

Growing up in America's Golden Age and Growing Old in the Age of AI

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By

James Ottavio Castagnera

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This book, my 25th, is dedicated to Joanne “Joey” Caine, my friend
for 60 years and my wife for 54 years, who passed away in 2024,
just as this volume was being typeset.

R.I.P., my darling.

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PART ONE:

GROWING UP IN AMERICA'S GOLDEN AGE

PREFACE TO PART ONE



(Fig. 0-1: *The Golden Age* by Pietro da Cortona.)

His name's not mentioned much anymore, but in the 1960s, when I was in my teens, Marshall McLuhan was the premiere hi-tech guru of his generation. Oddly enough, he was an English professor by profession. He wasn't a techie at all. However, he grasped the societal significance of electronic technology better—and expressed that appreciation more fluently and cleverly—than anybody else.

McLuhan's best-known pronouncement was: "The Medium is the Message." This was his most elegant insight, that the content of communication media was incidental to the media's socio-political significance. The media themselves were revolutionary.¹

Arthur C. Clarke², a McLuhan contemporary and renowned sci-fi writer, must certainly have agreed. His most quotable quote is: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

Another striking contention of McLuhan's was that we view life through a rear-view mirror. In the 1960s, he explained in a widely viewed documentary that we were mentally still stuck in "Bonanza-land," a reference to a popular weekly TV western of the time.³

McLuhan's great advantage in terms of recognition—on top of his well-honed writing and speaking talents as an English professor and inventor of "media studies" at the University of Toronto—was being the first. How important is that? Well, let me ask the question in a different way: Who was the second person to fly solo across the Atlantic?

Americans entered the second half of the 20th century faced with a plethora of "sufficiently advanced technologies" that were "indistinguishable from magic." Some technology was black magic; notably, the thermonuclear bomb. Some was white, such as television. The century's first half had been, without exception, the bloodiest period in human history. Tens of millions had died in two world wars and a holocaust. The West's great democracies had withstood the existential test posed by fascism, only to immediately be challenged by opponents at the opposite end of the totalitarian spectrum, communism.

Despite the demobilization of millions of servicemen and women, for the first time in American history the conclusion of a major conflict didn't bring a deep recession. And even the so-called Korean 'Conflict' was nothing more than a speed bump... unless, of course, you served in combat

¹ "Marshall McLuhan." n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 9, 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan.

² "Arthur C. Clarke." n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 25, 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_C._Clarke.

³ "Bonanza." n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed on April 9, 2024.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonanza>.

in Korea. Although Eisenhower in his farewell address at the close of the Fifties warned of the “military-industrial complex,” the arms race actually contributed to an unprecedented economic boom. Population growth, the building of the interstate highway system, the concomitant blossoming of the suburbs, the GI Bill that sent millions of vets to college—all of these contributed to the cornucopia of the Fifties. So too did the absence of serious economic rivals: the Soviet Union was a military threat but hardly an economic one, as Vice President Richard Nixon’s “Kitchen Debate” with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev demonstrated in 1959, and on national television no less.⁴ Germany and Japan were rubble. Great Britain was no longer great, and, indeed, had turned its greatest leader, Winston Churchill, ignominiously out of office, as the replacement Labour government merrily nationalized, then tanked, the country’s economy.

We stood on the cusp of vast technological changes, just as we do today. And Marshall McLuhan—who, sadly would die from complications of a stroke at age 69 in 1980, too soon to see the Internet, but too late to avoid seeing the decline of his fame and influence—was the first to focus our national consciousness on the revolutionary significance of the new hi-tech media.

When McLuhan told us “the medium is the message,” he defined “medium” broadly: “All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical.... The wheel is an extension of the foot... the book is an extension of the eye... clothing, an extension of the skin... electric circuitry, an extension of the central nervous system.”⁵ Furthermore, media impact social relationships: “Every Roman was surrounded by slaves, the slave and his psychology flooded ancient Italy, and every Roman became, inwardly, and of course unwittingly, a slave.”⁶

So, what McLuhan really meant by a “medium” was the dominant form of technology at any given moment in history in a given society.⁷ For McLuhan, television was the dominant medium of the Fifties and Sixties in America. It’s unlikely many Americans disagreed; our minds were fertile

⁴ “Kitchen Debate.” n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 9, 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitchen_Debate.

⁵ McLuhan, Marshall and Fiore, Quentin. 1967. *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Benton Books. p. 26-40.

⁶ McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill. p.12.

⁷ Castagnera, James Ottavio. 1964. *Applications of Unified Social Theory to the Development of a General Theory of Popular Culture*. Kent, Ohio: Masters thesis, Kent State University. p. 105.

ground for his clever and appealing theories. And we were watching plenty of TV.

But societies—especially vast, complex, and diverse ones such as the U.S.—don't change overnight. While, as McLuhan correctly observed, the pace of change had accelerated beyond anything ever envisioned by earlier generations, still the old ways lingered. "Bonanza" was among the most popular TV shows of its time; as one American eye watched the magic screen, the other gazed nostalgically into the rearview mirror.

As ever, wealth distribution was uneven. Status and luck, among many factors, influenced just how "golden" the age was for each individual, each family, and each community. For African-Americans, the Civil Rights Movement would win new rights, but only via decades of struggle, and not often including a fair share of the age's material bounty. Unions, which claimed one in three American workers during the first two decades following WWII, enabled Joe and Jane Lunch-Bucket to move firmly into America's burgeoning middle class, while unrepresented farm workers were left behind. The core of our great cities rotted, while the suburbs blossomed.

Despite such disparities, the general effect of America's post-war prosperity was that the vast majority of our boats rose. And, most stayed afloat through the ensuing three decades, despite the relentless decline of manufacturing and the once-robust labor unions that drew their power and influence from that economic sector. In point of fact, economic opportunities abounded for almost everyone who chose to exploit them. The GI Bill⁸ morphed into National Defense Loans, which enabled the likes of me to attend one of the proliferating and expanding colleges and universities that made America the higher-ed world beater. In the Sixties, so-called "hippies" and LSD-enthusiasts like Harvard's Professor Timothy Leary counseled, "Turn on, tune in, drop out."⁹ Indeed, so rich in opportunities—good educations, good jobs—was America, that a person of average intelligence and reasonable physical mobility quite literally had to make an affirmative decision to drop out in order to "fail."

⁸ See "G.I. Bill." n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 9, 2024.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.I._Bill. ("The G.I. Bill, formally known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, was a law that provided a range of benefits for some of the returning World War II veterans. The original G.I. Bill expired in 1956, but the term "G.I. Bill" is still used to refer to programs created to assist American military veterans.")

⁹ "Turn on, tune in, drop out." n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 9, 2024.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn_on,_tune_in,_drop_out.

So, What Exactly Is a Golden Age?

Like the term “Utopia,” the concept of a “Golden Age” is theoretical at its best, mythical at its worst. And like “Utopia,” the term can trace its origin to ancient times. In *Works and Days*, the Greek poet Hesiod presented as early as 700 B.C. the myth of five ages of man. The earliest was a “Golden Age” created by the gods on Olympus. It was succeeded by the Silver, Bronze and Iron ages, each one less perfect than the one before it, leading to the hard times that Hesiod’s Greece was experiencing when he penned his epic poem.¹⁰ Significantly, then, one version of a Golden Age—whether Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian—is of a long-lost Eden.

A second, more modern version of a Golden Age is an era in the history of a nation or empire of heightened, perhaps unrivaled, prosperity, plus creativity in the arts and sciences. In that sense of the term, historians have variously identified the following times and places¹¹:

- Ancient Egypt experienced several Golden Ages, including the Fourth Dynasty during the Old Kingdom, as well as the New Kingdom.
- The Belle Epoque period, considered France's golden age as it was a time when culture, science, and living standards reached their peak.
- The Athenian Golden Age presided over by Pericles
- 14th & 15th century Africa, a golden age for West Africa, when trade routes flourished, leading to the advancement of mathematics and science.
- The golden age of Latin literature between Cicero and Ovid.
- The age of the “Five Good Emperors” during the Principate, part of the Pax Romana period, generally considered the zenith of the Roman Empire (Edward Gibbon considered it the happiest age of humanity.)
- The golden age of India, between the 3rd century to the 7th century CE under the leadership of the Gupta Empire, during which time Indians made great achievements in mathematics, science, culture, religion, philosophy and astronomy.
- The Islamic Golden Age, involving scientific achievements spanning a wide range of subject areas including medicine,

¹⁰ “Ages of Man.” n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 28, 2024.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ages_of_Man.

¹¹ “Golden Age (Metaphor).” n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 28, 2024.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_age_\(metaphor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_age_(metaphor)).

mathematics, astronomy, and agriculture as well as physics, economics, engineering and optics.

- The High Renaissance of the 16th century, often described as the “golden age” of culture and art in Renaissance Italy.
- The Spanish Golden Age (*siglo de oro*), corresponding to the reign of the Catholic Monarchs and the Habsburgs between 1492 and 1659, a period marked by a powerful Spanish Empire and a flourishing of the arts.
- Two English Golden Ages:
- the Elizabethan era, under Elizabeth I of England, in the late 16th century, and
- the Victorian era, under Queen Victoria, in the 19th century.

(And these are only the most notable. Many other nations and ethnic groups cherish memories of Golden Ages in their history books.)

The geographic, temporal, and cultural diversity of these so-called Golden Ages demonstrates that such an era may be a very relative phenomenon, not mythical by any means, but more real in the eye of the beholder looking back (in a rearview mirror) than ever it was experienced by those people who lived through it. In that sense, all these Golden Ages have a lot in common with the mythical Edens of ubiquitous creation myths.

That the second half of the 20th century, or some substantial portion of it, is seen by many as America's Golden Age is a well-established fact. The precise parameters of the Golden Age do vary:

For many Americans, the 1950s were the golden age of American history. When asked when America was great, Donald Trump pointed to the post-war era of the 1940s and 1950s. America was the world's unquestioned economic, political, and military power. The business of America was business. The American economy was humming as never before. The result was a degree of prosperity unequalled in the history of the world. A man with no formal education could buy a house and a car, support his family, send his kids to college, and enjoy an occasional vacation.¹²

Others extend the Golden Age into the 1970s: “It was the Golden Age of the U.S. economy, the quarter century between 1948 and 1973, when the U.S. reigned supreme, manufacturing flourished and the American

¹² Nance, Scott. “The Golden Age of America -What Made America Great?” American Phoenix. Accessed April 26, 2024.
<http://americanphoenixpllc.com/golden-age-america-great>.

middle class prospered. During those 25 years, real GDP rose 169%, employment increased by 75% and manufacturing jobs by 30%, while per capita personal income almost doubled.¹³

Still other commentators take the Golden Age into the early eighties:

If we go back and reflect on the baby boom years—starting with the first birth year, 1946, and ending with the last year a boomer would have reached the age of majority, 1982—here’s what speaks for that as a ‘golden age’: Major advances in science, including the eradication of polio; space exploration; the civil rights movement and passage of major legislation to advance the rights of minorities; a protest movement that brought an end to the Vietnam War; the first Earth Day and the birth of the modern environmental movement; great rock music; an era of superb American cinema; a long, slow decline in childhood poverty; the feminist movement and the flow, however slow, of women into careers historically dominated by men.¹⁴

Cheerleaders for a still-longer extension of this alleged Golden Age are harder to find. As we will see, alert observers such as Robert Reich¹⁵ began tolling the death knell of America’s Golden Age more than 30 years ago. Such astute observers recognized that, despite the outward accoutrements of prosperity during the Reagan years, the seeds of decline had sprouted and were about to bear bitter fruit. By the time Reagan took office (1981), I was in my early thirties. Whatever else I was (or wasn’t), I was a “grown up.” My childhood was over, as surely as was the Golden Age.

Consequently, Part One of this little volume will chronicle my experiences, and my conclusions about them, between (approximately) 1947 and 1980 (with a brief backward glance at the earlier days of my hometown for a bit of essential context.)

My goal in the first ten chapters of this book is to paint as clear a picture as I can of this alleged Golden Age into which I and millions more Baby Boomers were born. My method is to present vignettes from my own

¹³ Gold, Howard. 2017. “The U.S. Economy Will Never Have Another Golden Age.” *Market Watch*. Accessed April 28, 2024.
<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-us-economy-will-never-have-another-golden-age-2017-09-01>.

¹⁴ Rodricks, Dan. 2023. “Was there a ‘golden age’ in our time? Will we see one again?” *Baltimore Sun*. Accessed on April 28, 2024.
<https://danrodricks.com/2023/08/03/was-there-a-golden-age-in-the-last-century-will-we-see-one-again/>

¹⁵ “Robert Reich.” n.d. *Wikipedia*. Accessed April 28, 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Reich.

childhood and young-adulthood, complimented by commentaries that place these vignettes into a broader socio-political context. The result, I hope, is a balanced view of our Golden Age.

Then, in the following chapters, comprising Part Two, I have endeavored to play the part of a 21st century Marshall McLuhan. From my—admittedly foggy—crystal ball, I have drawn to the best of my ability a portrait of what we have recently experienced, and what lies ahead for us in the Age of AI.¹⁶ In 1945, the technologies on the “white magic” side of the scientific spectrum contributed to the unprecedented prosperity of the half-century of America’s purported Golden Age. In 2025, the soon-to-be dominant technology we have labeled “Generative Artificial Intelligence”—while posturing in the guise of “white magic”—poses (in my view) an existential threat to our prosperity and our democracy. That said, I see the potential—following a likely period of wrenching trials and tribulations—for a new Golden Age.

¹⁶ See Kissinger, Henry A., and Schmidt, Eric, and Huttenlocher, Daniel. 2022. *The Age of AI*. New York: Little Brown & Company.

CHAPTER ONE

MY HOMETOWN

What It Meant To Be a Coal Miner

Jim Thorpe is the county seat of Carbon County. Carbon, coal... the black constant.

My old man mined coal during the Great Depression. This was a bigger mistake than his buying a share in the town's movie theater in the 1950s, just when TV became popular. It was an understandable mistake; it was the only work that was available. He worked for the Edison Coal Company in Nesquehoning, a mine patch a dozen miles from Mauch Chunk—Jim Thorpe's name until 1954. Just his luck, he had the worst job. Dad was a rock man.

Anthracite coal, hard coal, became hard under intense pressure caused by upheavals of the earth's crust. By contrast to bituminous—soft—coal, which is found typically in horizontal seams close to the surface, pressure pushed anthracite deep down in “U” and “V” shaped deposits. Getting to it usually entailed deep vertical shafts from which horizontal tunnels were carved to reach the coal pockets.¹⁷ The rock men carved those tunnels.

The work was dusty.

At the rock face you drilled your holes. Into each hole, you shoved your sticks of dynamite. You wired your dynamite. You strung the wire until you were well away from the face and then you fired the charges. If you hadn't already extended your track, you did it now. You rolled the car on the rails up to the face. Then, five men across, armed with short-handled, wide scoop shovels, you loaded the car with the newly blasted rock.

The least senior man was placed in the middle. An old miner, who worked as my dad's helper when they both were in their mid-sixties and pop was still laying bricks, a Czech who had migrated to America around 1925, recalled his days as the middle scooper. “Jimmy, I was working so hard, my nose was bleeding.”

¹⁷ See U.S. Geological Survey. “What Are the Types of Coal?” Accessed April 25, 2024. <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-are-types-coal>.

Most of all, the work was dusty. The upshot? Black lung disease, or more properly:

Anthracosilicosis: pneumoconiosis in coal workers caused by inhalation of coal dust (anthracosis) and fine particles of silica (silicosis). Called also silicoanthracosis.¹⁸

Ten years of breathing stone and coal dust, plus a pack a day of Lucky Strikes or Camels, will do the trick. Nobody guessed how bad the cigarettes were for you. In fact, lots of industrial workers believed they were good for you. I once represented a union at Philadelphia's naval shipyard. New members, once upon a time, were told to take up smoking: "The smoke will coat your lungs and protect them from the asbestos fibers." True story.

Dad was 34 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He worked in a critical industry. He didn't have to serve; he volunteered. Three years later, he was due to be released from active duty, except that his physical exam included an X-ray. The X-ray revealed shadows on his lungs. The docs at the naval hospital in Sampson, New York, assumed he'd picked up tuberculosis on Saipan. They held onto him for six months, waiting for something to change. When nothing did, they let him go home. That was the first time he suspected he had black-lung disease. He didn't quit smoking.

They said the rock men got the worst cases. One story: A mine operator stopped into the Italian Club in Summit Hill, just up the hill from Jim Thorpe. At the bar, he asked if anybody knew where he could find some good rock men. "I'll take you to them," replied one old geezer. He drove the operator to the cemetery. "They're all in there." Apocryphal, I suppose, but also accurate.

Still, hard coal is the bedrock on which the foundation of today's tourist destination—Jim Thorpe in 2025—rests.

Earlier Times¹⁹

Like all American stories, this one begins with the Indians; Eastern Woodland Indians in this instance. They were dubbed the Delawares by the

¹⁸ See Steven Ronsmans & Benoit Nemery, "Pneumoconiosis in Coal Miners; Anthracosilicosis after All?", *Ann. Am. Thorac Soc.*, Sept. 1, 2022; 19(9), 1451-1451, accessed at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9447397/>

¹⁹ This section is drawn from Castagnera, James. 1979. *Patterns of Ethnic Group Assimilation and Conflict in Carbon County, Penna. 1754-1954*. Doctoral Dissertation, Case Western Reserve University. Chapters III-IV.

pioneers from New York and Connecticut, who penetrated the Wyoming Valley of Central Eastern Pennsylvania. Leni Lenape is what they called themselves.²⁰ They traded away the rich coal lands bounded by the Susquehanna, Delaware and Lehigh Rivers for about two thousand dollars. Nobody was thinking “coal” at the time, but the Indians knew about it. Anthracite was so hard, some of these Native Americans carved pipes from it. To this day, the gift shops in the railroad station in Jim Thorpe sell hard-coal statuettes. On my desk sits a pen holder depicting a coal breaker (processing plant), carved from a lump of anthracite coal.

Columbus didn’t discover America, and Philip Ginter didn’t discover anthracite coal. However, he was the first white guy to notice it in 1791 on Sharp Mountain near the future borough of Summit Hill. A miller, he was looking for rock to make a new millstone. He had sense enough to take a sample home with him. He showed it to a blacksmith named Joe Neyer, who took a long time trying to make the stuff burn. When it finally did, he declared it to be some sort of coal.

Ginter didn’t stop there. His next visit was to Colonel Jacob Weiss, a deputy quartermaster general during the Revolution. A Philadelphian, Weiss consulted his cousin Michael Hillegas, formerly the first Treasurer of the United States and still a well-to-do merchant. These guys were shrewd businessmen and they knew other potential investors. On January 19, 1792, they brought some of these fellas together and formed the Lehigh Coal Mine Company. It would take 30 more years and the construction of a canal along the Lehigh River for the hard-coal industry to come into its own.

Mauch Chunk sprouted where railroad and canal were destined by geographic advantage to converge. This was about 1820 or so. The name is Native American in origin. And, in fact, there were two tiny municipalities: Mauch Chunk on the west side of the Lehigh was on the commercial side of the equation. Downtown eventually boasted a courthouse, a railroad station, a handsome First Presbyterian Church, and a pair of mansions owned by the Packer Brothers, Asa and Harry. During much of the 19th century, Asa owned the canal and its successor, the Lehigh Railroad. He apparently liked the name Lehigh and gave it to the college he founded in

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/33920211_Patterns_of_ethnic_group_assimilation_and_conflict_in_Carbon_County_Penna_1754-1954.

²⁰ See Licht, Walter et al. “The Original People and Their Land: The Lenape, Pre-History to the 18th Century.” West Philadelphia Collaborative History. Accessed April 25, 2024. <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/stories/original-people-and-their-land-lenape-pre-history-18th-century>.

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. I've always wondered why the prestigious engineering school isn't called Packer University.

Asa Packer bequeathed his mansion, which looks down from the mountainside onto the county courthouse, the railroad and the canal, to the town. The town let the place rot for decades, until the mines began closing in the 1950s.

Foundations Laid in the Fifties

I guess you can fairly say that Mauch Chunk was ahead of its time. As explained in the Preface, the Fifties are widely seen as having launched a Golden Age in America. Germany and Japan were still mostly rubble, some of it radioactive rubble in the latter's case. Britain was broke. The Soviet Union was aggressive and expansive, but economically no better off. The United States was the world's industrial goliath. One in three workers was a union member. Good wages, benefits and pensions put the guys who worked on the assembly lines comfortably in the middle class. Levitt and his towns made ownership of a single-family home attainable for millions.

The decades ahead would be marked by the steady erosion of American industrial primacy. Manufacturing moved from the Rust Belt to the right-to-work (read "non-union") southern states, then to Mexico, then to China and Southeast Asia, while Japan and Germany rose from the rubble to become archrivals. When I was a kid, "Made in Japan" translated to "junk." That didn't last long. Starting with the battery powered transistor radio every kid carried around, the Nipponese were the first to mount a serious challenge to the primacy of their recent arch-enemy, now principal ally.

The hard-coal industry was the bell weather—literally, the mine *was* the canary. But it wasn't Japan that got us. It was cheap Middle Eastern oil that put paid to hard coal, even in anthracite's own back yard. The volatility of the United Mine Workers of America, led by John L. Sullivan, who took his miners out on strike even in the midst of the Second World War, didn't help. Wildcat strikes, remembered my dad, were endemic. Something didn't go well. Somebody was upset. "Domo(home)," said the Slovak shop steward and that ended production at that mine for the day.

And coal, as I have noted, is dirty.

We had a furnace in our basement. Next to it was a coal bin. Every so often—more often in winter than summer—a dump truck backed up to the cast iron door and a shoot was slipped through the 12" by 24" slot. The truck's bed was tilted and the coal skittered into the bin. From there to the furnace was dad's chore with a scoop shovel. In the sixties, the chore was

mechanized; a device called a worm was installed. This corkscrew gadget rotated and kept a slow and steady stream of coal moving into the furnace... except when a clinker clogged up the works. Then the old man had to knock it free and get things going again.

No mystery, then, why, when oil was cheaper than coal, and a whole lot cleaner and less cumbersome, even the relatives and neighbors of coal miners made the switch.

The closing of the deep mines made for many disruptions. Half of some mine-patch towns migrated. Families headed for North Jersey, Philly, and lots of other places; wherever the jobs were. Every Levittown on the East Coast had its share of “coal-crackers.” The abandoned mines, some of which ran right under towns like Coaldale, Lansford and Tamaqua, slowly subsided. Homes cracked and then buckled right across their middles in some communities. But, then, the housing stock outstripped the population by the time this subsidence was well underway in the sixties.

Meanwhile, Mauch Chunk and its companion borough, East Mauch Chunk, cast about for their uncertain future.

These were still the days of thriving men’s clubs, usually named for animals: the Elks, the Eagles, and in our town’s case, the Lions Club.²¹ As an independent masonry contractor, although he never cleared above \$15,000 in a hard-worked year, Dad was a Lion in good standing. Well, after all, the “richest” men in town were the grocer, the haberdasher, the pocketbook-factory owner, the local-fleabag hotelier. The gap between them and my old man was surprisingly narrow.

The Lions spearheaded a fundraising drive dubbed “The Mile of Nickels.”²² Residents and folks just passing through were solicited to donate a few nickels from their pocket change to a line of coins that started at the upper end of Broadway, Chunk’s main drag. I’ll leave it to the mathematically compelled reader to calculate just how many nickels that was or how much it amounted to. It wasn’t about the coins *per se*. It was the gimmick, and it worked. A national TV network got wind of the drive and a few of the town fathers, Lions one and all (but not my pop), were invited on an afternoon talk show to tell the nation about their gimmick.

²¹ Lions International survives today. Accessed April 25, 2024.

https://www.lionsclubs.org/en/kindness?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjw_qexBhCoARIsAFgBlevbeBALRA1LjErDpIHzy0GzgC1iPoLXSR-T-lk3naBzepYSO55mgoaAq88EALw_wcB.

²² See “Mile of Nickels Off to a Good Start.” Jim Thorpe Times News. May 26, 1956. Accessed April 25, 2024. <https://www.newspapers.com/article/jim-thorpe-times-news-mile-of-nickels-of/20892459/>.

Even before “The Mile of Nickels” was the campaign to change the towns’ names. Patricia was the third wife and widow of the great American Indian athlete Jim Thorpe, who died in 1953. The town of Shawnee, Oklahoma, aspired to raise \$100,000 for a suitable memorial to this native son. When the fund drive faltered, Patricia became impatient. When Oklahoma’s governor vetoed a bill that would have filled the funding gap, impatience turned to fury. Meanwhile, she got wind of the Chunks’ boosterism, which had gained some national attention even before the hokey (but effective) mile of small change.

“According to Bruce Heydt, managing editor of *British Heritage* magazine, Patricia Thorpe found her way to Mauch Chunk after meeting with Bert Bell, then the Commissioner of the NFL. She had seen a TV broadcast about Mauch Chunk’s revitalization efforts and Bell was looking for a location for the Pro Football Hall of Fame. They negotiated with Mauch Chunk officials and struck a deal.”²³

The year was 1954. The resolution was put on the ballot, and it passed. The two tiny towns, a few thousand souls apiece, became one Pennsylvania borough: the Borough of Jim Thorpe.

The celebration was dramatic. Indians from Thorpe’s Fox tribe came up out of Oklahoma to add their feathers and paint to the local color. A commemorative coin was struck. I still have one: Thorpe looking statesmanlike (or perhaps prayerful) on its face, the town’s defunct “switchback” rail line on the back.²⁴

²³ Tom Benjey, “No Hall of Fame for Jim Thorpe,” accessed at <https://tombenjey.com/tag/patricia-thorpe/>

²⁴ The switchback rail line ran up the face of Mount Pisgah, little more than a high hill. 9th and early 20th century visitors, who rode the Lehigh Railroad north from Philadelphia on summertime excursions, would be towed up the incline by a steam engine and a cable, then released into gravity’s hands for a thrilling decent. It was a curious choice for the reverse side of the coin; perhaps it symbolized aspirations for a once and future tourist industry.



(Fig. 1-1: Jim Thorpe commemorative coin, front side.)



(Fig. 1-2: Jim Thorpe commemorative coin, reverse side.)

Like the switchback's rail-less railbed, things went downhill from there at first. "Bell died before he could bring the Hall of Fame to Jim Thorpe and it went to Canton, Ohio, the city for which Big Jim had his greatest professional years."²⁵

But some good stuff happened, too, though nothing so dramatic as a hall of fame. Jim Thorpe High School, with twice the students and twice the resources of either predecessor, became competitive athletically and respectable academically.

²⁵ Ibid.

The Lions had fire in their bellies. Their next project became the Asa Packer Mansion.²⁶ It took years of fundraising and volunteer labor, including my pop's masonry skills, to get the place back into shape. The chandelier—copied for “Gone with the Wind”—was a major restoration project in its own right. Gold leaf wallpaper required expert restoration. Even the stone retaining walls that kept the mountain from subsiding onto the mansion's back porch required months of rebuilding, much of it by my old man. The list was almost endless.

So endless that the year was 1963 and I was 15 when the mansion was finally opened to tourists. A nepotistic perk (only one in my life) came my way: Dad was able to procure one of the guide slots for his elder son. For fifty cents an hour I led visitors through the restored mansion, pointing out the famed chandelier, the chair allegedly upholstered with human skin, the family portraits.

No portrait of Alfred Griner Packer hung in the Packer Mansion. Not even a tintype. No matter; the story spread that he was a distant relative of Asa and brother Harry, whose mansion (still requiring restoration) stood nearby. Why did anybody care? Because Al Packer, born on the opposite side of the Commonwealth in Allegheny County in 1842, was destined to become “The Colorado Cannibal.”

In the winter of 1874, Al Packer and five hunting comrades imprudently attempted a crossing of the San Juan Mountains. Packer purported himself to be a guide. It wasn't enough that he got the party hopelessly lost in the midst of an especially nasty winter; he then ate them to survive that winter. When he emerged the following spring all on his lonesome, he tried out the alibi of having been abandoned by his party. When that story crumbled, he allowed that he and his companions had resorted to cannibalism. And when that explanation lost its legs, too, he admitted to having singlehandedly dispatched and ingested his charges.

Packer managed to escape custody and remained a fugitive from justice's long arm for nine years before at last being apprehended and tried for multiple first-degree murders. A story—again, likely apocryphal—has the presiding judge looking down at Al from the bench and saying in a stern voice, “It's not bad enough that you ate them fellas. But did you have to eat the only five Demecrats in Colorado?”

What isn't apocryphal is his conviction and death sentence. But Alfred had at least nine lives. He won a retrial and wound up with a 40-year sentence for five counts of voluntary manslaughter. He lived out the last of

²⁶ See “The Asa Packer Mansion Museum.” Accessed April 25, 2024.
<http://www.asapackermansion.com/>.

those lives serving that sentence.²⁷ A fictitious film version of his misadventures, titled “The Legend of Alfred Packer” was released in 1980,²⁸ followed in 1993 by “Cannibal! The Musical.”²⁹ Tenuous as is his relationship to Asa and Harry, his bizarre claim to fame has been at least marginally helpful to my hometown’s tourist trade.

Thirty years before the movie musical bombed, I left the tour-guide profession for an additional nickel an hour as the night clerk behind the desk of the aforementioned fleabag hotel—The Hotel American³⁰—a block or so from the courthouse on Broadway. I rented rooms to a trickle of itinerants and catered to the needs of the full-time residents. That was my summer of ’63. Two years later, a movement was launched to change the town’s name back to Mauch Chunk.

The moniker “Mauch Chunk” has never held much charm for me. In high school—where I was in ’65—when you drank too much cheap beer, you just might “blow chunks.” I did... more than once. “Chunky, what a chunk of chocolate,” actor Arnold Stang told TV viewers. That was more like it. But a name for a town? More to the point, Jim Thorpe High School students (I wasn’t one of them; I attended Marian Central Catholic) wanted no part of the municipal dissolution and separation that the referendum entailed.

Fortunately for us pro-Thorpers, the Chunkers, who hung out in a saloon where my dad said he wouldn’t drink anything not still in the bottle, were as politically naïve a bunch of bumpkins as was imaginable. When a reporter for *Sports Illustrated* dropped by the bar and inquired about the reason for the referendum, he was advised that “all we ever got was a dead Indian.”³¹ When that statement appeared in the magazine, many not already inclined to vote against the name change were embarrassed into doing so. The movement went down in ignominy and disrepute.

²⁷ “Alfred Packer.” n.d. Wikipedia. Accessed April 25, 2024.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alferd_Packer.

²⁸ See “The Legend of Alfred Packer.” IMDb. Accessed April 25, 2024.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0251182/>.

²⁹ “Cannibal! The Musical.” IMDb. Accessed April 25, 2024.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115819/>.

³⁰ Now “The Inn at Jim Thorpe.” Accessed April 25, 2024. <https://innjt.com/>.

³¹ McCallum, Jack. “The Regilding of a Legend.” *Sports Illustrated*.

<https://vault.si.com/vault/1982/10/25/the-regilding-of-a-legend>. (“In Jim Thorpe, Pa., Johnny Otto agrees, but from a different perspective. “All we got here is a dead Indian,” he says. Otto, a former railroad man like many of his drinking buddies, has uttered that sentiment from a stool in the town’s unofficial center of anti-Thorpe feeling, Al Weiksner’s Hotel Switzerland bar, located on Hazard Square, across from the Carbon County Court House and hard by the Sunrise Diner. For miles around, it is simply known as Weiksner’s.”)

That didn't mean that Mr. Thorpe, the man called the "greatest athlete in the world" by no less a light than the King of Sweden, after the young tyro won a pair of Olympic gold medals, was allowed to rest in peace in his namesake town. The next challenge came out of Oklahoma, where family members concluded their most famous native son couldn't rest in peace unless his remains were brought home to the reservation.

Thorpe, whose biopic stars Burt Lancaster,³² was a star baseball and football player, in addition to his Olympic feats. He lost his medals on racially motivated claims that he had supported himself through semi-pro baseball before competing in the Olympic games.³³ They were later restored to him, but by then the damage was done. He died of the consequences of alcoholism in middle age, setting the saga of my little town in motion.

Following the abortive referendum, Thorpe's eternal sleep, in fact, was undisturbed for 45 years until a change in federal law concerning Indian artifacts and remains inspired his son, Jack Thorpe, to launch a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for Eastern Pennsylvania. Joined by other descendants and leaders of the Sac and Fox tribes, he made his bid to have his father's remains repatriated from the park at the top of North Street on the town's east side back to the reservation. It took a few years, some thousands of dollars in legal fees, and an unsuccessful appeal by Jack Thorpe to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, sitting in Philly, before the lawsuit sputtered out.³⁴ Big Jim remains today in his namesake Pennsylvania borough.

The Molly Maguires³⁵

In the late 1960s, when Jack Thorpe's legal challenge was still far in the future, Hollywood came to my hometown. Director Martin Ritt and

³² "Jim Thorpe - All American." IMDb. Accessed April 25, 2024. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043687/>.

³³ McCullum, Jack. Note 23. (Thorpe apparently did accept money—some say \$2 per game, others \$25 for the season—for playing minor league baseball between terms at the Carlisle (PA) Indian School. Other collegians did the same, but under false names. Thorpe either didn't know any better, or didn't care, since he'd already determined not to return to school in the fall. Regardless, the amount he earned was trivial. Years later it cost him his two gold medals.)

³⁴ *Thorpe v. Borough of Jim Thorpe*, 770 F.3d 255 (3d Cir., 2014).

³⁵ See Castagnera, James Ottavio. 2020. "Plus ça change...? Alienation and Violence from Both Sides of Labor's Rise and Fall." History News Network, December 8, 2020, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/178400>; Castagnera, James Ottavio. 2013. *Counter Terrorism Issues: Case Studies in the Courtroom*. London: CRC