

LCCC needs strong head to set the right tone

MAYBE THE Luzerne County Community College board should translate its most recent crisis into Chinese, for in that language, the character for "crisis" also means "opportunity."

The results of a recently released 1998-99 survey at the school under the auspices of Educational Consultant Services shows that fully a quarter of the students queried have heard a faculty member utter a sexist or racist comment, while 39 percent report hearing sexist or racist remarks from fellow students.

This is the very kind of insensitivity that in the past has ripped the administrative fabric of the university, led to lawsuits over sexual harassment and heralded a slew of firings and resignations.

Yet with the imminent departure of President Jon Larson, LCCC has the opportunity to get it right this time. Certainly the board's decision to hire a consultant to fill the top spot for the interim is a sensible start. The atmosphere at the school, partially attributable to Larson, is still too charged and distrustful to make an internal appointment that could inspire even a crumb of confidence.

But the leader ultimately cho-

sen to replace Larson can carry LCCC toward being an open, unbiased center of learning where the principles of equality and enlightenment flourish.

**A strong
'institutional
culture' can
defeat bigotry
at LCCC.**

MBA classes and a raft of business books have analyzed and dissected the idea of a "corporate culture" in shaping the character and success of organiza-

tions from within and without. A corporate culture or — in the case of LCCC — an institutional culture is shaped by the individual at the helm.

Local examples of such leaders are the first president of Wilkes College, Eugene Farley, who directed that institution over the years toward becoming the university currently under Christopher Breiseth's capable leadership. Farley set a standard that served as a model and stepping-off point for those carefully chosen leaders who came after him.

And it is that very foresight that LCCC needs to apply in selecting Larson's permanent successor. LCCC is in desperate need of a role model who will set the tone for the faculty and student body, whose strength of character and personality can rid the institution once, and for all, of bigotry, ignorance and all that is the antithesis of an enlightened academic community.

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Union organizer Min L. Matheson (with microphone) encourages local members of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union during a 1958 strike at a Pittston, Luzerne County, factory owned by a mobster. She helped design and promote the ILGWU label (facing page).



BORN TO ORGANIZE

by Kenneth C. Wolensky and Robert P. Wolensky

For nearly two decades, from 1944 to 1963, in northeastern Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley, a center of anthracite mining, Min L. Matheson (1909-1992) and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) were synonymous with notions of "community."

A charitable event? Count on the ILGWU to provide volunteers and raise money.

Patients at an area veterans' hospital in need of a bit of holiday cheer? Bet that Min Matheson would dispatch the ILGWU chorus to liven things up a bit.

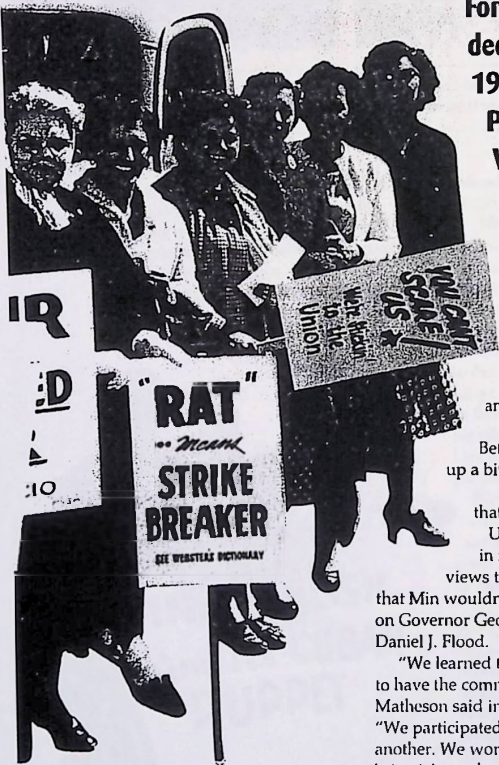
A president or presidential candidate coming to town? Rest assured that Min—and her chorus—would be on the program.

Unemployed residents desperately in need of an advocate to voice their views to state and federal officials? Know that Min wouldn't give a second thought to calling on Governor George M. Leader or Congressman Daniel J. Flood.

"We learned that, in order to organize, we had to have the community in our corner," Min L. Matheson said in an interview conducted in 1988. "We participated in one community venture or another. We worked with the Committee of 100 to bring jobs to the area and became active in the United Fund and the Red Cross. I think the people supported us because they thought it was good to



Bill and Min Matheson, in retirement, in the 1980s.





As the anthracite industry in northeastern Pennsylvania declined, more and more women (above) went to work—and many in factories owned by out of town interests. Min Matheson (below, right) was a radical young woman, as well as a socialist, during her days in New York.

have an organization like ours that was community-conscious and upped the earnings of people." Min L. Matheson understood the importance of community, she understood politics, she understood people and their problems and struggles. For she and her family, too, struggled against enormous odds for a cause that

defined her life: the cause of working people.

Minnie Hindy Lurye was born the second of eight children to immigrant Russian Jews in Chicago. As a youngster she observed the intensity with which her father, Max Lurye, approached his life's work to organize Chicago's cigar makers. She listened intently as immigrants came to their apartment and talked with Max Lurye about their daily struggles and toil in this new land of great promise. She saw his efforts to stimulate their interest in the idea of collective representation. She heard the fiery speakers who gathered at

Riverview Park on Sundays to talk of economic and social justice. And she witnessed, first hand, the intolerance of some toward those who struggled for fairness for working people.

"I'm not going to die, Minnie, I'm not going to die," her father uttered as he battled to hold onto life after being gunned down on a Chicago street corner by lieutenants of gangster Al Capone (1899-1947) for "causing trouble" as a union organizer. He survived, but memories of the attack remained with Min throughout her life. "You assimilate a lot of that stuff. And it always stayed with me. It stayed

with the whole family. But with me, more so." Of the Lurye children, Min and her brother Will followed most closely in their father's footsteps.

In 1928, nineteen-year-old Min Lurye fell in love with Bill Matheson, an activist twelve years her senior, whom she met at the Chicago Federation of Labor. With Bill's encouragement she left Chicago in 1932 to help striking textile workers in Patterson, New Jersey. After the Patterson strike was crushed, Min moved to New York and began working as a dressmaker in Manhattan's garment district. She befriended ILGWU members and leaders who were quickly impressed with her knowledge, social conscience, and ability to speak publicly. Garnering the respect of co-workers, she was elected chairwoman of ILGWU Local 22 in 1937. With thirty-two thousand members, ILGWU Local 22 was one of the country's largest. Bill soon joined her, and they both embarked on careers as union organizers.

In the early forties, Bill accepted an assignment in Sayre, located in Pennsylvania's largely rural northern tier, just south of the New York border. Min chose a line of work that held great meaning for her: motherhood. She gave birth to two



MIN MATHESON'S War Against PITTSTON'S Gangsters

daughters, Marianne and Betty. One day in 1944 she received a telephone call from ILGWU president David Dubinsky. He was agitated, ranting in his usual combination of Yiddish and English, because more and more garment factories were "running away" from Manhattan to Pennsylvania and, in particular, to its anthracite region. What would be the effect on New York? And what would it mean to the small cities and towns of Pennsylvania?

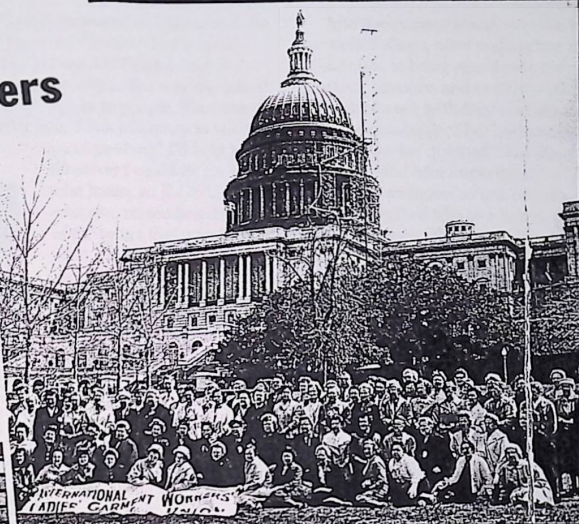
The reason for the exodus was, quite simply, economic. The union had been organizing factories in Manhattan since its founding in 1900 and progress was steady. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, manufacturers began seeking cheaper labor and an escape from union contracts, and the Keystone State's hard coal region seemed an attractive locale for "runaway" factories. Traditionally the breadwinners in the anthracite region, men were suffering periods of unemployment during mine closings and then joblessness as the bottom fell out of the coal industry. Families were desperate. Outmigration was growing. So was employment in newly emerging garment factories. The wives and daughters of coal miners were eager to sit down at sewing machines to earn what they could to support their families (see "Life After the Mines Closed" by Tom Dublin, and with photographs by George Harvan, Spring 1999). At the beginning they worked for paltry piece rates. The hours were long and the working conditions dismal.

Complicating matters was the underworld. It was no secret that criminal elements had become a problem in the garment industry. Gangsters had plagued New York's ILGWU for years. When the "runaways" began mush-rooming in



northeastern Pennsylvania communities, among them Pittston, Kingston, and Edwardsville, organized crime followed. Dubinsky asked Min and Bill Matheson to "clean up the mess down there." They accepted. Min was appointed manager of the ILGWU's Wyoming Valley District and Bill its educational director.

When they arrived in the valley, conditions were worse than either had imagined. "All the mines were down. Men weren't working," she recollected. "We had organized in New York and surrounding areas. Wages were getting higher. The employers were looking for lower wages. And, things were happening with organized crime. The big shots in New York, the Genoveses [a noted mob family] and



Min Matheson's father Max Lurye and her brother Will Lurye (left) were ardent union organizers—and targets of the mob. Matheson attracted the attention of the Reader's Digest (above, left) in 1957 and the nation's capital with many lobbying trips (above, right).

"It wasn't that organized crime was exactly nonviolent, you know. We were scared. I don't want you to think that we were so brave. We were scared."

[Albert] Anastasia were having legal problems and wanted a legal front for their illicit activities, which included everything. The dress industry is easy. You need very little capital, a handful of machines, and you're in business. So they were running. And they ran to coal fields of Pennsylvania.

"They told the women, 'We'll teach you to sew.' They worked for weeks for nothing. And the hours! There were laws in the land but they weren't obeying any of the laws. They did what they wished and made it easy for the women to come in any time of the day or night. Double, triple shifts. At the Pittston end of the valley it was as if every empty space was occupied by dress shops."

The ILGWU initiated its local presence in 1937, but proved no match to the growth of the runaways. Minnie Caputo, a garment worker and Matheson ally, described conditions in the early days: "I started when I was sixteen or seventeen years old, non-union. I think I got around ten cents an hour. They were like sweatshops. They [the bosses] stood behind you and timed you and if one girl did eight operations he would say 'Why not you?' But, you know, not everyone had the same

speed. If they didn't want you they got rid of you fast. You were out. They were really sweatshops."

Min found about six hundred and fifty union members in six organized shops when she arrived in 1944. By the time the Mathesons departed in 1963, the Wyoming Valley District counted eleven thousand members in one hundred and sixty-eight organized factories. The legacy of Min Matheson stretches far beyond the organization of garment factories, though. With the help of many, including her husband, she led the charge to transform powerless women garment workers into an influential, community-conscious coalition. She accomplished this by organizing the unorganized and establishing an activist movement. "It wasn't that organized crime was exactly nonviolent, you know. We were scared. I don't want you to think that we were so brave. We were scared," Min emphasized as she described the task of building a union. "But I went on the theory that if you let one factory stay non-union, it would contaminate the others. The union was here. They had to be union. We did not [yet] have the people. That's true. They were controlled. But when we walked in it was as though . . . drama had arrived."

She recruited Luzerne County residents to help the cause. Since legal problems might result, Min turned to former stage actor and up-and-coming lawyer Dan Flood, noted as much for his powerful presence as his grandiloquent oratory and sartorial splendor (see "'Dapper Dan' Flood, Pennsylvania's Legendary Congressman" by William C. Kashatus III, Summer 1995). "Dan helped us all the time. With his mustache and mannerisms and all, he fitted just perfectly into what we were doing." Members of other local unions, such as the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), lent a hand as well. Min recruited people like Angelo "Rusty" DePasquale, a UMWA member and Pittston resident who knew the region

well. "I was introduced to Minnie and she asked me about Pittston," DePasquale recalled. "We went to Pittston and she showed me the shops. The way she talked. The way she spoke to people. She treated me well. I said, 'Look Minnie, you want me to go along? I'll help you. Whatever I could do for you.'" John Justin, an ILGWU educator, remembered some of the tactics the organizers used. "In organizing, Min used the pressure of getting as many people in the union as possible. Of getting the Teamsters not to deliver products. We would use everything possible—not violence—but everything possible."

Initially, the union targeted factories not controlled by organized crime. Although apprehensive at first, workers began to pay attention to



"The girls were one hundred percent behind her because they knew that if we went on strike, we were going to get what we wanted. You could count on it and you could count on her!"

Min's soapbox speeches. "They used to just pack the union hall because they loved to hear Min talk," said garment worker Dorothy Ney. "She could convince anyone to join the union." She did not limit herself to speeches, however, Ney explained. "Min was right on the picket line with us. She went at six o'clock in the morning like we did and she was on the picket line most every morning." Minnie Caputo recalled that, "If we didn't have somebody like Min Matheson with us, I think we would have given up. She was so strong and she was right there with us. She fought for everyone. The girls were one hundred percent behind her because they knew that if we went on strike, we were going to get what we wanted. You could count on it and you could count on her."

Min then turned attention to the mob-controlled shops, often making live radio broadcasts, to bring attention to the workers' situation and to rally workers to the union cause with fiery orations penned with the assistance of her husband. One garment worker quipped, "Bill made the snowballs and Min threw them!"

Pittston mobsters on one occasion verbally attacked Min as a harlot, unfit to lead the women. She was infuriated. She telephoned the union hall and asked an associate to dress her two pre-school daughters in starched pinafores and bring them to the picket line. When they arrived, she handed the little girls picket signs and led them to the head of the column. How could the toughs call her such things now? The local press gave great play to the story "Children on the Picket Line." At another picket line, a reputed underworld boss shouted that Min should bring her "feeble" husband to the protest to see how long he would last. Irate, she walked up to him, pointed her finger in his face and announced for all to hear, "I don't need to bring Bill up here because I'm twice the man you'll ever be!"

By the mid-1940s, the ILGWU's momentum began to build. Garment workers were becoming increasingly aware of Min Matheson. Contracts began to be negotiated, and more workers were joining union ranks. While continuing to organize, Min worked to create an activist movement. In 1948, the union opened a district health care center in Wilkes-Barre, the only one of its kind designed to serve the entire anthracite region. Garment workers and their families from Pottsville, Schuylkill County, in the south, to Scranton, Lackawanna County, in the north, could take advantage of free medical check-ups, immunizations, examinations, screenings, and x-rays. The center provided a wide range of services to thousands of individuals in the region.

At about the same time Min asked ILGWU members Clementine Lyons, Bill Gable, and Jim Corbett to organize a chorus and plan performances. It was important, Min thought, for union members to enjoy social activities through which they could become more familiar with each other and their union. It was also important to her that the community see another side of the ILGWU. The chorus performed for community activities, charity functions, political events, and holiday festivities. It was common for its annual musical revue to sell out multiple shows with most, if not all, of the proceeds destined for local charities.

"We were one of the first ILGWU districts to ever put on a musical revue,"



Each year garment workers from throughout northeastern Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley traveled to New York to take part in a giant parade. Their floats celebrated the ILGWU and showcased the clothing they helped make in dozens of factories in the anthracite region.

Clem Lyons remembered. "We had our first show at the Kingston Armory. Then Mrs. Matheson wanted us to do a kiddie show. We did, and called it the 'Lollipop Revue.' We used to go to the Veterans Hospital to perform. We performed for the American Italian Association and the American Legion. Then we had a regular annual musical. Every year we had these shows, from 1949 to 1976."

Popularity earned the chorus prominent bookings. It performed during a local welcoming ceremony for President Harry S. Truman, and at a rally in Harrisburg for presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson. Invitations to present holiday revues at New York union headquarters were issued frequently.

Min recognized that routine factory work provided few avenues for intellectual stimulation. With Bill's guidance, she set out to develop a comprehensive curriculum for workers ranging from courses on factory safety and personal health, to daylong symposia on federal, state, and local policy and legislation, and to programs about the availability of community social services. The union regularly bussed workers to Unity House, its sprawling vacation and conference center

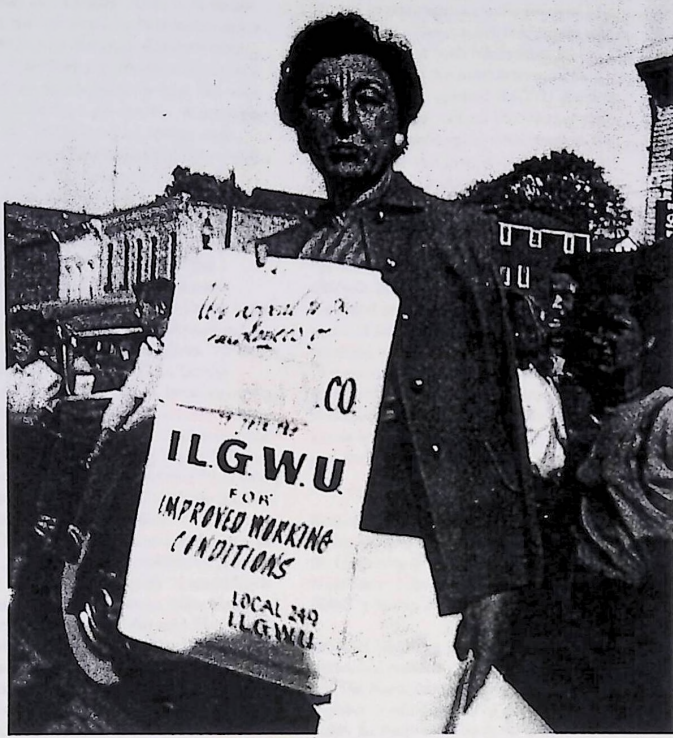
nestled in the Pocono Mountains to hear prominent speakers discuss topics of relevance to working people (see "Unity House: A Worker's Shangri-La" by Kenneth C. Wolensky, Summer 1998). Factory workers also traveled to Harrisburg and Washington, D.C., to tour, meet with policymakers, and attend legislative hearings, and to New York to visit landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty and the United Nations.

One of Min's proudest accomplishments in the area of education was forging a partnership with Wilkes College (now University) in the Luzerne County seat of Wilkes-Barre which gave workers the opportunity to do something practically unheard of at the time—to attend evening college courses. "I worked with Dr. Farley, who was president of Wilkes College," Min recounted. "With his help, and Dr. Rosenberg, who was teacher of economics, we instituted a series of courses and our people went to college. They were giving them a pretty rounded view of history and economics and so on. We graduated quite a few of them."

The union continued growing and it was divided into three locals at Pittston, Nanticoke, and Wilkes-Barre. More and

more factories were being organized.

Garment workers were becoming part of something much larger than themselves. Min and Bill Matheson had made significant inroads, but not without a cost. Organized crime would continue to haunt them. Someone once lobbed a red paint bomb at their house; on several occasions they had to send their children to visit friends because they feared reprisals; and threatening telephone calls were frequent. In May 1949, the unspeakable occurred. Min's brother, Will, working as an organizer for the ILGWU in Manhattan, stepped into a telephone booth on West 35th Street. Two men forced open the door and stabbed him to death with ice picks. The tragedy shattered the Lurye family and stunned the labor movement. One hundred thousand garment workers marched in the funeral procession through Manhattan's garment district. Popular journalist and commentator Walter Winchell, who closely followed the story, hinted that the real reason for Will Lurye's death could be found not in New York, but in Pennsylvania's coal fields and garment factories. A distraught Max Lurye suffered a heart attack and died one week later. Max and Will Lurye are buried side-by-



Not long after her arrival in Wilkes-Barre—at the urging of union leader David Dubinsky—a resolute and, at times, defiant Matheson took her place on the picket line.

side, their tombstone emblazoned with the inscription: "Father and Son, They Lived and Died for the Cause of Labor."

To make matters worse, the accused murderers, lieutenants to New York crime boss Albert Anastasia, were tried and acquitted after several eyewitnesses suddenly changed their stories. Despite the enormous loss, Min didn't give up. With Bill's help, she continued marshalling garment workers into a community-minded and politically active force.

The ILGWU desperately wanted to ameliorate the distressed economy of the anthracite region. The sagging job base was of chief concern to business, community, labor, and academic leaders. Congressman Flood and Governor Leader responded by introducing federal and state legislation to secure government aid for economic development. Min mobilized

ILGWU support for these measures and union members testified at government hearings in Scranton, Harrisburg, and Washington. Workers wrote to officials in Washington and Harrisburg, urging passage of the measures. The union partnered with local private sector interests to become a member of the "Committee of 100" that raised economic development funds to lure new enterprise and lobbied for government aid for economic assistance. On one occasion Min gave a dramatic performance before the U.S. Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee, urging members to pass Flood's Area Redevelopment Act. A Washington journalist characterized her oration as one that would assuredly convince wavering politicians to vote in favor of the measure.

Governor Leader's economic develop-

ment package, which created the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority, was enacted in the late 1950s. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy signed Flood's bill into law, eventually creating the Appalachian Regional Commission. Along with significant private sector investment, government aid lured many new employers and created eighty thousand new jobs in the coal region between 1960 and 1980. The era of public-private partnership for economic development had arrived and Pennsylvania led the way. New businesses put a significant dent in the double-digit unemployment rates, which had plagued the anthracite region for a fair part of the twentieth century. By the early 1960s the economy in the Wilkes-Barre area began a gradual turnaround. Unemployment dropped to an unprecedented seven percent. "In a very real sense, the community lived for twenty years, into the 1980s, on the fruits of what was accomplished in the fifties and sixties," one historian noted. Min Matheson and the ILGWU played an active part in these accomplishments.

Min Matheson and the ILGWU joined with many of the same politicians in advocating a number of initiatives. These included Flood's efforts to raise the federal minimum wage and to lower the social security retirement age; Governor Leader's work to overhaul the state mental health treatment system; and Governor David L. Lawrence's successful effort to swing Pennsylvania in favor of Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election.

Before long, politics and the union became inseparable; the ILGWU and politicians became allies. Snapshots of history include Min and the garment workers on stage for Harry S Truman's 1952 visit to Wilkes-Barre; Min and the garment workers making a presentation to 1954 presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson during a rally in Wilkes-Barre's Public Square; Min and the garment workers campaigning for candidates for local, state, and national offices; Min speaking at John F. Kennedy's crowded assembly during a visit to the area; and U.S. Senator Joseph Clark, Congressman Flood, and Governors Leader and Lawrence attending ILGWU educational programs at Unity House and annual picnics at Sans Souci Amusement Park in Nanticoke (which, by the late 1950s, drew fifteen thousand garment workers and family members). These alignments—some odd, several curious—meant votes. They meant action. And they meant that working people had access to those who made the policies that impacted their daily lives.

"The ILGWU was located in other parts of the state, but they weren't a force

like they were up there in the Wyoming Valley," Governor George M. Leader remembered. "Min wasn't just a labor organizer. She was a political organizer. She was an educator. There is no doubt about the fact that Min had mobilized the ILGWU as a political and community force. They had a great influence on my industrial development policy. She was, without doubt, a great force. A courageous woman." In his own inimitable style, Congressman Flood credited Min and the ILGWU for the "silver lining that it brought to the dark clouds of the economy of an area once dependent upon a single industry: coal mining."

Min and Bill Matheson left the Wyoming Valley in 1963 for a new assignment with the ILGWU Union Label Department, despite the protestations of their eleven thousand members. Although he needed her in New York, David Dubinsky recognized that, because of Min Matheson, the ILGWU "is widely welcomed as an integral part of all community activities in the Wyoming Valley." To her supporters, Min explained that "this valley has been good to the ILGWU; the ILGWU has been good to the valley."

The Mathesons returned to the area in June 1972, to live their retirement years close to family and friends. "I could have retired anywhere, Chicago, New York, but, to me, this is home," Min said. She remained active in the community. Just a few weeks following her return, she helped organize the Flood Victims Action Council to advocate for the needs of residents who lost all they owned to the wrath of Tropical Storm Agnes. Min Matheson was back. And she was back as an organizer in the community she so dearly loved.

Two decades later, on December 8, 1992, Min Matheson died in Wilkes-Barre's General Hospital. Her husband Bill preceded her in death five years earlier, in 1987. Their work, however, is far from merely a memory. Min remains very much a legend in labor circles, a hero to many, the stuff of folklore. "The memory of Min Matheson should be a permanent part of history," opined a local newspaper writer. One politician called for the placement of a statute of "Min Matheson in Wilkes-Barre for all that she has done."

And recognition is forthcoming.

On Friday, September 24, 1999, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum

Commission, the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, and the Pennsylvania Labor History Society will unveil a state historical marker on Wilkes-Barre's Public Square to commemorate the work of Min L. Matheson. The marker recognizes the contributions of both Mathesons in building one of the most active, vibrant, and community-spirited ILGWU districts anywhere in the nation. The marker also honors their unflagging dedication to the communities and people of northeastern Pennsylvania's hard coal region. Long before "network" became a fashionable buzzword among America's corporate leaders, Min and Bill Matheson worked tirelessly to enlist politicians, government officials, business owners, factory supervisors, and area residents in their cause—the cause of fair and equitable treatment of working women and men in northeastern Pennsylvania. When the familiar blue and gold historical marker is dedicated in Wilkes-Barre this year, it will celebrate the ideals and beliefs shared by the Mathesons and their legion of loyal followers. ♦

Kenneth C. Wolensky, a native of the Wyoming Valley, is a graduate of College Misericordia, the University of Delaware, and The Pennsylvania State University. He is a member of the PHMC's history division.

Robert P. Wolensky, also a Wyoming Valley native, is a graduate of Villanova University and The Pennsylvania State University. He is a professor of sociology and co-director of the Center for the Small City at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He is a former PHMC scholar-in-residence.

The Wolensky brothers are writing a book on Min L. Matheson, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and the growth and decline of the garment industry in Pennsylvania and, specifically, in its northeastern anthracite region.

Quotations and passages appearing in this article have been excerpted from interviews conducted under the

auspices of the Wyoming Valley Oral History Project, co-directed by the authors. Ongoing since the late 1970s, the project has collected reminiscences from more than three hundred subjects. Individuals who worked in the garment industry in northeastern Pennsylvania and are interested in sharing their memories are encouraged to write: Kenneth C. Wolensky, Division of History, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, P.O. Box 1026, Harrisburg, PA 17108-1026; telephone (717) 772-0921; FAX (717) 787-4822; or e-mail kwolensky@phmc.state.pa.us.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Min Matheson understood the power of politics. She took part in a political rally in Pittston with Governor George M. Leader and Pittsburgh Mayor David L. Lawrence.

955: *The first Fine Arts Fiesta was staged with a budget of \$1,000.*

Above, gardens landscaped especially for the festival provided the perfect setting for sculptures on loan from New York City galleries. At right, costumed dancers perform at one of the first festivals. Colorful canvas strips which translate as 'Our Town' adorn the stage.



Slides and postcard courtesy of Beth Schooley

Fine Arts a rite of spring

Annual fiesta helped launch other celebrations

By KRISTIE GRIER

Times Leader Staff Writer

W

hen Annette Evans volunteered to help the city of Wilkes-Barre celebrate its 150th anniversary, she could have had no idea that she was about to start an annual tradition.

But 43 years later,

Wilkes-Barre's Fine Arts Fiesta stands as a lasting reminder of her work.

In the mid-1950s, Evans traveled to see the Boston Fine Arts Festival, and brought back ideas for an outdoor gala in Wilkes-Barre.

Together with Eugene Farley, then president of Wilkes College, and Al Groh, longtime director of theater at Wilkes, Evans founded the Wilkes-Barre Fine Arts Fiesta in 1955 out of what was the United Nationalities pageant at the college.

The festival's beginnings were humble. Evans, who died in 1989 at 76, and the others started with a \$1,000 al-

lowance, a borrowed stage and no lighting.

Today, it has a budget of more than \$100,000.

And it has inspired any number of events — ranging from a tomato queen crowning or arm wrestling championship at the Pittston Tomato Festival to a bed race through the streets of Hazleton for the town's FUNFEST celebration. A traveling storyteller of African history promotes diversity at Afrozar, last year's maiden effort from the local chapter of the NAACP.

The Irish Days Festival. Polka festival. Jazz Festival. The list just keeps on growing, all thanks to the Fine Arts Fiesta.

"It encouraged the Cherry Blossom Festival, the Children's Festival and made it possible for other organizations to plan outdoor events," said Groh, of Kingston, who was born in 1910.

Crowds at the Cherry Blossom Festival, which began in May 1968, have grown to almost 20,000. And last year, the Hazleton FUNFEST attracted nearly

30,000 and the Pittston Tomato Festival drew 20,000, said Merle Mackin, executive director of the Luzerne County Tourist Promotion Agency.

Perhaps the festivals of today may run the gamut but no doubt they work on the same premise as the Fine Arts Fiesta: If you show them a good time, they will come back.

"There's certainly not a drop in attendance — they either maintain or grow," Mackin said.

"They are well-attended because they appeal to everybody — especially to children," said Groh, an adviser to the Fine Arts Fiesta. "It's the children, really, who are going to perpetuate that heritage."

"Many times people plan reunions or yearly visits to the Valley around these events. Once people experience them, they do come back," said Mackin.

The Fine Arts Fiesta has seen numerous changes over the years.

According to Mackin, the event now



Artists like this woman spinning flax offered demonstrations of their talents at early fiestas.

■ See FIESTA, Page 13

T.L. 4-25-98 Profile



SLIDES AND POSTCARD COURTESY OF RUTH SCHOOLEY.

This watercolor painted by Alice Welsh Jenkins inspired a Fine Arts Fiesta postcard. She served for years as an officer on the Fine Arts Committee.

Fiesta

(Continued from Page 12)

features 24-hour security and vendors screened by the Fine Arts Fiesta committee to comply with standards.

"It's no small undertaking," Mackin said.

Someone who knows firsthand about that is Ruth Schooley of Kingston. One year of watching the whirlwind efforts of Annette Evans and early supporters prompted Schooley to get more involved. She volunteered for the second festival, and went on to serve as president from the mid 1960s to 1972.

The first festivals originally were intended to offer exposure to the fine arts, in the hopes

that support for the local efforts would gradually build, Schooley said.

With the Wilkes-Barre Philharmonic Orchestra pitching in for free performances, it seemed to take root. "Some people decided they liked symphony music, when they had never even been to a concert before," said Schooley.

Sometimes the art got even more exposure than expected. Schooley recalls the early days when the fiesta presented art on consignment from New York galleries.

"Imagine our horror when we saw a kid standing on Andy Warhol's painted wooden oversized cornflakes box that was selling for \$1,000," Schooley said.

Despite such mishaps, the tireless efforts of the all-volun-

teer staff never failed to put together a few days of magic.

Nowhere else in the Wyoming Valley — or anywhere nearby, for that matter — could you stroll through sculpture gardens landscaped by the local garden club and dine in a "Cafe under the Green" produced by a local Greek church, all the while absorbing strains of Russian folk songs in the background.

Artists of all sorts were less than a few feet away demonstrating their talents: etching glass, spinning flax, caning chairs, braiding rugs or creating sculptures from coal.

"Everything was starting to blossom at that point," said Schooley.

Groh said the fiesta is "a free gift to the public. It's unpretentious and promotes the arts as people like them."

Others, such as Shannon McNulty, spokeswoman for Wilkes-Barre Mayor Tom McGroarty, said "clean entertainment" is key to the success of events in the city. The popularity of the St. Patrick's Day parade, the Independence Day celebration, Farmers Market and the most recent New Year's Eve party demonstrate this.

"People like the ideas of functions downtown," McNulty said.

Perhaps that was what Annette Evans and the early fiesta supporters were thinking when they designed, for one of the first festivals, a stage adorned with canvas strips decorated with all colors and languages of the Valley, which translated as "Our Town."

Whatever they were thinking, it definitely worked.

Education's stature has risen greatly

By JEAN LACOE
Times Leader Staff Writer

When Eugene Farley came to Wilkes-Barre in 1936 to head Bucknell Junior College, education wasn't a top priority for area residents.

In his autobiography, "Essays of an Educator," Farley said less than 5 percent of Luzerne County residents attended college in the 1930s. But nationwide, 25 to 30 percent of high school graduates continued their education.

"I encountered the attitude that education should be limited to the few who could afford to leave home to seek an education," the late educator wrote.

Frustrated with the lackadaisical attitude he encountered, Farley gambled by reprimanding an audience during a luncheon at the YMCA.

"Wilkes-Barre is probably the only community that has had a college thrust upon it," he said. "Other communities have concluded that their future well-being and stability depend upon an enlightened leadership. In consequence, they have created colleges to prepare their youth for their future responsibilities as citizens and leaders."

His listeners must not have been offended. Farley went on to lead the junior college for 34 years, steadily gaining support as it became an independent college in 1947 and building the foundation for it to become Wilkes University.

Although the Wyoming Valley was slow to found institutions of higher education, Wilkes and King's College began at opportune times. Bucknell Junior College was founded in the midst of the Depression in 1933 and began to thrive by the end of World War II.

Across town, King's College began holding classes in 1946 in the same building where Wilkes got its start on Northampton Street.

College wasn't a priority for area residents until the GI Bill made higher education affordable.

"The GI Bill made education possible for a whole generation," says King's College's president, the Rev. James Lackenmier.

Before King's and Wilkes, most men went to Penn State or Bucknell universities — if they could afford to leave home. But not many could.

Bob Ell, 72, of Wilkes-Barre, was the first registered student at King's College, thanks to his grateful aunt.

Ell's cousin, a paratrooper, was killed in World War II and buried in Holland. Before Ell came home from his tour of duty in Europe, he visited his grave.

Ell's aunt was so grateful, she

wanted to make sure her nephew received a college education.

She persuaded King's first president to admit her nephew, which made local news.

When Ell got home from the war, his mother ran down the stairs with the clipping, saying he was the first King's student.

"I said, 'Where is that?' " he said. "She said, 'Right here in Wilkes-Barre!'"

Ell had planned to go away to college, but doesn't regret staying at home.

"We were very glad to get home," he said. "Very few students were from out of town."

It's been so long since he graduated, Ell isn't sure who he is among the 203 men clad in caps and gowns in a photo of the first class.

But his memories of college days and the spirit of his classmates are vivid.

He remembers cramped hallways from his days in college, with jackets from every branch of the service hung on the walls.

"Almost every one of us had just gotten out of the service," he said. "A lot of us had seen action. Some were wounded, some had scars."

Two weeks after graduating from King's, Ell began working as the King's alumni-placement director. He retired in January 1992.

In the early days, men weren't the only ones receiving higher education. In fact, women had been earning degrees from College Misericordia since it opened in Dallas in 1924. It wasn't until 1973 that the college admitted men.

In 1913, the Sisters of Mercy purchased nearly 100 acres of land to establish the college. Ground was broken on the hill in 1921 to establish a mother house for the Sisters of Mercy and, later, a four-year liberal arts college.

The 37 women in the first class

■ See STATURE, Page 2

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Profile

OUR MINDS

1924: *With the dedication of College Misericordia, the modern university system arrived to the region. Although the first college (Wilkes-Barre Business College) opened in 1886, until the 1940s local young men had to leave home to get a four-year degree.*



FILE PHOTO
In 1933,
College
Misericordia's
laboratories
were filled
with women in
uniforms.

Stature

[Continued from Page 1]

endured Ku Klux Klan cross burnings during their first month of classes. But the sisters and women continued on.

Sister Regina Kelly, 76, a Wilkes-Barre native, was one of the college's first students and served as academic dean from 1967 to 1971.

"When I came I decided I couldn't leave until I read all of those books in the library," she said.

She's never thought of leaving since then. "The college was for people like me," she said. "I couldn't have afforded to go away to school."

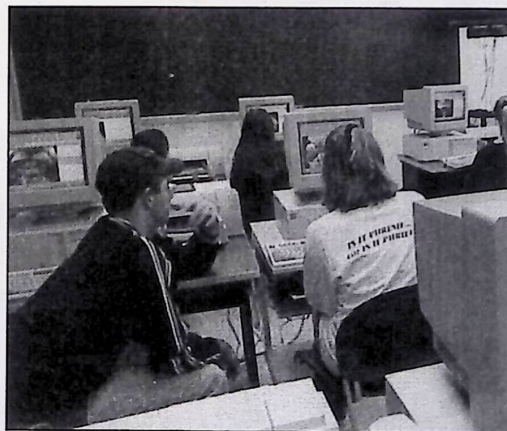
College Misericordia has turned out generations of teachers. At its start, teachers who had obtained teaching certificates from normal schools flocked there to earn bachelor's degrees.

Now, the liberal arts college offers many degrees.



TIMES LEADER/RICHARD SABATURA

Bob Ell worked as King's College's alumni director from graduation in 1950 until 1992. At right, today's College Misericordia laboratories are filled with computers and another new addition — male classmates.



Shaping the COMMUNITY

Eugene Farley UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT



Before becoming director of Bucknell University Junior College in 1936, Eugene Farley was told by an associate that "there was no hope for the future of the Wyoming Valley."

Although Farley admitted he sometimes wondered if his friend's advice was accurate, he spent most of his life improving the area through higher education.

An editorial cited in his book, "Essays of an Educator," said: "In every avenue — social, economic and cultural — Dr. Farley has been consistently active with only one goal in mind ... to make this community a better place in which to live."

Born in 1899 in Phoenixville, he was a graduate of Penn State University and the University of Pennsylvania and a veteran of World War I.

Farley served as a teacher before spending 10 years as director of research for the Newark, N.J., Board of Education from 1926 to 1936.

He served as director of the junior college from 1936 to 1947, when the junior college became Wilkes College. He served the college as president until 1970 and chancellor from 1970 to 1972.

When the modest, soft-spoken man arrived in Wilkes-Barre, the junior college and its 400 students attended classes in a rented building. The school was also in debt, so he sought gifts from area residents.

Under Farley's leadership, public support for the college and the number of students grew.

Less than a year before he died in 1973, he retired from his job as Wilkes College's chancellor to do community service and write his autobiography.

— Staff Writer Jean LaCoe

T.L. 4-25-98 *Profile*

Dorothy Dickson Darte
COLLEGE BENEFACTOR

Dorothy Dickson Darte will never be forgotten at Wilkes University.

Although she insisted on being an anonymous benefactor, it didn't work out that way for the woman who for 31 years contributed time and money to the educational institution.

The late Dr. Eugene Farley, president of Wilkes College from 1947 to 1970, wrote in his book, "Essays of an Educator," that Darte told him that if he insisted on publicizing her donations, she would take her money elsewhere.

It was only after her death after a hip injury in 1969 that the full extent of her contributions became known.

Preparations for a theater complex at the college began in 1955 on land donated by Wyoming Valley Society for Arts and Science.

Darte gave the go-ahead to construct Wilkes College's Center for the Performing Arts, one of the college's most lavish buildings.

Darte, a lifelong resident of the Wyoming Valley whose contributions were possible because of a family inheritance, donated approximately \$1 million for the project and saw its completion in 1965.

Today, the center at River and South streets is known as the Dorothy Dickson Darte Center for the Performing Arts.



— Staff Writer Scott Fertal

T.L. 4-25-98 Profile