and] you couldn't even see in there for the steam and hot metal and water and sand! They poured the metal down into the floor. Then we would have to dig up the sand and sift the sand and water it down."<sup>77</sup> Work at the powder plant was equally grimy, for laborers there were covered with aluminum bronze powder. As one observer said: "You would think they were men from the moon or something. Their faces had powder all over them and their clothes were all powdered up."<sup>78</sup>

"Women's work" had its hazards too. One worker, Mary Bonnoiret, "lost her fingers when her press repeated [came down without stopping] : . . . That was before they had the straps that jerked your hands back from the machine."<sup>79</sup> After being injured, Mary Bonnoiret worked to promote the union; for Mary Peli Petrigni, the motivations were insufferable working conditions and the treatment accorded women, who constituted a majority in many of the company shops. At that time "women were lined up and inspected in military fashion. Those who were hired were admitted to the shops and subjected to harassment and intimidation. [Women were also exposed to] personal insults, demeaning rest room policies and a 'bonus system' that deprived them of their just wages."<sup>80</sup> Mary Petrigni led a group of forty-two female coworkers to the Broad Building where they signed union cards. Shortly thereafter she was fired for "unsatisfactory work"; she subsequently became an officer in Local 18356.<sup>81</sup>

In 1936, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) replaced the AFL at Alcoa. There were strikes in New Kensington in 1937, 1938, and 1939, with a comprehensive union contract being signed in November, 1939. In 1940 the Local's report stated that "working conditions have improved to the extent that we seldom find anything wrong with the work place."<sup>82</sup> After the war, officials of the Local arranged a merger with the steel workers union that resulted in their being governed by the steel worker's constitution. The merger brought financial security to the New Kensington Local, but with the loss of autonomy it was much less vigorous and therefore unprepared to deal with the corporate changes which brought about the plant's demise in 1971.<sup>83</sup>

\* \* \*

Looking back, the relationship between management and labor at Alcoa's New Kensington Works was a civil one, particularly by the standards of the Allegheny Valley. The Company did not use the strikebreaking techniques commonly employed in other industries—they did not hire scabs or use thugs to intimidate workers. As already noted, Company policies (especially in the early years) and relatively high pay contributed to this comparative peace, as did the fact that it was common for management and union officials to be friends. As one man remarked: "Keep in mind that a lot of these people had grown up together, went to the same church since they were kids. So it's really hard to get far apart from someone you've known your whole life."<sup>84</sup>

That statement helps illustrate the complex and intriguing labor and social history of New Kensington, an understanding of which is essential to any overall analysis of Southwestern Pennsylvania's industrial heritage. Indeed, no study of that heritage would be complete without the documentation of the contribution the aluminum industry and its workers made to it, for it really was "more than a job . . . it was a way of life."

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Charles C. Carr, *Alcoa: an American Enterprise* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1952), pp. 1-2, 23.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 24-29. Hunt, a foremost steel metallurgist, was a graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Metallurgy and Mining in 1876; the other investors were all connected with the steel industry.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 40-43.

<sup>4</sup>Carl I. Myerhuber, Jr., *Less Than Forever: The Rise and Decline of Union Solidarity in Western Pennsylvania, 1914-1948* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, Inc., 1987), p. 181.

<sup>5</sup>Carr, pp. 40-43.

<sup>6</sup>Morton and Kane interview, accession no. 1FP93-GCB6-C log p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>The Women's Club of New Kensington, *Lore of Yore: A History of Parnassus, New Kensington, Arnold and Lower Burrell* (New Kensington: The Women's Club of New Kensington), p.62.

<sup>8</sup>*Alcoa in Westmoreland County: A Productive Past, A Positive Future* (Alcoa publication), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>Alcoa was one of the first companies to establish a research bureau



in the United States; over the next decade significant advances in technology were made, particularly in the development of new alloys for the aircraft industry. By 1929, Dr. Frary oversaw the construction of the Alcoa Laboratories on Freeport Rd. It was one of the largest and best equipped metal-industry laboratories in the world. (*Alcoa in Westmoreland County*, p. 8.)

<sup>10</sup>In 1917, after an explosion killed eight employees, aluminum powder production was moved to Logan's Ferry.

<sup>11</sup>*Alcoa in Westmoreland County*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup>Carr, pp. 75-83; see also George David Smith, *From Monopoly to Competition: The Transformation of Alcoa, 1888-1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Smith says that the typical big business maneuver was to achieve a monopoly through consolidation of firms in the same business. Alcoa's expansion was achieved through internally generated growth and enormous capital investment, by which Alcoa enjoyed a long lead over potential competitors.

<sup>13</sup>See the court case "Baush Machine Tool Co. vs. Aluminum Co. of America"; it was an expensive case for Alcoa, charged with monopolizing interstate commerce in 16 markets and being a party to competition conspiracies with foreign markets.

<sup>14</sup>Billman interview, accession no. 1FP93-GCB5-C, log p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Smith, p. 152.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Blissell, ed., *Celebrating A Century: New Kensington 1891-1991*. (A commemorative documentary, 1991), p. 85.

<sup>17</sup>Billman interview log p. 1; see also *Lore of Yore*, p.63. In recent years 3 of the buildings have been vacated and are now standing idle. Lack of military contracts is one reason.

<sup>18</sup>Billman interview, log p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>Morton and Kane interview, log p. 8.

<sup>20</sup>Stanley Pelczarski interview, accession no. 1FP93-GCM10-C, log p. 8.

<sup>21</sup>Smith, pp. 176-77; Myerhuber, pp. 179-199.

<sup>22</sup>*Lore of Yore*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup>Morton and Kane interview, log p. 9

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>Stanley Pelczarski interview; Mr. Pelczarski agreed to retire early because he was offered an additional \$100 a month in his pension.

<sup>26</sup>Gino and Garnet Marotto interview, accession no. 1FP93-GCM7-C, log p. 3. Mrs. Marotto, who worked at Alcoa for more than 30 years, says: "Alcoa is a good company, I mean, they still give me health benefits. I only wish they had modernized here, which to me would have been nice since this was the original plant."

<sup>27</sup>Gino Marotto interview, log pp. 6-7. The Decennial Census shows population changes:

	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980
Arnold	10,575	10,263	9,437	8,174	6,853
New Ken.	24,055	25,146	23,484	20,312	17,660

<sup>28</sup>Lois Sculco interview, accession no. 1FP93-GCM6-C, pp.6-7.

<sup>29</sup>Morton and Kane interview, log p. 2.

<sup>30</sup>James Mazzotta: *The Making of a Century* pamphlet published by the Mazzotta family, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup>Morton and Kane interview, log p. 2.

<sup>32</sup>Smith, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 176; figures taken from *Fortune* magazine (May, 1946).

<sup>34</sup>Billman interview, log p. 4.

<sup>35</sup>Blissell interview, log p. 1.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>Morton and Kane interview, log p. 7.

<sup>38</sup>Lois Sculco interview, log p. 1.

<sup>39</sup>Nicola Fusco, *The Building of Mount St. Peter's* (St. Joseph's Protectors, Pittsburgh, 1944), p. 19.

<sup>40</sup>*Celebrating a Century*, p. 87.

<sup>41</sup>Floyd Grecco interview, accession no. 1F093-GMC12-C.

<sup>42</sup>*The Alcoa News*, Vol. 1, no. 19 (Sept. 29, 1930).

<sup>43</sup>*Alcoa Warrior*, Vol 1, no. 2 (1943), p. 1.

<sup>44</sup>Henry Ryba interview, accession no. 1FP93-CMG8-C, log p. 1; Mr. Ryba worked at Alcoa from 1936 to 1988. He began in the seal mill and eventually worked in almost every division of the New Kensington Works.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Stanley Pelczarski interview, log p. 1.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>Ann Pelczarski interview, accession no. 1FP93-GCM10-C log p. 4.

<sup>50</sup>Loretto Gatto interview, accession no. 1FP93-GCB7-C, log p. 1.

<sup>51</sup>Henry Ryba interview, log p. 2.

<sup>52</sup>*Alcoa Warrior* (1943-44), p. 2.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup>*Alcoa Warrior*, Vol. 1, no. 5 (Monday, Jan. 11, 1943), pp.1-2.

<sup>56</sup>Numerous postwar studies of women in heavy industries have been completed and the findings demonstrate that the lives of women were very little altered by the experience. See Alan Clive, "Women Workers in World War II: Michigan as a Test Case." *Labor History XX* (1979, pp. 44-72; and Alice Kessler-Harris, "Women, Work and War" in *The Private Side of American History: Readings in Everyday Life*, edited by Thomas R. Frazier. Vol. 2 (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, Brace Javanovich, 1987), pp. 279-372.

<sup>57</sup>Smith, p. 180; northern males in smelting and fabrication made 35 cents an hour, northern females, 30 cents an hour.

<sup>58</sup>Ann Pelczarski interview, log p. 6.

<sup>59</sup>Loretto Gatto interview, log p. 3.

<sup>60</sup>Ann Pelczarski interview, log p. 6.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, log p. 4.

<sup>62</sup>Some women salaried employees, however, did collect more than male wage earners. Loretto Gatto says that in her job as a secretary in the late 1950s, she made more money than her cousin, a laborer who had worked in the mill 35 years (she had been there only a few years). As she said: "We were paid well." Loretto Gatto interview, log p. 4.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, log p. 2. The changes brought about by women becoming better educated and by the women's movement did serve to open a few research and managerial positions at Alcoa. But progress was slow: by the end of 1975 women constituted only 2.4% of all technical and managerial positions in Alcoa's domestic operations. The numbers improved to 7.6% and 10.8% respectively by 1986. (Information supplied by the accounting department, Alcoa headquarters.) See Smith, note 19, pp. 520-21.

<sup>64</sup>Loretto Gatto interview, log p. 3.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>Garnet Marotta interview, log p. 13.

<sup>67</sup>Gino Marotta interview, log p. 13.

<sup>68</sup>Smith, p. 119.

<sup>69</sup>Myerhuber, pp. 181-182.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup>Stanley Pelczarski interview, log p. 3.

<sup>72</sup>Ann Pelczarski interview, log pp. 2,3.

<sup>73</sup>Smith, p. 176.

<sup>74</sup>Stanley Pelczarski, interview log p. 3.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup>Henry Ryba interview, log pp. 2, 3.

<sup>78</sup>Stanley Pelczarski, interview, log p. 8.

<sup>79</sup>Ann Pelczarski interview, log p. 7.

<sup>80</sup>Myerhuber, p. 183.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 191-193.

<sup>83</sup>The rapid rise and decline of the Aluminum Workers Union is covered in detail by Myerhuber.

<sup>84</sup>Phillip Morton, Morton and Kane interview, log p. 5.

## RECORDED INTERVIEWS

Sr. Lois Sculco .....	interviewed June 29, 1993
Floyd Grecco .....	interviewed August 8, 1993
Elizabeth Blissell .....	interviewed July 27, 1993
Anne Pelczarski .....	interviewed July 26, 1993
Stanley Pelczarski .....	interviewed July 26, 1993
James Mazzotta .....	interviewed July 15, 1993
Henry Ryba (1) .....	interviewed July 15, 1993
Henry Ryba (2) .....	interviewed July 27, 1993
Loretto Gatto .....	interviewed July 10, 1993
Phillip Morton .....	interviewed July 8, 1993
John Kane .....	interviewed July 8, 1993
Gino Marotto .....	interviewed July 6, 1993
Garnet Marotto .....	interviewed July 6, 1993
Antonietta Beraducci .....	interviewed July 6, 1993
Fred Billman .....	interviewed June 26, 1993



# WOMEN'S WORK: Textile Manufacturing in the Lackawanna Valley

by Catherine Anne Jacobs



*A view of the Lackawanna Valley from St. Basil's cemetery, Simpson, Pa. (All photographs courtesy of the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority)*

In 1994 the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority, a community development effort under the Pennsylvania Heritage Parks Program and directed by Robert Durkin, initiated a year-long comprehensive survey of local folklife resources. The purpose of the program was to assemble data for the development of public programs about Lackawanna Valley heritage and traditions. The program was undertaken by a team comprising Tom Jones, preservation planner; James Turk, director of education with the Balch Institute of Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia; and the author, a folklorist.

The initial phases of the Lackawanna Valley Folklife Resources Survey were marked by encounters with the sites<sup>1</sup> connected to the Valley's once-vigorous textile and garment manufacturing industries, and by stories about them. Most women over forty in the area have some memory of or direct experience with the industries, but although these recollections of life in the Valley between 1900 and 1970 are pervasive, there has been no comprehensive effort to assemble information on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Employing about 11,000 workers in 170 garment-manu-

facturing plants as late as 1971, over the years the textile industry in the Lackawanna Valley has had a profound effect on the lives of tens of thousands of women and their families. Indeed, in many cases interviewees contacted about other topics were found to have stories and information about the garment and textile industries to share.<sup>3</sup>

## THE MILLS

Lackawanna County is located in the northeastern corner of Pennsylvania; the county seat is Scranton, about 130 miles north of Philadelphia. Business directories for Scranton and Carbondale, about fifteen miles northeast of Scranton, show that the number of women dressmakers there burgeoned after the 1870s. Related in part to the area's growing population and wealth, this increase may have been a precursor to the development of industrial employment for women. Entrepreneurs from east coast cities came to the Lackawanna Valley, a coal-mining area, to establish silk and knitting mills and other textile manufactories. Already well-connected to industrial America by an extensive rail





*View of the north side of the Klots Throwing Mill in Carbondale, Pa.*

network, the Valley also had a large pool of unorganized and unemployed girls and young women. The establishment of an early textile industry—silk manufacturing—in Scranton and the Valley was a direct result of this labor pool: “Available help first attracted silk men to the section. Up to the advent of the silk mill there were practically no industries employing female labor. During the long periods before the anthracite industry was stabilized . . . the silk industry was a Godsend to the region. Many families would have suffered for the necessities of life but for the money that daughters were able to earn in the silk mills.”<sup>4</sup>

Alfred Harvey came to Scranton from Connecticut and opened the Sauquoit Mill in 1872; it was followed in 1886 by the Alfred Harvey Silk Company located on South Washington Street. In 1900, Taylor’s *Scranton City Directory* listed nine silk manufacturers: Bliss Valentine, Cambria, Alfred Harvey, Klots, Loubignac, Meadow Brook Silk Mills, Petersburg, Sauquoit, Simpson, and the Scranton Lace Curtain Company which had opened in 1891, failed, and then reopened in 1897. The 1920 Polk’s *Scranton City Directory* listed forty-five silk manufacturers, but the 1940 edition, only eight.<sup>5</sup>

The establishment of mills in Scranton and Carbondale and some small towns in between changed the rhythm of life in the region. A lifelong resident of one of those small towns, Archbald, is Cecelia Philbin, now in her mid-nineties. She recounts a story that her family used to tell about the day she was born when her father, P. A. Philbin, went to Pat Malarkey’s Saloon and told the barkeeper to

give all the miners a drink on him to celebrate the birth of his child. Asking if the baby was a boy and being told it was a girl, the barkeeper replied, “Just as well now that we’ve got the mills.”

Cecelia Philbin recalls that the Clemmons Mill, which made dress brocades, and the Klots Throwing Mill<sup>6</sup> were important local employers in the 1920s. She also vividly recalls the girls parading off daily to work in the local mills, carrying their lunch pails just as the boys and men who worked in the coal mines did. Adult women who worked in the mills were stigmatized however. In fact, in some companies such as Scranton Lace, for example, policy dictated that women employees be terminated when they married. And, while women filled most of the jobs in the textile factories, men still had higher status: At Scranton Lace, only men could work as weavers, the highest paying job.<sup>7</sup>

At community events throughout the Lackawanna Valley one meets women who worked in the textile industries. Edna Kolvitch, one of the organizers of the Christmas holiday bake sale at St. Basil’s Russian Orthodox Church in Simpson, tells how, at age eighteen, she went to work for the Gentex Company (originally called General Textile) which occupied buildings formerly used by the Klots Company. Another woman at the bake sale recalled having begun to work when she was sixteen, noting that when the hourly wage rose from eighteen to twenty cents, “My mother thought I brought home the world in a fence for her.” When Edna Kolvitch and her friend married they left the mill and helped to support their families through a





*An inspector making a repair at the Scranton Lace Company in Scranton, Pa.*

series of household economies—raising a garden, some chickens, a pig, and a cow—while their husbands worked in the mines.

These employment opportunities changed some fathers' feelings about their daughters. In the town of Mayfield (located in mid-Valley), Olga Ross, Elizabeth Kedrick, and Anna (Natalie) Cekliniak shared their memories of earlier days, pointing out that in times past, men in their Russian community customarily considered daughters an economic burden. This view was grudgingly abandoned when daughters began to work in the mills and contribute to family finances. This was especially important when times got hard. As Anna Cekliniak explained about the closing of the mines: "There was no pension, no union, no anything . . . There was no work for the men. [But] there was a silk mill in the town. That's when the girls came into their own."

Anna Cekliniak went on to say that "when women started working in the garment industry I think it made the men feel very inadequate. It was very difficult for a Russian man not to be the boss of his household. But, as time went on, they're not stupid and they know that they have to eat and they accepted it. One of the things . . . they had large families. . . maybe one son and five daughters. The man would get so angry, he would take the boy to work at the age of twelve but he couldn't take the girls to the mine. [When the girls started to earn money] it was difficult for the man to recognize the fact that he was dependent on the daughters that he didn't welcome as well as he should have [when they were born]. Not that he didn't

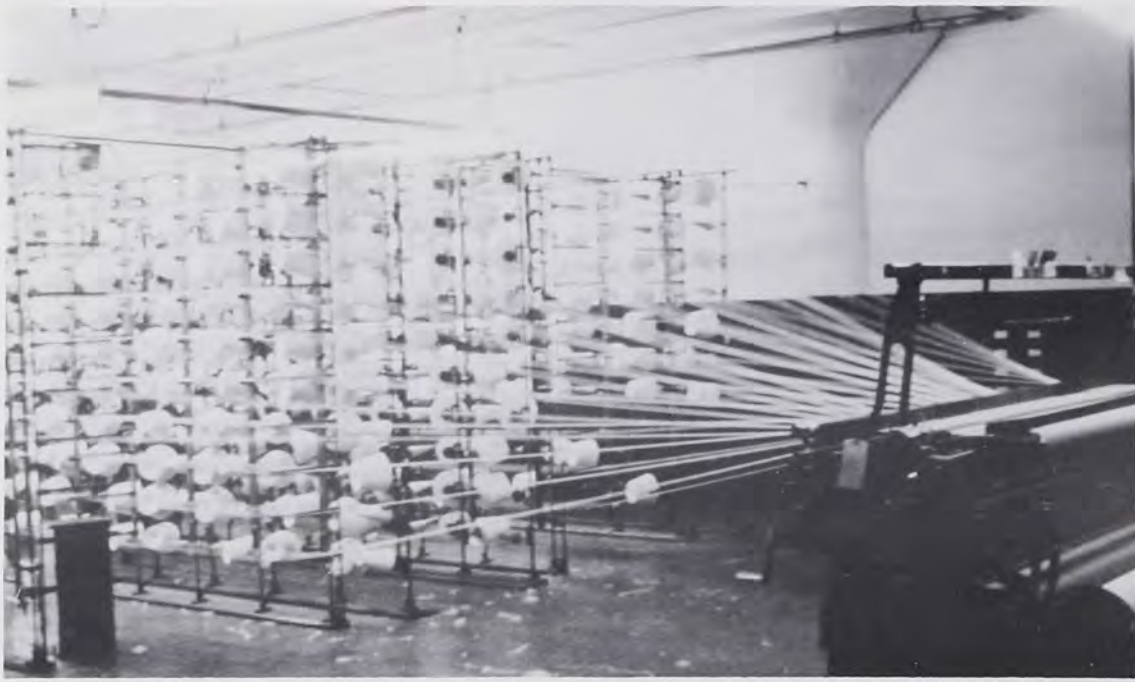
love them, but he was unhappy that he wasn't going to have someone to bring in the money [working in the mines].

### THE GROWTH OF THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

In the 1920s, garment manufacturers began to establish businesses in the Lackawanna Valley south of Scranton, gradually expanding northward as far as Vandling and Forest City. Like the mill owners before them, they came to take advantage of the Valley's large female labor force and so avoid the well-established, male-dominated union workforces in New York and New Jersey. One of the first garment businesses in the Valley was the Grasso family's United Pants Company in Swoyersville and Plymouth; other early establishments were the Sheldon Pell factory in South Scranton; the Lackawanna Pants Company and the Dickstein family's Anthracite Overall Company in Scranton; Howard Rottman's Wyoming Valley Garment Company in Wilkes-Barre; the Mayflower Company started by the father and brothers of Myer Alperin in Old Forge; and Louis Bisignani, Sr.'s, Pawnee Pants Company in Olyphant.

While in the textile mills it was often company policy to fire married women, the garment companies employed them in great numbers, even when they had children at home. In fact, Louis Bisignani, owner of the Pawnee Pants Company, said that it was typical for factory owners to allow women to have flexible work schedules so they would be able to go home at intervals to make meals and





*Warping equipment at the Scranton Lace Co.*

care for their husbands and children. This policy was perhaps the result of changing times, views, and labor laws and perhaps the result of practical considerations too. A child's agility and small hands were an advantage in operating complex weaving machinery, but adults with well-developed hand-and-eye coordination (and, preferably, with some experience as well) were needed to operate sewing machines.

Where employment in the textile industry had enabled children and single women to contribute to the support of their siblings and parents, the earnings of women garment workers went to support their husbands and children. Women's work increased in importance over the decades, peaking after the Knox Mine disaster in 1959 destroyed mining operations and left many families fully dependent on the income from the woman's job alone. Workshops flourished, and a collection of receipts and correspondence housed at the Carbondale Historical Society shows that in that town alone, there were more than a dozen garment companies operating, including Jo-ann Frocks Inc.; Isabel Dress Company, Inc.; Carol Carter Frocks, Inc.; Starlette Dress Company, Inc; National Sportswear Corporation; Paula Lee Frocks, Inc.; G & S Fashions; and Leslie Fay Manufacturer of Fine Dresses. It was a strong industry as late as the early 1970s, but disintegrated in the following years because of an inability to compete with cheap off-shore production. Only about a dozen companies remain in an area of which it was once said that there was a factory on every corner.

The stories of two Carbondale women, Italia Nardi and

Helen Saltisial, are typical of those related by women who worked in the garment trade. Mrs. Nardi, now in her eighties, worked the night shift at the Futura factory so that her husband could be at home with their children when he finished his shift at the mine. She also worked at a factory which made children's clothing under the Kate Greenaway label. Her fellow employees included a few boys, three mechanics, three or four floor ladies, bundlers, distributors, packers, and sewers—about one hundred people in all. Mrs. Nardi had previously worked at the Amholz Company where she made forty-five cents an hour; she also spent a year working at the Gentex Silk Mill in Simpson. After 1960, when her husband developed the health problems that left him an invalid until his death in 1984, it was her income alone which supported the family. She notes that at the time, it was typical for women to work.

Although her husband made enough money to support the family, Helen Saltisial worked in a dress factory: "I loved to sew and that's the only place I was happy in," she explains. Her employer, Joe Mussari, who had purchased his business from the Futura Company, was a man who "hollered like heck," but she respected him and worked for him for seventeen years. Mrs. Saltisial claims that the 1960s and 1970s were the best years for the garment trade in Carbondale. As she says, "We weren't making much money, but things weren't as expensive then."

Their jobs outside the home had far-reaching effects on women's roles within the family. For example, despite the incredible demands of her work life and her domestic





*Pattern room office at the Scranton Lace Co.; note Steamtown pattern on the wall.*

duties after her husband lost his mining job and she became the family breadwinner, Forest City native Frances Skube took care to teach her sons and daughters the Lithuanian traditions her mother had taught her. As a result, even today her adult children continue to observe ethnic traditions, celebrating holidays with special foods, songs, and crafts. But if working increased a woman's responsibilities, on the positive side it enabled them to send their daughters to college, as Italia Nardi pointed out. (In earlier times this was rare in working-class families; more often the family would pool their resources—including the wages of girls and young women—to send one or two sons to college.) Mrs. Nardi went on to say that oftentimes these college-educated daughters went on to pursue careers elsewhere, rather than remaining close to their families in the Valley.

### THE G & G COMPANY

The growth of the garment industry provided opportunities for other businesses to develop. One of those businesses, the G & G Company, is unique in the Lackawanna Valley for it filled a niche, catering to all the specific and diverse needs of the garment companies. G & G's growth paralleled that of the garment industry in the Valley, and members of the founding Glassman family are still able to provide insight into the reasons for that growth as well as for the industry's decline and demise.

The G & G Company was started by Aaron Glassman and his wife Marion in 1950; the couple sold home sewing machines from their apartment on East Gibson Street in

Scranton. The son of a rabbi, Aaron Glassman had been working at Ted Koppelman's Lackawanna Pants Company as a mechanic; an avid inventor and tinkerer, he had learned his trade as an apprentice, constantly being given new mechanical challenges to test his mettle. This early training provided him with a frequently shared motto: "You can learn from anyone." He believed strongly in learning through observation, whether from a senior mechanic or a machine operator.

Soon after they started their business, the Glassmans began receiving requests to repair the equipment of local garment companies. At the time, no business provided comprehensive, on-site repairs, and most companies employed a full-time repairman, fearing their secrets would be lost if they shared personnel with another company. Aaron Glassman, however, was known and respected for his honesty and integrity. Often he invented ways to improve the equipment he was repairing or during a visit to a factory saw a machine that could be made to operate more easily, quickly, or efficiently. He also frequently introduced equipment new to the Lackawanna Valley that he had seen being used in New York factories. He spent hours inventing machinery for the sewing trade, acquiring more than twenty patents, including one for a fusing machine that could be made for \$1200 when most of those in use at the time cost \$12,000.

As the business grew and diversified, providing (according to the company motto) everything from a "needle to a complete plant," the Glassmans moved into increasingly spacious quarters, relocating to the company's present site in Dunmore in 1964. Son Alan, who began working





*Technician tying the harness of a loom at the Scranton Lace Co.*

in the business in 1977, says that G & G's success in equipping new factories lay in their honest practices: "We'd take a machine in and let them try it for thirty days—they tried it with their best and worst operators. He also gives credit to his father, who died in 1994, marveling at the depth and breadth of his knowledge of the business. He illustrates by telling of the time he (Alan) was working in the parts room and a customer from a local company came in and asked for needles for "the fat lady" who worked in the back of his factory. Aaron Glassman, who just happened to be passing by, immediately said: "Give him a Reese S2 needle." Aaron Glassman's attention to the smallest details and his reason for it is summed up in another company motto: "Even the advent of automated sewing doesn't alter the fact that to create a stitch the thread must pass through the eye of a needle."

A major strike in 1960, over issues that neither Alan or Marion Glassman can now recall, closed many Lackawanna garment factories, never to reopen. Marion Glassman remembers one factory owner, a Mr. Zilowski, telling the women at his plant: "Your fathers started this and at the time there was a need for unions, but now you don't even know what you're striking for." When Alan Glassman went to work at G & G there were more than four hundred garment companies in the area; his mother says that every old school building in the Valley used to house a garment factory of some sort. Today there are twenty in the entire county. The flooding caused by Hurricane Agnes in 1972 destroyed some of the factories, while others were put out of business by overseas competition. Overall, the industry experienced massive change during

the fifty or so years of its existence. A machine that cost \$125 when the G & G Company started in business cost about \$40,000 forty years later. Once dominated by primary manufacturers, contractors are now in the majority in the industry. By the 1970s, G & G had become "the undertakers of the industry," buying out or helping companies sell their equipment as they closed down. In the process the company assembled many inventories which, along with their lists of equipment originally sold to set up companies all over the Valley, probably comprise one of the most complete technological records of a regional industry in America.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

As did almost everyone else surveyed, Marion Glassman answered in the affirmative when asked if working in the garment industry changed women's lives. Mrs. Glassman pointed out that through these jobs, women developed a sense of autonomy and self-confidence new to their experience. She also mentioned, as her son did, the fact that their company generally left a machine on loan for a month when the purchase of new equipment was being considered. This gave machine operators—usually women—a chance to evaluate it and decide whether or not it would help increase production. Such evaluations were almost always an owner's most important consideration in making a decision, so women knew that the company's competitive position, as well as the jobs of all who worked there, were to some extent dependent on their judgment.





*Quilters working at Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Dickson City, Pa.*

### A QUILTING TRADITION

There is a quilting tradition in the Lackawanna Valley that is linked to the garment industry through the social clubs which came into existence as the result of women's work schedules. As Mayfield residents Anna Cekliniak, Elizabeth Kedrick, and Olga Ross explained, when women started working, Sunday afternoons came to be set aside as a time when they could attend social clubs, many of which were hosted by local churches. These clubs provided a setting in which working women and housewives could get together, affirming the kinship of gender, family, and community. As Anna Cekliniak said, "That was the only time they had to exchange ideas, all that kind of stuff." The clubs also provided a respite from family and workplace responsibilities, much like that which men were accustomed to enjoying during their after-work visits to local beer gardens and social clubs.

Through these social clubs and independently, women organized quilting circles. To them they brought from their workplaces not only fabric scraps to use in the quilts, but the values they had learned there, adapting them to this social setting. For the most part these groups did not make quilts for their own members, but did quilting for a fee or made quilts to be raffled off to raise money for their ethnic, church, or community organizations. As quilters, women controlled the amount of work they took on, and the use of the money they earned. As with their paychecks, their contributions could be quantified by the amount of money they raised. This is still true today in the many quilting groups that work in community centers and church

halls around the Lackawanna Valley.<sup>9</sup>

Three quilts representing the work of the Ladies Aid Society of Plymouth Congregational Church in Scranton during the 1920s and 1930s were recently donated to the Anthracite Heritage Museum. The following information from their donor is about the groups that made them: "They were sometimes called Ladies Aid, sometimes called Missionary Societies and sometimes called circles. They provided an opportunity for service and fellowship for women members and they did much good raising money for foreign missionaries and local needs . . . Some of the women would be experts at 'marking' the quilts. . . Women who were getting on in years and unable to quilt would thread needles for the quilters. Women who chose not to quilt also came; they made the lunch. The results were easy to sell to church members."

Quilting groups have brought textile work full circle: From the very earliest years of home sewing for domestic use, through the era of the home-based dressmaker to the employment of girls and young women in poorly paid mill jobs, and then to the relative independence and empowerment women gained through their work in the garment industry and which led back to the household craft of quilting. Now, however, their sewing is not a part of their domestic economy. Rather, it is a reflection of decades of development in which women's participation in the labor force and their roles in business have led to a greater appreciation of their abilities on many levels. When they quilt today it is because they choose to do so, just as they are able to choose whether to leave off or continue the traditions passed to them by their mothers.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>As the industry has passed into oblivion, few obvious markers have been left on the landscape. Scranton Lace Co. is currently the only Nottingham Lace manufacturer in America. Though the business has undergone many changes in ownership, direction, and management style, the manufacturing process is essentially unchanged today from the time the company first went into operation. The physical plant of Scranton Lace Co. has been kept virtually intact, though many elements are no longer in use, providing a physical record of technology and working environment. Other sites occupied by spinning and throwing mills have been abandoned, are coming apart, or gradually being renovated for reuse. At the same time, these sites bespeak a once powerful presence in the Valley by the sheer size of their brick structures, which dwarf most worker-style local housing. Garment manufacturers required smaller quarters, and usually occupied building originally constructed for some other purpose—schools, storefronts, and houses. Though they were not grandiose in scale, their numbers were copious, and today many people recall that it once seemed as though a garment company could be found on every corner in every neighborhood.

<sup>2</sup>Local historical societies have collected newspaper clippings, some photographs, and occasionally miscellaneous items like correspondence from local manufacturers. The Lackawanna Valley Historical Society and the Anthracite Heritage Museum have a wide variety of material items in their collections related to many aspects of textile industry and craft. These range from examples of traditional dress brought to America by immigrants, to implements used for traditional bobbin lace making, tatting, crochet, home sewing and quilts. By comparison, these collections also contain examples of equipment used in local mills, including a sample machine used by the Scranton Lace Company to test patterns by weaving only a small repeat, rather than the entire width of a full-size production loom. We presumed to assemble employment figures, and the history of local manufacturers from the collections of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union and the ILGWU. At present, the two are undergoing a national merger, and have not been able to spare time to provide us access to their archives.

<sup>3</sup>Oral interviews have provided a good harvest of information, although much still remains to be reaped. However, through time and neglect, people are forgetting the stories. Toward the end of the project we learned of Mary Taffera, a native of Olyphant now residing in Bethlehem; she worked in the garment industry for sixty years and was an early labor organizer for the ILGWU in the Valley. Her insights should shed much needed light on the labor story in the garment manufacturing companies. Mary Taffera's still unrecorded memories exemplify a continuing imperative to focus attention on this subject before this aspect of the Valley's heritage and history passes forever into obscurity.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Murphy, *Jubilee History Commemorative of the 50th Anniversary of the Creation of Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania* (Topeka, Kansas: Historical Publishing Co., 1928).

<sup>5</sup>As throwing and spinning mills closed throughout the valley, their legacy was present in the equipment designed and utilized in their operations. Some of this machinery is now maintained in the permanent collection of the Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton. At the Braided and Rag Rug Company in Dickson City, old equipment found new use for the manufacture of braided and rag rugs. These articles, previously produced through domestic manufacture, have remained in demand although family members no longer have the time or skills to produce them. As in other cases, the domestic craft tradition was supplanted by the efficiency of industrial manufacturing processes.

<sup>6</sup>"Throwing" is the process of twisting fibers into thread.

<sup>7</sup>In contrast, the current foreperson of the weaving shop is a woman.

<sup>8</sup>G & G was sold in the early 1990s, although Alan Glassman continues to work for the company. Through the years, however, he and his family chose to diversify; they now operate six offshoot companies, specializing in different types of manufacturing equipment or processes for the garment industry.

<sup>9</sup>Quilters in the Lackawanna Valley have also been developing their own design idiom. While many women do use craft instruction books and books on quilting as the basis for their designs, two characteristics often appear that do not seem to be related to these sources. Many local quilters make quilts of solid colored cloth tops with flowered backs, quilted with colored DMC thread, an imported thread from France made of long silky cotton. Italia Nardi, born in America, of Italian and French family background, is a regular quilter at the senior center in Carbondale. In her ten years with the group they have always used DMC thread. The members of the quilt group had seen conventional "quilting thread" in stores in other regions, but didn't like it as much because the DMC seems stronger and causes the quilted pattern to stand out better. Helen Saltisial learned early to make quilts, but stopped while she was raising her children, and only took up the craft again as a senior citizen, also at the Carbondale Senior Center. She picked up quilting just by watching her mother, who died when Helen was twenty-five years old. She recalls that women were using DMC thread long before she began quilting at the senior center. Among her parents' generation, she recalls that more women made patchwork or applique quilts than people do today, remembering that stars and dolls were popular patterns. Many people used old clothes in their patchwork, and printed a remembrance on the quilt indicating who the fabric called to mind. She recently finished a rose pattern quilt for her daughter. When Helen finishes a quilt she embroiders in one corner "Grandma made it," with the date. Her own children sincerely appreciate her quilts, and her daughter has taken time to learn from her, "she loves when I have a quilt on (the frame) when she comes to visit." No consistent reason is given for the use of DMC thread. Some say it is stronger, others say it makes their patterns stand out. The historical rationale for the choice of this relatively expensive thread remains somewhat of a mystery.



# WORKING THE SEAMS: African American Professional Performers Moving Between White Public Culture and African American Private Culture

by Hugo A. Freund

As social and musical historians as well as folklorists and local residents note, American urban centers supported African American performers. Between World War I and World War II, professional African American performers thrived in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. This paper will focus on this particularly important historical period for African Americans in the United States — the twenty years between World War I and World War II.<sup>1</sup> During this period a whole host of singers, jazz musicians, tap dancers and jazz dancers filled clubs, dance halls, and theaters. Some of these same performers are now being rediscovered and presented as part of cultural conservation efforts in programs such as "Stepping in Time" which is devoted to tap dancing in Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup>

The results of my historical research in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia clearly indicate that an understanding of African American expressive culture requires that one confront the social and political reality of the African American experience in the United States. This conclusion dovetails with criticisms raised by reviewers who have examined the traveling museum exhibit "Folk Roots, New Roots", as well as Mary Hufford's book *Cultural Conservation*. In Charles F. McGovern's review of "Folk Roots," he notes that the exhibit is weakest in highlighting the political forces that determine what and who are "the folk."<sup>3</sup> Expressive forms such as African American music and dance may be celebrated in American culture writ large, but the existence of African Americans as a cultural group may be ignored, denied, segregated, or deliberately repressed. A subject little examined by folklorists, these circumstances suggest that they need to be more sensitive to the question of not just the politics, but the realities of discrimination and the distribution of power, particularly as they undergird expressive forms in multicultural America. Dolores Root, in her assessment of Mary Hufford's book, underscores the same concern—that folklorists need to examine "power relations."<sup>4</sup>

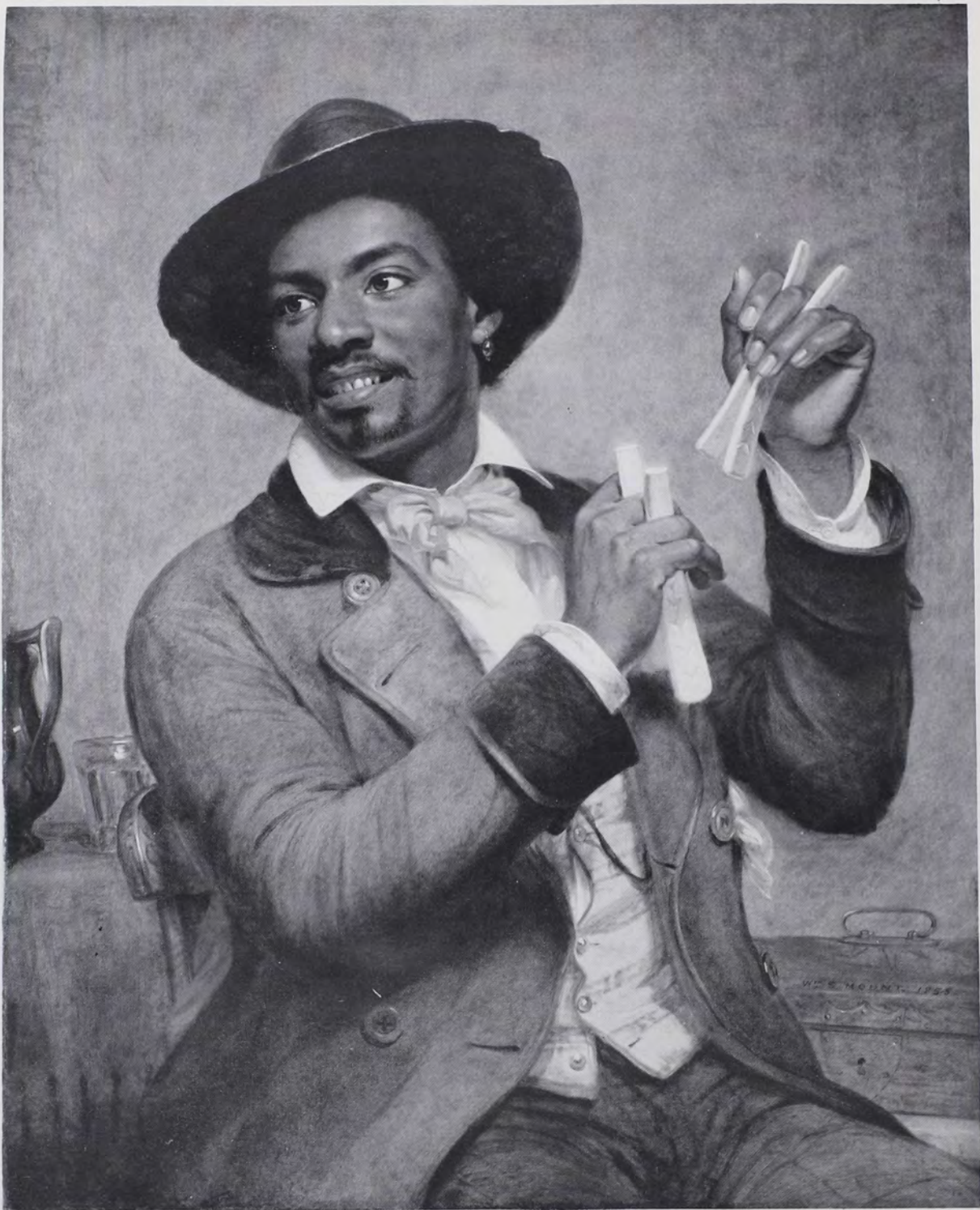
In both cases, reviewers outside of the folklore profession complain that the book and exhibit are incomplete and partially fail in their goals because they avoid examining difficult historical circumstances and the accompanying political realities. In essence the critics are concerned about the larger political and power realities that shape and constrain communities and tradition. If cultural conservation is to thrive, it must confront such present and historical

realities as discrimination and prejudice. Based on an unscientific sample of public presentations of African American expressive culture which are informed by cultural conservation, it appears to this observer that they steadfastly avoid mention of the concomitant harsh, racist, and segregated realities that affect these communities and performers.

A painting and its accompanying sign from the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts resonates with some of the issues that folklorists confront in trying to culturally conserve traditions. The museum sign for William Sidney Mount's 1856 painting entitled "The Bone Player" reads, "[i]n the 1850s, Mount painted a series of images of Blacks playing musical instruments (bones are thin bars of ivory or bone clicking together to produce lively rhythms)... [T]he Bone Player is rendered with exactitude and sensitivity. In its sympathetic portrayal of a Black man, it was almost unprecedented in the American art of the period."<sup>5</sup> In some ways the painting and the museum sign are emblematic of the problems folklorists face in carrying out cultural conservation. From the period between the wars there are photographic images of traditional performers that folklorists currently use. In fact, there are a great number of publicity stills available for the many performers and they are similar to Mount's painting in providing a sensitive human portrait. But these images are divorced from social context. Taken in photography studios, the performers are formally dressed and they are perhaps shown with their musical instruments. But what of the venues in which they performed? Despite substantial effort on my part, attempts at locating photographs of these professional performers in front of an audience have failed. The reasons why such images do not generally exist are twofold: Local newspapers would not send photographers to nightclubs, but rather would rely on publicity stills provided to them; and such photographs would show a contrast between the performers and the audience.

Probably the greatest strength folklorists bring to their efforts is the sensitive presentation of their informants such as African American performers. So too does Mount sensitively present the Bone Player and his humanity. But what of the weight and pain of historical circumstance? We cannot look at this painting without thinking of the slavery experience of the antebellum period. Should we have similar concerns about the social and political realities when





*William Sidney Mount's 1856 painting entitled The Bone Player (Bequest of Martha C. Karolik for the Karolik*

*Collection of American Paintings, 1815-1865. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)*

considering African American tradition bearers who worked between the wars as professional paid performers? What historical and political contexts are lost in the current representation of these performers in contemporary publications, festivals, and showcases?

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh to this day include two

important African American communities: North Philadelphia and the Hill District respectively. During the historical period under consideration, these two neighborhoods were shaped by the powerful forces of discrimination, racism, and prejudice, and both are the result of segregated and restrictive housing patterns. African Americans were re-



stricted in where they could live, limited to specific professions, denied membership in unions, and not able to obtain mortgages.

When it comes to the Hill District,<sup>6</sup> the record of physical isolation in Pittsburgh is particularly clear. Approximately a mile and a quarter east of Downtown and just under a thousand acres in size, the Hill District is a large upsloping neighborhood that incorporates a number of smaller areas including the Upper Hill District, Middle Hill District, Lower Hill District, Elmore Square, Robinson Court, Bedford Dwellings, Terrace Villages, and Schenley Heights. The Hill District rises sharply from west to east. Along Bigelow Boulevard in the Upper Hill District one has a tremendous panoramic view of downtown Pittsburgh, as well as the Strip District and Polish Hill which are far below.

To this day, physical isolation is enhanced through the placement of public buildings. The Civic Arena to the west serves as the dividing line between Downtown and the Hill District. To the south Fifth Avenue separates the Hill District from Soho. The northern reaches of the University of Pittsburgh demarcate Oakland from the southeastern portions of the Hill District. More specifically, Allequippa Street isolates Hill District projects from the University dormitories, buildings, and stadiums in Oakland. Towards the north and northwest, high atop Ridgeway Street, the Hill District is separated from Polish Hill, the Strip District, and a small portion of Lawrenceville.

Starting before the American Revolution, African Americans have continuously resided in the Hill District; there were African American families living there when George Washington and his scouts passed through the area in 1754.<sup>7</sup> In the early 19th century the African American community lived in the Lower Hill District area known as Arthursville.<sup>8</sup> The African American population continued to grow throughout the 19th century, with sizeable increases between 1875 and 1900. By 1910, the African American population in the Hill District was 10,745.<sup>9</sup> During the period 1910 through 1925, the Hill District saw the arrival of the largest number of African Americans.<sup>10</sup> The possibility of jobs and escape from the restrictive life in the South made Pittsburgh an attractive destination: "Lured by the prospect of higher wages and opportunity for social betterment, black migrants from the South crowded into Pittsburgh early in this century to such an extent that between 1910 and 1930, their numbers increased 93 percent. Most of these migrants came from the states of West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama—the latter in some cases because Birmingham was thought of as the 'Pittsburgh of the South.'"<sup>11</sup>

The first African Americans arriving from the South in this Great Migration were men,<sup>12</sup> and they settled in buildings that also housed other ethnic groups such as Poles or Jews.<sup>13</sup> This early pattern of interethnic and interracial populations gradually changed. Segregated neighborhoods developed, and later African Americans lived in commu-

nities largely composed of African Americans.<sup>14</sup> While the African American population in the Hill District steadily climbed in the 1920s, other groups left. The Jewish-American population is one such group, and their departure can be chronicled in student enrollments: "Enumerations of Jewish schoolchildren in Pittsburgh during the 1920s indicated a drop of one-third in the Hill District compared to a citywide decrease of Jewish pupils of only 2.6 percent. The more prosperous European immigrants and their children moved out of the Hill."<sup>15</sup> By 1930 African Americans constituted fifty-three percent of the Hill District population.<sup>16</sup> The result of the Great Migration, then, was the development of a segregated Hill District.

This new migration from the Deep South brought with it class divisions within the African American community. Most of the earlier African Americans in the Hill District were from the Upper South, especially from such states as Virginia or Maryland. They tended to be economically better off.<sup>17</sup> This established, long-term population included "Old Pittsburghers" who tended to be lighter in skin tone and who placed greater emphasis on status, prestige, and membership in exclusive clubs.<sup>18</sup> Although exclusionary, the Loendi Club and the Frogs were economically constrained by the limited number of more skilled occupations available to African Americans.<sup>19</sup> As one study shows, "with few exceptions, the Frogs were OPs or Old Pittsburghers, residents proud of having been in the city before the Great Migration. The occupations of these club members—postal worker, railroad clerk, chauffeur, lawyer, funeral director, laundry owner—indicate how constrained was the range of jobs then open to blacks."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the physical separation of the Hill District, the record of social segregation in Pittsburgh is particularly clear. Between the wars, African Americans faced discrimination and racism; they could not frequent Downtown businesses such as hotels or restaurants, and "in some clothing stores, if you tried on a hat that was your hat."<sup>21</sup> Women had to buy a dress without trying it on first. African Americans could not sit down and enjoy an ice cream at Isaly's. African American males were not even allowed in some stores and African American businessmen were not welcome. They could not rent storefronts Downtown and in some instances conducted business there from a distance. For example, orders for fur coats were filled in the Hill District but were sold Downtown to whites by white-owned businesses. The Downtown stores would sew their own labels onto garments made by African Americans in the Hill District.

African Americans could not enter the front door of the William Penn Hotel. In 1937, delegates from New York City filed a lawsuit against the Hotel for denying them lodging.<sup>22</sup> Such notable citizens as W. E. B. DuBois and A. Philip Randolph were excluded from Downtown hotels,<sup>23</sup> and world-renowned African American tenor Roland Hayes "was refused tickets to sit on the first floor of the Loew's Aldine Theatre on Liberty Avenue."<sup>24</sup> When the



Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team was playing at Forbes Field, African Americans were only seated in specific sections.<sup>25</sup> They were also discriminated against when traveling by train, bus, and taxi. The Yellow Cab Company, for example, would not provide service to the Hill District.<sup>26</sup>

African Americans could not join the American Automobile Association. They could not purchase Packard or Cadillac cars.<sup>27</sup> They were excluded from "portions of Herron Avenue nor did they feel particularly welcome in Washington Park or Schenley Park."<sup>28</sup> They were also barred from local Hill district establishments such as a bowling alley and a restaurant, Sandy's Steak House, located on Arthurs Street, even though African Americans bused the tables there.<sup>29</sup> Jewish Americans and Italian Americans did not serve African Americans.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, African Americans were excluded from public swimming pools, including some of those in the Hill District.<sup>31</sup> Summer picnics emptied the Hill District, as African Americans congregated in a South Park pool known as Sully's Grove, the only pool that would admit them.

Following World War I, the Pittsburgh steel industry began its slow but unstoppable spiral of decline and stagnation. The net result was that African Americans "entered the industrial work force at the bottom and had almost no success at moving up."<sup>32</sup> For example, one survey of African Americans employed in Pittsburgh plants showed that "ninety-five percent of the new workers . . . were employed in unskilled capacities, working 10 to 12 hours a day and earning 25 to 30 cents an hour."<sup>33</sup>

African Americans worked as laborers, as janitors, and as porters for the local mines, railroads, and steel mills.<sup>34</sup> Between the wars they continued to be excluded from over half the trades, and unemployment was over one-third of the adult population. Opportunities for them were also limited because of the contraction of industry; the unskilled jobs they were allowed to take "declined from 32 to 22 percent of the work force between 1900 and 1930."<sup>35</sup> Such fragile working conditions meant high turnover rates, a situation exacerbated by southern attitudes to work. Rural employment was seen as temporary, to be completed as part of the agricultural cycle—that is, one worked at other jobs between the seasons of planting and harvesting.<sup>36</sup> Many African American migrants in Pittsburgh would seasonally return to the South to work on the farm, to visit family, and to celebrate holidays.<sup>37</sup>

Restricted in employment, the elite of the African Americans in the Hill District were primarily middle-class professionals such as dentists, doctors, and politicians.<sup>38</sup> However, "the few who did pursue a professional degree in law, medicine, dentistry or pharmacy found themselves limited chiefly to black, and often poor, clients or patients, and most were forced to 'moonlight' at manual jobs to make a living."<sup>39</sup> Hospitals would not train African American nurses, nor would they hire them.

In the 1920s and 1930s, then, African Americans in

Pittsburgh were still restricted in where they could go, in what jobs were open to them, and in what businesses they could frequent. A survey taken in the 1930s showed that of African Americans employed in industry, "[m]ore than half (56%) were employed in manufacturing, 18 per cent in mining, and 12 per cent in hotel and school janitorial services. Virtually all—9,898 out of 10,821—were classified as 'common laborers,' and the average income was \$5 to \$6 weekly."<sup>40</sup> Retail employment opportunities for African Americans were not much better during this period, with most working as porters.<sup>41</sup> It was a time, too, when instances of discrimination could not be successfully challenged in court, and when there were no federal commissions that would enforce civil rights or equal employment.<sup>42</sup>

Access to work was also restricted by company owners and by labor unions, which African Americans were not allowed to join. Between the wars, relations between African American workers and organized labor were strained because of racism<sup>43</sup> and because African Americans served as strike-breakers in coal mines and steel mills.<sup>44</sup> In the late 1920s, mine owners would send a bus to the Hill District to transport African Americans to and from the mines;<sup>45</sup> once the strikes were over, they would be out of work.<sup>46</sup> It was only in the late 1930s that African Americans gained some acceptance and were allowed to join labor unions and construction crews. In 1938 the unions and the Urban League provided leadership training.<sup>47</sup>

Even before the Depression hit, the African American community in the Hill District suffered from high unemployment. Already in 1928 jobs were beginning to disappear and thousands of African Americans were laid off. It was a time when "[w]hites were taking jobs that once were regarded as fit only for Negroes—delivering ice, [and] working as waiters and bellhops."<sup>48</sup> By 1929 "over one-third of the men and women . . . interviewed had been idle for periods varying from one week to three months in the preceeding year."<sup>49</sup> In the 1930s, African Americans comprised approximately eight percent of Pittsburgh's population, yet were forty percent of those unemployed.<sup>50</sup> By 1934 matters had worsened still further with approximately sixty-nine percent of African Americans in Allegheny County unemployed.<sup>51</sup> Opportunities for employment in the iron and steel industries had all but vanished.

With a promise of higher wages and better living conditions, migrants "arrived daily in boxcars at Union Station, Pittsburgh, to find nightmare conditions and inadequate housing."<sup>52</sup> The "newcomers were forced into previously abandoned dwellings, into attics, cellars, store-rooms and basements. Churches and warehouses were converted into shelters, and those families with a spare bed or room converted it to a sleeping place... rooms would be converted into dormitories with scarcely space to walk between the beds; often two, or possibly three, men working separate shifts would occupy a single bed."<sup>53</sup>

In the 1920s African Americans lived in crowded conditions with few jobs and with not enough food or clothing.



The only people helping were the preachers.<sup>54</sup> It is estimated that there was "an average of four people per room in Pittsburgh's black residences."<sup>55</sup> The crowded conditions meant two couples sharing one room and men sharing one bed in shifts.<sup>56</sup> The following is representative of the many reports detailing the squalid and deteriorating conditions: ". . . six in a room in tumble down hovels, sharing common faucets, cups, toilets and beds. One tenement had a single water hydrant for 24 families. One tuberculous Negro was found in a hole in a hillside. An aged couple covered [*sic*] in a tin garage without water or toilet. A mother, father, eight children, and the illegitimate offspring of the 16 year old daughter, were herded into squalid rooms. Oozing through the backyard of another tenement was a scummy spring choked with offal, used as an open sewage drain."<sup>57</sup>

Owned mostly by absentee landlords, the housing stock in the Hill District was notoriously bad for the working class. One third of dwellings there were "classified as either in need of major repairs or unfit for human habitation,"<sup>58</sup> while approximately twenty-three percent were considered to be in good condition.<sup>59</sup> A disproportionate number of African Americans resided in these substandard domiciles: "In the mid-1920s only 20 percent of black houses had bathtubs and only 50 percent had inside toilets, while 30 percent had nothing better than outside water closets and 20 percent no more than privies. This situation represented little, if any, improvement over conditions in the migrants' living quarters during the World War I influx."<sup>60</sup>

Only one percent of the Hill population owned their own homes,<sup>61</sup> and the poor conditions there bred high rates of infant mortality and adult morbidity.<sup>62</sup> The crowded, cramped, unsanitary conditions led to a higher incidence of disease, and "by 1934, tuberculosis was killing Pittsburgh Negroes at a rate six times higher than it did whites."<sup>63</sup> In an African American population of 55,000, approximately eight percent had tuberculosis, while among the children the prevalence of the fatal form of pulmonary tuberculosis was three times the general rate.<sup>64</sup> There were also widespread reports of whooping cough, gonorrhea, and syphilis.<sup>65</sup> Despite these serious health problems, the Hill District was poorly served by medical services; there were only three field nurses serving the entire District.<sup>66</sup>

Because of this institutional and informal pattern of segregation, African American life was sadly restricted, but these severe conditions were important contributory factors in the blossoming of the Hill District. The social and economic forces that constrained what could be done outside the District helped this community concentrate its vitality and energy within the neighborhood. It was only here—particularly on Wylie Avenue—that one would find a wide range of African American expressive arts, including music and literature. During this period the Hill District also supported a large number of thriving African American organizations and businesses—lawyers' and doctors' offices; stores that sold furniture, jewelry, or furs; butcher shops, pawnshops, and printing shops; dry cleaning estab-

lishments; drugstores; beauty salons; summer camps; hotels; and various theaters, including movie houses.

Under these conditions of discrimination and limited employment opportunities it is not surprising that in addition to thriving legitimate African American businesses, the Hill District had an underground economy that included illegal clubs (speakeasies), dope dens, houses of prostitution, illegitimate gambling, and the sale of moonshine.<sup>67</sup> In *Shame of the Cities*, Lincoln Steffens reported that in Pittsburgh, houses of prostitution were run by syndicates. They provided—at inflated prices—a rented property, furnishings, and all the clothing, shoes, hats, jewelry, and other items needed by the women.<sup>68</sup> Segregation even extended to houses of prostitution, with some African American establishments in the Hill District open only to whites. Police and city officials were paid to ignore these illegitimate activities.<sup>69</sup>

Two notable figures in this underground economy of the Hill District were William "Woogie" Harris and William "Gus" Greenlee. They ran a large and successful numbers business.<sup>70</sup> The daily number was tied to the closing number of stocks traded on the New York Stock Exchange and payoff odds were taken from win, place, and show horses at a race track.<sup>71</sup> In an interview with Charles "Teenie" Harris, brother of Woogie, Ralph Lemuel Hill reports that Dick Gafney brought numbers to Pittsburgh from New York. It was initially strictly African American. Dick Gafney gave the business to Gus Greenlee and he in turn gave it to Bill Snyder.<sup>72</sup> In this same interview, Teenie reports that the Italians took the lucrative business away. During the Depression the importance of the numbers cannot be overestimated. One penny could win \$7, and numbers winnings, which sustained some of the unemployed, were used to pay for rent, groceries, and other necessities. But families were devastated when they lost food or rent money to numbers.

Woogie Harris and Gus Greenlee headquartered much of the numbers game in their Hill District businesses. The operations were run from either "Harris' Crystal Barber-shop on Wylie Avenue, the nearby Crawford Grill, or the numbers bank, complete with cashiers' windows and a lounge for the runners, that Greenlee ran in downtown Pittsburgh across from the courthouse."<sup>73</sup> Thanks in part to his success in the numbers racket, Gus Greenlee parlayed his earnings into a substantial empire. He was a social, economic, and political force to be reckoned with in the Hill District. He owned the important nightspot the Crawford Grill Number Two, had a stake in the Pittsburgh Crawfords Negro National League baseball team, and built a ballpark for the team in the Hill District. Greenlee also managed light-heavyweight boxing champion John Henry Lewis.<sup>74</sup> Because banks would not loan money to African Americans, Gus and Woogie loaned money so African American lawyers and doctors could open up offices. The numbers writers also supported political campaigns and civic events.<sup>75</sup>

Those that wrote the numbers became the Hill District's



financial tycoons and folk heroes, and were seen as trustworthy, respected, and honest. Hill District writers were not organized-crime outsiders or criminals, but rather people one knew and possibly were related to.<sup>76</sup> Gus Greenlee and Woogie Harris were known for their largesse and there are stories that they paid people's rent or gave them money for food. They also provided "uniforms, Christmas baskets, and toys."<sup>77</sup>

Wylie Avenue, Centre Avenue, and many side streets attracted whites and African Americans to thriving entertainment establishments, including the ". . . Collins Inn, the Humming Bird, the Leader House, . . . the Crawford Grill, . . . Derby Dan's, Harlem Bar, Musician's Club, Sawdust Trail, Ritz, the Fullerton Inn, Paradise Inn, and the Bailey Hotel. . . ."<sup>78</sup> It should be emphasized, however, that many of these nightclubs and theaters both Downtown and in the Hill District reflected the segregation found in so many other aspects of American life between the wars. Even though African Americans did own some of these entertainment venues and certainly many were employed in them, these establishments were open only to whites; African Americans were not permitted to patronize them. Such policies were found not only in Pittsburgh, but in Philadelphia as well.

Friday and Saturday nights were date nights, when couples would dress in their best and go out to bars. One could go out dancing at the Harlem Casino Danceland on Centre Avenue. (A popular dance step of this era was called "trucking"; it included putting your hand on your hip.) Another popular nightspot was the Hurricane, also on Centre Avenue, and many notable musicians played at the Crawford Grill. Many of the nightclubs were patronized mostly by whites.

Clubs would feature Sarah Vaughn, Dizzy Gillespie, and Billy Eckstein, whose big band included such notable musicians as Art Blakey, Dexter Gordon, and John Coltrane. Cab Calloway would come in for musical engagements, and the big bands of Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie would play Downtown and then go to an after-hours club in the Hill District. The Crawford Grill Number Two was a jazz mecca in the 1950s. Another spot was the Musician's Club. Run by George and Sarah Harley, the Celebrity Cafe on Centre Avenue was another important night spot; tap dancers performed in its floor shows and drummer Art Blakey played there early in his career. Jazz and swing drew crowds from all over Pittsburgh to the Pythian Temple and then to the Savoy Ballroom. After World War II, the Hurricane Lounge and Crawford Grill became focal points for musicians like Ramsey Lewis, Oscar Peterson, and Cannonball Adderly. Many African American musicians remember the Bailey Hotel in the Lower Hill.

One of those musicians, Clarence Smith, recalls that the Hill District supported a plethora of local big bands, including Leroy Bradley and his Club Miradors who performed at the Labor Temple on Bedford Avenue and

Washington Street. Other groups included Gerty Long and her Night Hawks, the Harlem Troubadors, Harry Tanner, Ollie Walker, Sherdina Walker and her Orchestra, and Walt Rainey's High Schoolers. Smith himself played for Walter Felix Bradford, and his wife had her own band, the Rhythm Queens. Clarence Smith also remembers the Broadway Syncopators with baritone Louis Depp singing through a megaphone.<sup>79</sup> The Hill District has also produced a number of performers who have traveled extensively and who are world renowned: such musical talents as Billy Eckstein, Lena Horne, Erroll Garner, Earl Hines, Mary Lou Williams, Roy Eldridge, George Benson, Billy Strayhorn and Ahmad Jamal all lived there at one time or another.

\*\*\*

The historical circumstances discussed above raise difficult problems for cultural conservation. How should these harsh realities be presented? How did professional performers such as musicians, dancers, and singers negotiate between the more secure, private world of musical apprenticeship and training and the more public world of nightclubs and stages? Such a perspective raises interesting questions about the relationship between tradition, communities, and audience; historical issues that need additional attention by folklorists as they plan cultural conservation programming.

In his study of Pullman porters from the 1920s through the 1960s, Jack Santino notes that they faced "dualities every day. It was a good job and a bad job; they were hosts and they were servants; they had the highest status in their community and the lowest on the train."<sup>80</sup> These dualities are evident as well for all African Americans who served as cultural or musical ambassadors to the larger white public. Santino's approach—examining the ways in which porters bridged conflicts, resisted stereotypes, protested conditions, and, most importantly, sustained a sense of identity—should serve as a model for approaching this problem. Those involved in cultural conservation must find a way to fully recognize the historical circumstances of cultural traditions they are now trying to protect and conserve.

Currently, folklorists help to culturally conserve the vitality of African American expressive forms through contemporary public re-presentations such as festivals and concerts. In these re-presentations, folklorists recognize and inform others that performers are situated in African American culture and society. This community is seen to have supported and nurtured performers and their skilled singing, dancing, and playing of musical instruments. But what of the less comforting historical circumstances? The preceding historical survey of social conditions between the wars indicates the importance of a crucial factor: African Americans were embedded in the performance context of clubs and ballrooms that were restricted to white audiences. Performers had to respond to and struggle with the struc-



tured racism, discrimination, segregation, and poverty of the period. To ignore this historical reality that critically shaped the same performers that folklorists now introduce on many stages is for folklorists to ignore at their professional peril crucial contextual experiences. Santino's message is that one cannot ignore these historical realities because they offer crucial keys to understanding the character of the performers and their traditional expressive art forms. But more importantly, the successful approach to cultural conservation must include an appreciation of the historical circumstances that shaped these expressive forms. Folklorists, then, should not obscure or erase racism,

prejudice, and discrimination when they attempt to represent these traditions today.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this paper was presented at Ursinus College on Saturday, April 22, 1995, as part of the Occupational Folklore/Work and Multiculturalism Through Folklore Conference sponsored by the Pennsylvania Folklife Society, the Middle Atlantic Folklife Association and the Society for Pennsylvania Culture Studies. The author would like to thank Doris Dyen, Susan Isaacs and Tom Gallagher for their assistance in completing this article.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on my role as a folklife consultant and historical researcher contributing to surveys of local African American communities including Germantown in Philadelphia and the Hill District in Pittsburgh.

<sup>2</sup>"Stepping in Time" [A special commemorative issues devoted to African American tap dancers in Philadelphia] *Works in Progress the Newsletter of the Philadelphia Folklore Project* 8:2 (February 1994).

<sup>3</sup>Charles F. McGovern "Real People and True Folk" [Exhibition Review], *American Quarterly*, 42:3 (September 1990), pp. 478-495.

<sup>4</sup>Dolores Root, "Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage" [Book Review], *American Anthropologist*, 97: 1 (March 1995), pp. 155-56.

<sup>5</sup>Visit to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Mass., July 19, 1994

<sup>6</sup>The discussion concerning the Hill District relies heavily on my final report to the Steel Industry Heritage Corporation (SIHC). My report was completed as part of the Regional Ethnographic Survey. This survey will lead to the development of the Rivers of Steel Heritage Area in southwestern Pennsylvania. The author would like to thank SIHC and Doris Dyen for the opportunity to complete this research as well as rely on the final report for his published article. Freund, Hugo, *Pittsburgh's Hill District and Oakland Neighborhoods*. (Homestead: Steel Industry Heritage Ethnographic Survey, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>*African-American Historic Sites Survey of Allegheny County* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1994), p. 85.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 86-87. <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup>Ralph Lemuel Hill, *A View of the Hill-A Study of Experiences and Attitudes in the Hill District of Pittsburgh from 1900 to 1973* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1973), p. 44; see also Peter Gottlieb. *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 66-67.

<sup>11</sup>Joe T. Darden, *Afro-Americans in Pittsburgh: The Residential Segregation of a People* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1973), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup>Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Gottlieb, p. 67. <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*; and Laurence Glasco, "Double Burden: The Black Experience in Pittsburgh," in *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh*, ed. by Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), p. 80.

<sup>17</sup>Ruck, p. 11. <sup>18</sup>Glasco, p. 80; Gottlieb, p. 185.

<sup>19</sup>Ruck, pp. 11, 13. <sup>20</sup>Glasco, p. 81. <sup>21</sup>Hill, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>23</sup>Glasco, p. 84. <sup>24</sup>Hill, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup>Glasco, p. 84.

<sup>26</sup>Arthur J. Edmunds, *Daybreakers: The Story of the Urban League of Pittsburgh, The First Sixty-five Years*, (Pittsburgh: Urban League of Pittsburgh, 1983), p. 58.

<sup>27</sup>Hill, p. 24; and Glasco, p. 84. <sup>28</sup>Hill, pp. 18, 19.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22. <sup>31</sup>Edmunds, p. 57.

<sup>32</sup>Glasco, p. 76 Glasco also notes that African Americans found lowskill, low-paying jobs at Jones & Laughlin Steel, for instance (p. 75).

<sup>33</sup>Edmunds, p. 23. <sup>34</sup>Ruck p. 13. <sup>35</sup>Glasco p. 77.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78. <sup>37</sup>Ruck, p. 12. <sup>38</sup>Hill, pp. 22-23.

<sup>39</sup>Edmunds p. 59. <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88; Edmunds notes that there were only two elevator operators.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64. <sup>43</sup>Edmunds, p. 66. <sup>44</sup>Ruck, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup>Gottlieb, pp. 171-172, 174; Edmunds, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup>Gottlieb, pp. 171-172, 174 for an alternate view of union and African American relations see Edmunds, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup>Edmunds, p. 90. <sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73. <sup>49</sup>Gottlieb, p. 104.

<sup>50</sup>Edmunds, p. 87. <sup>51</sup>Ruck, p. 13. <sup>52</sup>Edmunds, p. 20.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>54</sup>Hill, p. 109. <sup>55</sup>Gottlieb, p. 70.

<sup>56</sup>Hill, pp. 118-119.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 122; for additional descriptions of the horrid conditions see Ruth M. Lowman, "Negro Delinquency in Pittsburgh" (M. A. Thesis Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, 1924), pp. 19-21; V. C. Wright, "Social Aspects of Housing" (M. A. Thesis, Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1927), pp. 74, 95; Glasco, p. 79; and Edmunds, pp. 25, 55.

<sup>58</sup>Gottlieb, p. 70. <sup>59</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>61</sup>Glasco, p. 79.

<sup>62</sup>Alexander Z. Pittler, "The Hill District in Pittsburgh: A Study in Succession" (M. A. Thesis, Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1930), pp. 63-64.

<sup>63</sup>Hill, p. 121. <sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 121-122. <sup>65</sup>Glasco, p. 79.

<sup>66</sup>Hill, p. 122.

<sup>67</sup>See Ira Reid, *Social Conditions of the Negroes of Pittsburgh* (Urban League Study, 1930), p. 28; and Ida Selavan, "The Social Evil in an Industrial Society: Prostitution in Pittsburgh, 1900-1925" (University of Pittsburgh Library Papers). For a fascinating chart showing the location in 1929 of speakeasies lining Wylie Avenue, as well as a scattering of dope dens and stills in the Hill District, see Hill, p. 123; he adapted Chart 7 from Pittler, p. 51.

<sup>68</sup>Hill, p. 134. <sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>70</sup>Hill, pp. 24,124; see also Ruck, pp. 140-152.

<sup>71</sup>Hill, p. 125. <sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126. <sup>73</sup>Ruck, p. 145.

<sup>74</sup>Ruck, pp. 176-179. <sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 149-150. <sup>77</sup>Hill, p. 127; see also Ruck, p. 150.

<sup>78</sup>Glasco, p. 76.

<sup>79</sup>Jerry Vondas, "Happy days on the Hill" in *The Pittsburgh Press Roto*, June 3, 1973, p. 26.

<sup>80</sup>Jack Santino, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 69.



47th Annual

Pennsylvania Dutch

**KUTZTOWN**

BETWEEN ALLENTOWN & HARRISBURG, PA

**FOLK  
FESTIVAL**

June 29-30 - July  
1-2-3-4-5-6-7, 1996

DAYTIME GATHERINGS  
10:00 AM to 8:00 PM

## The Festival and its Sponsorship

The 47th Annual Kutztown Folk Festival is brought to you through the efforts of Festival Associates, Ursinus College and the Foundation for Agricultural Resource Management (FARM). A non-profit organization which is the proud owner of the new festival grounds, Schuylkill County Fairgrounds, FARM receives a portion of the proceeds to maintain and update the new grounds. Festival Associates is our new management team that will present an authentic and theatrical reenactment of 18th and 19th century Pennsylvania German life for the public to enjoy. Ursinus College of Collegeville, Pa., supervises all cultural aspects of the festival. The college uses its portion of the proceeds for scholarships and general educational purposes.

FOR THE FOLK FESTIVAL BROCHURE WRITE TO:

**Pennsylvania Folklife Society**

461 Vine Lane, Kutztown, Pa. 19530

