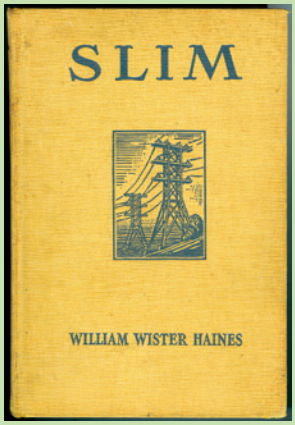
The Story of Slim, a Lineman in the Great Valley

J. Michael Morrison

Leslie White Morrison

All images courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted.

This article is an adaptation of a presentation that Michael Morrison made at the September 2016 meeting of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, and describes the intriguing connections between his grandfather, Leslie W. Morrison (1899–1974), and the familiar high-tension power lines that run through the Great Valley.

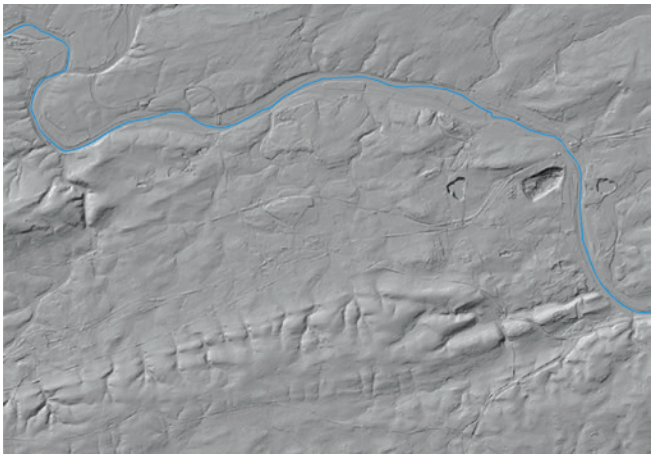


William Wister Haines (1908–1989) was a successful American author, screenwriter, and playwright. His first novel *Slim* (published in 1934), about linemen in the electric power industry, won him critical and popular acclaim as a writer. The novel was part adventure tale, part social commentary, and part time capsule of the Great Depression, notable for its realistic portrayal of working class attitudes and language during that period. In 1937, the novel was made into the Hollywood movie *Slim* with Haines writing the screenplay. The film was directed by Ray Enright, and starred Pat O'Brien and Henry Fonda (as "Slim"), with featured supporting cast members Margaret Lindsay and Jane Wyman. The film went on to become a classic, and made Slim the best-known lineman in America. It is still frequently viewed by those in the profession.

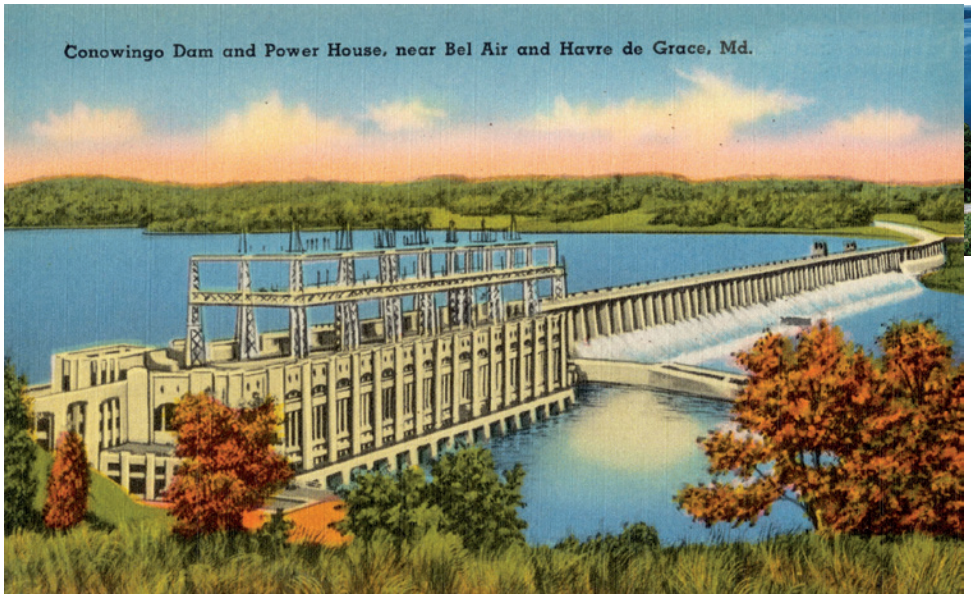
Starting in 1926, while attending the University of Pennsylvania, and after graduating with a business degree in 1931, Haines worked as a lineman on both transmission lines and on the catenary that electrified the Pennsylvania Railroad. He drew upon his extensive experience as a lineman in writing his first two books, *Slim* and *High Tension*.

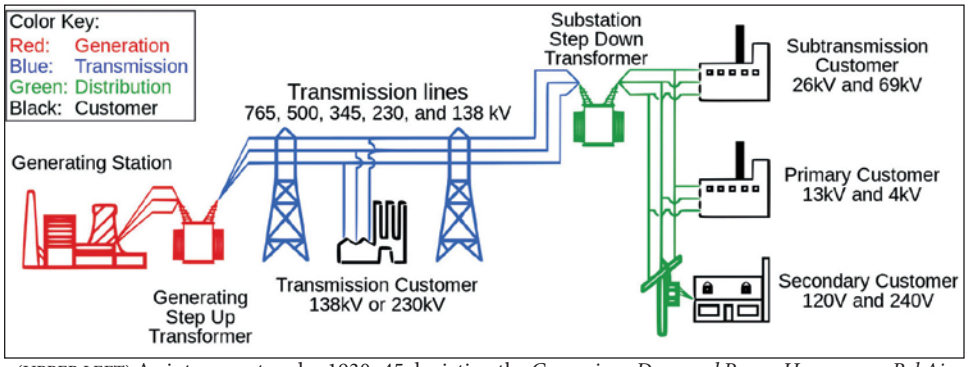
The story of Slim, a lineman in the Great Valley, actually begins about 500 million years ago, when microscopic sea creatures and plant life, inhabiting the inland sea that covered the area at that time, decomposed into sediment that became limestone. Fast forward to 150 million years ago, and that limestone layer was gradually uplifted to the surface as a result of continuing geologic processes, forming what we know as the Great Valley.

Early settlers coming to this area in the 17th and 18th centuries found rich, fertile soil from which they could produce plentiful harvests. The Swedes and the Welsh were accomplished farmers, and recognized that this flat, very arable land was ideal for farming. What they may not have understood was exactly how limestone creates a pH-neutral soil with abundant nutrients that allowed crops to thrive.



Topographical map showing the eastern end of the Great Valley, and the Schuylkill River between Valley Forge (upper left) and Conshohocken (lower right). *Courtesy of PASDA (Pennsylvania Spatial Data Access)*





(UPPER LEFT) A vintage postcard c. 1930–45 depicting the *Conowingo Dam and Power House, near Bel Air and Havre de Grace, Md.* (UPPER RIGHT) A more recent aerial view of the dam and the Susquehanna River vicinity. (LOWER) A schematic drawing showing the different voltage levels present in the distribution system. The much higher voltages used in the transmission lines allow more current to be transported over long distances using manageable cable sizes.

Later, the same flat landscape that welcomed early farms would also be recognized as the ideal location for an east-west wagon road that became a major highway, and later a modern turnpike, as well as not one, but two important railroads. The pristine Great Valley was bisected over and over, due in large part to the limestone bedrock just under the surface that created an ideal environment for settlement—a process that continues to this day.

The Philadelphia Electric Company (PECO) was incorporated in 1902, originally adopting Thomas Edison's direct current (DC) system over George Westinghouse's alternating current (AC), invented by Nikola Tesla. By the time the U.S. entered WWI in April 1917, the Philadelphia area was a major industrial supplier of war goods. Even with a Schuylkill River generating station, and a new station in Chester, Pa., producing power at the highest rate possible, they still could not keep up with the growing demand. Labor and materials—especially coal—became very scarce and also very expensive, and electricity had to be severely rationed for a time.

During the 1920s, the need for power was still on the rise, and Philadelphia, Pa. had a ravenous appetite. When Westinghouse's AC won out as the power distribution standard, PECO began changing over from DC to AC. Although the AC system offered greater electrical capacity, demand continued to increase. Homes were not only using electricity for lighting, but for appliances as well, and they were being fitted for electrical power as they were being built. More capacity was needed.

To take better advantage of the natural waterways in the region, it was decided that a new hydro-electric power generating station should be constructed to increase the supply of power for the city and also the surrounding communities that were expanding at a rapid rate.

Located on the Susquehanna River in northern Maryland, Conowingo Dam was constructed between 1926 and 1928, and at that time was the largest power plant ever built, equipped with the largest turbines and generators ever installed. When the Conowingo Dam was completed in 1928, it was capable of producing 252 megawatts (MW), and became the second largest hydroelectric project in the United States, just behind Niagara Falls.

The original plant was equipped with seven turbines and, in 1964, four more turbines were installed. The water flow of the Susquehanna River provides the motive power for the eleven current turbine generators, now capable of producing 548 MW of electricity. Because water stored behind the dam is used to turn the turbines, Conowingo can also be used to "jump start" the electric distribution system in the event of a failure elsewhere in the Pennsylvania, (New) Jersey and Maryland (PJM) interconnected electrical grid.

It appears that the power lines for transporting the electrical current were constructed at about the same time as the Conowingo Dam, between 1926 and 1928, and these power lines ran from the dam to a sub-station in Plymouth Meeting, Pa., once again bisecting the Great Valley.

But who was capable of building the towers to hold these power transmission lines? Doing so required great skill with a healthy dose of luck! By the time WWI had ended in 1918, there were fewer men in the workforce, and along with strikes and labor unrest, a notorious and deadly influenza epidemic had also struck, further depleting the pool of workers, especially in the Philadelphia area. Where would new workers be found?

From 1710 to 1775, over 200,000 people (known as Ulster-Scots, or Scots-Irish) emigrated from Ireland to the original thirteen American colonies. The largest numbers went to Pennsylvania. From that base, some went south into Virginia, the Carolinas, and across the South, with a large concentration in the Appalachian region; others headed further to western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and the Midwest. These were industrious and determined families with a strong work ethic and the ability to get the job done. One of these families was the Morrisons.

Will and Lottie Morrison with six of their eleven children at their home in South Carolina. Eldest son Leslie stands just behind his mother.

Leslie White Morrison (later know as "Slim") was born in 1899 to Lottie and James William "Will" Morrison and was the oldest of eleven children. In his late twenties, he decided to leave South Carolina with several of his brothers and go north to seek their fortunes. He and his brother John Reid were immediately hired by PECO, while his brothers Lewis and Leland went to Lancaster County to work for the railroad. Reid was transferred to the Conowingo Dam for a time but returned to PECO as a lineman and lived in Valley Forge. Slim became the foreman of the power line that originated at the dam, and ended at the substation in Plymouth Meeting, Pa. It is unclear what applicable experience he had prior to moving north, but it was customary to promote those with useful skills.

The job of foreman involved the supervision of the crews that built the towers that carried the power lines. The path of the line ran through mostly farmland, but nonetheless, much clearing had to be done before the towers were erected.

Rather than explain the significance of "K" pieces, "X" braces, struts, legs, wing sections, arms and dropper plates, let us conclude that this "erector set" of various pieces went together to magically become a tower. The towers were built in sections, and using ropes and a relocatable "gin pole" (a supported pole with a pulley or block and tackle attached to its upper end), these sections were then raised into the air and connected to the previous part of the growing structure. The sections were added incrementally, while repositioning the gin pole, until the tower reached the desired height of somewhere between 50 and 150 feet, depending on the project. Mules were sometimes used to hoist the gin pole into position to begin the building process. The gin pole was used as a moveable crane to pick up the heavy steel parts.

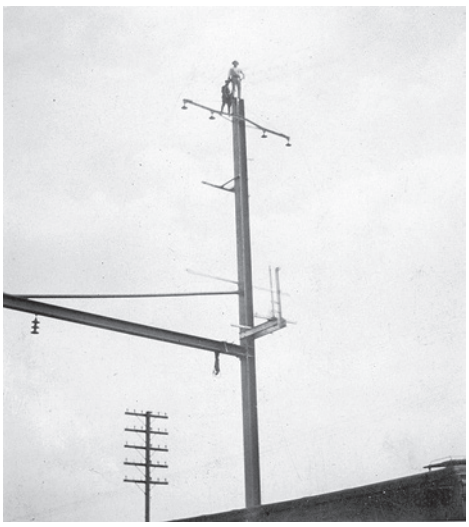
An electrical transmission line tower under construction, with a gin pole visible near the top.

Life as a construction worker on the line was always a challenge. Men on the towers wore a body belt with a safety strap that also carried their spud wrenches (essentially large crescent wrenches, with tapered handles used as alignment tools). Sometimes though, they moved so fast up and around the rigging that they were unable to use their safety straps, and there were frequent accidents. Camp living was adequate but Spartan. Oil lamps lit the way at night. Food was acquired as they moved along the route, and was prepared in camp.

Photos of Slim and his co-workers from the Morrison family scrapbook collection. *Courtesy of the author.*

Many photos of these brave men exist, and one wonders if they enjoyed climbing and taking dangerous poses for the camera as a way of blowing off steam, and easing the tension of the job? Slim managed a skilled crew, and they all respected his work ethic, brought along from his years on the farm, where he had mentored his ten younger siblings.

Apparently, when your line was completed, you were out of work. Men could be trained in other types of work, and gain certifications building railroad catenary towers, or large signal towers to hold aircraft beacons or radio transmission equipment. Slim chose railroad catenary construction for a while, but later returned to work for PECO until his retirement.



It is interesting to note that the power lines run through the middle of the Chester Valley Golf Club, built in 1929–30, and for years, golfers had to play right through the lines. People always assumed that the course had been built first, and later the power lines were constructed. Recent research, however, revealed that either the lines were already there or the club knew they were coming, as the 1928 deed to the property specifically mentions PECO's easement. In the late 1960s, the construction of Route 202 took a piece of the Chester Valley course, and with the funds received from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as compensation, the course was rebuilt to take the power lines out of the direct line of play.

Connections to Slim

In 2013, the author was approached by TEHS member and friend, Jim Brazel, who told me of a man by the name of Dan DiAddezio. Dan was a former PECO employee, who had at one time displayed on Tredyffrin Township Television some pictures of the company in the early days. Jim was able to provide me with Dan's email address, and I set out to contact him about Slim. The following correspondence is what transpired:

19 March 2013, Michael Morrison to Daniel DiAddezio: *My name is Michael Morrison, and I am President of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society (est. 1936), and the King of Prussia Historical Society (est. 1953). My friend Jim Brazel gave me your contact information, in the hope that you might be able to help me.*

My grandfather, Leslie White (Slim) Morrison came to this area from South Carolina to work for the Philadelphia Electric Company in the mid-1920s, as a foreman working on the power lines that ran through this area from the Conowingo Dam. He met my grandmother who was a schoolteacher in Spring Mill, and soon married her.

They purchased the Thomas Rees House on King of Prussia Road (sister property to the King of Prussia Inn), as well as the old general store and Post Office, turning it into an antiques shop.

I understand that you have information on that early power line, and I was wondering if you have any photographs of the early construction, as they may very well feature my grandfather. I am including a picture of his badge for reference.

I remember my grandfather telling me that he always insisted on having his men carry a pocket knife, and that it would be a valuable tool that might even save their lives. At his retirement dinner, the men all stood up at one point and held up their pocket knives in tribute. I have never forgotten that story, and I always carry a pocket knife to this day.

I would appreciate anything you might do to help me find out more about my family.

Best,

Michael Morrison

Slim's "Reddy Kilowatt" pin and his PECO ID badge.

28 March 2013, Dan DiAddezio to Michael Morrison: *Michael, I will look around at our old photos from that line.*

Most of what I've seen is the post-construction file photos from 1926 and don't recall any in-construction pictures. I will check around next week and get back to you.

29 March 2013, Rick Ash to Dan DiAddezio: *This is amazing. Slim Morrison was the guy who started the OHT [Overhead Transmission] gang at PECO. He preceded Joe VanName. Slim, Dan Blevins and Pop Clowney were all guys that came north with the crews building transmission lines.*

They all stayed with PECO after construction was over. Slim led the group, Dan and Pop stayed on as patrollers (on horseback). It was rumored that a book, and the movie "Slim" was about Slim Morrison. There may be early pics still around of them.

29 March 2013, Dan DiAddezio to Michael Morrison: *Rick Ash just called me; he is really excited to hear about Slim, he said he is a true legend in the electric transmission world. Some information from my old supervisor, who ran the OHT GROUP in the 90s, appears a movie may have been based on your Grandfather and he was the leader of the department.*

30 March 2013, Rick Ash to Dan DiAddezio: *I just talked to Jerry Zimmerman who worked for Slim when he first started. Him, Bill Mullen and my Dad all worked for Slim early on. Mullen remembers the retirement dinner and the knives. Maybe we can get Jerry, Bill and Michael and meet somewhere for lunch. Those guys could tell him some stories about Slim.*

Although the suggested lunch meeting never took place, a great deal of information was gathered from this series of emails.

I have also contacted the son of William Wister Haines, and he says that there was no basis for the title character in real life, and that it is 60% autobiographical, as stated in the preface of the book:

"It has been impossible for me to exclude from this story many of the individual peculiarities of speech, thought, or personality that I have encountered among the linemen I know. Most of these linemen are still alive; some of them will read these pages. To them I can say only that I have worked harder to avoid than to attempt the portrait of any living man."

According to the men who worked with Slim, on the other hand, they seem to feel that not only the book, but the movie as well, were loosely based on the life of Slim the Lineman. I can only say that the book and the movie remind me of the life of my grandfather, and that he was known to me as Slim.

The Story Continues

But that is not quite the end of the story. It seems that a young Harvard-graduate schoolteacher from the Spring Mill community, near Conshohocken, stole his heart, and Slim decided to settle in the area, and soon married Lucressa Hastings and they began their family in Gulph Mills. They built a small home, and raised two young sons, James William, and Robert Lee. The house remains today, owned by Royal McGeorge.

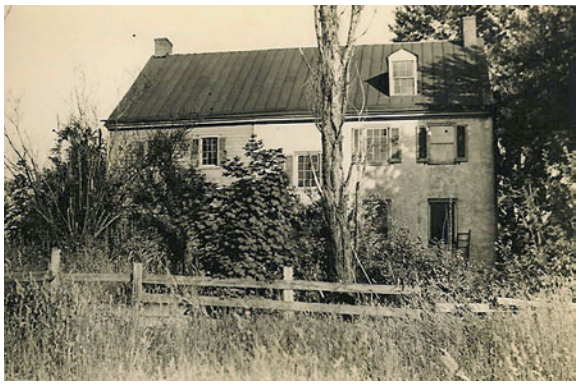
(UPPER) The Spring Mill School building, where Lucressa Hastings worked as an educator.

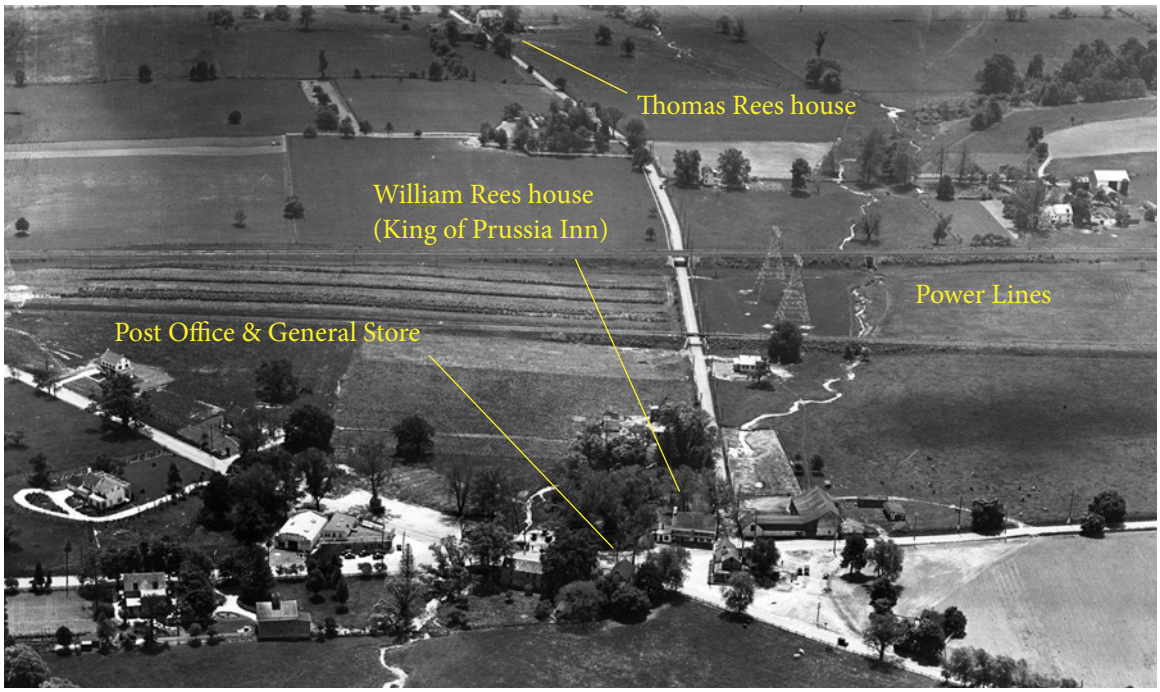
(MIDDLE UPPER) Lucressa and Leslie "Slim" Morrison in one of the first photographs of them as husband and wife.

(MIDDLE LOWER) Lucressa and Slim's first home, in Gulph Mills, now owned by Royal McGeorge.

(LOWER) The Morrison family, taken in the mid-1930s. (LEFT to RIGHT) Robert Lee Morrison, Lucressa Hasting Morrison, Leslie White (Slim) Morrison, and the author's father, James William Morrison.

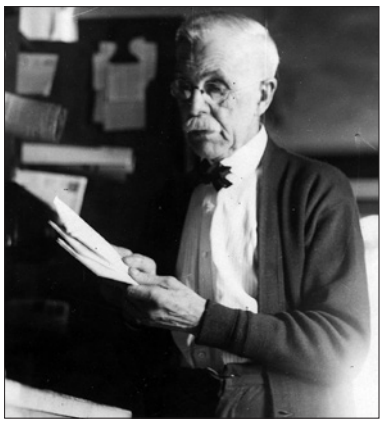
Slim continued working at PECO and continued looking for a larger house for his family. One day, he and Lucressa stumbled upon an old house on King of Prussia Road that was abandoned. The door was open, and the key was in the lock. After some research, they discovered that the property was deeded in 1714, and the house that stood on the property was built by Thomas Rees, probably around 1745. They purchased it in the 1930s and spent nearly ten years restoring the property, and learned that it was in fact the sister property to the King of Prussia Inn, built around 1769 by brother William Rees. Both houses were constructed in a similar style, and the farms bordered each other, putting them in close proximity to one another.





Dallin Co. aerial photo courtesy of Hagley Museum & Library

In August of 2000, the King of Prussia Inn, all 550 tons of her, was picked up and moved to a new location less than ½ mile away. The dilemma facing the owners was how to restore the building to its 18th century appearance, both inside and out. The outside was easy, as they had many references. The inside was all 20th century though, having been in constant operation for nearly 200 years. The owners visited the Thomas Rees House, and took extensive photographs of the interior, duplicating the doors, walls moldings, and trim.



One of the oldest photographs in the King of Prussia Historical Society collection depicts the King of Prussia Post Office and General Store, taken on April 17, 1878. The Morrisons purchased the property in 1930s, and Lucressa replaced Allen Pugh as postmaster. At the time of his retirement, Pugh had served in that position for over 55 years! When the town outgrew the tiny post office, the Morrisons gradually turned the building into an antique shop and general store, selling penny candy, souvenirs, and keepsakes along with fine antiques to an increasing mobile population. Sadly, the building is no longer standing, and the site is now a gasoline station.

The Morrisons were very much engaged in local history, and spent many hours volunteering to help preserve what was left of our rapidly disappearing past. One of their projects was the restoration of the Old Roberts School in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The roof of the Old Roberts School was made of cedar shakes (shingles), and the restoration plan called for complete replacement. Slim contacted his former employer PECO, and soon a large cedar telephone pole was delivered to the site and cut into shakes that are still in place today. The Morrisons also located and installed an authentic wood burning stove inside, as well as supplying most of the window sashes, complete with wavy old glass.

An interesting side note is that when the King of Prussia Historical Society reapplied for its non-profit status, they were required to attach the original articles of incorporation. It was interesting to find Lucressa's signature there.

Leslie White Morrison and Lucressa Hastings Morrison rest at the First Presbyterian Church of Port Kennedy, Pa.

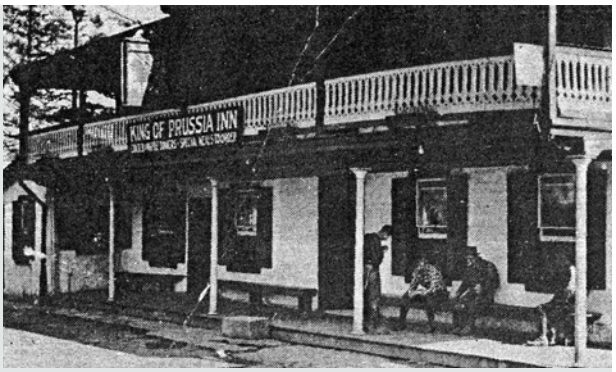
Slim (LEFT) with two co-workers in his office at PECO, March 1958.

Slim (RIGHT) at demonstration of cedar shake fabrication to visiting students at Old Roberts School.

According to TEHS member and friend, Jim Brazel, this photo can be identified as having been taken in Norristown, Pa., and the 1930 Pa. license plate on the car on the right helps to date the photo. In his 2013 correspondence, Brazel writes, "I think the picture of the three men sitting on the car bumper is at the site of the "new" PRR [Ed. Pennsylvania Rail Road] passenger station, which was opened in 1934. The largest building right behind the car they are sitting on ... appears to be the 'Valley Forge Hotel.' It was torn down in the early 1960s for a disastrous urban renewal project to install a robotic [Ed. automated] parking garage there to save Norristown's downtown shopping district in the face of the openings of the Plymouth Meeting and King of Prussia Malls.

And I believe that street behind the left shoulder of the man on the right is 'Strawberry Alley.' But I have not been there in a while. I think the building with the two chimneys (like an original P&R [Ed. Philadelphia & Reading railroad] station) at the far end of Strawberry Alley is still there. It was the site of Pagel's Men's Clothing Store; which was run out of business by the late 1960s by the malls, to be replaced by a succession of failed bars." [Ed. This is presently the location of a law office and Pauline's Deli, at the intersection with Main St.]

When members of the King of Prussia Historical Society were helping to clean out long-time Upper Merion Township resident Nancy Powell-Daley's family home on Allendale Road in 2016, among the many things of some historical interest that she offered to donate, we came across a clipping of a letter written to the editor of the *King of Prussia Courier* in the 1970s.



TO THE EDITOR: I've always followed the COURIER'S articles about the King of Prussia Inn with interest since moving to this area ten years ago from Lancaster County.

Recently my mother came across this photograph in her album and thought it might bring back some fond memories to the "old-timers" around King of Prussia.

One of the characters on the porch is her brother, who helped construct the first high power line from Conowingo Dam through this area, so that might help to place the year if one of your readers has a good memory. Her guess was 1925 or 1926.

The letter was signed by Alfred C. Schneider, of Signal Hill Road in King of Prussia. I contacted Mr. Schneider and we spoke about the picture. He said that the man referenced in the letter, his uncle Buddy, only lived to be 26 years-old, but did not know the cause of his death.

Personal Musings about Slim

Growing up with your grandparents living across the street can be both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, you have an extra set of parents available to pass along their wisdom, but on the other hand, it is difficult to get away with much. All in all, though, I feel blessed to have grown up in that close family setting.

Everyone called my grandfather "Slim" from as far back as I can recall, including family, friends, and co-workers. He was a good teacher, and a master of many things. When the family business is antiques, you learn about them at an early age, and weekends were always spent at "the shop", cleaning some of the newly acquired items, or helping deliver purchases from the previous week's sales to anxiously awaiting customers. He was strict but fair. I learned early on about refinishing furniture, and how to repair and care for vintage keepsakes.

Slim was a beekeeper, and I learned such skills as how to care for bees, their hives, and how to properly gather the honey. Slim had a sweet tooth, and there was always a honeycomb draining in the pantry, as well as jars of assorted "penny candy" (from the many jars at the shop) throughout the house. He was an avid hunter and would often bring a pheasant home from his walk. He also tended to a small garden and orchard, where he grew rhubarb, currents, asparagus, and a lovely grape vine. Cherry trees, seckel pears and apples adorned the yard as well, and their fruit yielded many wonderful pies.

He was an elder of the First Presbyterian Church of Port Kennedy, and a big supporter of the church and its mission. The family (all seven of us) could be found in the first pew on the left, each and every Sunday. To help keep things calm, my sisters and I would be bribed with the promise of ice cream or even a Howard Johnson's clam roll after the service had ended.

Wednesday night was spaghetti night, and we would always gather at Slim's house to share food, family, and fun. In the summertime, we would all eat outside under the porch roof, seated at a huge table with a marble top. Slim would ask the blessing, and my grandmother, Lucressa, would then serve the meal. Looking back, this was a wonderful time to be together as a family.

Saturdays meant lawn care, and Slim ran a tight ship. My dad and I would go over early in the morning, and they would put out an ample spread for breakfast. It was an elaborate affair, usually consisting of large quantities of eggs, toast, bacon or scrapple, and—of course—grits. Slim liked his grits with a slice of sharp cheddar cheese, and that must have been something he brought with him from the south. After we were well fed, it was off to man the mowers. We had about ten acres to cut between the two properties, and everyone knew their jobs. A tractor with five reel mowers configured in a "gang" took care of the open areas, while push mowers handled the close-up work and the terraced gardens. We would break for lunch and then be back at it until very late afternoon. In the fall we would rake leaves that had fallen from the ancient trees, and be so frustrated that the fallen leaves would reappear by the next day.

— J. Michael Morrison