

The Great Boom: Du Pont arrives

23

In the spring of 1902 the Washburn Times reported that a "mysterious man" was purchasing land midway between Washburn and Ashland, and that civil engineers had arrived to survey the property. "Moneyed men" from the East also visited the site, but would only say that a manufacturing plant of some kind was to be constructed. Speculation as to the type of plant ranged from an iron works to a tannery, but in February 1903 it was revealed that a dynamite plant, costing several thousand dollars and employing a few hundred men, was to be built on the site.

Incorporated as the Atlantic Manufacturing Company for the purpose of manufacturing and selling explosives, the plant was part of the newly organized E.I. Du Pont de Nemours Powder Company. It was located in northern Wisconsin to provide explosives to the iron ore mines in Minnesota and the copper and

iron mines in Michigan. Construction began in July 1903 and by March 1904, 26 buildings had been completed. The "powder line," where the explosives were manufac-

03 11/5/09
**Lars
Larson
Guest
columnist**

tured, was located in a ravine to reduce the effects of an accidental explosion. The plant was named the Barksdale Works after a Du Pont Company executive. Washburn claimed ownership of the plant, expecting that the plant offices would be located there and that it would benefit from taxes paid by the company. But the city was disappointed in both respects. The offices were located at the

plant, while the city lost the taxes because of the detachment of the land on which the plant was located from the city's corporate territory, reducing Washburn's role to providing housing for officials and workers. The top executives at the plant lived in large houses provided by the company on the north side of Third Street, between Second and Third Avenues East. Several other houses were also built by the company for employees at various locations east of Central Avenue. Ashland had confidently expected that Du Pont employees would live there, so Washburn gained a measure of satisfaction at Ashland's expense when they chose to live in Washburn instead.

On Saturday, May 28 1905, the first batch of dynamite was produced, all units of the plant operating efficiently. While elaborate precautions were taken to prevent fires and explosions, accidents

were inevitable. In August 1905 the first fire occurred, destroying a building and in November another building was gutted. Then early in the morning of Monday July 16 1906, a terrific explosion on the powder line killed three men, including the general superintendent of the plant; damaged all of the plant buildings; and broke windows in Washburn and Ashland.

The contribution of the Du Pont plant to Washburn's economy during the 70 years it was in operation was intermittent, as employment at the plant varied continually, from almost none during strikes at the ore mines and occasionally during the great depression to nearly 2,000 during World War I. Whatever economic contribution the plant did make came at a terrible price, for 36 men were killed in explosions and other accidents during those seven decades.