

Postwar years at Barksdale Works saw a couple of large explosions

CJ 5/23/13

The 150th anniversary of the founding of the E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company was observed on July 18, 1952, with a community celebration at Memorial Park in Washburn attended by an estimated 2,000 people.

Plant Manager B.A. Semb delivered a welcoming address, praising the DuPont Company, declaring that it had "contributed importantly to the soundness of our American economic system, to raising the standard of living, and to preserving the country in time of war. That is the real reason for this celebration, and I think it is a good one."

After the opening ceremonies presided over by Ernest H. Holman, the main ceremonies on Brandywine Creek, near Wilmington, Del., the location of the company's first powder mill, were broadcast over loud-speakers.

Beginning at 3 p.m., there were athletic contests, games, contests and boat and pony rides, while buses took people on a tour of the Barksdale Works. Music was provided by a Scandinavian-German band. The day's program culminated with a family picnic supper.

Two months later, on Oct. 15, 1952, the worst explosion that had ever occurred at the Barksdale Works took place, breaking a five-year accident-free record.

At 2:15 in the morning, 5,000 pounds of soda amatol exploded, destroying the large building in which the explosive was produced and packed. The blast killed eight men, including six who worked in the building and two on the railroad crew who happened to be in the building at the time.

One man was returning to the building from lunch when the explosion occurred, narrowly escaping the fate of his fellow workers.

People in Washburn and Ashland were at first confused about the reason for the blast, but the dreaded

sound of the plant whistle confirmed the worst. Many people drove to the plant, waiting outside the front gate for word about relatives employed there.

Work on rebuilding the destroyed facilities started immediately, and by the middle of April 1953 the plant was back in full production.

Plant Manager Semb expressed his appreciation to employees for giving "unselfishly and unstintingly" of their time and effort to the reconstruction program and to the people of the local community for their support and cooperation.

On Aug. 14, 1954, the 50th anniversary of the Barksdale Works was celebrated with another community picnic at Memorial Park. That day's program was opened at 1 p.m. by Ernest H. Holman, master of ceremonies.

Semb delivered another address, this time lauding the employees of the plant whose "many accomplishments are too numerous to mention," and the policies of the "sincere, democratic, liberal and far-seeing" owners and executives of the DuPont Company.

Afternoon activities included remarks by "old-timers," the usual athletic contests, bus tours of the Barksdale Works and music by a Scandinavian-German band. The feature event of the afternoon was a fashion show, during which women employed at the plant and the wives of employees modeled 1904 and 1954 bathing suits.

At the end of 1954, Semb reported that business at the Barksdale Works had continued at a high level during the year, producing explosives for commercial use. Employment during the year averaged 291 people.

Unfortunately, the record of no major injuries since the explosion in October 1952 was broken when in the late afternoon of June 15, 1955, 3,000 pounds of powder in the primer mixing house exploded, killing three men.

In his annual review for 1955, Semb reported that the cause of this "unfortunate disaster" had been determined and that the "most modern and safe buildings and equipment" were being installed. He noted that 1955 "was the best in the peacetime history" of the Barksdale Works, with "record production, employment and payrolls."

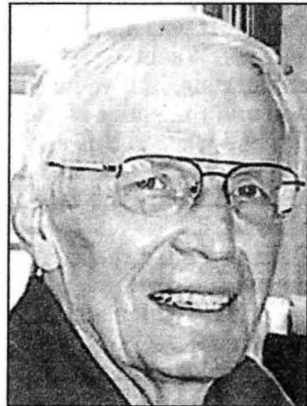
In his annual report for 1956, Semb noted that the Barksdale Works was "enjoying one of the best business years in its history" due to increased winter mining and expanded taconite iron-ore operations.

Wages and salaries were increased, employee benefits were liberalized, and a severance pay plan instituted. From 1957 to 1961, average employment at the Barksdale Works declined from 372 to 200, with small increases during summers due to the employment of teachers and college students.

Wages and salaries were increased and employee benefits liberalized, while long-service employees were granted three- or four-week paid vacations.

In November 1962, the production of nitroglycerin dynamite ended because of the closing of many underground iron-ore mines and the use of safer explosives.

Dynamite was replaced in open-pit, iron-ore mining on the Mesabi Range by a water gel explosive that was delivered directly to the bore holes of an excavation site by special pump trucks. The production of this water gel explosive in large quantities offset the end of dynamite production.



Lars Larson

■ has been a guest columnist for The County Journal for many years.