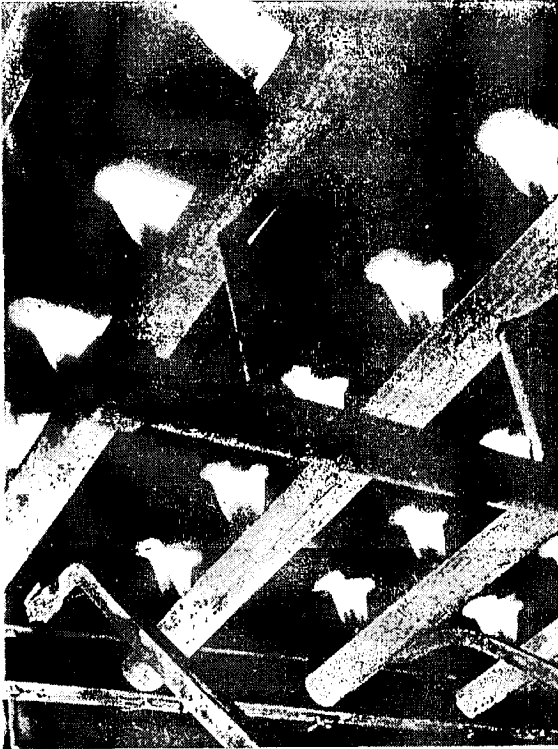


Carbon Black in Harrison County during the Petroleum Boom

by Dorothy Davis

Carbon black factories were important industries in Harrison County during the petroleum boom at the beginning of the twentieth century. The factories, which were strung along the B & O railroad tracks in the western end of the county, are forgotten for the industry, which is remunerative only when it has a cheap source of natural gas, is known as the first to move in and the first to move out when natural gas is discovered. The product at the time of the petroleum boom was used in the manufacture of ink, paints, crayons and anything else where color was important.

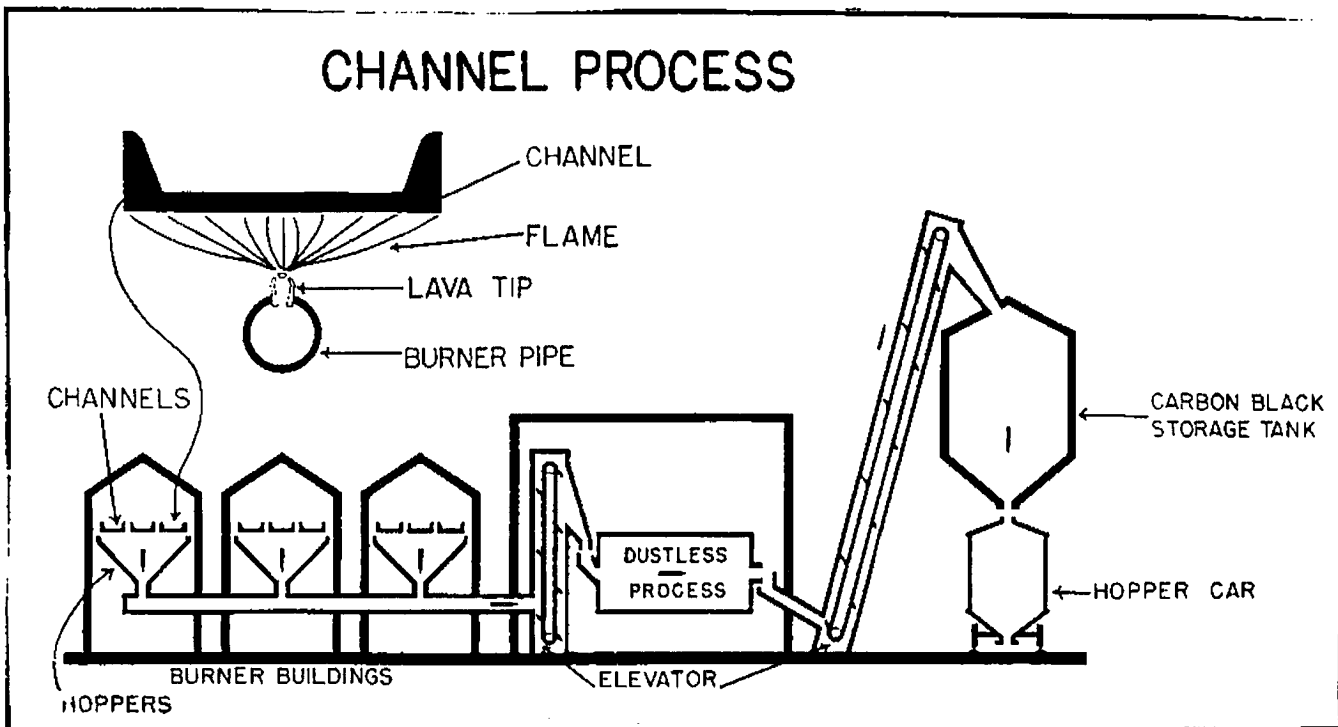
Most of the early factories employed the channel process for the manufacture of carbon black. The factory consisted of maybe 30 metal houses 144 feet long, 12 feet wide, 9 feet high. They were constructed of sheet iron. Steel channels were mounted on a track under which iron burner pipes contained small lava tips of special design for burning gas. A tip may have burned 30 to 75 cu. ft. of gas per 24 hours depending on the quality of black desired, the spacing between the tips and their distance from the channel. The flame produced was luminous, fan-shaped and at right angles to the length of the channel on which it impinged. The operation looked like this:



Flames in a channel process plant. Each flame is a miniature carbon black factory



Overhead view of burner houses



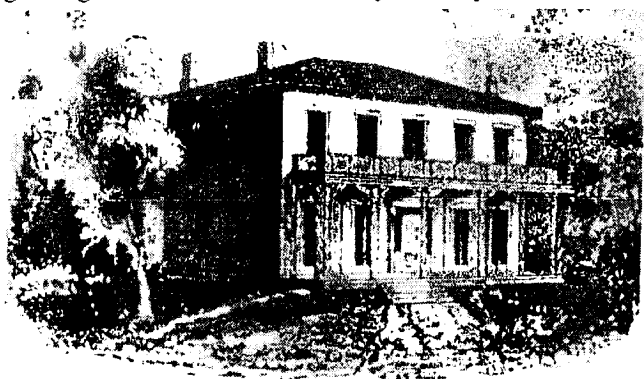
The channels were moved slowly back and forth over the burners and the black deposited by each flame was removed from the channels by scrapers with black falling by gravity to the conveyer.¹

A generation ago old timers would say that they remembered carbon black factories along the B&O tracks everywhere in Doddridge and Harrison counties. In 1999 the researcher can find documentation for only two factories in Harrison County and for four factories in Smithburg alone in Doddridge County. Fredrik Engstrom, born in Sweden in 1862, immigrated to the area of Kane, PA in 1883. From Kane he was sent to Smithburg circa 1905 as superintendent of Castle Brook carbon black factory which was the largest in the world at that time. His daughter remembered that four carbon black factories existed in Smithburg when her family moved there in 1908.²

Of the two factories documented in Harrison County, one was located on Flinderation owned by the Bristol Oil and Gas Company, which Godfrey Cabot bought in 1918 and shut down the carbon black plant.³ The other was the Peerless Carbon Plant in Wilsonburg. We know more about the Peerless, which existed from 1901-1917, because personal letters written by Robert Emory Sellers, superintendent of the factory, have been found.

The fact that both Fredrik Engstrom and Robert Sellers were superintendents of carbon black plants in Kane, PA, in 1898 attests to the abundance of natural gas in the area of Kane. Everyone in the carbon black industry was also a producer of natural gas. On March 25, 1899, Sellers wrote from Kane to his wife in Pittsburgh: "Have been at [well] 345 all day - well down to 2430 feet. At 2405 we got a little more gas. Everything ready to connect to the well and get home Monday if possible. Will wire you."⁴ And again five months later: "Got the gasometer up and it works like clock work." He then mentions wells 3, 4 and 5.⁵

Men attracted to being producers in the drilling business usually were adventurous, risktakers and oftentimes financially secure. Godfrey Cabot, who had graduated from Harvard and had then cast his lot with drilling near Kane, one day in 1897 while driving out to a drilling well said to his companion, "Sir, I am going into West Virginia; they say there is good drilling territory down there to be had at a fair price. We're going down there and see what can be done."⁶ That was the beginning of the extensive Godfrey Cabot petroleum industry in West Virginia.



Evergreen Hamlet
Dwelling of R. E. Sellers 7

One can understand why Robert Sellers wanted life in the new petroleum industry when he knows his family background. Henry Downes Sellers (1790-18_) studied medicine in Baltimore. He established as a physician in Pittsburgh and married Susan Emory of Pittsburgh, sister of famed Methodist Episcopal Bishop Emory. Their son Robert Emory Sellers (1814-1894) was a Pittsburgh druggist who with four of his friends established the first community home development in suburban Pittsburgh, a development called "Evergreen Hamlet." Robert Emory Sellers II signed on with Peerless Carbon Black Company in 1883 and was sent to Kane. Ada Brownfield Sellers was the second wife and was 22 years younger than her husband. By 1904, when R. E. Sellers was fifty-five years old, they would have three young children.

Natural Gas must have been playing out around Kane for January 28, 1906. R. E. Sellers wrote his wife in Pittsburgh from the Waldo Hotel in Clarksburg, WV. He has the room he wanted - 616. It faces northwest. The day is warm and since it is Sunday he will walk around town. He has found "no lets" yet, but real estate agents tell him about the middle of March is better for that. He reports that the worst drawback to Clarksburg is the water - "hard and we will need to distill it as they do or buy drinking water. Am getting along fine making Carboline [sic]. I am making 24 barrels a day - flow 217%. I am going to send Binney and Smith 230 barrels. This is a carload and I think it will last them about six months. You ask about the schools: from what I can learn they are just as good as at home. I have not been able to find Wilson or Carter, the contractors, yet. You know I want them to make or to give me a price on drilling for gas while I am here. I can do better by seeing them than by writing." He wound up his letter by telling her that after she moves to Clarksburg, the two can go to Oakland or Mountain Lake Park for awhile.⁸

Robert Emory Sellers (1904-1974), who was a secondary school principal in Harrison County in the mid-20th century and the son of the former superintendent of the Peerless factory, remembered the factory and the row of company houses in Wilsonburg. He said that at the time his family lived on Lincoln Street in Clarksburg.⁹ Peerless Carbon Black Company was active in the drilling business since the deed book in the county courthouse recorded a total of 43 leases purchased by Peerless between 1902 and 1912.¹⁰

On October 23, 1913, Sellers drew up his last will and testament and on July 31, 1917, he died "following a long illness." His funeral was held the next evening at his home, 208 East Main Street in Clarksburg. "This body will be taken to Pittsburgh Thursday morning on the 5:40 train and burial will be in the Allegheny Cemetery there Thursday afternoon. He is survived by Ada Brownfield Sellers, his wife; Eugene and Robert Sellers, sons; Virginia Sellers, a daughter."¹¹

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FACTORIES
WILSONBURG, W. VA.
KANE, PA.

WILSONBURG, W. VA.
PITTSBURG, PA. Oct 23rd, 1913

My last Will and Testament.

To my beloved Wife, Ada Brownfield Sellers, I bequeath to her without any restriction all my estate in its entirety, and nominate her as Executrix, the appraisal and sale of all my personal property shall be dispensed with, she is not required to give bond, she is to have full charge of all money in bank belonging to me, also, all money that my three children have in bank held by me as trustee, also, to all my Real Estate, and to my stock in The Peerless Carbon-Black CO., and all my Life Insurance.

"Amen"

R. E. Sellers

I have been with The Peerless Carbon-Black CO., since 1883 also a life time spent in making a standard product, as well as making other improvements for the benefit of the company, I trust they will give you at least half of my yearly salary until my three children become of age. 12

According to Catherine Morrison, who in 1999 has lived in Wilsonburg for 86 years, a man by the name of Johnson, who had emigrated from Sweden, took over the factory to manufacture carbon black. Ms. Morrison remembers Johnson's four daughters and that he and his family lived in Wilsonburg in a company house, all of which were painted red.¹³ The very nature of the early carbon black factories was to be "fly by night" and circa the mid-1920's the last of them in Central West Virginia "moved west." Most of the factories went to the oil fields opening in Texas. But Johnson chose to go to Kansas. Roy Custer, a native of the Clarksburg area who had worked for Johnson at Wilsonburg, moved with the plant to Kansas and spent the rest of his life in the west.¹⁴

After scientists found the carbon black added to rubber hardened automobile tires, demand for the product soared and its manufacture became a majority industry.

Footnotes

1. Isaac Drogan, Developments and Status of Carbon Black, United Carbon Company, Inc. Charleston, WV, pp. 34-37.
2. "One carbon black factory stood where the Gaston Body Shop is now located, known as the Castlebrook Carbon Black Company. It was named for a stream called Castlebrook at Kane, PA, where it came from. About 1921 it became Columbia Carbon. About 1905 the Acme Carbon Company on the present site of Geneva Lumber Company came from Muncie, Indiana. Alton and Rusk Davis were the owners. Another known as the Mt. State Co. and built about 1906 or 1908 was located on the old Smithburg 4-H Grounds. It was built by J. L. Mann and Silas Langfitt was president. About 1905 a plant was built by Godfrey Cabot Co. known as Southern Carbon Co. It stood on the Longacre farm near the B&O Watering tank just east of Rock Run." History of Doddridge County, p. 43.
3. Tales of the Old Timer, pp. 8-9.
4. R. E. Sellers to Ada Lou Brownfield Sellers, Mar. 25, 1899.
5. Ibid. Aug. 3, 1899
6. Tales of the Old Timer, p. 5.
7. Stefan Lorant, Pittsburgh, the Story of an American City, p. 107.
8. R. E. Sellers in a letter to Ada Sellers, Jan. 28, 1906.
9. R. E. Sellers in conversation with Dorothy Davis circa 1950.
10. Harrison County Deed Book 192, p. 497; 328, p. 25 are typical deeds for leases; 328, p. 19 is a typical agreement to lay pipe line. 21 rights of way were recorded.
11. The Clarksburg Daily Telegram, Aug. 1, 1917.
12. Sellers Family Papers
13. Catherine Morrison Interview, Jan. 5, 1999.
14. Frances U. Custer in an Interview, Jan. 12, 1999.

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Interviews

Frances Custer, 116 Waverly Way, Clarksburg, WV

Catherine Morrison, 38 Wilsonburg Road, Clarksburg, WV