

A Peek At The Past:

When the Manns of Mill Hall made axe-making history

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By MATT CONNOR , The Express

For 79 years it was the dominant tool manufacturer of its kind, churning out hundreds of axes per day at its peak and earning a vast fortune for the family that established the impressive Mann Axe factory along Fishing Creek in Mill Hall.

Today there is little to show for the massive enterprise that once flourished there. The factory itself has been gone for decades and the products it produced can these days only be found in the hands of a few avid collectors.

As for the Mann family home, a grand Queen Anne that once graced West Main Street, that too has been gone for decades.

The story of the Mann Axe factory begins around 1848, when the Robert Mann family settled in Mill Hall and established what was initially a relatively modest business endeavor. The factory started out manufacturing just 20 axes per day, but after expansions in 1863 and 1876, the plant increased its output to over 400 axes per day.

Other factories - including one in Lewistown - followed, and according to John Blair Linn's 1883 "History of Centre and Clinton Counties," by 1877 the Mann family were "the most extensive manufacturers of axes in the world, making at their various factories two thousand eight hundred axes per day, or eight hundred and forty thousand per year, and their trade and reputation extends around the globe.



"The success of the Mann axe is due to close attention to one business and constant care to keep their goods up to the highest point of excellence," Linn wrote.

A first-person account on the history of the factory, which appears to have been written by family patriarch Robert Mann (but which is incomplete and contains no byline) tells of the early ambitions of the family, and how at age 25, and with the partnership of his brother William, Robert "had an opportunity" to grow a business: "true, that growth was as from the mustard seed, very small and enfeebled by want of capital, want of experienced workmen, and want of reputation in the market. These difficulties caused growth to be very slow, but it was very satisfactory that year by year there was a growth. And without the exercise of any extraordinary ability on my part, my unintermitting attention to the details of the business was having its effect on production, and the goods were winning in the market."

There were myriad challenges beyond those mentioned above, of course. The factory itself was destroyed by fire twice in its early years. In the fall of 1877 it was burned to the ground, but the determined Manns had a brand new factory built and equipped by May of that year. It was said to be even larger and more productive than the previous factory.

Three sons, Thomas, Alfred and Joseph joined the enterprise, and in the 1880s, as their father was easing himself out of the business, they faced yet another major challenge.

In 1882, the employees of the factory launched a strike, described in the unauthored narrative in the Heisey Museum files as "a bitter and determined fight."

To compensate for the experienced workers who refused to work in the factory unless their demands were met, the Manns hired "green" employees as replacements. This "played havoc with stock, and many axes were made that had to be sold as seconds; but after two months it was clear that the new men, with the help of a few experienced ones, were gaining ground, and the strikers saw and felt it."

The strike finally collapsed after about three months, and it wasn't long thereafter that the elder Mann sold his interest in the factory to his three sons.

Along with fire and labor issues, the Manns faced other disasters, including the great flood of 1889, which devastated the factory and occurred during the busiest season of the year, when the goods were being prepared to fill fall orders. But the family persevered, made necessary repairs to the factory and continuing to flourish.

Indeed, in 1893 Thomas R. Mann, a member of the third generation of the Mann family, used the generous proceeds from the axe business to build a spectacular house in the Queen Anne style on West Main Street.

This beautiful home featured many distinctive Queen Anne features, and was perhaps the most impressive home of its kind in the city, with its fishscale slate shingled roof with decorative filials, the octagon and hip roofed dormers, the three-story corner tower with third floor Queen Anne windows, pilasted chimney and sunburst gable-end panels.

It stood at 514 W. Main St. until well into the 1980s, when later owners unfortunately allowed it to fall into disrepair and a fire damaged its third floor. Located next door to a fraternity house during that period, the old Mann home, then owned by the Miller family, was a source of curiosity to many college students who passed by the property on the way to cheap beer parties on Friday nights.

Over 20 years ago the city condemned the property due to ongoing deterioration. Sadly, demolition followed. It was an ignominious end for a tremendous house with a wonderful history, but it would soon get worse. As a final indignity, the vacant lot upon which the house once stood is now home to a pizza stand that - to put it mildly - hardly suits the neighborhood's residential nature.

The end came for the Mann factory itself when it was completely consumed by fire in 1926. Then known as the Mann Edge Tool Company it had by then been in operation for almost 80 years. Its loss put about 40 men out of work.

According to an Express article on the conflagration, "The Mill Hall fire company responded in a very short time and three streams were played on the burning building, but the flames had gained such headway that it was impossible to check them.

"Added difficulty was given by the fact that the plant was operated by crude oil and the oil tanks and oil lines exploded. So fierce was the blaze that telephone poles along the road burned. The high tension lines of the Pennsylvania Power and Light company run on the opposite side of the road, and the company was informed of the danger of high tension wires coming down, and cut off the current until the blaze was extinguished."

Today little is left to indicate that a massive business enterprise once churned out thousands of axes a week in Mill Hall, and was a major economic engine for the area. There are, however, two local auto mechanic shops - Axe Factory Auto and Mann Garage - which adopted their names from the former business giant. Neither is associated with the Mann family, though one of the proprietors of the Mann Garage said he is an avid Mann Axe collector.

And then there is the Mann family ghost, said to still linger within the city. As wealthy and prominent as the Manns were in their time, it's not surprising that a few of them married into some of the other socially prominent families of the era, like those related to one-time Lock Haven mayors L.A. Mackey and S.D. Ball.

Local paranormal investigators believe one of those Mann family members, Jeanne Mann Heisey, daughter of Thomas R. and Annie Mann, is one of the spirits who haunt the Heisey Museum today. The Heisey had been her longtime home at the time of her death in 1947.

At that time, the original Mann family homestead at 514 W. Main St. was likely still at the height of its architectural glory. One wonders what Jeanne would think of a Pizza Express having replaced the beautiful old Queen Anne of her youth.

Maybe one of those paranormal investigators should hold a seance to ask her. Then again they might not like the answer they get.

POST SCRIPT: In response to my article "Lost in the Beech Creek Mountains: One family's 13-hour ordeal," published Sept. 3, I received a call from Ed Norris, the father of the family described in that story. The 80-year-old Norris said his family often talks about their adventure in the mountains of central Pennsylvania all those decades ago. He now resides in upstate New York but has warm memories of his life in Beech Creek.

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