

Working-Class Culture in Youngstown

We're "Steel" Running

by Robert Moss

If a child were to ask, "Grandfather where did you work," how would he respond when a large part of his world is gone? If, after a detailed explanation, this child could not mentally frame a picture, how could his grandfather make it clearer? In Youngstown this is a problem. With the miles of grassy meadows that have now displaced the once proud steel industry, how could a trip to the great ghost-lands that once housed these fire-spewing giants satisfy the child's inquisitive nature?

A trip to the Youngstown library might suffice, or maybe a tour to the Youngstown Historical Center for Industry and Labor ("The Steel Museum") would help satisfy the child's mental appetite. Would the topic end after this discussion, or would the picture become less of an abstract if a dinosaur also known as a Blast Furnace still existed? LTV, U.S. Steel, and Sheet and Tube - the powerful manufacturers who once controlled our Valley - were very successful in their dismantling of Youngstown's once proud steel industry. In spite of their best efforts, one fire-breathing dragon remains alive and well to this day.



Somewhat removed from the area where twenty-eight Blast Furnaces once decorated Youngstown landscape, the WCI Steel Blast Furnace remains as a working monument for the industry that once shaped the Mahoning Valley. This industrial icon, located in Warren, Ohio does not have a fancy name like Jeanette and thus far, she has avoided the opportunity of providing another verse to Bruce Springsteen's "Youngstown" ballad. Somehow the Blast Furnace that has almost since its inception has been referred to as "she," has avoided the wrecking ball. In the middle 1980's, by conceding several hundred jobs, the Warren Furnace barely avoided the threat of also being permanently closed and reduced to a field of rubble. From several points of higher elevation in and around Youngstown, one can look to the Northwest and still see the standing monument that has the distinction of being the tallest structure in the Valley.

The Warren Blast Furnace eats over a million tons of taconite ore, coke, and flux material every year. She continuously digests them before spewing out her product, molten iron. Capable of producing over a million and a quarter tons of molten iron per year, the giant located just south of downtown Warren often looks like she is sleeping. When she roars, however, the community she supports seems to shake with her. With 2,758 competing reactions taking place simultaneously – all more or less out of control - within her massive stomach she produces the same product that was stolen from the other now non-existent steel dragons that once breathed fire in the Mahoning Valley.

The hazards that challenged our ancestors are not as threatening, but they still remain. The Blast Furnace still produces a lot of carbon monoxide (CO) gas along with her molten iron product. Water and molten iron however remain a very lethal combination. Liquid iron explosions are common when moisture turns to steam while trapped beneath the lava-like product. As the quickly produced steam creates an escape route, the volcano-like showers of sparks and fire can consume all the available space in a matter of seconds. In the late 1800's and well into the 1900's, Blast Furnace molten iron eruptions resulting in serious burns and even the loss of life were common every day occurrences. The technological improvements found in present day cast houses, however, have greatly reduced the likelihood of a chance explosion. The required safety equipment, as seen in this photograph, has reduced the chance of someone suffering burns during the performance of their work. The 2000 cast house floor provides an almost ghost-like image as only two employees per turn now form the modern day casting crew. The responsibility for this two-man-crew is to ensure that the 2700-degree lava-like product is properly directed toward its railroad bottle car destination. The smoke and heat have not been totally eliminated but the modern day emission control devices provide a cleaner and cooler environment.



The Basic Oxygen Furnace (BOF) is the next processing point for the molten material. Once the molten iron has been charged into the BOF vessels, oxygen, scrap and other additives are injected as the product is now transformed into liquid steel. The steel product will then continue its journey through the continuous caster and strip mills. As it passes through these stages of the operation, the product is turned into coil form and the coatings, depending on the customer, are also added. The final coil product will then be loaded on a tractor-trailer unit and taken to a customer in another part of the country or even shipped to another country for use.

We, the employees at WCI, miss sharing the stories of our daily operation with our relatives and neighbors in the Mahoning Valley who also used to make this great product. We realize that we are not exempt from the same fate that befell our competitors. With the desire of one person, we can also become a ghost town. But for now we do provide a museum of what used to be -- the same steel that made our valley and is still made in our valley. If your grandchildren ask "where did you work grandpa," bring them to Warren. The visual answers we provide may help them understand the way Youngstown used to be. We survived so far and we are not bragging but, We're "Steel" Running!