



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

The impending departure from Sharpsville of Laird Technologies (formerly Cattron Group)—coupled with the recent closures of Jason Black Chevrolet and the PNC Bank branch—is clearly disheartening. Yet a review of our town's history shows that we have been through similar circumstances many times before.

The foundation of the Shenango Valley's prosperity lay in the banks of "block" coal mined at Sharon, Hickory and Neshannock, with Sharpsville, still in its infancy, serving as an important transit point for this coal. The mining fortune amassed by James Pierce and the coal's excellence in smelting iron led to the rise of the iron furnaces here. So, by the time the coal fields began to exhaust themselves in the 1880s, Sharpsville had been for over a decade an important iron center. Yet this heyday of growth was not a time of uninterrupted prosperity. The financial "panics" of the 19th century were sharp and severe economic downturns, without the stabilizing influence of government fiscal and monetary policy, nor unemployment insurance and other social safety net programs. Often many, if not all, of our nine furnaces were "out of blast". Further, as the century waned, so did Sharpsville's once mighty iron industry; as steel making eclipsed iron, the furnaces here did not adapt, and larger facilities often near better river transportation were built elsewhere.

Around this time, though, Thomas West perfected the making of large foundry castings, and a new industry arose with Sharpsville now a center of ingot mold manufacture (and with the foundry a ready consumer of the pig iron produced by our remaining blast furnaces). His firm, which became the Valley Mold & Iron, was the largest such plant in the world. Yet, when Valley Mold decided to leave Sharpsville in 1926, a crisis was averted when Shenango Furnace stepped in and brought the Shenango-Penn Mold to town, employing hundreds in both the making of ingot molds and the raw pig iron for them. Still, this era too would pass, with innovative firms like Cattron Group and the successors to the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators after it closed—as well as a number of Sharpsville's unheralded small businesses—taking up much of the slack.

But just because Sharpsville has been able to recover from past setbacks time and again does not guarantee success in the future. It will take the dedication of our public officials and business community as well as the commitment of entrepreneurs who either already know Sharpsville or who come to learn of the proud work-ethic, advantageous location, and livable small-town environment that make this a great place to grow a business.

Part of the equation in attracting business owners and workers here is developing our "quality of life." Along with other cultural, recreational, spiritual, and social resources, we see the Historical Society as a small but important element in contributing toward a thriving community.

Even though ensuring a prosperous Sharpsville for the next generation will take persistence, action and perhaps a bit of luck, a look to our history shows our task is not impossible.

Upcoming Events

Christmas Concert with the
Madrigal Singers
of the Shenango Valley Chorale
Saturday December 21st 7:30pm
Sharpsville Historical Society Building

Please also plan to attend the quality productions of
Area Community Theatre of Sharpsville (ACTS),
showcasing local talent

Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*
November 8th and 9th at 8:00pm
November 10th at 2:30pm
Pierce Opera House

Items for Sale

2014 COMMEMORATIVE WALL CALENDAR

featuring twelve rarely-seen photos of old-time Sharpsville
along with other nuggets of historical information.

Available at: Mela's Tax Service A.J. Kovach Tax Office,
Touch of Class Salon, Sharpsville Floral, Muscarella's,
Lori Rollinson's Salon, Pizza Joes, Mehler Insurance,
Sharpsville Boro Building,

Cost \$10

A perfect Christmas gift!

From the Archives

This curious article was picked up by the wire services and appeared in newspapers across the country in August of 1903.

GOD MOTHER OF BLAST FURNACES.

Miss Helen E. Reed of Sharpsville, Pa., is an unrivaled godmother of blast furnaces. All western Pennsylvania operators look upon her as the personification of good luck. She has started the fires in more furnaces than has



MISS HELEN E. REED.

any other young woman in the country, and the success that has attended the enterprises so inaugurated has been phenomenal.

Miss Reed's fame has extended beyond the borders of this State, and the last fiery christening over which she presided was in Toledo, Ohio. Nowadays Miss Reed's services are in great demand. Her home is in Sharpsville, where her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Philo Reed, reside.

Much like the christening of a ship, the inaugural firing of a blast furnace was attended with fanfare, with the crucial duties falling to a comely lass. However, instead of whacking a champagne bottle against a hull, here a torch was thrust into a layer of kindling wood set overtop a bed of coke.

At the time, the Reed family lived on Shenango St., with Philo (short for Philetus) employed as superintendent of the Alice Furnace. Philo was one of the investors when the Boiler Works reorganized in 1907 but died shortly afterwards. Helen married Elias Wilkins in 1926; they later moved to Southern California where she died in 1980. Her youngest sister Dorothy was well known here, the wife of Dr. Dan Phythyon.

A Look Back

The Torrence Brothers

A paper read by Mary J. Thompson before the Sharpsville Current Topics Club in 1904 includes this intriguing anecdote:

Mr. Torrance, the village blacksmith, had a son named Ock who was the bully of the town and often when there was a spelling bee or singing school he would amuse himself by cleaning the place out, and if he needed help there were always helpers at hand. Ock had a brother whose sharpness did not incline that way. One day he took "French" leave and hid himself over to Youngstown, where he found employment with Mr. Tod (afterward governor of Ohio), who became interested in the boy and sent him to school. When the Civil War broke out the young man enlisted and before the war closed he became a general. Afterwards he located in Chicago and became wealthy and was known as the man with the \$40,000 overcoat.

Besides noting the obsolescence of the quaint post of "Town Bully," you may presume that Ock (which was short for Oscar) met his end in some brawl or on the gallows. No, he married, had two children, and died in 1864 at the Battle of Drewry's Bluff in Virginia, a private in the 76th Keystone Zoaves.

The brother who made good, though, had an even more colorful life, one that the Chicago papers turned to when in need of good copy. Joseph T. Torrence was born in 1843 in Sharpsville and learned the blacksmith trade from his father. He was employed by the Agnew brothers at the Sharpsville Furnace before working for David Tod at the Brier Hill Furnaces in Youngstown where he learned the iron businesses.

He, too, fought in the Civil War where he was wounded at the Battle of Perryville and received a disability discharge after taking four Confederate bullets. Nonetheless, back in Ohio he raised one of the volunteer forces that pursued and captured the Confederate General Morgan whose guerilla raids were terrorizing southern Ohio. Torrence held the rank of Corporal throughout his service.

After the war, Torrence landed in New Castle where he was able to revive the ailing Sophia Furnace. He then got the idle furnaces as Ironton, Ohio running again, cementing his reputation. After lending his expertise to furnaces and rolling mills in the southern states, in 1869 he moved to Chicago. There Torrence became connected with a number of iron and steel interests.

As his reputation in Chicago grew (helped by a marriage to a congressman's daughter), he was recommended to serve as Colonel in the Illinois National Guard. Torrence was quickly promoted to General and commanded the militia that ruthlessly quelled the Chicago labor riots of 1877.

By the 1880s, Torrence branched out to railroads, assuming a part ownership of the Chicago & Western Indiana line. This was then complemented by his development of Calumet Harbor and the city of East Chicago, just over the state line in Indiana. Iron and steel plants were built there by Torrence as was the Calumet Terminal Railway. He is considered the founding father of the town, with he and his firms owning 9,000 acres there.

His last major business venture was his organization of the Chicago Elevated Railway Terminal Co. in 1890. This scheme was to eliminate crossings and allow intercity rail traffic to enter the city quickly on elevated lines. (The famous "El" for transit within the city would follow on its heels.) He sold the company to the Santa Fe Railroad two years later at tremendous profit.

To say that he became wealthy is something of an understatement. Indeed he gained widespread notoriety for his Russian sable overcoat, though it "only" cost \$10,000 (\$271,000 in today's dollars). (A decade later, a

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Sharpsville Inventors

Walter E. Hull

Developer and manufacturer of the familiar automobile dashboard compass, Walter E. Hull was born October 22, 1905 in South Pymatuning Township to Ralph W. & Mary (Jackson) Hull. We may guess that Walter's inventive talent was inherited from his grandfather, John W. Jackson, inventor of the celebrated Jackson Oiler.

He was a draftsman living at home in the 1930 Census. Around the time of his marriage in 1934, he had moved to Warren, Ohio. There, he incorporated his business, Hull Manufacturing Company on June 10, 1936.

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HULL MANUFACTURING CO., P. O. Box 246-D11, Warren, Ohio

With his first patent dated March 23, 1934, the compass introduced an effective means of compensating for the magnetic distortion produced by the metal and electrical system of a vehicle. The streamlined case design introduced in 1936 evoked the style of era. Later models included a lighted version and a bicycle compass.

The compass found use in automobiles, watercraft, and aircraft. It was a necessity for World War Two's Jeeps and even tanks. As postwar America took to the highways, the Hull compass became a familiar sight on automobile dashboards.

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Write For Literature



HULL MANUFACTURING CO., P. O. Box 246-E8, WARREN, OHIO

The compass continued to be made until the late 1980s. Walter died August 6, 1996 in Cortland, Ohio; he is buried at Riverside Cemetery, Sharpsville.

With Gratitude

Two events we sponsored recently—the Antiques Roadshow and the performance by Cahal Dunne—were successful fundraisers for the Society thanks in no small part to the generous support we received.

The appraisers for the Roadshow, Mike Malley and Michaelyn Besco, donated their time and expertise and the Sharpsville VFW graciously furnished us the space. For Cahal's performance, Shenango Valley Performing Arts Council provided major sponsorship, with other donations by Margaret Conti, Thomasina Yourga and Bob Disko. Dr. Francisco Cano continues to be indispensable in making the Pierce Opera House available for this and other performances.

Attendance at both events far exceeded our expectations, and a fun and entertaining time was had by all who came. We hope to repeat them in the future.



This view along 6th Street of the Sharpsville Boiler Works (known as Sharpsville Steel Fabricators after 1938) is part of the collection donated by John Fagan, as noted below.

It dates from the 1920s when the company was a major producer of oil storage tanks such as those seen here ready for shipment. The era's burgeoning demand for gasoline was also met by another of the company's products, the Sharmeter gas pumps.



With Gratitude

If you were able to attend the recent performance of *Rigoletto* at the Pierce Opera House, we're confident you thoroughly enjoyed the virtuosity of the singers and orchestra, the costuming and staging that brought Verdi's libretto to life, and the rich sound and intimacy with the performers the historic interior makes possible. The Historical Society is proud to co-sponsor, along with Valley Lyric Opera, performances like these.

The cost of bringing professional-caliber opera productions to the Shenango Valley is daunting, even with a packed house like we had at the September performances. Nonetheless, Dr. Francisco Cano (local allergist/immunologist and founder of Valley Lyric Opera) has generously shared the revenue from the event with the Historical Society. Dr. Cano's generosity for this and past operas has allowed them to be not only an artistic success but a financial success for the Society as well.

The Torrence Brothers, cont'd.

New York dandy, with more money than brains, would set a new record with a \$40,000 coat.) Other extravagances were the gold dining service for his lavish dinner parties and an enthusiasm for driving his ornate 18th-century style four-in-hand coaches. Shortly before his death he threatened to move from his Chicago mansion and erect an even more palatial residence on Long Island costing \$2,000,000. Plans were drawn, but "Westbury Hall" was never realized.

At the time of his death in 1896, his fortune was estimated at \$10,000,000, though subsequent litigation over the will showed the actual estate much depleted, apparently squandered in his last years. A major thoroughfare on the South Side of Chicago, Torrence Avenue, is named for him.

Collections Update

The following have been recently added to our collections:

John Fagan donated a large (approx. 3½ cubic feet) and important collection of photos, correspondence, sales catalogues, company histories, and documents from the Sharpsville Boiler Works (known as the Steel Fabricators after 1938). Also included were 84 weekly "Newsmaps" sent by the War Department during World War II to various factories to give news of the war's progress and to maintain morale.

Toni Wygant donated class photos from South Py Elementary School, commemorative plates from the Centennial, old street maps and a planning report.

Contact Us

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email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com
or see our website for officers' phone numbers

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Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month
at 7:00pm at our headquarters

Active members are reminded to vote in the upcoming Board and Officer elections.