

Book renews love of Scranton, 'Jacobs' first city'

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As a Scranton native, I felt compelled to write after reading Glenna Lang's "Jane Jacobs's First City: Learning from Scranton, Pennsylvania," which was published in 2021.

Scranton native Jane Jacobs, an urban theorist of iconic proportions to city planners and citizens concerned about the viability of our urban environments, has been the subject of multiple works about her revolutionary ideas which were put forth in a series of books beginning in 1961.

In her time, she was viewed as an iconoclast who was ahead of her time, a view that is held by many today. Glenna Lang's book traces the trajectory of Jacobs' life in Scranton and Dunmore — she was born in 1916 and died in 2006 — in parallel with Scranton's history, and causes the city and Jacobs to achieve a vitality that I had not appreciated.

I make no claim that I am a student of Jacobs' ideas, and cannot even make claim to having read any of her 10 books, the most famous of which is "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (1961).

What I can claim is a true affection for my sometimes ambivalently held city of birth and upbringing, enhanced by the genuine admiration and caring that the author Lang clearly holds for the city and Jacobs, which clearly palpably comes forth in this detailed and well-written book.

In a personal communication with Ms. Lang, she noted that what originally started out as a plan for an article about Jacobs and Scranton ended up being an over-400-page book, a kind of love story. Rather, this is intended to be an appreciation — newly activated in me — of my home city of Scranton, via Lang's excellent book that describes Scranton's "grandeur" dating

mainly from the latter portion of the 19th century into the 1930s, through to its subsequent economic decline.

That decline was the narrative that I was born into. With no experience and little knowledge of the history of Scranton's economic prowess and the decline that predated my birth in the mid-1940s, I was exposed in my growing up to frequent negative comments about the lack of economic opportunity, which was juxtaposed with what a great place Scranton had been to grow up.

Many people in my parents' generation, my own family among them, directly had been affected by the economic and psychological consequences of the city's slide from national and regional prominence to a state of chronic deterioration, creating in the populace an underdog mentality.

The introductory chapter "My Own City" is remarkable in that it captures, in just 13 pages, Scranton's past glory, in balance with its decline. This beautifully written chapter synthesizes Scranton's good, even great, times with the darker times to form a cohesive narrative, and with an emphasis that gives appropriate airing to the golden era characterized by achievement and opportunity.

Beyond the introductory chapter, the interspersing of Jane Jacobs' life with Scranton's history makes the city and Jane come alive.

While I didn't grow up in Jacobs' neighborhood (her family lived on Electric Street in Scranton and Monroe Avenue in Dunmore), much of what she writes is familiar: I grew up from the '40s to '60s on Quincy Avenue, near the Dunmore line.

But while no part of the city was more than 20 minutes away by car, it would be an understatement to say that we didn't get out much. My immi-



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Jane Jacobs, above, in 1961. Right, author Glenna Lang visits the former Jacobs home in Dunmore in 2016 while researching her new book about Jacobs' early life in Scranton and Dunmore.



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grant (from Poland) grandparents lived briefly in Green Ridge, and then in the "Flats" section of South Side before settling down on Madison Avenue in the Hill Section. (Although Lang refers to the "fancy" Hill Section, it was as diverse in its variety of wealth and housing as was Jacobs' Green Ridge and later her Dunmore "Hollywood" section.)

This was the same diversity that Jacobs was imbued with in her upbringing. In that regard, my blacksmith-turned-carpenter grandfather lived in a modest triple-decker directly across the street from the elegant home of a fellow Jewish immigrant who founded a local chain of supermarkets.

Lang writes that while Jacobs "never specifically cited Scranton in Death and Life, ... the seeds of her ideas about cities originated in her years during the 1920s and 1930s in her home city ... Here she witnessed and experienced the cohesion of the many types of diversity and the messy complexity of her city, and she learned the function and necessity of close-knit neighborhoods. In an era now vanishing from memory, in this medium-size city, citizens regularly participated in neighborhood as well as citywide activities, fostering a strong sense of community, social

responsibility, and civic pride."

Lang writes that "a far cry from the past-its-prime backwater depicted in the hit television show 'The Office,' Scranton — when Jane was growing up there — was prosperous, attractive, and the third most populous city in Pennsylvania ... Scranton took the nickname 'the Electric City' because it boasted the nation's first successful electric streetcar system. ... Fine stores drew crowds from the city and its region, as did institutions such as theaters, clubs, a museum, a central public reference library, schools, and colleges. By the late nineteenth century, Scranton thrived as an iron and steel-manufacturing center supported by a network of railroads. Fueling the iron and steel furnaces — and a wealth of other industries, including the textile factories, where women worked — the hard anthracite coal that burned hot and clean constituted the basis of the city's robust economy. At the turn of the nineteenth century, when the largest steel producer left town unexpectedly, the city relied ever more heavily on its single most plentiful natural resource ... In 1909, when Jane's parents settled together in the city, Scranton reigned as the premier city of the anthracite-mining region."

The narrative of Jacobs's

Scranton/Dunmore life is assiduously researched: the author drew from personal interviews with Jacobs's family members, friends, classmates and current-day figures in the Scranton community. For me, as a native son, almost every paragraph triggered a memory.

What I hadn't anticipated as I read through the book were the nostalgic — even teary — feelings that frequently rose to the surface, catching me by surprise in the moment. For example, in reading about the Wickham's potato chip factory in Green Ridge, my mind jumped to the 5-cent bags emblazoned with an Indian chief and the occasional debates with my brother over whether Wise or Wickham made the superior chip. Lang's references to the mobile purveyors of produce, milk, meats and baked goods flooded me with memories of my own neighborhood's "huckleberry ladies," umbrella repair man, ragman and hucksters, one of whom had a horse-drawn wagon that was pulled up the steep hills by Charlie, the prototype horse of my childhood. I can still visualize Charlie sweating profusely and fighting off flies as he grunted and struggled to pull his cargo up the Hill Section's steep Gibson Street in the

summer.

Glenna Lang has synthesized Scranton's past glory with its less-than-glorious aftermath, placing these divergent histories into a cohesive narrative, and the final chapter, "Learning from Scranton," is a wonderful summation — a cautiously hopeful one at that — that eloquently summarizes the influences on Jacobs' urbanism concepts in the context of her growing up in Scranton.

"(Jane Jacobs' ... ideas) ... germinated in the dynamic and livable Scranton of her youth, in the 1920s and 1930s, as the city reached its economic and demographic zenith before embarking on a steady descent. This once-thriving, then tottering medium-size city served as Jane Jacobs's initial observational laboratory.

"In 2007, the year following Jane's death ... a solid arc of granite blocks was unveiled (in the Courthouse Square) to pay tribute to eight Scrantonians in diverse artistic arenas. There, citizens of Jane's first city proclaimed, as the inscription reads, that she had 'inspired generations of city planners and preservationists and transformed public policy regarding cities.' The plaque noted that, in her book, 'Economy of Cities,' she had cited Scranton as 'vibrant and livable.'"

Ending on a note of hope and against the backdrop of Scranton's glory days, Lang concludes that while "its destiny is uncertain ... Scranton — like lively, diverse, intense cities everywhere — contains the seeds of its own regeneration."

What she has effectively done is to reframe the region's negative, victim perspective and by so doing greatly enhances our appreciation of where we came from, and all of it done through weaving Jane Jacobs's early life journey into a fabric that allows us to better appreciate our own Scranton origins.

"Jane Jacobs's First City" should be required reading for all Scrantonians.