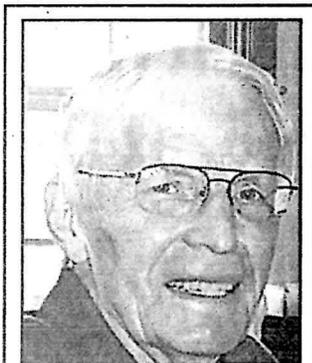


# Washburn During The Great Depression— The Du Pont Barksdale Works

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The Du Pont explosives plant at Barksdale, despite fluctuations in the size of its hourly work force, remained an important part of Washburn's economic base. The principal business of the plant was the manufacture of dynamite for the iron ore mines in northern Minnesota and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The demand for iron ore depended on the demand for steel, which in turn depended on the level of manufacturing activity and the health of the general economy. Employment at the plant therefore tended to fluctuate with changes in general economic conditions as well as seasonally. The company policy of "spreading the work" by reducing the length of the work week and work day, and by scheduling maintenance and construction projects to provide work during slack times, somewhat mitigated the impact of these factors. Also, the Barksdale Works was the only plant manufacturing TNT for military use, so occasional orders for that explosive were received from the federal government.

While hourly work force employment in the fall of 1929 was the largest since the war years, in December 1930 the Times reported that "the regular crew of the plant . . . has been working on a four day schedule for several months." By July 1933 the employment situation had improved with about 115 men working but



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with reduced hours. In June 1935 employment had risen to 250 men, some hired for temporary construction work. In March 1938 only about 190 men were on the hourly payroll, the plant manager stating that "Prospects are somewhat discouraging for a seasonal increase this spring." The "defense preparedness" program undertaken by the federal government in response to the deteriorating political conditions in Europe and the outbreak of war with the German assault on Poland on September 1 1939 resulted in increased government orders for TNT. By mid-September 1939 about 280 men were employed and the TNT operation was working at full capacity. In October construction of a larger TNT unit to replace the older one was underway, employing an additional 95 men. With this and other changes in its production facilities, the Barksdale Works was prepared to

meet the heavy demands for military and commercial explosives after the United States entered the war in December 1941.

Throughout the 1930s the Du Pont Company, rather than taking advantage of the depressed conditions to reduce wages, periodically increased them: two increases of 5% in 1933, raising the hourly wage for unskilled labor to 42 cents, 10% in 1934, 6% in 1936, and 10% in 1937, raising the wage for unskilled labor to 58 cents an hour. In return for the wages it paid the company got a loyal, intelligent, and flexible labor force, willing to work in the dangerous business of manufacturing explosives, a good bargain for the company. The company also began to provide sickness and injury insurance for its employees, paying 20% of the premium. In 1935 a Works Council with representatives from the workers and management was established to help maintain "harmony" between the labor and management, but was dissolved when it was defined as a "company union" under the Wagner Labor Relations Act, approved by Congress in 1935. The hourly workers then organized the Barksdale Workmen's Protective Association as a bargaining unit under the provisions of the Wagner Act, some 80% of the work force joining it. But the absence of serious issues for conflict between management and labor and

with good will and flexibility on both sides to resolve grievances, the association was not needed so it gradually died out. The company also improved working conditions for the men, building modern washroom and restroom facilities, and installing air conditioning in the buildings to draw off fumes and heat. It also contributed to the construction of an employees' club house on its lake shore property, named "Max Beach," in honor of M.C. Knake, the plant manager.

The Barksdale Works was located on about 1,000 acres of land enclosed by a high fence, topped by barbed wire. This proved no barrier to deer, large numbers of which jumped over the fence. Safe from wolves, dogs, and hunters, the deer herd became so large that many starved to death in the winter from lack of food. Without the threat of predators and fed by the workers, the deer became quite tame, grazing in the fields, loitering on the roads and railroad tracks, even entering buildings, posing a safety hazard. Finally in 1936 the state conservation department agreed to cull the herd by trapping and relocating some of the deer. During the next few years hundreds of deer were removed from the plant enclosure and released at distant points throughout the county.