

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 11, 2016

The Smoke Stack at the Big Mill: Locals in Yorklyn referred to the main NVF fibre mill, much of which has now been demolished, as the "big mill." This was to distinguish it from the Marshall Brothers paper mill, the snuff mills, and the tape mill. About 2/3 of the big mill was built in 1911 and 1912, the centerpiece of which was the essential yet ornamental stack nearly 150 feet high.

Coal-fired boilers required tall stacks for proper draft, and the huge boilers and their fireboxes below turned out a high volume of steam to run the steam engines and heat the dryers that were essential to the manufacture of paper and vulcanized fibre. A large steam shovel with a bucket called a "clam shell" moved the coal from under the railroad's coal tippie to a pile just outside the boiler room. Most of the stacks built for expansion of the industrial revolution in the 19th century were of the rectangular brick design, similar to house chimneys except in size and height. Shortly after 1900, however, round and somewhat ornamental stacks were becoming popular, often built with yellow-tan bricks with a decorative pattern of irregular brown bricks at the top. Such was the stack at the big mill. This mill was about half complete when Israel Marshall died in June 1911. When the stack was completed the next year, an American flag was flown from the top to signal the end of construction and the beginning of the greatly expanded operation. I have tried to research how scaffolding could be built in 1912 to lay bricks 150 from the ground, and I have deduced that there would not have been scaffolding but rather a seat and ropes around the stack on which the mason could sit in the manner used by linemen on electric poles before modern hydraulic platforms lifted them to the necessary height.

The coal-burning days lasted until about 1960. A lot of black coal smoke came out the top of the stack for nearly 50 years. My father used to say that if the smoke went straight up, it meant good weather (obviously very light wind). When there was a breeze, the prevailing wind direction was from the west. The clothes line at Auburn Heights was not negatively impacted as much as those on Gun Club Hill. People trying to find the Yorklyn Gun Club who were not familiar with our back roads could go toward the smoke and know they would soon reach their destination. Shooters at the Gun Club, at about the same level with the top of the stack, would sometimes claim they had missed a target because it got lost in the smoke.

As oil succeeded coal as fuel to make steam, the stack did not need to be as high to give enough draft, so, as the ornamental top deteriorated, it was simply removed, and the stack was lowered. This occurred at least twice in the later years of NVF operation, so at the time the mills closed in 2008, it was probably 120 feet tall.

Several of us hoped the stack could be saved as a symbol of what had been in a prosperous manufacturing town of the 20th century, but we were told this was not possible because of the massive ground contamination and the clean-up required. With demolition of the surrounding buildings, the stack started to list, and this week it is being torn down for good. Like the steam whistles that blew in Yorklyn morning, noon, and "quitting time," the century-old stack is a thing of the past.