

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Lilly, Cambria County

When Jim Salony, former dean of Mount Aloysius College in Cresson, retired in 2001, his hometown of Lilly was coming up on its 200th anniversary. Salony thought he would gather a few photos together for the bicentennial, and one thing led to another. “At that moment, not realizing the full consequences of it, I had made a life-altering decision.” He would go on to organize a historical society, establish a museum, research the 200-year history of the community and memorialize it in a series of monuments and a history book titled *The Spirit of a Community, 1806–2006*, and plan for a year-long celebration in 2006 as the community’s Bicentennial Year.

Salony had some time, as the bicentennial was four years down the road, but he moved quickly to form an advisory committee. By March 2002, the Lilly Washington Historical Society (named for the township as well) had 800 members within a community of 950 people. “At our highest point, we have had 1,100 members,” said Salony. “The most rewarding part of implementing the challenging agenda was to witness the epiphany of the two youngest generations of the community as they moved from the agnosticism of believing that Lilly had no history to the discovery that they not only had ancestors—but that those ancestors had accomplished much that was interesting and important.”

Charlie McColester, labor historian and founder of the Battle of Homestead Foundation



Jim Salony poses in front of monument commemorating resistance to “the unpatriotic and un-American Ku Klux Klan.”

All photos by Bette McDevitt.

brought the achievements of Salony and the Historical Society to my attention with a short film he and Jim Hohman, another member of the Homestead group, created after visiting Lilly. “To walk down the streets of the village of Lilly and see murals reflective of their mining heritage along with dramatic memorials to the ‘Nobility of Women,’ the ‘Nobility of Labor,’ with a ‘Volunteerism’ monument picturing young and old, male and female striving upward together for the common good, makes you aware that you are in someplace special,” said McColester.

The most dramatic and heart-stopping memorial, according to McColester, is that of Lilly and the United Mineworkers of America’s heroic resistance to “the unpatriotic and un-American Ku Klux Klan.” In a three-foot-by-five-foot bronze cast depiction, a crowd of hooded figures is blocked by two joined hands, commemorating the town’s opposition to the invasion of 450 armed Klansmen in 1924. The invasion of the town, cross burnings, and the resulting confrontation led to three killed and many wounded.

Salony brought the story alive with some background:

Early in 1924, eight members of the United Mineworkers were expelled from the Lilly local union after the national UMW passed a resolution forbidding KKK members from UMW membership. These workers were replaced with immigrants from Eastern Europe, labeled by the KKK as “Catholic foreigners.” These were the groups that the KKK most detested. This great affront to the KKK prompted them to charter the “KKK Special,” a train that started in Pittsburgh and picked up Klansmen at each stop through Johnstown to arrive 400 strong in Lilly at 7:10 p.m., Saturday, April 5, 1924.

The story of the confrontation with the Klan is told in the text on the monument, shown in the photo included here. Salony recounted:

There were many wounded on both sides

of the battle, but some of the locals who were wounded did not come forward [in order] to avoid prosecution, since both the townfolk and the Klansmen were charged with being rioters. On June 9, 1924, 29 Klansmen and 15 Catholics from Lilly were tried in Ebensburg at the Cambria County Common Pleas Court for rioting. The jury found all parties not guilty of rioting, but convicted 18 KKK members and 13 townspeople of unlawful assembly, and they were sentenced to two years in prison.

Salony continued:

Animosity toward Catholics was nationwide. In Lilly, most of the Catholics were miners, and the store owners were Protestants. Indeed, afterwards, several merchants were boycotted for being Klan sympathizers. In the end, Lilly was given the distinction of starting the beginning of the end of the expansion of the Klan into the Northeast. Larger demonstrations followed in New York and Boston and the rallying cry was

“Remember Lilly!”

It’s quite a story for a small town, and Salony, having brought the past into the present, mostly through one-on-one conversation, laments the present scene when people sit with earplugs, and text each other across the table. McColleston, who also spends time in the past, said, “Affirmation of the experience and struggle of common people are very important in times of social crisis and change. If people in this place confronted danger, overcame adversity, and built community, then so can we. Attention needs to be paid to our roots.”

Bette McDevitt is a longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.

In the Spring 2014 “Neighborhoods” column, the name of trombonist Al Dowe was misspelled in a photo caption on page 15.

The Lilly monument text.

