

Yesteryears

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George pottery largest in U.S.

Empire built with local clay

By Lois Firestone

PROFESSOR HENRY ASH-bridge's musicians were swinging into a few jazz numbers while Strong Man Paul Kridler was showing off his muscles before a six-deep circle of awed young boys. It was Aug. 24, 1921, and the occasion was the W. S. George Pottery picnic, held every year for the potters and their families at the East Palestine fairgrounds.

Over the clamor and blaring horns, the voice of R. G. Sutherin reverberated: "George Rockenberger's Men O' War, gentlemen, has won the tug of war again!"

The Men O' War was another name for the potters in the clay shop and the tug of war was only one event scheduled during the day-long party — a three-mile automobile race, baseball throwing contest and boxing bouts, to name a few.

The women's race only drew two contenders, Minnie Garside who came in first, and Blanche Shaw, who ended in second place. Before the event, most women modestly

expressed their horror at having to don bloomers, the prescribed costume, and then forced to perform before a large, and most likely, wildly hooting crowd.

And the spectators did enthusiastically cheer on both Minnie and Blanche, because these contests were taken seriously by the 800 employees and their families, and the competition was fierce.

At the pottery, though, everyone worked together, and the reason was the owner, William Shaw George. On the day of the picnic, the 56-year-old owner was sauntering from one group to another, sipping lemonade and munching a wiener sandwich. The largest individual owner of a pottery in the country and probably the world, W.S. knew every worker well and they knew him.

Only Homer Laughlin made more ware than the eight George potteries with their 43 gloss and brick kilns and 36 decorating kilns. The company payroll in 1921 was \$1.1 million; 23 years earlier, his first year of managing the East Liverpool pottery, workers' salaries totalled \$52,000.

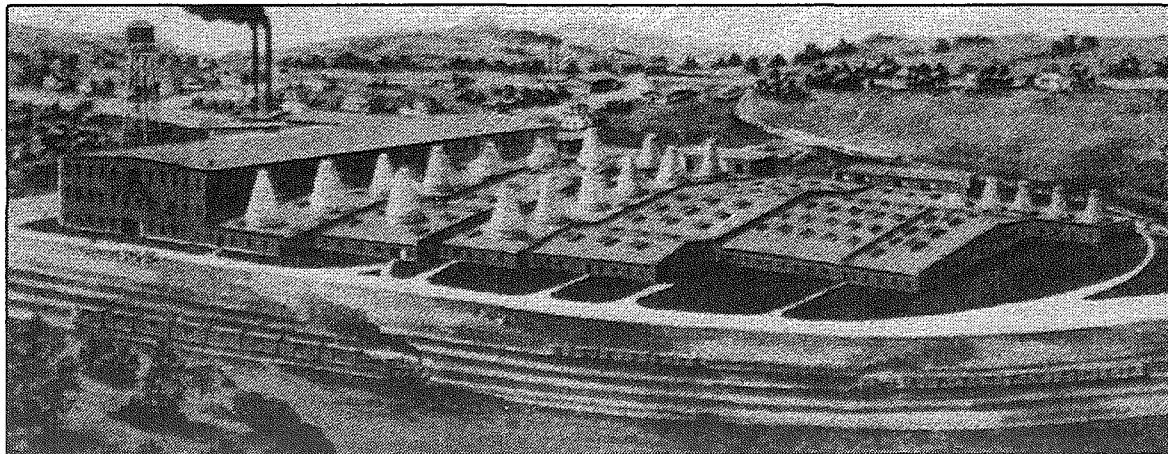
W. S. was 32 when he found work as a decorator foreman at the Ohio China Co. in East Liverpool. A year later, in 1898, he launched his own business when he took over the East Palestine Pottery, the site that later became plant four in the chain.

William Shaw and Mary Cavett George were hard-working farmers who expected young William to do his share of the chores on the Dry Run Station farm where he was born the year the Civil War ended. When the elder George learned the pottery trade after the family moved into town, his young son took up the trade, too.

By the time he was in his 30s, W. S. had a personal working



The mens dipping room crew at the W. S. George Pottery pose for the photographer in this 1916 photograph. R. B. Stewart stands with arms folded at far right. Photos loaned by Baird Stewart and the East Palestine Historical Society.



The W. S. George pottery complex lies along acres of land in East Palestine in this postcard loaned by Baird Stewart.

knowledge of every phase of the pottery business, from clay room to sales. As a salesman, he learned his customers' needs and filled them. Throughout his career, he kept in touch with jobbers and did his own selling. His word was his bond.

He was 22 when he married Anna Stewart Campbell of Philadelphia. They had nine children: William Campbell, who became company vice president; John Stewart, Lois, Robert Barnett, Janet and W.S. Jr., who stayed on in East Palestine after they were grown; Frank Cavett and Mrs. J. L. Adams of Kittanning, Pa.

where the company had a branch; and Dorothy Woodard of Asheville, N. C. Anna, like her husband, was active in community affairs until, after 34 years of marriage, she died in 1921.

The year 1910 was a prosperous one for the company and W.S. added on several kilns and departments. He hired 75 more workers, bringing the total to 375. The 14-kiln plant was fourth in size among U.S. potteries. That same year George potteries started using natural gas from the George gas line which ran from Negley through Pine

Hollow.

By 1912, 750 men and women, almost an equal number of each, were working in the two shops when they were running at full capacity, and that was most of the time. The exception was a few weeks in the summer when the shops shut down for repairs.

Most workers were skilled journeymen who worked three to five years to learn the trade: jiggers, whirlers, footers, liners, pressers, packers, casters, moulders, chippers, spongers, fillers-in, batters-out.

See George, page 4



William Shaw George, owner of the East Palestine pottery.

George

Continued from page 1

They produced high quality ware speedily. Five fruit dishes were made every minute, hour by hour, for nine hours a day, six days week.

The potters were the best-dressed in town. They worked hard, made good wages and spent freely. W. S. never missed getting their pay to them, either. When other businesses were handing out script, he was giving his workers envelopes full of cash, every two weeks before noon on Saturday. One time, he cashed in an insurance policy to meet the payroll.

W. S. was a believer in helping others outside his factories. He gave \$50,000 to build a hospital in Abyssinia, continuing to contribute to the institution over the years, and was a trustee of the University of Cairo in Egypt.

Immersed in the missions work of the local United Presbyterian Church, he was a strict tither. He never missed a prayer meeting when he was home.

East Palestine was a special place to him, and he often said that "I never feel so happy when on a trip as when I have my face turned toward East Palestine, have finally crossed the Pennsylvania line and can say, 'home again.'"

The main office and showroom was in East

Palestine, but as the business grew, offices and permanent display rooms were leased in New York City and Chicago.

Hopeful buyers wandering the aisles of Chicago's Merchandise Mart saw a room filled with dishes made in East Palestine, displayed with gilt letter placards reading "W. S. George Pottery Co., East

Palestine, Ohio."

Samples of EPPCo ware, along with the company's three other potteries were displayed at pottery shows each year, focusing on the latest patterns and shapes.

W. S. spent most of his time on the road, and products moved to all sections of the country. In the early years, basins, pails, combinets and chambs were sent to the southern markets. Cuspidors went to stores, hotels and offices everywhere. Hotel and home dinnerware was distributed widely, and five and ten-cent store shelves were filled with George ware.

The union was a strong one at George potteries from the beginning. The local had affiliated with the national Brotherhood of operative Potters by 1897, becoming NBOP No. 31.

Over the years, major strikes were unheard of. Even minor flareups seldom occurred at the George company.

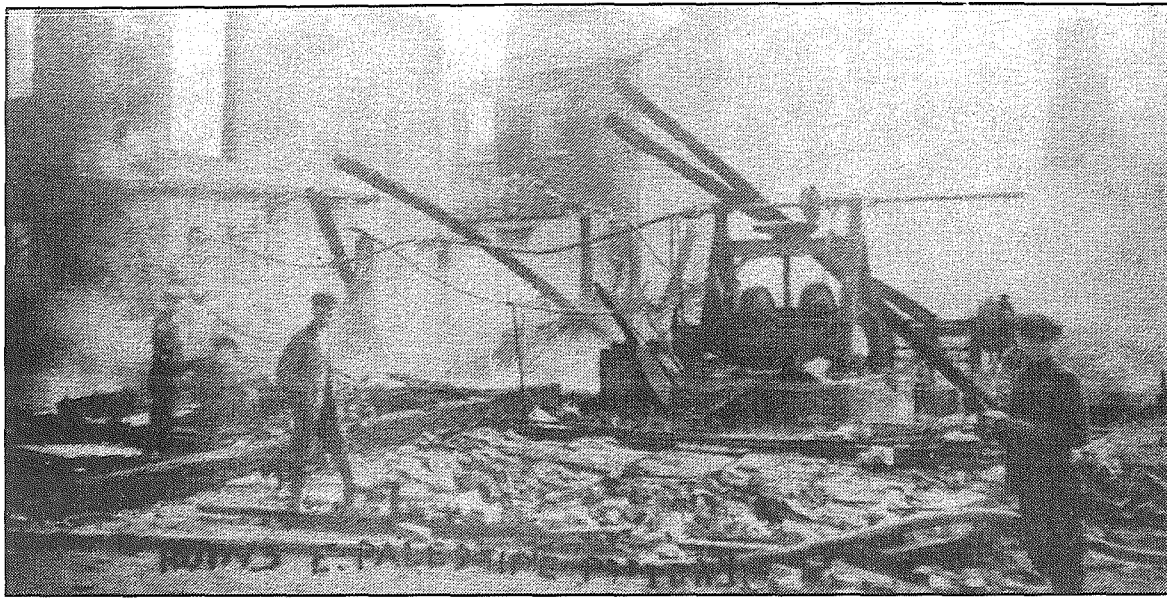
Only two accidental deaths marred the company's high safety standards. Ernest Bruno's father was squeezed to death between box cars on a rail siding. And Jim Clark's son was crushed under a belt in the sagger room.

A disaster which threw 200 workers out of a job was the blaze which wiped out the Old Shop, the original East Palestine Pottery plant, in the early morning hours of Sunday, May 5, 1912.

Henry Ashbridge, the night watchman at the railroad crossing, turned in the alarm shortly after 2 a.m. but firefighters couldn't save the building. The \$125,000 loss was only partially covered by insurance.

In 1920, W. S. started rebuilding the plant on the ruins. The three kilns of the old Feustal Pottery were repaired and W.S. added others, making a total of five glost, four bisque and eight decorating kilns.

The two-floor building measured 405 by 156 feet. The



The shells of kilns can be seen in the smoldering ashes of the blaze which destroyed the Old Shop, the original pottery building, after the disastrous 1912 George pottery fire which threw 200 employees out of work.



The women and men in the dipping room gather during their busy work day in January 1916. R. B. Stewart is standing in the center of the photograph.

combined capacity would be 38 kilns, including the local kilns and those at Cannonsburg and Kittanning.

W.S. didn't live to see the completion of the work on the new plant. In early April 1925, he and his daughter, Lois were stopping over in New York City after a month's trip abroad. His traveling companion on stays in Central America and the West Indies after Anna's death, Lois left for a brief visit with her sister Dorothy in North Carolina.

Alone in his room at the Hotel Astor, W. S. was stricken with a severe heart attack. He never recovered and died four days later, at 5 a.m. on Easter Sunday morning, April 12,

1925. At his bedside were three daughters and three sons and

his nephew, Willard George.

Word of his death stunned the people of East Palestine, and businesses and industries shut down April 15 in deference to the man the town revered. Crowds gathered at the United Presbyterian Church for the funeral that day.

The Daily Leader editor echoed the feelings of many: "His modesty forbade that he ever claim to have placed East Palestine on the map, but always insisted that East

Palestine had put him on the map. This tells the cause of the sadness that pervades every home and heart today...a world traveler and donor of large sums to foreign institutions, his home held the largest and warmest place in his

heart...Today, as the lifeless body passed along our streets for the last trip, making home for the last time, every citizen felt that he had lost a personal friend. These are the things that make men great."

20 YEARS AGO

JULY 6: Walter Rutzky was named chairman of the Leetonia Board of Public Affairs.

JULY 7: George C. Equizi has been promoted to executive vice president of the Community National Bank in Flushing.

JULY 8: Charles F. Prince was installed as commander of Salem Commandery No. 42 Knights Templar of Ohio.

JULY 9: Frank Blankenship was hired as assistant principal for Beaver Local Public School.

JULY 10: Bruce A. Burgett has accepted the position of manager of Carroll Landmark Inc.

JULY 11: Susan (Stanton) Katz received her law degree from Akron University School of Law.

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