

Washburn During The Roaring Twenties—Part 3

With the collapse of the Anchor Shipbuilding Company, and with it the dream of a great ship building center, the Du Pont plant, the box factory, shipping, and a few other businesses continued as the sustainers of Washburn's economy. Employment at the Du Pont explosives plant was only a fraction of what it had been during the wartime boom, varying between 150 and 300 men, depending principally on the demand for explosives from the iron ore mines in northern Minnesota and Michigan, although explosives for land clearing and for military uses were also produced. But the plant's contribution to the city's economy exacted a fearful toll. From January 1904 to August 1928, 23 men were killed in explosions and other accidents, while many more men were injured or became chronically ill from exposure to toxic chemicals. In 1912 after ten men had been killed, the company established an elaborate safety program. A safety manager was hired, the workers were enlisted in the program, and "safety first" was adopted as a motto. The program was successful in reducing the incidence of injuries and fatal accidents, although 12 more men were killed from 1916 to 1928. The company treated its employees comparatively well, with regular wage increases, cheap life insurance, and annual physical examinations. Early in the

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decade it began to sponsor employee picnics at Memorial Park, usually held on a Saturday in late summer. The picnic began at noon with a dinner served out of the park kitchen, followed by a brief address by the plant superintendent, and then sports and games for adults and children, ending with a community mixer at the Du Pont Club.

The Kenfield-Lamoreaux Box Factory prospered during the Great War, operating with double shifts and doing a "monster business," according to the Times. Because of the wartime labor shortage, twenty women were hired, but were allowed to work only 55 hours a week, rather than the 60 or more hours for the men. Business continued to be good after the war, with the plant running day and night. In May 1920 a six week strike by the workers for an eight-hour day ended without the workers achieving their goal. After the strike the factory resumed full-time operations, but soon unstable economic conditions and competition from large companies

close to their markets, forced the factory to close periodically. In the spring of 1922 the company was purchased by a large box and crating firm from Chicago, which pledged to continue to operate the plant, but by mid-1920s the factory had closed permanently.

Cargoes of coal continued to arrive at the coal dock, primarily to serve the needs of Washburn consumers, coal distribution beyond Washburn apparently having been taken over by a large coal dock at Ashland. Occasionally large pulp rafts arrived, the pulp shipped by rail to paper mills in the region. Shipments of soda—sodium nitrate from Chili—also arrived, packed in large paper bags that were unloaded to railroad cars for transport to the Du Pont plant. Cargoes of sulfur also occasionally arrived, which were shipped to the plant. Vessels arriving with these cargoes included the Sierra with 7,500 tons of coal, the Lake Traverse with 2,100 tons of soda, and the George H. Ingalls with 2,200 tons of sulfur. Also arriving with cargoes of soda were the Hansa and Terge, tramp steamers from Bergen, Norway.

Changes in the service provided by the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railroad—the "Omaha," Washburn's "founding" railroad line—reflected the transformation in the city's economic

base and population in the 1920s. While there were cargoes of coal and pulpwood to haul, principally in the winter, there were no longer shipments of grain, lumber or brownstone, while the passenger, merchandise and freight service declined as the population decreased. In August 1922 the Omaha "greatly curtailed" its passenger service to Washburn then in April 1925 the company terminated its local switching crew, assigning this work to the regular road crew. A month later the local Omaha agent addressed a letter to Washburn businessmen, urging them to support the railroad by using its freight service rather than trucks, noting that the annual payroll amounted to \$80,000 and supported 98 people. His appeal seemed to have had little effect, for in 1929 one train between Ashland and Bayfield was dropped and the station and yard crews were reduced in size. The city council passed a resolution protesting the reduction in the operating force, claiming that it discriminated against Washburn, by moving business to other points along the line, but to no avail. (The railroad between Ashland, Washburn, and Bayfield—now the Chicago and Northwestern—was abandoned in 1981 and the tracks were removed in the fall of 1982.)