Vol. VIII, No. 6

March 2020

SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

A reflection upon the circumstances which led to the Society's purchase of our headquarters building shows how close our community was to losing what we hope will increasingly become a focal point of community pride—as well as how far we have come in its restoration.

While built in 1884 as the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville, since 1945 it had been owned by the Seventh Day Adventist Church of Sharpsville. In 1996, their congregation decided to build a new building more fitting for their services, and the Sharpsville church was soon put up for sale. Almost immediately, two offers were made for the original pipe organ, and one for the stained-glass windows. The original pews and other decorative woodwork would also have been at risk. Through the intervention of Gregg Smith, the church's board agreed to hold off on selling the church or its fixtures, provided the Historical Society could come up with the asking price. While the Adventists could have garnered a higher price by piecemealing off the decorative elements, they saw the virtue of keeping intact the historic building that had been the church's home for decades.

At this point the Society had been in existence less than two years and maintained only a modest bank balance. Through a dedicated fundraising campaign, the Society was able to raise the $60,000 purchase price from both the community-at-large and a significant donor. The purchase was finalized October 12, 2000.

During the first decade of the century, the Society was concerned with bringing up its bank balance, and except for installing a new furnace was unable to tackle the many restoration projects the new building would require. If you are a homeowner, you can well sympathize that these projects have taken longer and cost more than first projected.

In the past decade, however, significant donations and grants as well as a flurry of fundraising events have allowed us to devote over $200,000 toward the restoration of this architectural gem. While we still have a way to go, we hope the building is indeed seen as a focus of community pride.

Upcoming Events

Gambling Spree Bus Trips

Meadows Casino, March 18th
Mountaineer Casino, April 22nd

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations

Quilt Show

May 2nd 10 am - 3 pm
Sharpsville Historical Society Headquarters
Quilt Judging & Refreshments

The Historical Society is open from 1:00pm to 3:00pm on the first and third Saturday of the month. Come inside and see the unique Victorian interior of our building as well as our growing display of Sharpsville memorabilia.

Remember 1-3, 1st & 3rd Saturday

Please also support the quality productions, showcasing local talent, of Area Community Theatre of Sharpsville

The perennial favorite

OKLAHOMA!

March 13th-15th and 20th-22nd and 27th-29th
Buhl Park Casino
call 724-815-4388 or go to actsharpsville.org

Our Industries

Sharpsville Boiler Works

When the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators closed its doors in 1985, the Shenango Valley along with much of industrial America, and despite the "Morning in America" theme of the prior year's election, was amidst a historic depression in manufacturing. In marking the sad event, the company was noted as the oldest industrial firm in the Valley. Its long history was summarized in a 1960 document marking the firm's centennial, as well as in speeches given by its president, Charles D. Fagan, Sr., at functions celebrating that event. An update to the history was written around 1966. Unlike the congratulatory tone suitable for an anniversary celebration, another company history was written in 1952, and focused on the firm's struggles—an almost unrelenting tale of woe. Its purpose was to support a request for a reduction in tax rates. These along with 324 items of business correspondence, sales catalogues and flyers, product and plant photographs, as well as other documents constitute the largest single subject collection in the Historical Society's archives.

The firm was founded in 1860 by a Mr. Post and Mr. Hawthorne. Matthew Gemmill later came to Sharpsville from Pittsburgh and by 1872 purchased Post's interests. The firm was known then as Gemmill & Hawthorne and located on Shenango Street. By 1879, Gemmill had bought out his partner, with the company known as the Sharpsville Boiler Works. Besides boilers, an early job for which the firm prided itself was supplying Colonel Drake his first iron tank for his oil well at Titusville. Gemmill also developed a steel buggy for the hauling of ore to charge blast furnaces.

When Matthew died in 1882, his son James R., who had been active in the business, assumed ownership. In 1887 James moved the business when he purchased land on 6th Street from Jonas Pierce. An 1895 map shows the shop as a small frame building of about 2,400 square feet there toward the northern end of the current plant.

Matthew Gemmill

In an expansion of their product line, in 1895 the company won the contract to erect the new stack, hoist and casting houses at the Spearman furnaces in Sharpsville. This large job would require 400 tons of iron. The following year they would refit a blast furnace in Hubbard. Around this time, the company branched out into the erection of steel bridges, mainly in Mercer County.

Ill health led James Gemmill to sell the business in 1907 to Frank King along with Philo Reed, Wallace Shipley, and William Rumbaugh who incorporated as the Sharpsville Boiler Works. King was treasurer of the Valley Mould & Iron here but had little experience with steel plate fabrication. He went through a series of managers who operated the plant with indifferent success, and at two points shuttered operations. The last, James P. Keene, was brought up from Pittsburgh. He had experience in steel plate fabrication, but not much in sales, engineering, or management. Keene asked a friend with whom he had worked in Pittsburgh—Charles D. Fagan—to come to Sharpsville to help manage the plant. Fagan declined, citing the firm's undersized facilities and lack of capital. To get operations running again, Frank King persuaded Hugh J. Garvey and J.L. Considine to lease the plant on a trial basis. (Garvey was with the Valley Mould & Iron and Considine was affiliated with Petroleum Iron Works of Sharon and Masury.) As is related in a 1974 interview with Garvey:

> In 1915, the partnership was in process of dissolving after Reed had died and King wanted to devote full time to his job as treasurer of Valley Mould and Iron Co., then in Sharpsville. Keene went over to Valley Mould to turn over the shop keys to King. While there, King introduced his about-to-resign manager to Garvey, a vice President of Valley Mould.
>
> Garvey takes up the story:
>
> "King brought Keene in to meet me before going out of town.
>
> "Frank," Garvey said, "I don't want to butt in. But is seems to me you're making a mistake to close the plant now" as it was beginning to show promise.
>
> King told his friend and associate that he had become disgusted with the fabricating plant.
>
> King challenged Garvey to become a partner. Garvey said he would if Keene would stay on and operated the shop. Meanwhile, Garvey also talked his long-time friend, John Considine, who managed the former Petroleum Iron Works at Petroleum, Ohio, [a locale near Masury] into joining the new partnership.
>
> And Garvey asked Keene if he could recommend somebody who could sell the firm's products out in the field and had a good engineering background.

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Items for Sale

The Sharpsville Historical Society is planning a major project to beautify the borough and which incorporates our history. Discussions are ongoing for a large mural depicting a panorama of scenes of Sharpsville's history to be painted on a Main Street property. As details are being worked out with the artist and property owner, the main issue is funding. While a grant is being applied for, it would require at least a 50% match of the estimated cost of $10,000. Besides a direct donation, one way to support this project is to purchase a commemorative brick.

A 4" x 8" brick with three lines of inscription is available for $75.
An 8" x 8" brick with up to six lines of inscription may be purchased for $125.
The bricks would be placed around the Shenango Furnace Ingot Mould in the town park.

Please consider an "In Memory of" or "In Honor of" brick for a loved one. Maybe they worked at the Shenango, maybe they are a service member stationed overseas, maybe you want to honor your parents who contributed to the town in their quiet way, maybe you want to recognize a civic organization or High School Class, or maybe you want to memorialize a Sharpsville family name.

Stop at Mehler Insurance or call 724-962-2392
or email sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com

ALSO FOR SALE

T shirts with Historical Society Logo.
Several colors and sizes are available.
$10 each

Natural Stone Drink Coasters

featuring lithographed scenes of old Sharpsville
many different choices
$8 each, any 4 for $30

Cat's Meow Keepsakes

First Universalist Church $15 each

Scenes of Old Sharpsville volume 1 & 2

DVD slideshows featuring 100 photos of Sharpsville in years past
$10 each

Engaging the Community

In a tribute to the King of Rock 'n Roll, Michael Kennedy with a combination of Elvis' voice and moves, along with some humor, treated packed audiences to a highly entertaining performance that was also a great fundraising success for the Society.

With Gratitude

A significant donation that will allow us to continue the restoration of our historic headquarters was made by:

Ralph & Carol Mehler

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org
email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com

see our website for officers' phone numbers

Headquarters: 131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpsville, Pa.

Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane,
Sharpsville, Pa. 16150

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

Sharpsville Boiler Works, cont'd.

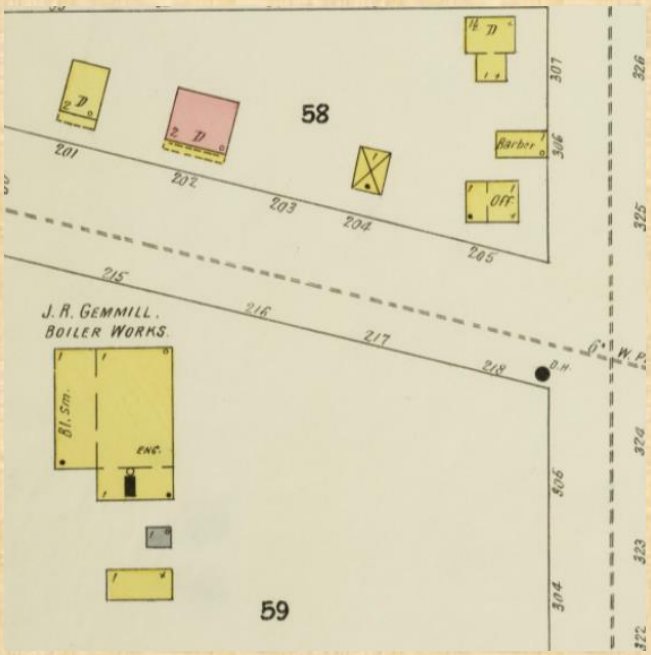
That's when Fagan entered the picture. He had been trained by a widely-known Pittsburgh firm. Fagan was summoned with a telephone call for an interview and highly impressed the new owners.

With enough success to warrant at least some optimism, King, Garvey, and Considine purchased the plant in with the company reorganized July 17, 1916 as The Sharpsville Boiler Works Company. Fagan was persuaded to join the venture. He, along with Keene provided the expertise and were given shares in the ownership.

Still, working capital was still tight. The Sharpsville Improvement Association was at this time instrumental in keeping the Boiler Works afloat. This local business organization (which would now be styled as a Chamber of Commerce) was particularly active during this time. It was formed in 1909 and known until 1915 as the Board of Trade. In 1915, it advocated for rebuilding the dam at Sharpsville, was a constituent of the Valley Americanization Committee during World War I, and urged an alternative to the narrow curves of the roadway through Pine Hollow. In their first decade as the Improvement Association, they were instrumental in the creation of the town park, urged the borough to erect street signs and to annex the Knight addition to Sharpsville, organized a system of municipal garbage collection, and pushed for the replacement of the bridge over Thornton Hollow as they had with the recently completed extension of Seventh Street to Buhl Farm. Their 1917 banquet attracted, among its speakers, Scott Pierce of Dayton, Ohio (son of Jonas) and Mercer County native James Sheakley, the former governor of Alaska.

How did the Improvement Association help? To counter offers of free land for expansion elsewhere, in all, 43 Sharpsville businessmen—ranging from grocers to druggists to clothiers and bankers—pooled $1,700 to allow the Boiler Works to purchase neighboring lots and keep them in Sharpsville. The 1916 reorganization brought in $13,000 of capital from the new owners. Of this, about $8,000 was used to buy out King's partners from the 1907 purchase, leaving only $5,000 in working capital. So, the amount raised by the Improvement Association's subscription—while seemingly small in today's dollars—was a significant amount for the struggling firm. In 1921, the contributors were repaid at 6% interest, or offered to exchange the debt for shares of stock.

The old shop was torn down in 1916 and replaced by a new steel building and up-to-date machinery. An overhead crane replaced the old wooden derrick. Profits were finally being earned and the plant was able to be enlarged. Several thousand square feet were added in successive stages—in 1918, 1920, 1921, 1925, 1926, 1928, and 1930, with the brick (now stuccoed) shop fronting Main Street added in 1931. The office building at corner of 6th and Main was built in 1918.



A 1905 map showing the old shop fronting 6th St., near Main

One large order that both allowed and prodded this expansion was based on a gamble Fagan made. When he came on board, an early idea of his was to standardize oil storage tank sizes; then, in a highly-fragmented market, each oil company required tanks of its own size and design. His idea gained little traction with the oil companies; however, Harris Brothers, dealers in farm implements, saw promise in the idea for their farm customers. They invited Fagan and Keene out to their Chicago headquarters to further explain their idea. The Sharpsville men left with an order for 300 storage tanks. Between the two men, Keene, the plant manager, was skeptical: "We can't build that many tanks—our plant is too small. Fagan, the salesman, responded: "We'll go back and start building a bigger plant." The plant was indeed too small. As the 1952 history puts it, "inasmuch as there was no room to work in the small shop, they worked in the field adjacent to the plant. For this purpose, they purchased some fishermen's outfits consisting of gum coats, hats and boots; so the tanks were assembled in the open regardless of weather conditions. There were absolutely no handling facilities and this was solved by Keene and Fagan building a large wooden derrick for unloading steel and loading out the finished products; using for the purpose, a kindly neighbor's railroad siding." In a later writing recollected by an old-time employee, referred to

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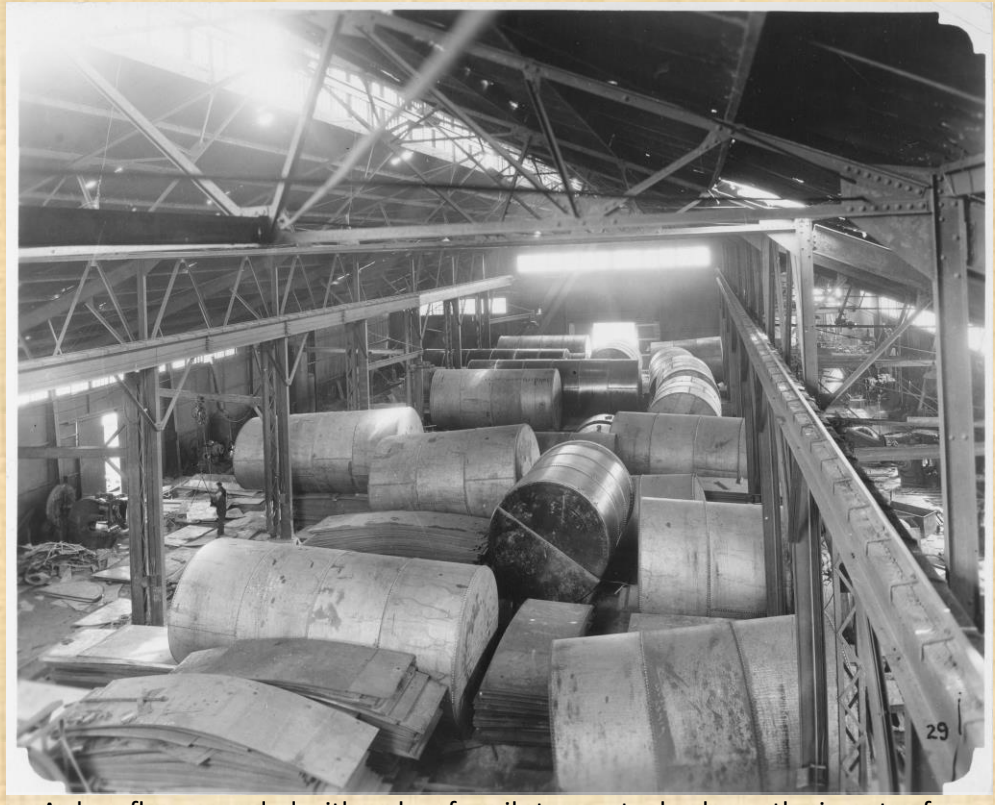
only as Joe—in a direct style that indicates a Slavic native tongue—he described this first big order for the reorganized firm. The first tank built had trouble when the employee testing it forgot to open a valve, and the tank, "Go pufo; get flat pin kake [like a pancake]." As Joe continues, the workers, however, were not deterred by this initial failure nor the facilities for fulfilling the large order: "Charlie buy gum coats, bootes, hats and work outside in the whethar. She snow. She rain. We work every day. Build tanks nights, Saturday, Sunday. Jim [Keene] say I think we no do it. Then we do it anyway. I buy all boys drink. Jim buy new car. Fagan get married."

Yet, just when the company seemed to be turning a corner, in 1919 they were faced with not only the post-war downturn in business, but the departures of Considine and Keene. Keene, who couldn't get along with Fagan, left to start his own company in Youngstown, taking many of the Boiler Works' employees with him. Considine's exit was made in light of his main venture, the Petroleum Iron Works, directly competing with the Sharpsville Boiler Works in the manufacture of steel tanks. King, too, had left by the early 1920s. The plant expansion and the need for Garvey and Fagan to buy out their former partners' shares, left the firm heavily in debt. In 1922, Benjamin F. Jackson was brought on as superintendent.



A shop floor crowded with orders for oil storage tanks shows the impetus for the multiple expansions of the Boiler Works in the 1920s.

This era's surge in automobile ownership created a growing demand for fuel storage tanks at filling stations and bulk plants. The ubiquity of fuel storage tanks, though, led to the adoption of Fagan's idea for standardized tank sizes. While reducing production costs, this in turn, resulted in increased competition. Around this time and after some experimentation, the Boiler Works began welding its tanks instead of riveting them. While the later histories composed by Fagan claims the firm was "one of the first to weld the tanks," in a 1974 interview Garvey recalls the Boiler Works was late in switching from rivets to welds. In fact, they put out the story that the riveting tanks were better than welded vessels, which, Garvey admits, was done "in self-defense because we didn't have the money to buy the welding equipment."

By 1927, the company took a new direction with manufacture of the "Sharmeter" gasoline dispenser. As they already sold storage tanks to the oil companies, the dispensers for their filling stations would be a good complementary product to offer. Initially, gasoline dispensers were manually operated pumps which dispensed a set amount of fuel into a graduated glass cylinder before being deposited into the automobile. In the 1920s, two innovations were introduced: 1) the hand-operated pumps bringing the fuel from underground storage tanks were replaced with motor-driven ones, and 2) a metering system, using a clock dial, to replace the visible cylinder. (Late, the metered volume of gasoline would be calibrated to compute the price. This then allowed one to purchase a certain dollar-worth rather than a set amount of gallons, eliminating the need for pencil and paper arithmetic to figure the cost). The later company histories claim that Sharpsville Boiler Works developed the first motor-driven metered pump. Neither their nine patents, nor their contemporary sales literature, however, make this boast. Other manufacturers are shown to have come out with

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these developments earlier. For the Sharmeter, the Boiler Works relied on Neptune Meter Company of Long Island City, N.Y., for the meter control. Neptune licensed their "Red Seal Cash Recorder" to at least 17 pump manufacturers.

The chief design advance made at Sharpsville, though, was the automatic nozzle control. This allowed the now-familiar operation via a trigger at the nozzle. Savings on power usage of 50-80%, along with a similar reduction on wear of the pump motor, were touted to gas station owners. In comparison, the pump motor for other dispensers was activated on the body of the dispenser and ran while the attendant was extending the hose to the car, unscrewing the gas cap, etc. Other exclusive features included a "triple action" automatic air eliminator, automatic pressure equalizer, automatic trouble detector, and automatic self-primer.

Of the patented improvements relating to gasoline dispensers, Charles D. Fagan is credited on five, Rehl W. Swank on one, and Fagan and Swank together on two, and with Theodore C. Ehrlich jointly on one. (Rehl W. Swank came here in the late 1920s, having previously worked for the S.F. Bowser & Co. in Ft. Wayne, Indiana; in 1905 Bowser was the first to introduce a gasoline dispenser.) Benjamin F. Jackson, the plant superintendent, while not credited in the patent applications, contributed toward these designs and oversaw the manufacture of the pumps.

Sales flyer for the Sharmeter

Sales literature depicts the dispensers fashioned with the Streamline or Art Deco style of the time. Within the Society's archives as well are 42 photographs of installations of Sharmeters at service stations in an area stretching from New Brunswick, Canada to St. Louis. Many more were undoubtedly sold, with installations in at least 56 Ohio filling stations by 1929. The apparent success of the product, however, would soon lead to a major headache for the Boiler Works. In a highly competitive industry amidst the Great Depression, and with the Boiler Works never in a very strong financial position, they eventually found themselves at the mercy of a dispute between their meter supplier and a major pump manufacturer. In 1932, the Wayne Pump Company patented its own meter to automatically measure the fuel dispensed and to compute the price. Neptune Meter Company made a competing product and licensed their meter to the Boiler Works as well as to at least sixteen other pump manufacturers. Wayne brought suit claiming the Neptune Meter infringed on its patent, with the case decide in Wayne's favor June 29, 1937.

At the commencement of the suit, sales of the Sharmeter suffered, since oil company customers did not want to risk purchasing an infringing product. All the while, Neptune assured the Boiler Works that the suit was groundless and, after they lost, Neptune would win it on appeal. Neptune, though, reached a settlement with Wayne at the close of 1937; the repercussions for Sharpsville, were to essentially force them out of the pump business, given the crippling terms of the meter licensing agreement Wayne Pump could now dictate. As a result, Sharpsville Boiler Works along with at least six and possibly as many as eighteen other manufacturers of meter pumps were forced out of that line of business. Claims and counterclaims between the Boiler Works and Neptune also ensued. Sharpsville contended that Neptune had dealt with them in bad faith over the Wayne Pump matter and, in their settlement with Wayne, bound Sharpsville to manufacture an unprofitably small number of dispensers. Neptune wanted repaid the substantial trade balance that had accumulated.

In what was always a low-margin lines of business, the Boiler Works officially exited the Sharmeter business in July 1938. In a general settlement it was agreed that they and Wayne Pump would exchange mutual releases, that the Boiler Works would not compete in the gasoline pump business for three years, would assist Neptune Meter with sales

Cont'd. on page 7

Sharpsville Boiler Works, cont'd.

referrals, would assign an interest in their patents to Neptune, and would receive a forgiveness for much of their indebtedness to Neptune, with the remainder payable in installments.

The Boiler Works' anti-trust complaint to the Federal Trade Commission against Wayne Pump was also dropped at this time; nonetheless, federal prosecutors continued the case. Two indictments against Wayne Pump and conspiring pump makers, Gilbert & Barker Manufacturing Co. and Tokheim Oil Tank & Pump Co., were returned charging them with combining "to fix, maintain and control arbitrary, artificial and non-competitive prices for the sale of computer pumps." Given that Wayne's valid patent, in effect, grants the patent holder a monopoly, the District Court, however, found the indictment insufficiently showed price fixing beyond the licensing of the patent. Appeals, including, one to the U.S. Supreme Court, upheld the court's decision.

Sharmeter installation at Harrisburg

Meanwhile, the company still produced its tanks. In 1938, the firm changed its name to Sharpsville Steel Fabricators, Inc. to better reflect the actual scope of its operations. Just prior to America's entry into the Second World War, the Army Air Corps selected the firm to supply 4,000 gasoline pressure tanks for domestic and foreign airfields. The war also brought work fabricating sections of dry docks and the LSTs famous for their use in amphibious landings in the Pacific Theatre and at Normandy. These were shipped to Neville Island where they were assembled by Dravo Corporation and sent to sea. Their application for the coveted Army-Navy "E" Award listed an exemplary record of production, overcoming supply shortages and cost savings to the government. As there is not a record of the final disposition of their application, it does not appear that this award for "Excellence in Production" was granted them. (Only 5% of defense suppliers did qualify.) A later recollection by Hugh Garvey, however, maintained that further steps for the application were rejected, since, if awarded, the ceremony would have required the hiring of entertainment and building a grandstand—something the frugal owners found too costly. Nonetheless, this relatively small firm's ability to keep up with the demands of war production—200 employees on three shifts making up to 18 storage tanks a day—is especially remarkable given that 65 of their employees left to serve in the armed forces.

After the Second World War, the company continued to make storage and pressure tanks; truck tanks, for both fuel delivery as well as for firetrucks, became a major line of business in the 1950s. Custom steel plate fabrications also grew as a profitable line of business. The more remarkable fabrication jobs included the first industrial-scale agitator tanks for the production of penicillin, the first tanks for the manufacture of DDT and synthetic rubber, and housing of a simulator the space program used to mimic the vacuum of outer space. They also fabricated two of the largest steel smoke stacks then in the world.

In 1955, Hugh J. Garvey's forty-year association with the company ended when he sold his interest to the other stockholders. Garvey was acknowledged as a civic leader and served as longtime president of Sharon General Hospital, president of Federated Catholic Charities and The Shenango Inn, board member of Penn Power and Trumbull Bronze, and chairman of First Federal Savings & Loan.

The firm's 100th anniversary in 1960 was just cause for celebration. Charles Fagan gave a speech to the students and faculty at the high school. But the main even was a testimonial dinner sponsored by the Sharpsville Service Club. Prominent members of Sharpsville and Valley Industries were among the 150 who attended the event at Angel's Casino.

The driving force of the Steel Fabricators for a half-century, Charles D. Fagan, Sr., died in 1965. His son, Charles D. Fagan, Jr., succeeded him as president of the company.

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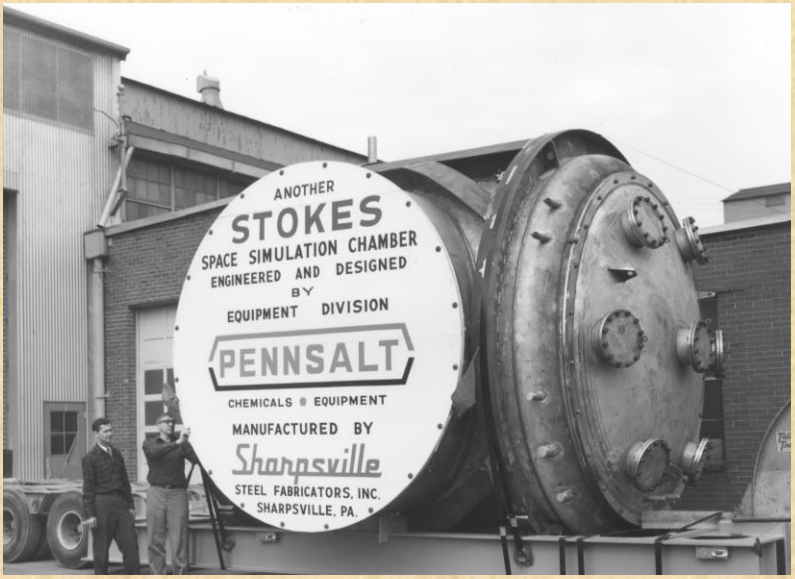
Sharpsville Boiler Works, cont'd.

In 1966, a 23,544 square foot addition (the large building section behind the Rossi Barber Shop) was erected, increasing the area of the plant by over a quarter. This investment indicated an optimistic outlook as did the tone of the updated company's history written then. A purchase of additional land was made in 1977, apparently with an eye to further expansion, though never built on.

Yet, later that year would fall "Black Monday"—the day when Youngstown Sheet & Tube furloughed 5,000 workers, and which marks of the beginning of the long de-industrialization of America. The following decade saw a nearly 10% decline in motor vehicle production workers and an astounding 29% reduction in the workforce of primary metal industries. The recession that began in 1981 hit the Shenango Valley particularly hard. Our peak unemployment was a Depression-level 23.9% in January 1983, exceeded nationally only by the Johnstown, Pa. area's jobless rate of 24.8%. The 1985 demise of the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators was not unexpected and, in retrospect, perhaps inevitable.

Still there was new hope for the town when in 1988, the firm Utensco, of Port Washington, New York, bought the plant and moved its operations here. Two years later, they filed for bankruptcy, with a new company, Sharpsville Container Corp., taking over the plant in 1991. The Reserve Group of Fairlawn, Ohio acquired the firm in 1997.

Today, the company continues to operate as Sharpsville Container Corp. under the same ownership. They have a solid business and specialize in stainless steel vessels for the chemical, food, dairy, and pharmaceutical industries, specialty beer kegs, and gas cylinders. Their current work-force of 49 counts as the largest industrial employer in Sharpsville.



Photos, top to bottom:
Truck mounted oil tank, ca. 1948
Boiler Works workmen, 1929
Fabrication for the space program, 1960s