

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 4, 2006

**Smoke and Whistles in Yorklyn:** My father indicated that when he was young, the normal work week for millworkers was 60 hours, 10 hours per day for six days. Fortunately over the years this was reduced, and when I was young, I am under the impression that it was 46½ hours for most employees. Since many couldn't afford a watch, mill whistles told them when the workday was to start and when it ended. Yorklyn had four main mills, and each had its steam whistle, as big boilers were needed for their various operations. Unless hours were staggered, which they seldom were, all four whistles were supposed to go off at the same time. Since blowing the whistle was the responsibility of the fireman on duty, he alone was "on the spot" to do it on time, or he would hear about it. If he forgot, he'd better be close enough to his whistle cord to get there in a hurry, as he heard the first whistle from another mill.

Here at Auburn Heights, we could tell each mill's whistle by its tone and our distance from it. The Marshall Brothers paper mill was the closest and therefore the loudest; the Snuff Mill was less shrill, and the Tape Mill (Crowell Corporation) being nearly a mile away with a hill between, sounded more distant. These three whistles were high pitched, but not so the whistle atop the National Vulcanized Fibre's boiler room. It seems that when these mills were built about 1912, my father went to Lunkenheimer or one of the companies supplying steam valves, gauges and fittings to the mills and told them he wanted them to make a whistle for the new mills that sounded like the "City of Chester," a steamboat plying the waters of the Delaware River between Wilmington and Philadelphia. This they did, and what a low, melodious sound it had! There was no question which was the Fibre Mill whistle. This whistle could be seen on top of one of the NVF buildings many years after it was used. I should have tried to get it for our collection, but I didn't, and it disappeared.

All four whistles signaled the beginning of the day at 8:00 A.M. Then they blew for lunch at 12:00 noon. Again they went off at 12:30, time to go back to work. Finally, the sounds across the valley at 5:00 P.M. indicated it was time to go home. Most employees worked from 8:00 A.M. until noon on Saturdays, so the whistles were blown only twice on those days. By the late 1940s, the work week was 40 hours for most, so the 5:00 whistle was blown at 4:30 instead, and there were none on Saturday. (About half the hourly workers in the paper and fibre mills were on shift work, so the whistle signals did not help them much.)

First the Snuff Mills closed down in 1954, then the Tape Mill burned to the ground in 1964, never to be rebuilt. By the 1970s, NVF probably figured everyone had a watch and they need not blow their whistles anymore, so a tradition in a milltown was gone forever.

Only when a storm was brewing and the wind was from the east did Auburn Heights get much smoke from the stacks at the mills. This was not true on Poplar Hill east of the mills, its buildings getting the brunt of black coal smoke from the prevailing west wind. Once in a while the smoke from the tall stack above No. 2 Fibre Mill went straight up as far as the eye could see. Of course this meant there was no wind, but my father told me it was the sign of clear weather to come.