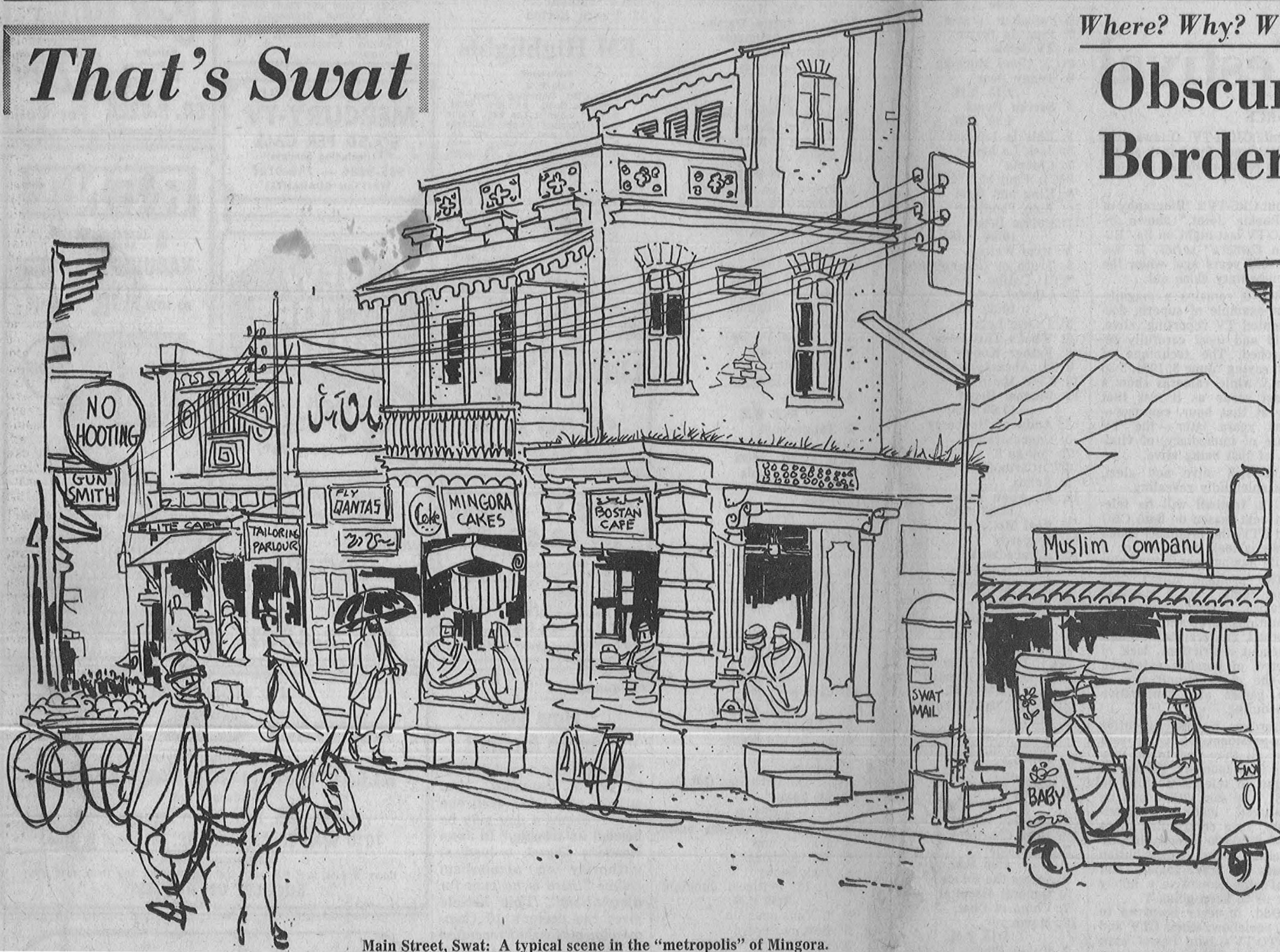


# That's Swat



Main Street, Swat: A typical scene in the "metropolis" of Mingora.

Where? Why? What?

## Obscure Little Swat Borders on Impossible

By PETER DESBARATS

It isn't really true to say that George Thomas Lanigan stands in the front rank of Canadian poets. He sort of sits at the back. Born in Three Rivers, Quebec, in 1846, he made a single major contribution to English literature: The Ahkoond of Swat.

The Ahkoond is the Mona Lisa, the Taj Mahal, the Magna Carta of Canadian doggerel. On the night of Jan. 12, 1877, Lanigan was sitting at a news desk in St. Louis or Chicago — at the first hint of success he had of course emigrated to the United States — when he received a brief report that the Ahkoond of Swat was dead. He started to doodle on a piece of copy paper:

"What, what, what,  
"What's the news from Swat?"

"Sad news, bad news . . ."

It is doubtful if Lanigan knew where Swat was — or, as the famed versifier Edward Lear wrote years earlier:

"Who, or why, or which, or what,  
"Is the Ahkoond of Swat?"

"Is he tall or short, or dark or fair?  
"Does he sit on a stool or sofa or a chair — or Squat?"

"The Ahkoond of Swat?"

Journalist Inspired

But ignorance of his subject never fazes a good journalist. As Lanigan warmed to his work, he began to write with something approaching inspiration:

"For the Ahkoond I mourn  
"Who wouldn't?"

"He strove to disregard the message stern,  
"But he Ahkoond't.

"Dead, dead, dead;  
"Sorrow Swats!"

"Swats wha hae wi' Ahkoond bled,  
"Swats whom he hath often led

"Onward to a gory bed . . ."

And so on, for 52 brilliant lines, down to the final immortal words: "The great Ahkoond of Swat—is not!"

Then George Thomas Lanigan wrote "30" at the bottom of his verse and turned to more serious writing, all of which was read quickly, wrapped around the day's garbage and forgotten. But the Ahkoond survived to give him a kind of minor immortality, as did the newspaper which he helped to found, known today as THE MONTREAL STAR.

Ed McNally, The Star's cartoonist, and myself owe a lot to Lanigan, not to mention our livelihood. Because of him, we discovered the last corner of the Garden of Eden that Progress has left on this earth. It was Lanigan's poem which sent us halfway around the globe to find out, once and for all, who, or why, or which, or what is the Ahkoond or Ahkoond or Ahkund of Swat.

Lanigan was right about one thing. The Ahkund (that's the way they spell it in Swat) is not. Saidu Baba, who inspired Lanigan, was the last Ahkund of Swat. But in other respects, the poet was guilty of gross inaccuracy. He wrote, "Mourn, city of Swat, your great Ahkoond is not." He referred to the "Metropolis of Swat."

Swat is no earthly city. It is a State. It is 100 miles long and 50 miles wide. From its capital city of Saidu Sharif, from a palace in the centre of the city, from a desk in the centre of the palace, it is ruled single-handedly by a man of medium height and round features who looks like

a gentle Mussolini. He is the Wali of Swat, Major-General Miangul Jahan Zeb, the great-grandson of Lanigan's Ahkoond.

A Rewarding Stay

Unlike Lanigan, I can write with authority if not inspiration about Swat. Ed McNally and I spent a week there. We talked with the Wali. We interviewed the Chief Secretary.



We met the Commander of the Royal Bodyguard. We chatted with the Dentist of Swat — there is only one. We visited the Bar of Swat — also unique. We encountered dozens of Swatis. And we returned with enough material to write and draw an accurate picture of life inside Swat.

Of people, Swat has six lakhs—600,000 Yusufzai tribesmen. Of lawyers, politicians, press agents, psychiatrists and nuclear physicists, it has none. Of income taxes, none. There are no courts of law, no newspapers, no radio or television stations, no airports, no railways.

There is a golf course. You can see it from the capital city of Saidu Sharif, about six miles away. But the bridge between is washed out and you have to drive 50 miles to reach it. It is said to have one member, Miangul Aurangzeb Khan, son of the Wali and the Heir-Apparent.

To the west of Swat lies Dir. About 40 years ago, Dir was ruled by a dastardly Nawab whose favorite sport was hunting in Swat. He hunted Swatis. But today the two states co-exist peacefully, not only with each other but with Chitral to the north and the other neighboring areas of Gilgit, Hazara and Mardan.

Borders On Impossible

For the average Canadian reader, this locates Swat geographically. But it is relatively unimportant that Swat borders on Dir or the domains of the Mather of Chitral. What matters is that Swat borders on the impossible. It verges on fantasy. It is only a stone's throw from Shangri-la or Atlantis or the Wizardom of Oz.

In the history of mankind, Swat is a brief and beautiful error. Fifty years ago, it didn't exist. It probably won't be there tomorrow. But today it thrives, against all the laws of economics and politics, at the top of West Pakistan, only a few miles from the Russian border, farther away from the twentieth century than the South Pole.

Swat will vanish because it is too impossible and wonderful to be permitted to live in this age of jet travel and transistors. Already the lush valleys are filled with the gasps, admiring and asthmatic, of elderly American tourists who are "doing Swat" — to death. The 20,000-foot peaks of the Hindu Kush have been scarred by the first skiers. There are schools and hospitals.

Swat is dying. It is only a matter of time until the Peace Corps arrives and finishes it.

But this spring, the nomad families were still driving their cows and goats up from the hot plains of Pakistan, through the Malakand Pass and the Valley of Swat to the high pastures beyond Madyan and Bahrain. A man still had the right to carry a rifle — and to administer his own justice with it. In the meadows of Swat the opium poppies bloomed like lotus flowers. The Wali was in his palace and all was right, for the time being, in this small world below the Himalayas.

Tomorrow: The Great War of Swat.

