

For about 100 years, it was 'boom' time at Barksdale Works

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EARLY YEARS

For about 100 years, from 1904 to 2004, the explosive plant of the E.I. Du Pont de Nemours Company, located between Washburn and Ashland, was a mainstay of the economy of Washburn.

The history of the plant began in 1902 when the Washburn Times reported that a "mysterious man" was purchasing land midway between the two cities.

Then "civil engineers" arrived to plat the property and "a few moneyed men from the east and from Chicago were also visitors." They would only say that "a big manufacturing plant of some kind" was to be constructed.

Speculation as to the type of plant it would be, from an iron works to a tannery, ran rampant in the area. Finally in February 1903 the Times "discovered" that "a dynamite plant to cost one million of dollars" was to be built on the property and would employ "between 1,500 and 2,000 men."

"The enterprise will become part of Washburn," the Times declared, "and will be one of the heavy taxpayers." It rebuked "greedy Ashland" for claiming the plant but vouchsafed "that Ashland should pick up a few of the remaining crumbs."

It was "logical" that the "workmen" would live in Washburn, and "This will mean a great many new houses and in all probability a boom for the place."

Nothing further appeared regarding the "dynamite plant" until July, when articles of incorporation were filed with the Wisconsin Secretary of State for the "Atlantic Manufacturing Company," for the purpose of manufacturing and selling explosives "of all classes."

While the five incorporators might have commanded a half-million dollars between them, they

could not have had the expert skills needed to plan, construct and operate an explosives plant. In fact, the plant was built by the Eastern Dynamite Company, part of the newly formed E.I. Du Pont de Nemours Powder Company.

Although the legend of the Du Pont Company tells of a prosperous and unbroken history beginning with the first powder works built on Brandywine Creek in Delaware by Irénée Du Pont in July 1802, the company came very close to being sold in 1902.

Three relatively young Du Pont cousins, against the better judgment of their elders, took over the company and through adroit and hard-headed financial management and maneuvering, and not a little skulduggery, formed the E.I. Du Pont de Nemours Powder Company, under which they consolidated and eventually absorbed numerous powder companies and associated businesses from across the country.

One of the first decisions of this new company was to construct plants located so they could serve areas of the country that were too far from existing plants to be supplied profitably.

The "dynamite plant" west of Washburn was the first one to be constructed. It was named the Barksdale Works after Hamilton M. Barksdale, head of the explosives operating department of the new company. The principal business of the plant was the manufacture of dynamite for the iron-ore mines on the Iron Range in northern Minnesota and the Gogebic Range in 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. So the volume of orders for dynamite from the ore mines quickly changed as economic conditions changed for good or bad. Demand also declined in the winter when mining activity was curtailed. The result was frequent changes in the size of the workforce at the Barksdale Works.

The Times reported that the completed plant would include 43 buildings with a railroad siding, would employ "175 to 200 men" and "cost \$500,000."

Construction began in July 1903 and by March 1904, 26 buildings had been completed. The Times reported that "The buildings where the explosives are finished and handled are down in the ravine" to minimize the effects of an explosion but added that "those in charge of the work say that manufacture of this class of goods has been so perfected that there is but little danger in handling it."

Meanwhile, telephone service between Washburn and the plant was installed, putting "that institution ... within speaking distance of the city."

A post office was also established at the plant that enabled the company to conduct its business there. This was a disappointment to Washburn's leaders, who had expected that the company offices would be located in Washburn. This, along with the later detachment of the sections that included the plant property from the corporate limits of the new city of Washburn in May 1904, meant that Washburn's "ownership" of this "institution" was limited to providing housing for officials and workers.



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