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He called me a few days ago to remind me of our previous conversation and told me that if there wasn’t enough history in the 1920’s that maybe I could mention something about the Wheeling Symphony. I told him that there wasn’t enough history in the 1920’s but what you could cover in less than five minutes and I was wondering if I could go back a little before the 1920’s and make a more interesting story and he said certainly.

Now in talking about Theatres in Wheeling I’m going to have to include myself somewhat because some of these theatres have been a big part of my life.

The first theatre I’m going to mention is a theatre that used to be on Market Street close to the corner of 14th street on the west side of Market Street. Yes it stood on the spot that is now occupied by that brand new Wheeling Dollar Bank and its parking lot. The entrance to the theatre was on Market Street about three or four doors from 14th street and that was the theatre that used to handle all the Road Shows that came to Wheeling.

That was the theatre in which I saw my first Road Show. Now, believe it or not, that was 86 years ago — yes, I was only two years old. Now you know my age.

I sat on my mother’s lap and I can still remember one scene and the name of that show was Faust — you know the story where Faust made a deal with Satan that if Satan would make it possible for Faust to have a real gorgeous life — he, Satan, could have his soul after death to do with whatever he wished.

Well, after living awhile after making that agreement Faust did everything he could think of to get out of that agreement. No, indeed, says Satan — that will not happen — you are mine. The scene I remember so vividly was the fire and brimstone part of Hell where Satan was going to give Faust the works.

Now you’ve been to Fireworks Shows where they put on a display called Niagara Falls? Well that was the fire part — but instead of the fire looking like our Fourth of July bright silver sparklers, the color of those falling sparks or fire was reddish orange. I have never forgotten that scene.

You could see thru those Flame Streams coming down and see Faust trying to Prevent Satan from throwing him into the Fiery Pit and this all happened way back in 1895.

That theatre stayed there a few more years but I’ll tell you about its demolition later.

The next theatre I’m going to mention is the Grand Theatre. You know where Elby’s Restaurant is on the Corner of 12th and Market Streets — This theatre was on the 2nd Floor and the entrance was the last store up by the alley on 12th Street. You had to go up a long flight of stairs — They were real wide stairs — The width of that store — and they were all painted white — and it was a real pretty entrance. The
shows were not all Top Job but they did a real good business never the less, Mr. Charlie Feinler was the owner and manager. We'll talk about Mr. Feinler later in another theatre.

Now who among you remember when the movies first started? When almost every other door in a business district was a nickelodeon - The first one I remember in Wheeling stood on the spot which is the Hawley bldg., upon Main St. across the street from Stone and Thomas' Dept. Store. In no time at all they were all over town - you should have seen the crowds that used to jam those little theatres. You only had to pay a nickel and the show would last about 15 or 20 minutes - maybe a half hour. You would exit one theatre then maybe 2 or 3 doors from where you left you'd reach another nickelodeon and spend a few more minutes there. You'd keep that up until you had been in all of them. What a time everybody was having. Our family was no different than the rest because at that time everyone was doing it.

This condition didn't last too long because progress back then was pretty speedy in the movie industry and the movies finally became big business. Even the theatres that always booked Live Shows become movie houses in between those Live Shows.

Wheeling wasn't the only place that had theatres - Bellaire put in their nickles worth too. There was the Elks Grand Theatre in the Elks Club Bldg. I had an orchestra in that theatre for awhile. There was the temple across the street from the city park. It was torn down and a new theatre was built farther downtown.

Bridgeport only had a couple small theatres because they were too close to Wheeling.

Martins Ferry did a little better - in fact they did better than Bellaire. They had the Fenray - the manager's name was Mr. Ike. That theatre was on 4th Street close to Hanover. There was the Elzane farther down on 4th Street. There was the Past Nine and several smaller theatres.

Now let's come back to Wheeling.

The year is now 1902 or 3 and somebody had to be responsible for demolishing the Old Opera house down on Market Street and also the building of the new Court Theatre - I couldn't find anybody who could give me that information but I think I'm fairly close when I mentioned the year 1902 or 3 as being the years for all this activity. You know I've outlived a lot of people who could have given me answers.

When Market Street had been built back up again there was still that 4 or 5 story brick building on the corner. There was a drug store on the first floor for a good while. I believe it was a Hoge Davis Drug Store. When television started in Wheeling - W.T.R.F. took the top floors for their studios - The Old Wheeling Register News Paper was the building next door and the Register Office was on the first floor. The Old Dollar Savings and Trust Co. was in that row of buildings too.

Now the new Court Theatre. You know there were smart men even back in those days. They knew Wheeling was a good show town and with the passing of the old Opera House, Wheeling had to have another Show House and the Court Theatre was to be it.

I started to take violin lessons when I was 11 years old; that was in 1904 and my first teacher was Prof. Edwin Speil; and do you know who he was? He was the first musical director of the newly built Court Theatre Orchestra.

My father played trombone in that Court Theatre Orchestra under Prof. Speil. When my father saw what a good violinist the Prof. was, he made arrangements for me to study the violin with him. The Old Prof. had a large class and I had a cousin Grace who was one of his pupils, and she developed into a real good violinist. That was good enough for my father so that's why I got started and as he told me it was only experimental because he had an understanding with the Prof. that if I had the talent O.K., if not drop me - A few weeks after my father was told that I would be a violinist - and who would have thought that at that time that 22 years later I would be the musical director of the Court Theatre Orchestra.

The Court used to book in all the largest stage shows there were back in those days.

Ben Hur was one of those shows - The Shepherd King was another - a big Biblical Show about King Solomon and King David - There was a scene in this show where David slew the Giant of the opposing army with his sling shot - that was before he was King of Course, Chu Chin Chow was another big stage show that came there. All the noted actors and actresses of the day came there - The reason all the Big Stage Shows came there was because the Court Theatre had the biggest stage in town and could accommodate them.

The Court Theatre is no longer a road show house - sometime ago they remodeled the inside of that Theatre. They put the stage way back and put in a lot more seats. They can't book anymore big productions in there now. All road shows coming to Wheeling have to go to the Capitol and those kinds of shows are not too plentiful any more anyway.

The Victoria was the Vaudeville house in Wheeling - It was a Market Street Theatre at 13th Street and it has been there for years - I don't know when that opened but I know when I was just a kid I used to go there and see 5 Acts of Vaudeville each show. They used to run one Matinee in the afternoon and two shows at night. This is the place where I first heard that tune.

Alexanders Rag Time Band which is supposed to be the start of our modern Jazz Music.

Mr. George Schaeffer was the owner and manager of the Victoria right from its opening day up until he died.

Now let's come back to Mr. Schaeffer a little later.

There's one more thing I'd like to touch on before we leave the Victoria and I think you'd enjoy hearing it.

I inherited one musician from the Old 2nd Floor Grand Theatre
and he was a trumpet player. His name was Albert Albinger. Albert was a huge man — When he worked with me at the Victoria he weighed 350 lbs. He claimed the only thing he could get ready made was a handkerchief. At this particular time we’re going to talk about Albert had just had a new suit made for himself — Everything was alright but the vest — it was too tight. He was so uncomfortable with it he took his pen knife and split that vest clear up his back. There was just a little piece at the top he didn’t cut and that was holding the vest together. Now don’t forget that vest — It’s going to be important later. We had an act that came to the Victoria and it had or was made up with the characters from the Barnum and Bailey’s Circus Side Show — Yes there was the Fat Lady — the World’s skinniest Man, the Ape Man and of course several Freaks. Now what I’m going to tell you happened back stage or rather down under the stage where our musicians room was and all the dressing rooms. My drummer for the Orchestra and I were wandering thru the halls down there when we passed the Fat Lady’s Dressing Room. The door was open — she was just sitting there and when she saw us passing she called to us to come in. She said she wanted someone to talk to. So we went in and the talk was mostly about show business experiences — interesting things that happen when you’re on the Road.

My drummer got to thinking about our trumpet player — His size as compared to the Fat Lady and he says to himself — I’m going to try something — So he says to the Fat Lady — you know we have a man in our Orchestra, our trumpet player who used to be a Fat Man in a Circus. The Fat Lady’s eyes almost popped out of her head. She said Oh My! Could I meet him? I sure would like to and we said sure — we’d bring him around. You never saw anybody get so elated. She started to chant — Goody — Goody, I’m going to meet a Fat Man from another Circus — I’m going to meet a Fat Man from another Circus.

We looked at our watches and saw it was about time to start the show so we had to leave her while she was still chanting — I’m going to meet a Fat Man from another Circus.

We got hold of Albert and told him what we had done and told him the Fat Lady sure wanted to meet him — Albert always ready for a little fun said sure I’d like to meet her too. This was all happening during the night shows — The 1st Show was over and now we’re in between the two night shows. We got hold of Albert and took him to the Fat Lady’s dressing room. This time she wasn’t sitting down. When we got into the room she saw him. She didn’t even wait for an Introduction — She waddled up to him as fast as she could and you could see she was going to throw her arms around him but that never happened because of the midsections of both parties. She never got close to him. Her arms were no help — they were too short. Well after that first meeting excitement things quieted down and it became a question and answer session — Questions on her part and answers on Albert’s part and Albert had an answer for all her questions — how he thought of them so fast I don’t know but the answers seemed so legitimate that the Drummer and I were about ready to believe them ourselves. Toward the end of our visit Albert was telling her about how he lost weight — how much he lost and to prove to her how much he lost (Now here’s that Vest). He took hold of his vest with both hands, one hand on each side, and pulled the vest way out in front of him 3 or 5 times and said look here see how much weight I’ve lost and she was amazed.

Before the show left town we thought we would tell her what we had done — but we decided that would be kind of cruel and because we made her so happy we would just let her believe that she really did meet a Nice Great Big Fat Man from another Circus.

There were other theatres in Wheeling — There was the Coronet another Market Street Theatre on the corner of 15th Street and the only history I have or know about that theatre was its first name was the Rex and they suddenly changed the name to Coronet. They had an Orchestra in that Theatre before the talkies came in too.

Mr. George Zeppos was the manager of that theatre.

The Colonial was another Market Street Theatre — The entrance was at the north side of Independence Hall which bldg. is on the corner of 16th St.

The Theatre part of the Colonial ran the whole length of Independence Hall in the rear clear to 16th Street.

You bought your tickets at the Market Street entrance and the Hallway you entered ran clear back to the Theatre part which I mentioned was in the Rear of Independence Hall. This was another one of Charlie Feinler’s Theatres.

Now there was a family known as the Velos Family a bunch of young men who had the Liberty Theatre across the Street — that’s across Market Street from the Independence Hall. Nothing of any historic value happened in that Theatre that I know of. They had the Temple Theatre in Bellaire which was torn down and I believe they had the Capitol down there too.

Where the Security Nat’l Bank and Trust Co. is on Market Street close to 11th St. The Veloses had a theatre there. It had three names — The State the Plaza and the Empire — The State was a movie House and the Plaza too. The Plaza was changed to the Empire and turned into a Burlesque House. They ran several Road Stock Companies of Burlesque — each company would stay until they used up their repertoire then another company would come in.

Now here’s an interesting fact about one of those companies. There is a well-known comedian — he’s out in Hollywood now and I’m sure you have seen him several times on television. His name is Red Skelton and he was the comedian of this one company. He worked here in the Empire for several weeks. I saw him at work on the stage here and he looked like a 20 year old kid — but he goes more than that now as you all know.

Now let’s go back to the Old Grand Theatre and Charlie Feinler.
That was the 2nd Floor Theatre at 12th and Market Streets that we mentioned previously. Charlie had to get out of the Grand Theatre either because his license or lease ran out or they wanted to remodel the place into an office bldg. or else he wanted to build his own Theatre — I never did hear, anyway he planned and started to build the Virginia Theatre — This was built and it was intended to be a Road Show House also. He ran road shows for quite a while then like everybody else he eventually turned it into a movie house. He had a contract with Paramount Pictures and he did a marvelous (sic) business with those pictures.

Now we’ve reached the year 1920 — Mr. Feinler put an Orchestra back in his Virginia Theatre at the beginning of the summer of 1920 — The Orchestra Leader wanted to go back to the Court Theatre when the Fall Season opened, it had been closed all summer — so they needed another Musical Director at the Virginia — They contacted me — I was the Supt. of the Tube Decorating Dept. at the Wheeling Stamping Co. at the time. That is I had the Dept that enameled — printed and decorated tooth paste tubes, facial cream tubes, shaving cream tubes — that kind of stuff. They made it worth my while to make the change.

I was at the Virginia the Fall of 1920 — All of 1921 — 22 and 23 then a disagreement came up I left the Virginia and went to Washington D.C. for 1924-25 and in Aug. of 1926 I was offered another orchestra directorship by Mr. Geo Schaffer of the Court and Victoria Theatres.

Mr. Schaffer (sic) had taken over the Court Theatre from a Mr. Fred Johnson and had offered me the job of looking after the music in both the Court and Victoria Theatres. I came back to Wheeling and took over.

In 1928 things started to happen. The Talkies were starting to come into the picture and I was lucky I had two theatres. The orchestra was laid off for a week at the Court Theatre while they showed the Talkies of Al Jolson in the Jazz Singer. I worked at the Victoria while that was on. Then there was another talkie that Mr. Schaffer booked into the Court. I can’t remember the name of the show but Al Jolson was in that and I think it was something about Sonny Boy — there was a song about Sonny Boy that Al Jolson sang and maybe the show was written about that I don’t remember. Well the orchestra was off for another week, so I went back to the Victoria.

At that time the Capitol Theatre was being built in Wheeling on Main Street by a Mr. Poupoulis representing a Greek Outfit — It was getting close to completion when all of a sudden I was offered the job of Musical Director in that new Theatre. Well what should I do — Nobody ever wants to turn down the opening of a new theatre so I accepted. We opened that new Capitol on Thanksgiving of 1928 and it wasn’t entirely completed. In the balcony they were still using those electric drills and hammers putting in seats. The noise was deafening (sic) and I’m now trying to have a rehearsal with a new show. How we ever got through that rehearsal I’ll never know but the Afternoon Show went off without a hitch. I suppose experience in this kind of business does help.

You know the business in that New Theatre was not good right from the start and for show business that is not good.

There were bright spots during our stay at the Capitol. One was when Seszu Hayakawaz, a Japanese, had an act on one of the shows and he was really friendly — he loved to play bridge and he would come into our music room and play bridge. One night he invited three of us out of the orchestra to go down to his room at the McLeure Hotel and play bridge — Right from the beginning he chose me as his bridge partner and at his room I was still to be his partner — We played till four o’clock in the morning and it was a good thing I told my wife what I was going to do after that show.

Another thing happened I thought was interesting. We have a comedian come to the theatre. I think some of you will remember Joe Penner the one with the 1st line of his act. You want buy a Duck — That was his first line no matter where he was on the stage, on radio which was always followed with that funny little chuckle he always did. It’s too bad he didn’t live long enough to get into television. He was pretty interesting and before the show would open he would bring me his violin before we went into the Pit — Orchestra Pit that is — so when he would ask for a violin player in the orchestra who was left handed — his violin was strung up backward or left handed and when Joe Penner called for a violin I handed him the left handed fiddle — You should have seen him try to Handle that Instrument and finally he’d say — Hey — is this a left handed fiddle — after the laugh was over I handed him his own fiddle and he finished his Act.

Sometimes later another Act came in — this was a dance act and when one of the fellows in this act saw that I was the Orchestra Leader — he asked me if a Joe Penner had been here — I said, oh yes, about a month ago. He then told me about an article he saw in the Variety Paper — Now this paper is a show business paper or magazine telling all about show business and it’s Published I believe in Cincinnati. (sic) Ohio — it seems a columnist for this magazine was interviewing Joe Penner and one of the questions he asked Joe was — in your travels around the different theatres on your circuit what if any was the funniest experience you had. He told the columnist about what happened to him in Wheeling when the orchestra leader handed him a left handed fiddle to finish his act. He said that was the funniest thing that ever happened to him.

Well the Capitol wasn’t going to stay in business very long as far as the Orchestra was concerned. A statistic came to light in Wheeling when the capitol was built and 2600 theatre seats were added to the Wheeling number of theatre seats ratio against the population was way ahead of the city of Chicago and we all know that was not a good percentage. Anyway the Capitol Theatre stayed good for the musicians about 5½ months then out into the streets we went — this condition wasn’t just in Wheeling it was all over the whole country.

When the silent pictures were going strong you couldn’t hardly
buy a good musician but when we were all thrown out you could get them for a dime a dozen.

This condition in Wheeling was another reason for the start of the Symphony Orchestra in Wheeling and not only in Wheeling but all over the whole country Symphony Orchestras were springing up everywhere — We just couldn’t see all that Musical Talent going to waste.

Wheeling is an old town and it’s an old historical town — every place you go in this town you see history written all over the place. There were historic business men here too. Not too far back — When I was just a boy I can remember two very prominent men who were considered real benefactors for the city of Wheeling. There was a Mr. Schmulbach. I don’t remember his first name and there was an Andy Reymann. I don’t remember where Mr. Schmulbach’s home was but Mr. Reymann’s home was that big Red Stone House that stood on the corner of 15th and Eoff Sts. It was torn down just recently. They were both very successful with their businesses and why shouldn’t they be — they both had very large breweries and it was all back before prohibition came in.

Mr. Schmulbach built the Wheeling Steel Building there on Market St. and when it was finished it was known as the Schmulbach Bldg. I don’t know how long that name stayed with the Bldg.

I think Mr. Alex Glass was the chairman of the board of the Wheeling Steel Corp. when the deal was made for Wheeling Steel to purchase the Schmulbach Bldg.

Mr. Glass took about three smaller steel companies here in Wheeling and brought them together to form the Wheeling Steel Corp. Mr. Glass in my estimation can be considered quite a benefactor for Wheeling too — You all know that Mrs. Eleanor Caldwell was the founder of the Wheeling Symphony — well Mr. Glass was the father of Mrs. Eleanor Caldwell and he was great help to the symphony during those first couple years of struggling with the building of the symphony orchestra.

Now Mr. Andy Reymann he was a real “Music Lover.” When the old opera house the first theatre I mentioned — was in business down on Market Street. The musicians from that theatre wanted to get up a professional Brass Band — to play concerts — parades or for anything that would call for a brass band. They needed a band director and somehow Andy Reymann knew all about it. He told them don’t think anymore about it — let me see what I can do — Well he did do something — he brought a man from Detroit to direct the band and that band the Old Opera House Band stayed in business for years and the band director was none other than the man I have already talked about — It was Prof Edwin Speil the first musical director of the Court Theatre Orchestra and my first violin teacher. So you see what a big favor Andy Reymann did for me without knowing it.

When we were struggling during those first years of the Wheeling Symphony — often would I think of Andy Reymann. Oh if Andy Reymann was still here what a help he would be to us and without taking any credit away from Eleanor Caldwell — because she was marvelous — I thought then what a team those two would have been for the good of music and maybe the theatres in this old historic town.
THE McLURE HOUSE AND E.M. STATLER
by DOUG FETHERLING

A little less than a hundred years ago, a young man named E.M. Statler entered the Opera House, across Twelfth Street from the McLure House where he worked at the time, and underwent a character analysis at the hands of Dr. Orson S. Fowler, the father of phrenology. Fowler had convinced much of 19th century America that the bumps on one's skull were the key to one's personality and potential, and he was now visiting Wheeling on one of the barnstorming tours that were more show business than science. Examining Statler's cranium, he concluded, in part, "You will pass along this life without being especially noted for anything": a statement that must surely go down as one of the most wrongheaded ever uttered in the private sector. For Statler was destined to make a considerable fortune by building up a chain of famous hotels, the precursor of the Hilton and the Sheraton empires. In the words of one hotel historian, "There has probably never been a better Horatio Alger story in the annals of American business than that of Ellsworth M. Statler," whose beginnings, in the best Alger tradition, were among the humblest the Upper Ohio Valley could offer at the time.

Statler was born in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in October 1863, only three months after the terrible battle that etched the town's name on everyone's memory. His father, a German immigrant, was variously a farmer, a storekeeper and a preacher. In all, there were seven children who survived into adulthood, most of whom had unusual names. One male sibling was named Osceola, for example. The future hotelier, for his part, was named Ellsworth, after General Elmer Ellsworth, a Union hero who commanded a Zouave unit composed for former New York City firemen; his middle name, Milton, was taken from the poet, whom his mother had been reading during her confinement.

The family moved west in 1868, settling in Bridgeport, Ohio. Two years later, when he was nine, Ellsworth began his working life in the La-Belle Glass Works just outside town. His job was to tend a small coke furnace (this was known as "teasing the glory hole"). It was a hellish bit of drudgery for which he received 50 cents per day for 12 hour days. Even later, when he graduated to 90 cents per day, there's no disputing the statement by one of his biographers that it "was a career comparable with some of the more appalling experiences of the less fortunate characters of Dickens."

In 1875 or 1876, when he was thirteen, Statler was able to escape the glass works by getting a bellyboy's job at the McLure, following on the coattails of an older brother who was already so employed there. Although the hotel had an elevator, bellboys were forbidden to use it. Statler's job, for six dollars per month plus tips and food, was to scurry up the backstairs with luggage, buckets of ice water and whatever else might be required by the various guests. The clientele included drummers and other businessmen passing through by rail, highlifes and lowlifes from steamboats at the Wharf, and vaudeville artists making Wheeling a port of call. This last group must have found the McLure particularly convenient once the Opera House across the street succeeded Washington Hall in 1875, just as it too would be replaced eventually by the present Laxonia Building.

In addition to such guests, there were visiting notables, as there always seemed to have been since the place was built in 1852. The arrival of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in January 1853, for instance, was used as an excuse to celebrate, somewhat belatedly, the McLure's opening, attracting the usual railway magnates and financiers. During the Civil War, the McLure housed General U.S. Grant, General William T. Sherman and General John C. Fremont, to list them in descending order; and for a time, General William S. Rosencrans had made his headquarters there. Had not John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry made Virginia seem unsafe for unionists, the 1860 Republican convention likely would have been held in Wheeling, meaning that Lincoln would probably have stayed at the McLure as well, setting the pattern for about one dozen presidents, future presidents and former presidents who have roomed there through the years.

But in Statler's time all this was in the past, though the spirit remained unchanged. For in his own era, or shortly afterward, the hotel offered accommodation to the original John D. Rockefeller, to William Wrigley (then a soap salesman and not yet a chewing gum mogul), and to the usual array of theatrical people, including assorted Barrowyers and, during one of her frequent farewell tours, Sarah Bernhardt. It occupied, in short, the topmost place in the local hotel business despite some surprisingly spirited competition.

What is now the Windsor Manor Apartments, for instance, had been occupied by hotels since 1815, when the Sprigg House opened (succeeded there by the United States Hotel, the St. James and finally, in Statler's time, the first of the two Windsors).

However, the competition was reduced somewhat in 1877 when the Grant House at Tenth and Main, formerly called the Virginia House, the Kramer House, the Chapline House, the Metcalf House and the Monroe House, burned to the ground. But this still left the famous Stamm House, which was then being enlarged, a various lesser establishments such as the Central Hotel. Then as now, the hotels were divided between downtown and the Out-the-Pike area, where the Mount View Hotel was building and the Stratford Springs Hotel would follow. Such was the situation as Statler would have found it in his Wheeling years. As for the McLure particularly, it seemed to remain quite stable, considering the fluid nature of the competition, with all its openings and closings, its many changes in ownership and attendant alterations in identity.

Such confusion as surrounds the McLure, in fact, stems only from the problem of sorting out the tangled family of that name. The first to arrive in Wheeling was the original John McLure (1783-1874); he came
from Washington County, Pennsylvania, in 1806 as part of the second great wave of settlement. At length he became the president of the North Western Bank of Virginia and a generally ubiquitous businessman. It was his son, also named John, who built the hotel, when he was aged about 36. By the 1870s it was being managed by a third generation, the brothers Harry, Frank and Bernie McLure. At one time they worked under the name Grant, Scott & Co., a partnership which for a period included Frank Stamm of the Stamm House; at another point, apparently in tandem with the Norton family, who had run the old Top Mill.4

Another of Statler’s eventual biographers would state, on what authority isn’t clear, that during this epoch “Wheeling had more saloons and sporting houses per population than any other town in the country.”5 This may be so much nostalgia. From surviving accounts, however, it does indeed seem obvious that the McLure, in its early days, shared in the well earned reputation for local color. The lobby was a massive open space where baseball scores were posted daily, since the hotel was a den for gamblers. They congregated in the billiard room to the right of the main entrance. Card games were in progress there perpetually, and dice flashed; this room was also, at various periods, the virtual headquarters for Democratic politics in West Virginia. Indeed, when Washington Hall (then the state capitol) burned down, the state senate began holding sessions in the McLure dining room upstairs. To the left of the lobby was the McLure bar, equally famous in its way. The lobby itself was festooned with buffalo heads and other hunting trophies. One would probably not be far wrong in imagining marble floors, potted palms, and overstuffed leather chairs occupied by office-seekers, confidence men, newspaper scribblers, police station lawyers and other sociological phenomena; for Statler learned and prospered in a Wheeling flexible enough to accommodate both good German burghers and people like Dutch Zellers, the grandfather (or is that the godfather?) of the local criminal elite.

Any by all accounts, Statler was a good pupil. One of his mentors was a McLure House bartender named Tom Duffy, who tried to teach the boy proper grammar and the like. Through this and other means, Statler picked up some semblance of social polish. One story concerns the arrival in the hotel of General Nathan Goff, another remnant of the late war. Goff summoned the lad to his room and asked him to fetch a cuspidor. Statler agreed to do so, but remained motionless for a moment, apparently waiting for the general to give him the money to purchase some object in one of the nearby shops.

“I reckon you don’t get me, son,” Goff finally said. “I want a spitoon.”6

Thus did ambitious nippers expand their vocabularies in that age before Reader’s Digest.

In what seemed like very rapid order, Statler rose from bellboy to check-room boy to night clerk to day-room clerk making $50 per month. Along the way he learned to keep the hotel’s books as well.

Sometime in the late 1880s, Statler had the opportunity to take over the lease on the hotel’s billiard room. Thanks to his friendship with a salesman for the Brunswick company who frequently stayed at the McLure, Statler was able to refurbish the place. For good measure, he added a sideline: scalping railroad tickets. In 1890 an even better opportunity arose when he saw the means of taking over the Wheeling Musee. This was a former bowling club, built originally as a vaudeville house, which had slipped into financial difficulties and was now up for grabs. Statler borrowed $3,000, assumed the lease, installed four more alleys and some billiard tables and sublet space to a barber and a tobacconist. Also, he incorporated a restaurant called the Pit House, which soon demanded the attendance of the better sort of diner. His mother and his sister, who was named Alabama Statler, cooked for the lunch counter while his brother Oseola hustled pool and another brother, unaccountably named Bill, took over the young entrepreneur’s responsibilities at the McLure. Statler also became a sports promoter, staging bowling competitions in his Musee and on at least one occasion hiring the Opeka House for a marathon billiard tournament. By 1895 or so, he was said to be earning the considerable sum of $10,000 a year from his various enterprises. His future in Wheeling seemed assured, but it was not long afterward that events took him out into the larger world of business.

In 1898, Statler found himself passing through Buffalo, New York, and sensing another potential venture, rented space in the Ellizcott Square office building: at the time, the biggest such structure in the country. The restaurant he opened there seemed to do well enough, but he subsequently lost money, in 1901, when he put up, partly with Wheeling financing, a Buffalo hotel with a capacity for 5,000 people. This, like a number of his later hotels, was built originally to cater to the crowds attending a world’s fair. In 1908, he had another go at Buffalo, building the Hotel Statler, which still survives under the original name. Its success reveals the attitude toward hotels that would give him properties in Boston, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Dallas, St. Louis, Washington and New York, including, in the last-named city, the largest hotel in the world. Any such examination also reveals the extent to which his eventual empire was based upon ideas picked up while he worked at the McLure.

In essence, Statler’s philosophy was that people wanted dependable service with a few small, practical extras, instead of the massive luxury practised by Cesar Ritz. Accordingly, his second Buffalo venture was said to be the first hotel in America with a private bath in every room, not to mention complimentary sewing kits and free morning newspapers. Mindful of all of the miles he had run up the McLure’s stairs, he also arranged for piped ice water in every room. What’s more, Statler is said to have devised room locks with the keyholes above, rather than below, the doorknob, mindful as he was of drunken guests at the McLure cursing as they attempted to insert their wobbly keys into moving doors. It was also apparently Statler’s idea to have a closet in every hotel room, replacing the few wall
hooks found in earlier times. Most importantly of all, he invented the concept of room service. It has even been said that it was he who coined the phrase, "The customer is always right." He became, in short, one of the business giants of the day, with a very famous name and a rather considerable fortune to perpetuate it, if not the other way around.

As for the McLure itself, its significance did not decline immediately after Statler's departure. Quite the contrary. About 1910, it was enlarged considerably to meet the demand for rooms; it may have been at this time, also, that the present sixth story was added. And although it changed hands relatively frequently following the end of the McLure family's involvement, it continued to be the scene of important events.

It was at the McLure, in 1950, for example, that McCarthyism was born when Joseph McCarthy, the junior senator from Wisconsin, addressed a local Republican group and astounded everyone by claiming communists had infiltrated the U.S. State Department. Later it played a role in the so-called Checkers affair, when Dwight Eisenhower met in Wheeling with his vice-presidential running mate, Richard Nixon, and patched up the ticket following allegations that Nixon had accepted graft. The basic story is told in Nixon's Six Crises and other works of the day. The last presidential candidate in point of time to stay there was John F. Kennedy, during the 1960 West Virginia primary race so important to his final victory.

As for Statler himself, he revisited the old place at least once following his great financial success — in 1917, eleven years before his death. By then, the hotel was under the control of what would be a long succession of different owners. For a period in the 1940s or 1950s, its name was changed from the McLure House to the Hotel McLure. But this decision was rescinded later by the Grubb family, who were partners in the building then, in deference to one member of the family, Paul Biery. From 1898 to 1914, Biery had operated another Wheeling inn, the Farmer's Hotel and Livery Stable, and he preferred the McLure's original name because it reminded him of younger days in Wheeling.

In recent years, the hotel has declined both in substance and reputation, again under various owners. Sadly, the current plans, in effect, to tear down the building while simultaneously erecting a new McLure on the same site have not aroused the controversy one might have wished. Along with the West Virginia Independence Hall, the McLure is one of the two most historic buildings in downtown Wheeling. (It's well to remember, in fact, that when the final Wheeling convention, which resulted in statehood, was being held in what's now Independence Hall, the caucusing, lobbying and other backroom convention activities were taking place at the McLure.)

At the very least, the facade of the old structure should be retained. In this way, the new interior can restore to the McLure the kind of central place it held for so long but without sacrifice to what the hotel stood for, not only in terms of the hospitality industry, but in terms of local and state politics and national affairs as well.

3. The Intelligencer, March 31, 1877.

by FRASIER SMITH
Wheeling Park Commission

Thomas Ashe traveled extensively. His overall impressions may be indicated by the following comments: "The Northeastern states are indebted to nature but for few gifts. The middle states are less contemptible. For the southern states, nature has done much but man little." 1

Thomas Ashe traveled by horseback from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, stopping at Lancaster, Harrisburg, an unidentified "miserable" tavern, and Bedford. He was much impressed with Pittsburgh. Here he purchased a "Kentucky boat" sixteen feet wide and forty long, costing forty dollars. Having modified the boat by the addition of a chimney and four windows, laying in two coops-full of chickens and other stores and accompanied by two doubtful types, he departed Pittsburgh and headed down river. He could have hired another hand for fifteen dollars and should have, as he later discovered. 2

At the end of the first day's run, he put ashore at Grape Island where he visited with an old woman and three children who were much relieved to find that he was not a "Kentucky Man" and was "without disposition to plunder." 3

The second night was spent at Georgetown, and the following day he moved on to Steubenville. Leaving Steubenville, he then descended seven miles to Charlestown on the Virginia side, then on to Wheeling. 4

Following is a series of direct quotations:

"The town of Wheeling is one of the most considerable places of embarkation to traders and emigrants." 5

"It is a pleasant town, healthfully and pleasantly situated on a high bank of the river." 5

"The town is formed of about two hundred and fifty houses, ten of brick, eighteen of stone, and the remainder of log." 5

"The original settlers were not calculated to give importance to an infant establishment. Had they been so, had they attended to worthy commercial pursuits and industrious and moral dealings in place of rapine on Indian lands, drunkenness, horse-racing, and cock fighting, their town could have rivaled Pittsburgh long since and have now enjoyed a reputable name." 5

"To this frontier all persons outlawed or escaping from justice fled and resided without the apprehension of punishment or the dread of contempt or reproach. Of these materials blended with the better order of citizens the society of the town is now formed." 5

An old Quaker he became acquainted with expressed the hope that the more unruly element would eventually be "bought out" and that industry, peace, and prosperity would prevail, which the author esteemed to be considerably in the future.

Typically, two passing strangers drinking in a public house disagreed as to the merits of their respective steeds and repaired to the race course to settle the matter. Two thirds of the population followed; the town appeared a desert. All good was done for that day. The people would remain on the ground until night and some into the next day.

The original race was run and a collection was taken to inspire a larger, six-horse contest. Wagons were made; the race was run, but the judges' verdict was not accepted, and a general battle ensued. The discussion narrowed by two individuals: a Virginian by birth and a Kentucky man by adoption.

A ring was formed, and a decision was made to "fight fair" rather than "rough and tumble." The battle began. The contest was between power and science, Science triumphed as the Virginian knocked down his man and inserted his fingers into his opponent's eye sockets. "The sufferer roared aloud but uttered no complaint. The spectators shouted with joy. The poor wretch whose eyes were started from their spheres and whose lips refused their office, returned to the town to hide his impotence and get his countenance repaired." 7

Ash's Quaker friend at dinner that evening noted that this sort of thing occurred two or three times a week and would no doubt continue so. Also that this could be expected all down the river, especially on the left-hand side. 8

The Quaker also recommended care in the selection of stopping places, many taverns being operated by unsavory types, who in many cases could be identified by the possession or absence of ears, these appendages often being detached by way of punishment for horse stealing and similar antisocial behavior. 9

Following dinner, the author retired to his inn "with a view to passing a peaceable night." It was not so ordained.

The excitement of the day having carried over into the evening, the storekeepers and other principal citizens decided to have a ball and supper at the inn. The landlord advised Thomas Ashe that a stranger and a gentleman he was entitled to attend. Noting that the landlord's ears were intact, evidencing his good character, he entered the ballroom which was filled with citizens of both sexes engaged at cards, drinking, smoking and dancing.

Music was furnished by a Negro band, consisting of two banjos and a lute. The violent nature of the music, plus the clamor from the card tables impressed Thomas Ashe as a vulgar uproar, but he noted that one should never judge other people's standards of entertainment by one's own.

The entertainment would have concluded to everyone's satisfaction in the early morning hours and not one of the local politicians insisted that a friend drink "Damnation to Thomas Jefferson." A general riot broke out; the ladies retired to the sidelines. At this point some gentlemen present expelled the worst of the troublemakers, and the fracas spilled over into
the street, leaving the inn in its usual peaceful state except for one drunk
whom the proprietor dragged over into a corner and left to sleep it off.10

After all this excitement, Mr. Ashe being disinclined toward slumber,
went over the events of the day with the landlord, who conceded the logic
of Mr. Ashe's arguments in favor of more civilized recreation but observed
that this ball was relatively harmless, other similar affairs having gone for
thirty-six hours and often concluded with one or two duels, sometimes
with melancholy results.

He departed Wheeling the next morning, bound for Marietta but
added an observation regarding the road and valley east of Wheeling as
follows:

"Directly on ascending the mountain in the rear of Wheeling an
immense deep and gloomy valley appears in view, twelve miles long,
by from two to six broad. It is completely surrounded by high
mountains, through which there is but one small pass serving the
current of the water of a beautiful creek that traverses the valley
twelve different times in search of a level to facilitate its course
to the Ohio and the sea. The road crosses the creek at every traverse,
and, for the entire length is nearly a perfect plain, adorned with
trees of the most sumptuous growth; with corn and wheat of an
unexampled luxuriance, and encircled by an amphitheatre of
mountains, whose summits of eternal verdure are often embraced by
the clouds. The soil, composed of decayed vegetable substances, and
putrid animal remains, appears like a fine garden mould; it is from
three to sixteen feet deep, and, judging from the channel of the
 creek, is deposited on gravel and limestone rock.

"There are eight settlers on this enchanting spot who have to regret
nothing but the too transient visits of the sun who in his median
glory looks down on this little world, sheds upon it his most fervid
rays, until intercepted by the mountains, toward the south he sets
in the vigour of the day."

Three editions of this work were published. The complete title of
all is Thomas Ashe, 1770-1835, Travels in America performed in 1806,
for the purpose of exploring the rivers Allegheny, Monongahela, Ohio, and
Mississippi, and ascertaining the produce and condition of their bands
and vicinity.

FOOTNOTES
1. Ashe's overall impressions are found on pp. 2 and 3.
2. The boat is described on page 167.
3. The old man was probably living on an island about ten miles before
reaching Sewickley. The description is found on page 177.
4. This Georgetown is probably the town of the same name a very few
miles east of Chester, W. Va., and barely within the state of Penn-
sylvania. Rufus Putnam shows Georgetown thus, opposite the Little

Beaver, on his map of 1804.
5. The series of quotations concerning Wheeling are found successively on
pp. 217, 218, 219, and 220.
6. The discussion with the old Quaker is on page 222.
7. This paragraph expresses the character and town of Wheeling and its
people as given on pages 223 through 230.
8. By left-hand side, he probably refers to the Virginia side.
9. This dinner discussion with the Quaker friend embraces pages 233
through 235.
10. The clamorous party is found on pages 236 and following.
11. The description of the Wheeling Creek Valley is found on pgs. 239-40.
BOOK REVIEW


This excellent modern history of the state's capital city by the premier authority on West Virginia history is a welcome contribution to the growing body of literature on state history. Handsomely illustrated, this volume presents the entire panorama of the Kanawha Valley story from pre-history to the 1980s.

The urban story is told within the context of Charleston's growing importance during the past two hundred years as the focal point of state history. The drama of growth and diversification of industry is presented against a backdrop of relevant regional and national trends.

Otis K. Rice, noted scholar from West Virginia Institute of Technology, is the author of other works on West Virginia History which are characterized by careful scholarship. These are The Allegheny Frontier: West Virginia Beginnings, 1730-1830, West Virginia: The State and Its People, a textbook, Frontier Kentucky, and The Hatfields and the McCays. Attention to detail combined with a judicious touch regarding the interpretation of events marks Rice's works.

Those of us from the Northern Panhandle who are accustomed to viewing the Southern half of the state as having been generally pro-Con federate during the Civil War will be pleased to learn that the standoff between partisans of the North and the South in the Kanawha Valley was a dead heat. The result was that neither side was able to fly its flag over the city during the war.

Although the text of this volume is of moderate length, the author has been able to include such significant details as lists of the mayors and their party affiliations as well as statistics of population growth. Details of the industrial development of the city are presented in such a manner as to explain the economic vitality of the Kanawha Valley in the twentieth century. The cultural development of the Valley with emphasis on educational and religious history constitutes a final chapter which casts a hopeful eye to the future. Rice sees the inhabitants of the Kanawha Valley as having "the ability to blend and benefit from the best of the great contemporary forces and enduring values from their past." This represents, he asserts, "the challenges . . . in the future."

The book contains a concluding section as a postscript entitled "Partners in Progress" by Harry Brawley about the leading businesses of the city. An impressive photographic essay "Charleston in Color" gives visual expression to the story. A brief "Selected Bibliography" rounds out the volume. Because this is a popular history, the editors have omitted footnotes. Their omission is the only aspect which detracts from an otherwise outstanding book.

This account will be a welcome addition to libraries, not only in the Charleston area, but, throughout the state. Dr. Rice's attention to detail and grasp of the historic forces at work both within the state and the nation make this an outstanding popular urban history.

CONTRIBUTORS

DOUG FETHERLING was born in Wheeling in 1949 and was a reporter with The Intelligence. Since then he has worked as an editor and writer in Britain and in Canada, where he now lives.

Fetherling is the author of a half dozen books including, most recently, The Five Lives of Ben Hecht (a biography of the 1930's novelist and screenwriter) and Gold Diggers of 1929 (a study of a great stock market crash). Fetherling was recently selected to write a history of Wheeling to be published by Windsor Publishing Company.


KENNETH R. NODYNE, a native of New Jersey, came to West Virginia in 1968. He received his B.A. from New York University in 1961, the Master of Arts from the University of Pennsylvania, 1962, and the Ph.D from New York University in 1969. He has taught on the faculty of West Liberty State College since 1968.

Phi Beta Kappa, Herbert Lehman Fellow and Fellow of the Newberry Library, author of articles in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, West Virginia History, The Public Historian, Journal of the West Virginia Historical Association, the Upper Ohio Valley Historical Review, and The Intelligence. He is the co-author with Robert Murphy of the West Virginia entries to the forthcoming Dictionary of American Medical Biography. He is the co-author with Dennis Lawther of The Wheeling Area: An Annotated Bibliography. His manuscript on the History of Dentistry in West Virginia is nearing completion.

The late EARL SUMMERS, Sr. was orchestra conductor with the Court, Victoria, and Virginia Theatres in Wheeling. From 1921-24, he was conductor of the Savoy and the Keith Theater orchestras in Washington, D.C. In 1926, he returned to Wheeling to conduct the Court Theatre Orchestra. In 1927, he became the conductor of the orchestra at the new Capitol Theatre.

He was closely connected with the Wheeling Symphony from its beginning in 1929, serving as assistant conductor and concert master. From 1936-1940, he conducted the Wheeling Steel Orchestra and was staff band conductor at WWVA.