

End of an era for the Du Pont Barksdale Works

Business activity at the Barksdale Works in 1963 and 1964 continued at a high level due to the expanded taconite ore mining and the production of the blasting agents that replaced dynamite.

Average employment for both years was about 200 people, with slight increases in the summer. In 1965 the production capacity for TNT was doubled due to increased civilian and military demand for the explosive, creating employment for about 300 people.

Also in 1965 a metal cladding operation began on leased property in the Chequamegon National Forest. Controlled explosions were used to bond a copper core between two thin layers of copper-nickel alloy into a "sandwich" of laminated metal used in the production of coins. Plant Manager B.A. Semb noted in January 1966 that "We are optimistic about the future — both immediate and long term — and I'm looking forward to good prospects for Du Pont in this area. All of our experience, both historical and recent, indicates that the company will continue to keep its facilities here up to date."

In December 1966 Semb retired and was replaced by John G. Blackburn. In his annual report, in February 1968, Blackburn noted that the plant was producing different types of explosives to meet the needs of the mining, construction and quarrying industries. Metal cladding operations continued and a government contract for the manufacture of TNT had been awarded. Employment was approximately 350 persons in December 1967. During the summer of 1967, 26 college students and teachers were employed.

On August 6, 1970, Thomas E. Rafferty, who had replaced Blackburn as plant manager, announced that the operation of all TNT and acid production facilities would end in March 1971 because of decreasing customer demand and increasing competition from other types of lower cost explosives. These alternate explosives could not be manufactured at the Barksdale Works plant because it was located too far from major markets to be competitive and had become obsolete, belying former manager Semb's assurance that "the company will continue to keep its facilities here up to date."



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About 20 men were to be retained for the time being for the production of explosives used in the manufacture of synthetic diamonds and in the metal cladding operations. In April 1975 it was announced that all explosive manufacturing would cease during the summer and that the seven remaining employees would be terminated. All buildings were to be burned or torn down.

The announcement of the shutdown of the major part of operations at the Barksdale Works with a 90 percent reduction in the workforce came as a severe shock to the people of the area. The immediate reaction of people in Washburn, where many of the current and retired employees lived, was typified by a comment by the local druggist, who in the midst of building a new store had particular reason to be discouraged: "It is undoubtedly a genuine blow to Washburn, but we must take a positive attitude and conquer it. The effect will not be as severe as we feared."

And a Barksdale Works employee quipped, "I guess we'll have to plant more potatoes and get more venison," expressing the self-reliance with which the people of the community had in the past survived the loss of the lumber mills, the railroads, the coal and grain docks and other industries. The mayors of Washburn and Ashland and the chairmen of the Ashland County and Bayfield County boards issued statements regretting the Du Pont Company's decision, but as one of them noted, "I am confident that the always faithful and dedicated people of our area will again rise to the occasion and overcome this setback."

At a hastily convened meeting in Ashland on Aug. 17, various schemes were proposed from a government takeover of the plant to converting the property to an Ashland-Washburn-Bayfield "industrial complex." Despite the enthusiasm of local leaders in the bay communities, a plan to convert the plant property into a large industrial complex failed as did a proposal by a large realty firm to develop the land for condominiums and recreational vehicle sites.

The operation over many years of the complex chemical processes involved in the manufacture of explosives left a legacy of surface water, groundwater and soil pollution at the Barksdale Works site. The production of TNT, or trinitrotoluene, resulted in the creation of a waste product known as red water. This toxic liquid was discharged into Boyd Creek, which runs through the plant and empties into the bay. In 1968 the company was given until Oct. 1, 1970, by the state to abate this pollution.

Local pressure was applied by a demonstration by faculty and students from Northland College, held outside the plant in October 1969, to call attention to the continuing discharge of this red water into the bay. The company considered different methods of abating the pollution but finally solved the problem by stopping the production of TNT. The potential cost of pollution abatement methods might have been a factor in the decision to close the plant, although it was never cited by company officials as a reason.

A second pollution problem — groundwater (drinking water) pollution — was not so easily solved. In 1981, in response to citizen concerns about pollution, the state Department of Natural Resources conducted

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a limited investigation of the Barksdale Works site but took no further action. In June 1997 the DNR sampled three residential drinking water wells and found them contaminated with dinitrotoluene, an intermediate product in the production of TNT. Beginning in 1998 the DNR and the Du Pont Company sampled and monitored residential wells adjacent to the Barksdale Works site. The DNR concluded that the level of contamination found in these wells did not constitute a threat to human health.

But due to the continuing concern among the residents of the Town of Barksdale, it was decided to supply drinking water to houses in the town by a pipeline from Washburn.

In January 2004 the Washburn City Council approved agreements with the Du Pont Company to supply water to the Town of Barksdale via a pipeline from Washburn, to be constructed by the company.

The project began on July 28, 2004, and was completed in mid-November.

By mid-December the installation of laterals from the pipeline to residences was almost complete and Washburn began billing the Du Pont Company for water that same month. In 1968 the Barksdale Works site of 1,698 acres was sold to the C.G. Bretting Manufacturing Corporation and is used primarily for recreational activities. Investigation and cleanup of polluted areas on the site, by the Du Pont Company, continue.