

Hidden in Plain Sight

Anthony Borgo

To this day the oil refinery that resides in the City of Whiting's backyard, has been the lifeblood of this community. From its infancy the area that would become Whiting was nothing more than swampy hunting grounds. Representatives from Standard Oil changed all of that. They created an oil refinery, but also a town alongside of it. The influx of immigrants flooded the area seeking an honest wage, also created communities. The bunkhouses that sprouted up next to tank fields, would become our neighborhoods. The arrival of Standard Oil also created the diverse ethnic community that Whiting celebrates every year at Pierogi Fest. In honor of this symbiotic relationship that Whiting has with its refinery, I thought that I would provide some background to the early days of Standard Oil's construction.

The first plans to build a refinery in Whiting, Indiana was disclosed to Standard Oil executives in February, 1889. At that time, W. M. Irish of Olean, New York, James A. Moffett of Brooklyn, New York, and W. P. Cowan, Superintendent of the Cleveland, Ohio refinery called on the services of William Curtis. Curtis was a master mechanic at Standard Oil's Cleveland refinery. He was showed some sketches of the Whiting area where the refinery would be constructed. In addition, he was presented with pencil drawings of the plans for the plant. Curtis was hired to draft blue prints for the future construction of the Whiting refinery. He was then instructed that the utmost secrecy was demanded of him.

In order to ensure that no one was able to see his plans, Curtis worked on them in the privacy of his home. When his blueprints were completed he was sent to Chicago to establish a purchasing department. In April, 1889, Curtis put Alex Marshall of New York in charge of this department. Two weeks later, Cowan hired Curtis as the master mechanic of the Whiting refinery.

The purchase of land in the Whiting territory had been going on ever since Towle arrived from New York. And although many of Whiting's early settlers looked forward to the arrival of the refinery many also had apprehensions. According to U. G. Swartz's article, "Some Early Days of Whiting," "Those who had sold their places to the Company not only had to leave their homes and land, but they had to stand by and see all that they cherished thoroughly demolished. Gardens and woodlands were uprooted, orchards and shrubbery were swept away, and all was confusion and desolation." The Whiting that these settlers knew was about to change as was their way of life.

In the winter of 1889, the Standard Oil Company went about erecting bunkhouses. The Company built three of these bunk houses: one was used as a office with a drafting room on the second level; one housed a dinning room with bedrooms above it; and the third bunk house was used as a commissary. When W. P. Cowan first arrived at the construction site he used one of these bunkhouses as his residence.

Work on the refinery began on May 5, 1889. On that day seven laborers were put to work clearing away brush and trees. W. A. Barstow served as foreman for these men. Soon teams of workers swarmed the construction site coming from all parts of the country. At all times, during this whole process, Cowan remained secret about the purpose of the construction work.

All business and transaction were carried out in Cowan's name. All of the incoming shipments of material were only accepted by Cowan. Paychecks, tools, and any documents were also only approved by Cowan. He ensured that the purpose of the construction remained secret no matter how many questions were fielded.

This remained the case for several months, until someone leaked the story to the press. In

October 1889, New York representatives of the Standard Oil Company revealed the mystery of what was going on in Whiting, Indiana. Executives of John D. Rockefeller's enterprise admitted that Cowan's name was being used as a cover for the Standard Oil Company. Now that the secret was out work started to take place, full steam.

One of the first tasks was the construction of a waterworks operation in the area. Standard Oil laid a twenty-inch pipeline into Lake Michigan. The pipes were floated over the lake on rafts and then lowered as one piece into the water. Shortly afterwards, contractors built a tunnel under the lake. The tunnel, five feet in diameter, was sunk seventy feet vertically and then driven under the lake for about a half a mile. The tunnel was then connected to a crib at the bottom of Lake Michigan and was marked with a buoy. U. G. Swartz stated that it is worthy to note the foresight in the tunnel's planning. "This tunnel has had the capacity to supply all the increased demands for water due to the numerous enlargements of the plant and also for the town of Whiting."

The next job at the refinery was the construction of immense sewers. The sewers needed to be large enough in order to take on the huge demands required of them. During the construction of the sewers, most of the refinery's land was under water. Where Standard oil built the storage tanks, sand was wheeled into the water to create paths. Sand rings, then, had to be erected surrounding the location of storage tank to serve as a barrier to keep back the flowing water. It was only after this was done that the construction of the storage tanks could be started. Once the tanks were erected it was necessary to travel by boat to get from one tank to the other. After the sewers were in operation for several months much of the water receded and eventually drained.

The next task for Standard Oil's workers was to scrape down the ridges of the sand into low places. A large number of horse teams were hired from the Knickerbocker Ice Company to help in this process. These employees razed the sand ridges, smoothing them down and filling in the existent sloughs in the process. The loose sand was a great burden for the laborers. The leveling and removal of the sand made walking and teaming through the sand extremely difficult.

The sand was so soft and dry that it was almost fluid. Horses stumbled and fell while attempting to pull the heavy vehicles and earth moving machines. Wagons were equipped with great big tires and the trails throughout the plant were covered with straw or hay to prevent the wheels from getting stuck in the deep sand ruts. The workers struggled through the water and wet sand, while hoards of mosquitoes made their lives a living hell during the summer months. By June of 1889, fifteen hundred laborers were now working on the refinery.

To assist W. P. Cowan, who was a short and very heavy man, in navigating the rough terrain an Indian pony was provided for him. Cowan made it his point to be everywhere at one time, so the pony, which he named Bessie, came in handy. Bessie galloped tirelessly throughout the Whiting area with Cowan on her back. Cowan loved horses and made Bessie a pet of his. The pony would come anywhere at Cowan's call. Once it became easier to travel through the refinery, Cowan passed on Bessie to the general foreman of the refinery's labor department. Bessie served the foreman for many years until her old age made her useless. Afraid that someone might harm Bessie, Cowan had her put to death and then buried.

Men were arriving in Whiting from every direction answering the demands of construction work. Large contingents of boilermakers were relocated from Buffalo, New York, under the supervision of George Keimm. These men were put to work building storage tanks North of the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks. Likewise, men from Cleveland, Ohio and among other locales were instructed to construct stills and storage tanks on the South end of the Pency tracks. Due to this division of men, the North side of the refinery was known as the "Buffalo side," and the South side of the plant was called the "Refinery side."

As construction of the plant progressed, additional mechanics were called on from the Eastern refineries and the demand for housing became even greater. Early in 1889 George P. France came from Titusville, Pennsylvania to become plant superintendent. The heads of department under him were: Charles Halsey, boilermaker; Richard Harris, brick mason; J. P. Freeman, carpenter; John N. Gowe, blacksmith; William H. Smith, cashier; N. Seubert, pipe fitter; Dan Mohnkern, common labor; and Ed Mack, tinner.

Although the company erected several bunkhouses for the construction workers, there just were not enough accommodations for everyone. Due to the lack of housing, a special train known as "The Hobo," was added by the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway Company to transport workmen from Chicago neighborhoods making the round-trip from Chicago in the morning, traveling to Whiting, where the train stayed during the day, and returning back to Chicago at the end of the work day. The train carried twelve carloads full of workers and charged a nickel per fare.

As the year 1889 came to a close, the entire land of the refinery was littered with building material of all kinds. U. G. Swartz remembers that it seemed like overnight that the refinery was erected. "The piles of lumber became scaffolding and buildings. Piles of pipes became lines for oil or water. The scattered heaps of bricks became parts of useful construction. Sheets of boiler iron became huge tanks and stills, and the many hundred loads of gravel mixed with cement became foundations." Two side railroad tracks were also laid into the plant: one by the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern company on the "Buffalo Side" and one laid by the Chicago Terminal Transfer Railway on the "Refinery Side".

By the summer of 1890, the refinery's construction neared completion. Standard Oil started to send men to Whiting to set up the administrative offices, soon management personnel from Titusville, Pennsylvania, Cleveland, Ohio and Buffalo, New York began arriving. Beaumont Parks took charge of the Buffalo side of the plant, W. S. Rheem was put in charge of the refinery's oil department, and Fred W. Weller became supervisor of the naphtha department. James A. Moffett, president of the Standard Oil Company, was placed in charge of operations. W. P. Cowan, vice-president of the Company, served in the capacity as Moffett's assistant after he arrived. In addition, Dr. William M. Burton, whom the street Burton Court is named after, was put in charge of the laboratory and inspection department.

Burton was one of the first trained chemists hired by the oil industry. The book titled *The Calumet Region* states that Standard Oil knew that scientists would play a major part in the oil industry's growth. "Recognition of the value of scientists at this early date gave the Standard Oil Company a tremendous advantage over all other oil companies and made it an outstanding leader in research."

Dr. Burton's laboratory was established on the second floor of Herman C. Wuestenfeldt's old farmhouse, with the first floor housing the Superintendent's office. Wuestenfeldt and his family were one of Whiting's early pioneers. The farmhouse was located near the mill house gate. Burton set up his research equipment for experiments in a cow shed located in the rear of the farmhouse. Likewise, another old farmhouse that remained on the refinery site was converted to administrative offices. In 1895, a new modern laboratory was built for Burton. In addition, permanent mechanical shops and boiler houses were constructed replacing the temporary ones that had been erected.

To find out more about Whiting, stop by the Local History Room.