

“Book Recounts Intertwined Lives of Scranton, Jane Jacobs”

BY PATRICK MCKENNA, (SCRANTON) TIMES-TRIBUNE, ASSOCIATE EDITOR, May 9, 2022

Native Scrantonian Jane Butzner Jacobs didn't mention her hometown in her seminal 1961 treatise on urban vitality and decline, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." That work, and her role in protecting cherished urban neighborhoods in New York City and Toronto from highways and cookie-cutter redevelopment, made her an icon of urban advocates around the world.

But as biographer Glenna Lang makes clear in "Jane Jacobs's First City: Learning from Scranton, Pennsylvania," you could take Jane out of Scranton but couldn't take Scranton out of Jane.

Lang, who teaches at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, came to know Scranton well while researching her 2009 Jacobs biography, "Genius of Common Sense: The Story of Jane Jacobs and 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities,'" and has been a frequent visitor over many years.

The book is as much a biography of the living, breathing Scranton as it is of Jacobs. Even for an old, native Scrantonian like me, a longtime local journalist reasonably well-versed in Scranton's history, the book was enlightening. Scores of wonderful stories illustrate Scranton's prominence and colorful history in its anthracite boom era, from the late 1800s into the late 1920s, when the city's population was roughly equivalent to that of Los Angeles. For example, flamboyant pool hall and hotel entrepreneur Charles "Susky" Battle discovered Jack Johnson, one of the most powerful and controversial boxing champions in history, working in a South Scranton livery stable and managed his early career.

The Scranton revealed by Lang will be familiar yet unfamiliar to many Scrantonians. Jane Jacobs believed in strong downtowns and commercial cores coupled with vibrant, diverse neighborhoods, including local goods and services, businesses and neighborhood schools. That clearly was her own experience. She grew up walking to her elementary schools in Green Ridge and Dunmore, including walking home for lunch, and walked or rode the streetcar to Central High School.

She had the same experience when she worked for a time at The Scranton Republican, the predecessor of The Scranton Tribune, next to City Hall and across the street from her father's office in the Medical Arts Building. All of that clearly formed Jacobs' view of how cities should work. (Another of the book's charms is Lang's thumbnail history of Scranton's rich newspaper tradition.)

Less familiar to many Scrantonians is the degree of diversity Lang depicts as being common in the city. Racially and religiously integrated schools and Jane's Girl Scout troops were common in Jane's childhood. That likely was because of the city being an immigration-fueled boomtown, as it and the region produced millions of tons of anthracite coal every year.

My only quibble with the book is its rosy portrayal of life in the city, generally, during the anthracite boom period. That's because its focus, naturally, is on the relatively affluent and highly accomplished Butzner family. Jane's father was a prominent physician, and several of her siblings became prominent professionals in different fields, including U.S. District Judge John Butzner. But that hardly describes life for most Scrantonians of the era, who were tied much more closely to the coal industry. My grandfather, Michael "Bull" Cafferty, for example, began working in a Scranton coal mine in the 1890s when he was 9.

But Lang's depiction of how Scranton's meteoric rise, fueled by anthracite, and its rapid decline from over-dependence on a single industry, clearly proves the case that Jacobs' vision — which had its greatest impacts elsewhere — clearly flowed from her formative years in her home city.

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