

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE ROSCOE LEDGER:

A Portrait of the Upper Monongahela Valley's Boom Years

FRANK J. KURTIK

ALMOST coincidental with the birth of a new century, the twentieth, was the birth of a new era in the upper Monongahela valley — a boom era. It marked a time of industrial growth, accompanied by population growth. These factors combined to produce an atmosphere charged with activity, from which evolved a life style peculiar to a fast-paced environment. One way to gain an impression of that life style is to examine the files of the newspapers that served the area during that era. Most of those newspapers are now nonexistent, either having died as a result of financial difficulties or poor circulation, or having been absorbed by other, stronger publications. Now totally consigned to history, their back issues are the only reminders of their past lives.

Monongahela Times, Monessen News, Charleroi Mirror, Belle Vernon Enterprise, Brownsville Clipper, California Sentinel, Donora American, Roscoe Ledger — these are but a few mastheads of the sheets that brought the news, daily or weekly, to the men who mined the coal, forged the steel, plied the rivers, or wound the trains through the valley to the beat of an enterprising America. The last named of these papers can serve well to illustrate much of what once was the character of the Monongahela valley.

Roscoe lies nearly thirty miles above Pittsburgh, almost midway between Charleroi and Brownsville, on the left bank of the Monongahela River. The town is but a shadow of its former days. The *Ledger* is as much a ghost of the past as the Alice and Eclipse mines, the Moose Beer brewery, the Allenport-Roscoe Electric Railway, and the Roscoe Marine Ways Company.

With the spirit of Babbitt-like boosterism that was typical of the era, a 1903 vintage *Industrial Edition* of the *Ledger* gave this description of the town:

Roscoe is one of the hustling little towns on the Monongahela river, its transportation facilities are unsurpassed. Besides the railroad . . . it has the steamboat advantages of the Monongahela river, which is navigable at all seasons and which affords an outlet to the gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic ocean.

The leading industry is boat building, and numerous coal mines surround

Mr. Kurtik, employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, Pa., is a graduate of California State College.—Editor

the town. As to the public schools and churches, Roscoe is not excelled in fine buildings and facilities anywhere. Roscoe's real estate has for sale no boom lots in it, and in no sense is it a boom town, but has the substantial and solid growth and invites the attention of all who visit the town, seeking for a healthy progressive and growing town in the great Monongahela valley.

No other town in the Monongahela valley combines in its natural location a greater wealth of endowments than Roscoe. It is nearly the center of a radius of supply for food and the necessities of existence, fuel, plastic materials and the manifold treasures which Mother Earth yields for the needs of man. Thus no doubt exists as to the city's bright future.¹

A product of this environment was George Collins, Jr. To provide a biographical sketch of Collins in the preface to a book that he wrote while living in New York City, his publisher quoted an article which appeared in the *Pittsburgh Sunday Dispatch*. He was described as "a very well educated man, a beautiful penman, a telegraph operator, a typesetter, a job printer, a newspaper correspondent, and the editor, publisher of the *Roscoe Ledger*."²

Collins epitomized that quality which his contemporary, Horatio Alger, called "pluck" in the endeavor that led him to found the *Ledger*. He was afflicted with inflammatory rheumatism while but in his teens. This condition resulted from work as a "trapper boy" in the damp environs of a coal mine, and progressed to the stage where the joints of his knees, right ankle, elbows, wrists, thumbs, and four fingers had solidified. Nonetheless, using a "news, stationery, confectionery and tobacco store" as his office, Collins published a newssheet which he called *Little Sunshine*. He set the type by hand, and his printing plant consisted of a small leverhand press.

This effort was so well received that Collins eventually purchased the *Roscoe Forum* from Moses Lowers. Combining his own publication with the latter, he founded the *Roscoe Ledger*. The first issue appeared on Friday, April 26, 1898, and the masthead proclaimed it, "A Weekly Journal Devoted to the Interests of Roscoe, Elco, Stockdale and Surrounding Country."³

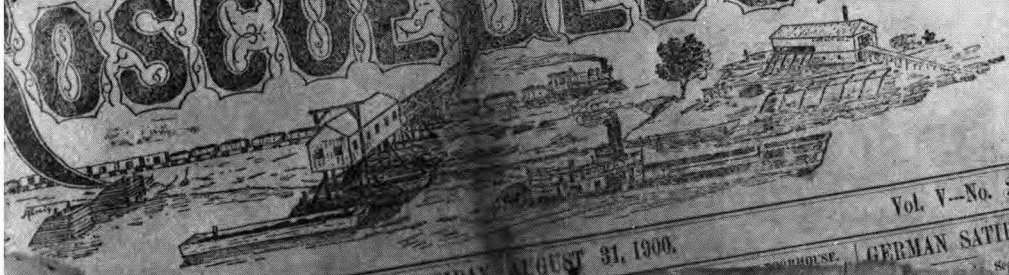
Several years later, hoping that he might receive better treatment for his condition by doctors in New York City, Collins decided to sell the *Ledger* and leave Roscoe. He did, however, continue to write, and in 1904 the Broadway Publishing Company of New York printed his novella, *A Strange Railroad Wreck*. It was modeled upon the real world of the people and places along the rail lines through the Monongahela valley.

¹ *Roscoe Ledger, Industrial Edition*, Aug. 1903.

² George Collins, Jr., *A Strange Railroad Wreck* (New York, 1904), Preface.

³ *Roscoe Ledger, Industrial Edition*.

ROSCOE LEDGER



Vol. V--No. 23.

ROSCOE, PA. FRIDAY, AUGUST 31, 1900.

GERMAN SATIR

THE ROSCOE LEDGER

ROSCOE Ledger

Interests of Roscoe, Elco, Stockdale and Surrounding Country.

ROSCOE, PA. FRIDAY, JUNE 1, 1894.

ROSCOE WINS.

Want a Bicycle



This cut illustrates wheel we offer Read our proposition.

LOCAL

George Ford was here Mon

Mine Explosion.
The explosion which occurred in the mine at Roscoe, Pa., on Friday, August 31, 1900, was a most serious one. It resulted in the death of several men and the injury of many others. The cause of the explosion is still under investigation, but it is believed to have been caused by a gas explosion. The mine is owned by the Roscoe Coal Company, and the explosion occurred in the lower part of the mine. The bodies of the men who were killed were recovered from the mine, and the injured men are being treated in the hospital. The Roscoe Coal Company is now closed, and the mine is being investigated by the State Mining Commission.

JAMES LINDENBERG, NEW POSTMASTER.
The appointment of James Lindenberg as postmaster of Roscoe, Pa., was announced by the Post Office Department on Friday, August 31, 1900. Mr. Lindenberg has been serving as assistant postmaster for several years, and is well known in the community. He is a native of Roscoe, Pa., and has been a resident of the town for many years. The appointment of Mr. Lindenberg as postmaster is a great honor for the town, and it is expected that he will continue to serve the community well.

People You Know
The Washington Reporter has been purchased by a syndicate, the head of which is John L. Stoen. The manager and editor of the paper is to be public.

VOL. VIII--NO. 40.
The Washington Reporter has been purchased by a syndicate, the head of which is John L. Stoen. The manager and editor of the paper is to be public.

The new owner of the *Ledger*, who came to describe himself as "editor, reporter, compositor, pressman, engineer and devil, as well as general bouncer," was Joe T. S. Cowen.⁴ Born in Cleveland in 1874, he was the son of the internationally known labor leader, Isaac Cowen. Quite active in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, an early affiliate of the American Federation of Labor, he was once a candidate for governor of Ohio on the Socialist ticket.⁵ The elder Cowen's radical labor leanings had a marked influence on his son, as can be noted in the latter's editorials and news articles.

Cowen's first newspaper experiences came with work in the printing department of a Cleveland paper. After he attained the level of journeyman printer, Cowen left his hometown to ramble down the Mississippi valley, working for various newspapers. Eventually, he headed northward and came to southwestern Pennsylvania. He was employed by the *Charleroi Mail* when he purchased the *Ledger* in 1901. The paper was not his only gain, for he met the woman who was to become his wife at the *Mail*, where she was employed as a linotypist.⁶

Bearing the name of *Roscoe Ledger* today is a job printing and lithography business operated by another Joe T. S. Cowen, in a building that his grandfather built in 1926 to house his newspaper office and printing plant. It is on the second floor of this structure, in a store-room, that the bound volumes which contain fifty-four years of the history of the *Ledger* are found. The crumbling yellow newsprint bears the unofficial written record of the people whom the paper served.

While the paper cannot be relied upon to give the most thorough account of life at the turn of the century, it does lend itself to giving an insight into the character of the time. It was a time filled with the nervous energy of a country on the move — mentally and physically. European immigrants saw a way to improve their lives amid the growth of a prospering America. The time was filled with the noises of men and machinery, the roar of steam locomotives, the slosh of paddle-wheelers, and the sound of steel picks biting into coal, with an undertone of the accents of Slovaks, Poles, Serbs, Croats, Italians, Hungarians, and Russians.

Incidents such as this occurred when the newcomers met the es-

4 *Ibid.*

5 This information is in a scrapbook kept by Isaac Cowen, now in possession of Joe T. S. Cowen, Coal Center, Pennsylvania.

6 Joe T. S. Cowen, interview, March 8, 1975, Coal Center, Pennsylvania.

tablished country folk: "A lively time was on hand the other night at the picnic here [West Brownsville]. A 'cornhusker' came in from the country and tried to bluff one of our boys, but the bluff would not work, and the farmer was knocked out with a right hard 'hook' on the jaw."⁷

At times, the experiences of the recent arrivals gave rise to humorous situations such as this:

The new mail carriers in Monessen are up against it and they have our everlasting sympathy. The foreign element to whom they deliver the mail do not seem to appreciate the service and think the men are merely agents of the gas company to collect money from them. Time heals all things and we think that the carriers will eventually win out if they stick.⁸

But those who had been around for a few generations also became objects of humor as shown in this excerpt from a tale about a rather loose woman. With one deck of the heading reading, "Married Men Flock After Her Like Flies After Molasses," part of the front-page story reads:

You can find her almost any evening strolling along the streets of Charleroi, dressed like a cheap actress, and trying in different ways to attract attention. In this she succeeds wonderfully, as by nine o'clock one uninitiated would imagine there was an organ grinder in the lower end o' town. But it's funny to see the married men when they are walking with their wives and chance to meet this darling bit of femininity. They utterly ignore the fairy on these occasions, and of course, the women won't even look at her, but for all this the married men are the worst of the lot, it is not uncommon to see heads of families anywhere from 40 to 50 years of age sneak into a candy shop for a pocketful of knickknacks, and then stroll to the gates of the fairy's domicile, there to chew at the palings until Rosebud shows herself at the door to give an acquiescing nod that the coast is clear or a shake of the finger to warn them that hubby is at home and they must postpone for a time their informal call until the hostess is prepared to receive them.⁹

The times were also filled with personal drama, as these sensational headlines imply:

Double Tragedy
At Donora

Jealous Negro Shoots His Wife
Then Kills Himself

SHE WAS A MINISTER'S DAUGHTER

Cooly Perpetrated the Deed And Went To
Church To Execute It!¹⁰

⁷ *Roscoe Ledger*, Aug. 24, 1900.

⁸ *Ibid.*, June 10, 1904.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 20, 1903.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Mar. 18, 1904.

Wife's Attempt At Poisoning

A Roscoe Hungarian Narrowly Es-
capes Death at his Frau's Hands

GAVE HIM MEAT FILLED WITH LYE

She is Bound Over to Court on Charge of
Felonious Assault¹¹

Even Cowen, personally, entered into this realm:

Assault Made On The Editor

W. H. Boyle Attacks Him in the
Street With Great Force

HE TOOK OFFENCE AT AN EDITORIAL

Only Two Blows Were Struck and They
Landed On Editor's Face¹²

One category of stories that was particularly caught up with the action and harsh reality of the turn of the century involved industrial accidents. The reportage conveyed a vivid starkness, a bluntness and descriptiveness not seen in most of today's newspapers. It conveyed a realism, which in its literary quality could be considered analogous to the graphic quality of the work of the artists of the then-developing Ashcan School. Examples are found in these arresting headlines:

Head Cut Off By Railroad

Hungarian Miner the Victim of De-
capitation at Lucyville

Attempt to Alight from Train

Right Arm was also Cut Off and Both Feet
Mangled in Horrible Manner¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 6, 1903.

¹² *Ibid.*, Feb. 20, 1903.

¹³ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1903.

Eight Were Killed AND MANY MORE INJURED IN WRECK

The Most Disastrous Catastrophe in the History
of P.V.&C. R.R.¹⁴

The sensationalism of the latter heading was carried into the text of the story that accompanied it, as this excerpt reveals:

The West Elizabeth Express had just left Oliver station and being a little late was driving ahead to make up time. Coming to a slight curve near Cochran station the engineer could not see very far ahead. A freight was ahead trying to make a siding. It had apparently cleared the track, but the last car, a big steel gondola, hung over and evidence presents itself that there was no flagman to protect the rear end. The passenger thundered along, caught the cowcatcher and ripped the side off the engine, smashed into the tender and forcing it from the engine crashed it through the combination baggage car and smoker. The tank plowed through the car and jammed everything living or dead in a small place at the rear of the car. The engine being released shot ahead and the rear coaches came to a standstill on account of the sudden setting of the air brakes. A stove in the rear car soon started the derbies [debris] burning and the injured men were unable to move and slowly burned to death as the heat was too terrific for the rescuers to get to them. . . .¹⁵

Among the listing of the dead were these entries:

Unknown Foreigner, residence unknown; died on way to McKeesport hospital; clothing burned off, but body otherwise in good condition; remains taken to Allebrand's undertaking rooms, Duquesne.

Unknown Foreigner, residence unknown; burned to a crisp; taken to undertaking rooms of J. A. —————, Duquesne.¹⁶

If such accidents were not bad enough news, there were some rather extreme examples of antisocial behavior, as appeared under the following headlines:

Attempt to Kill Operator

Fiends Incarnate Attack Mrs. Wilson at Walton Station

TRIED TO FORCE HER HEAD IN STOVE

Timely Arrival of Freight Train Prevents
Their Dastardly Deeds

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Jan. 9, 1903.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

A fiendish and dastardly attack was made last Sunday evening on Mrs. George Wilson, of Monongahela, while on duty at the Walton tower where she is employed as night operator. It is believed that the attack was for the purpose of bodily harm. Mrs. Wilson's plucky defense and prompt use of the wires thwarted the villainous attackers of their attempts to burn her to death.¹⁷

In another instance, the victim of an attack was "a young man named Hildebrand," who was "held up and thrown on the [railroad] tracks unconscious." The article reported that the victim was "beaten in a brutal manner and left in an unconscious condition when he was found the next morning by a flagman. . . . Fortunately there was [*sic*] no trains passed [*sic*] there during the night, a circumstance which saved his life."¹⁸

Editor Cowen was sensitive to the ever-turning wheels of local political machinery. It thus became an ever-present topic in his editorials. An example is this commentary upon a local election: "It is not necessary for political reformers to go to the large cities to find the essence of corruption well developed . . . Some colored fellows who didn't care how the election went were induced to vote then change their clothes and vote again."¹⁹

Cowen brought his personal feelings to the fore at times, and occasionally in a very strong manner. In reading the following excerpt from an editorial concerning the aftermath of another election, one can sense the attitude — that can only be described as demoniac glee — in which he wrote:

The printery is one in for a good deal of cussing on the part of the defeated candidate at last Tuesday's election. Go it old boy, as long as cussing is done behind the editor's back he can afford to laugh up his sleeve. It is not the first time that the disciple of the long-eared quadruped stood up on its hind legs and brayed because it has been worsted. By the way some people talk about the result of last Tuesday in this town it is plain that the fool killer is badly needed.²⁰

Cowen also dealt with injustices meted out to local laborers. Here is a comment about a situation which has long been remedied, and which is taken for granted by many of today's miners:

The Ellsworth miners are accused of having too many holidays. It is too bad that these wage slaves, who so diligently labor to line the pockets of the "poor" operators should take the time to rest their weary bones. Too much rest! What an infamous insult from parasite to laborer. Truly the iron bands of greed grow tighter as the flow of dollars comes easier to the capitalist.²¹

17 *Ibid.*, Feb. 13, 1903.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1903.

20 *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1904.

21 *Ibid.*, June 9, 1905.

In an article about a mass meeting held by coal miners, an iniquity common to coal towns at the time was a central issue: "Perhaps the principal question that stirred the meeting up was the alleged discrimination against many of the men because they did not deal at the company store."²²

Then there were times when he would sound off quite strongly on the prolabor line:

... There is no more dangerous occupation that men are employed at than in the mines and too much care can never be exercised for the protection of life. If the barons and lickspittals who clamor for favor would cease in their mad chase for the Almighty Dollar at the expense of the miners, and tend more to the comfort and safety of employees in their death traps perhaps they would stand a chance of gaining more respect from the public.²³

Occasionally this human drama would be forsaken in order to present news of another type of drama — theatrical — which came to the people via riverboat. Then the editor became theater critic:

Price's Floating Show Boat stopped here [Roscoe] for a short spasm Thursday evening and inflicted upon an unsuspecting public an abortion of that famous production of Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle." If those who took part in it did their best then it is some other business they should be in.²⁴

Cowen often addressed his reading public on an open and informal basis. Such was an instance when he remarked upon the addition of a new piece of equipment to his shop:

Next issue of the Ledger will be printed by the assistance of our new gasoline engine for which we made a deal with the Fairbanks Company of Pittsburg [sic]. The old steam engine has run its race and last week it froze up and bursted, so in order to surmount this additional trouble that seems to be following the editor he decided to install a gasoline engine. It is a hummer and we don't object to visitors coming in and looking at it.²⁵

At times, in these one-sided discussions with his readers, Cowen would get "hot under the collar":

Don't show your littleness by borrowing a Ledger and then because it don't suit you, cuss the editor. Next to the man who takes a paper with no intention to pay for it, the one who borrows it and then swears at the editor because the paper is not run to suit the borrower's whim is the most infinitesimal section of nothing that it is possible to describe.²⁶

And then, he would sound almost exasperated:

It is certainly a stony proposition to try and please everybody. Hardly an

²² *Ibid.*, Nov. 4, 1904.

²³ *Ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1903.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1903.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Feb. 27, 1903.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Mar. 25, 1904.

issue of our paper goes out that some insignificant item becomes offensive to some narrow-minded person as to how a paper should be run. We have no time to quarrel with them and would advise that they go and take a good cool bath before approaching the office with their worn-out kicks.²⁷

All these incidents and experiences and events now belong to the past and exist only in the realm of history. The contemporary accounts of an area and its inhabitants, when both were growing and developing, sit and gather dust on the second floor of a building in Roscoe, Pennsylvania. There the crumbling newsprint continues to hold stories of life and action and excitement, ready to reveal to any curious reader impressions of the people and places of the upper Monongahela valley.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, June 24, 1904.