

To dye for: The history of a chemical plant

The Express Takes a Peek at the Past

By Matt Connor - For The Express

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Today the American Color and Chemical Corporation - commonly known as "the dyeworks" - is remembered largely for the negative impact it reportedly had on the lives of many locals, specifically the damage it did to the environment, according to the EPA, and the effect it allegedly had on the health and well-being of its workers.

But there was a time when the dyeworks was considered a good corporate neighbor to the city of Lock Haven, when it employed more than 350, was listed as one of the top five manufacturers in the field nationally and helped many area families weather the storms of the great depression.

In an article from The Ex-press in 1939, which detailed the history of the then-named American Aniline Products Inc., the company was lauded for its careful expansion strategy.

"The determination of the American Aniline Products Inc. to grow efficiently and on a well-planned foundation has been demonstrated by its courage in extending its activities when the recent depression was at its lowest ebb," an unknown Express reporter opined. "It is understood that in the courage thus displayed the company has been amply repaid."

Those glowing words are a far cry from the reaction one gets these days when one mentions the old dyeworks. Today the company name typically brings deep frowns, nods of regret and dark talk of the dire health consequences suffered by its employees.

Located near the corner of Mount Vernon Street and South Jones Street, the dyeworks began life on the grounds of George J. Patterson's Lock Haven Clay Works, which manufactured terra cotta sewer pipes at the location from 1888 through 1900.

According to the aforementioned 1939 Express piece, the clay works had been vacant for a decade and a half when Edgar F. Heffner, one time secretary of the Pennsylvania State Pharmaceutical Association and a longtime local business booster, read an article about a fellow named Dr. I.V.S. Stanislaus of Philadelphia.

Stanislaus, a chemist and academic, was then in the business of manufacturing phenol, a chemical used in explosives. Heffner, a former student of Stanislaus, thought the good doctor might be convinced to bring his chemical manufacturing facility to the old sewer pipes plant.

Heffner met with some other Lock Haven business associates and civic leaders to hammer out a package of incentives to get Stanislaus to move his business to Clinton County.

It was finally decided that the city would purchase the old sewer pipe plant for \$10,000 (the equivalent of \$124,452 today, according to the Consumer Price Index) and turn the property over to Stanislaus once he had invested a total of \$70,000 (\$871,168 today) in the project and hired 50 local workers. Stanislaus agreed to those terms and established his Stanley Aniline Chemical Company at the location.

Stanislaus and his family moved into the city (and into a house at the corner of Water and Mill streets), secured some capital from investors in Buffalo, N.Y. and promptly lost his shirt. With the close of World War I, the need for explosives - and phenol - plummeted, and the factory was sold in a sheriff's sale.

The next owners of the company had much more success with it, however. Ernest J. Culmann took over the factory's operations, "almost literally pulling the old chemical plant out of the swamp" according to The Express.

Indeed, by 1919 the then-named American Aniline Products Company was doing solid business, thanks to its expansion into the dye-making business and some factory renovations. A front-page article in the Clinton County Times that year, for example, touted the installation of 36 "shower baths" for use by employees, who were coming in regular contact with the "fine quality" blue dye manufactured there.

For the next six decades, the dyeworks was in an almost constant state of expansion. It benefitted hugely from the massive growth of the American industrial Northeast, providing dyes for the highly profitable automotive, textile, paper and food industries.

But conditions at the plant were not always sunshine and lollipops. As early as the 1920s, there were clear warnings that the huge vats of heated chemicals used in the creation of dyes - many of them toxic, acidic and highly flammable - were potential death traps. "\$100,000 Fire at American Aniline Products Co." shouted a front-page headline in the Clinton County Times on Feb. 3, 1922. Indeed, the ultimately determined cost of the fire at Aniline that year was probably closer to \$200,000, the equivalent to \$2.6 million today.

"The fire started in the milling room, where an overheated machine ignited a dust bag immediately enveloping the entire room with smoke, and the flames were conveyed to the wooden rafters," the paper reported.

"Numerous explosions of drums containing nitrobenzol (a highly toxic solvent and perfume additive) caused much excitement among the many onlookers, although there was no danger from this, as was suspected by some," wrote the unnamed Clinton County Times reporter, "A large amount of alcohol was also ignited causing the loudest outbursts, the detonations were easily heard for a mile or more."

Article Photos



Matt Connor

Although the newspaper went into great detail about property losses, nothing was said about loss of life, which - considering the sudden and volatile nature of the fire - had the potential to be significant.

By early 1923 the plant was up and running again, churning out dyes for a growing roster of industrial clients. Still, there was trouble ahead, and it came frequently.

On Jan. 11, 1924, the Clinton Times reported that a South Fairview resident, Roy Robinson, was horribly burned in an explosion at the dyeworks. Two co-workers, Daniel Rhine and William Bower, were also injured.

The men were mixing a batch of dye when the explosion - "thought to have been caused by spontaneous combustion" - occurred. It reportedly "hurled the men off their feet" and ripped the clothes from Robinson's body.

"His entire body, with the exception of his eyes and a small part of his abdomen, was seriously burned," the paper reported. He was rushed to the Teah Hospital, where "slight hope for Robinson's recovery is entertained."

Still the company grew. Still it profited.

Even in the 1930s, when corporate America was buffeted not only by the economic cataclysm but also fierce labor disputes, American Aniline continued to prosper.

In the Spring of 1937 employees of the factory held a strike in protest of the dismissal of a fellow worker. Just the same, the plant remained operating through the strike "as long as the (non-striking) men remain at work," according to then-company technical director Dr. Talfryn James.

Three strikers with surnames familiar to many longtime residents Walter Lucas, Lee Bottorf and Frank Winsloe were arrested during the dispute, but it's unclear whether the union had any impact on the plant's ongoing production.

In the 1960s American Aniline Products Inc. spent \$1 million (the equivalent of \$6.6 million today, based on the Consumer Price Index) on yet another expansion, but by then it was becoming clear to some locals that the benefit to the city and its residents in the form of jobs and cash flow might not quite equal the costs in other ways.

Company executives emphasized that they were aware that residents were not pleased about the air pollution generated by the plant, and announced that new "scrubbing systems would be installed to prevent the escape of fumes and gases."

"Particular note has been made, also, of the water shortages the community has suffered in recent years," The Express reported.

Despite the alleged increased diligence by Aniline executives, however, just a few years later the company would suffer one of its biggest ever public relations setbacks locally. In 1973, 100 locals complained that a strange yellow-tinged substance was coating their cars and homes, causing unspecified "damage."

It turned out to be colored matter that escaped into the air through a hole in a collector bag at American Aniline Inc., according to an Express report of the time. Despite company officials' assurances that the yellow substance was non-toxic, non-corrosive and not harmful to humans, many locals were left with a distinct feeling of unease.

That feeling may have been justified on a number of levels. It became clear in the 1970s that the American Industrial Northeast was in a slow, inexorable decline. The industries that fueled American Aniline's greatest profits textiles and automotive were suffering severe setbacks.

Local powerhouses like Armstrong, Drake Chemical, Bloomsburg Mills and Capital Industries were experiencing rapidly declining profits. Each of those companies would close by the early 1980s.

So would the dyeworks. In 1982 the then-named American Color and Chemical Corporation announced it was ceasing operations in Lock Haven, throwing 140 out of work.

A report obtained by Express reporter Jim Runkle stated the reasons for the closure of the plant were as follows: 1) The very depressed dyestuff economy; 2) The inability to successfully compete in the dyestuff marketplace; 3) Adequate capital requirements cannot be generated to keep the plant facilities up to date; 4) Effluent treatment costs continue to increase.

That last item was of particular interest to those concerned about the local environment. It had been suspected for some time that the dyeworks was having a detrimental effect on local groundwater. An Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) investigation determined that suspicion to have merit.

In 1991 the American Color and Chemical Corporation entered into an Administrative Consent Order with the EPA, and the agency enforced corrective action measures that continued for the next 13 years.

By 1995 the dyeworks had been demolished, and American Color and Chemical, under the enforcement of EPA, began excavating the soil at the former company site.

"The potential exposure pathways for industrial workers via soil include ingestion, absorption through dermal contact, and inhalation," the EPA reported. "Constituents of concern (COCs) found in the soil include arsenic, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), 2-nitroaniline, nitrobenzene. An assessment, which assumes that the site may be developed for residential use in the future although no plans currently exist, suggest exposure pathways via groundwater and soil including ingestion, inhalation and dermal contact. The COCs found in the groundwater include aluminum arsenic, chromium, copper, manganese, mercury and nickel."

In simpler terms, the workers and residents of the area surrounding the dyeworks had, according to EPA findings, been exposed to some pretty nasty chemicals over the decades the facility had been in operation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some relatives of former dyeworkers still react in barely disguised horror when mention of American Aniline or its corporate variations comes up in conversation. They talk of dyeworks employees whose skin remained a perpetual shade of orange as a result of constant exposure to the dyes and other chemicals, and of health consequences even cancer that they believe their relatives suffered as a result of their long exposure to these toxins.

Friday morning I asked my colleague, Jim Runkle, about his coverage of the environmental cleanups that took place in the city from the 1980s through the early 21st Century, both as a result of the EPA rulings on American Color and Chemical and the Superfund designation at the former Drake Chemical site.

Drake, formerly located at Myrtle Street, may have had an even worse impact on the local environment than even the dyeworks.

Jim said he was in his early years as a reporter for The Express in the days when the dyeworks closed its doors for good, but remembers learning more about toxic chemicals, as a result of his reportage of the environmental cleanups, than he ever cared to know.

What about the employees of these companies who allegedly suffered dire health consequences as a result of their exposure to these chemicals, I asked him.

"Most of them," Jim said, "are dead now."

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