

Book Reviews



Pittsburgh Pizzazz — A Life in Showbiz

By Patti Faloon

Tarentum, Pa.: Word Association Publishers, 2013

376 pps., photographs

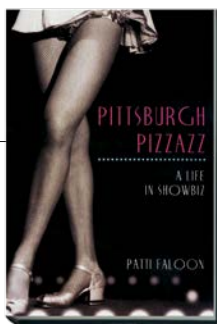
\$18.95 paperback

Reviewed by Paul Roth

I had a hard time putting this book down! Let me explain. This is a memoir (actually, each chapter is a mini-memoir) written by a local entertainer who is a contemporary of the reviewer. It is, essentially, the calendar of a life: family, friends, marriage, and especially show business. Therefore many of the references to local and national celebrities and locations were very familiar and nostalgia-provoking. Harold V. Cohen! Baron Elliott! Bill Bickel! Ted Weems! Vogue Terrace! Syria Mosque! Gordon MacRae! Morey Amsterdam! WCAE! Charlie Byrd! Slim Bryant! Lenny Litman! Rummy Bishop! The list goes on and on.

In its entirety, the book constitutes a biography of the life and career of a Pittsburgh singer-dancer-entertainer, which is enhanced contextually by the plethora of acquaintances and colleagues with whom she and her musician-husband, guitarist Marty Faloon, were associated. The reader will happily discover that the author appeared in various personas: it depended upon the booking whether she was featured as a balloon-twister, a clown, member of a girl's singing duo, vocalist with her husband (as a duo or with his band), or featured vocal soloist. All of these talents provided for a lifelong, productive career.

Easy reading is accommodated by the book's



organization: a chronologic sequence of short chapters, each devoted to a specific narrative or topic. Many photographs enhance the text.

I recommend it both to contemporaries who want to be treated to memories of the popular showbiz and club entertainers of the greater Pittsburgh region and to younger folk who desire to be oriented in what show business was like during the period covered by the author's career.

Another appealing facet is the author's memory (or diary), such as when she reflects upon the details of her Niagara Falls honeymoon stay in 1950: "The prices at the hotel seem archaic compared to today. Hotel Statler was a 'big deal' hotel at the time. A three-night stay: \$9.50 per night including a meal and valet. Total with taxes: \$31.75. Wow!" Wow indeed.

What is most compelling is the author's optimistic and sometimes humorous takes on the events in her life. She even conveys these traits in her narrative of confronting some of the more tragic occurrences like death and illness. The reader just has to ignore some loose editing, especially in the spelling of proper names and song titles.

An excerpt from the book's last paragraph pretty well covers the author's (and for that matter, the reviewer's) outlook: "Here I am, an octogenarian and still doing what I love! Call me spunky or spry, I'm fine with that. I say to those still able to do something well that they love, DON'T EVER STOP!"



Paul Roth is retired from the Computer Science faculty of Virginia Tech. He is a noted musicologist, specializing in popular and show music from 1900 through 1960, and has produced and hosted musical radio and TV programs. He wrote "Pittsburgh's Dance Band Era" in the Fall 2013 issue of this magazine.

Over the Alleghenies: Early Canals and Railroads of Pennsylvania

By Robert J. Kapsch

Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2013

376 pps., maps, photographs, bibliography

\$39.99 paperback

Reviewed by Andrew Stroud

In 1825 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was faced with a dilemma: whether to build a canal or a railroad to compete with New York's newly completed Erie Canal. The controversy involved the use of conventional stillwater canals to cross the Allegheny Mountains and connect Philadelphia with Pittsburgh, or to use the neophyte technology of railroads. In the new book *Over the Alleghenies: Early Canals and Railroads of Pennsylvania*, veteran canal historian and engineer Robert Kapsch tells the story of the engineering, economic, and political history of this early system of transportation.

After the War of 1812, politicians in East Coast states began to see the need for lines of transportation to connect with the growing Ohio Valley and Great Lakes regions. New York was fortunate in that receding glaciers had left a high shoreline around Lake Ontario, which was perfect for a contour canal from Albany over to Lake Erie. With no mountains to cross, the Erie Canal was built across relatively flat areas of land and required few technological innovations. Pennsylvania was different: the same glaciers had left a topography of twisting ridges, narrow river valleys, and the problematic Susquehanna River. With no easy route through the veil of mountains, the engineers were forced to build riverside canals through the steep valleys. This direct connection to the temperamental rivers made the canals extremely sensitive to floods and droughts. Between the east-west river systems was the Allegheny Ridge—a 35-mile wall of heavily forested mountain that rose

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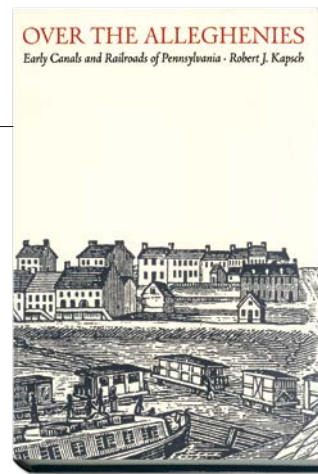
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1,200 feet above the headwaters. After looking at canal, tunnel, and turnpike options, the engineers settled on a complicated railroad arrangement. The resulting Allegheny Portage Railroad was a marvel of its time.

Political maneuvering complicated the grand scheme of the Pennsylvania Public Works. To sell the concept of the canal, promoters rationalized financial and technological miscalculations that wildly underestimated the scope of the project. The project was then fast-tracked without a clear plan to vault the mountains. Expensive lateral canal projects were initiated to entice politicians from the fringe counties to support the Mainline. Bonds to finance the project were then shunned as it became apparent that the construction costs far exceeded estimates, and that maintenance costs alone outstripped income from tolls. The heavy debt from the Public Works placed Pennsylvania in a precarious position when the Panic of 1837 arrived.

Despite its many shortcomings and expense, the Public Works succeeded in creating an expanded transportation link between the Eastern seaboard and the Ohio/Mississippi River systems. The increased volume, lower costs, and greater speed over the turnpikes for transporting raw materials allowed fledgling industries such as iron and glass production to develop. Passenger service by packet boats made the trip west faster and more comfortably than by stagecoach. And, like the modern NASA space shuttle program, the Public Works pioneered many technological innovations.

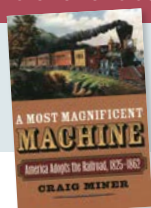


Over the Alleghenies is a large book and is copiously illustrated with period artwork, technical drawings, and antique map reproductions. The format is uncluttered and the writing style flows easily. The focus of the book is from the mid-1820s (when construction of the system was begun) to 1857, when the Public Works was sold to the Pennsylvania Railroad. All 15 divisions of the system are reviewed and documented. Observations are often reinforced with quotations from the reports of the Pennsylvania Canal Commission, both from the commissioners and also technical reports submitted by the individual canal engineers. A substantial section of endnotes and a bibliography make the book a valuable reference. With *Over the Alleghenies*, Robert Kapsch has created a definitive textbook on the Pennsylvania Public Works that is both educational and entertaining. ☀

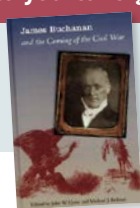
Andrew Stroud is a native of Pennsylvania, attended the Montana School of Mines for Geological Engineering, and is currently working on a guidebook series for the Pennsylvania Canal.

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