

A FINAL BLAST OF MOLTEN ORE, THEN QUIET - BETHLEHEM'S RULE IN STEEL AND IRON GUTTED BY PROGRESS

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Bethlehem's steelmaking tradition died yesterday in a final, nostalgic gush of metal and fire.

As workers opened the side of the blast furnace for the last time and iron began to flow, everything fell silent while steel worker Herman Stengl whistled "Amazing Grace" over a speaker system on the furnace floor.

"They were all really sentimental. It brought back a lot of memories," said 42-year steel worker John Tiwold, who retired from the blast furnace in 1992 but came back on the last day. "Say what you want about the steel company, but it was a great place to work."

About 500 people lost their jobs as Bethlehem Steel Corp. turned off the final operating blast furnace and basic oxygen furnace, huge structures within which iron ore, limestone and coke became iron and then steel.

In a season of layoffs and shutdowns in the Bethlehem plant, this is the biggest hit. By the end of the year, 1,800 steel worker jobs will remain, or about half the number there were before the cutbacks started.

It was part funeral, part retirement party, part media spectacle. Outside the plant gates, some workers angrily brushed aside television crews, others fought tears and a few embraced their moment before the cameras.

"Is this my 15 minutes of glory or what?" said 31-year steel worker Woody Stauffer of Hellertown, who lost his job in the basic oxygen furnace with the end of the day shift. He was there in 1968 when the furnace opened, and he said the routine was the same up to the last day.

"It's a regular day," Stauffer said. "Nothing will change until the last heat is poured and it shuts down, and then the noise stops."

The huge ladles and furnaces dwarfed the powerful steel workers who worked there. Heat and noise were intense as long tubes called lances fired oxygen into the molten metal with a deafening roar.

There were some patriotic touches as the ladle poured the final heat into the furnace. Someone hung an American flag from the crane that carried the ladle, and the public address system played "God Bless America."

Once, like the blast furnaces, the basic oxygen furnace was a technological wonder that promised huge profits to those who invested in the heavy costs of construction. Those days ended with the advent of minimills that use cheaper techniques to melt steel from scrap metal.

The end came yesterday just before noon at the blast furnace and just after 5 p.m. at the basic oxygen furnace. Everything was supposed to be over by 3, but the last cast at the blast furnace yielded so much iron it took extra time for the crew to turn it into steel.

Outside the blast furnace in the morning, a dozen onlookers lined up with cameras on a levee along the Lehigh River to watch the end. Tiwold, the retired steel worker, was there as were two photographers who camped overnight.

Tom Baker of Whitehouse Station, N.J., said he'd been visiting the steel plant for months to photograph it before it disappeared. "It's kind of quiet today," he said. "I thought there'd be a lot more people."

The deck of the dark, foreboding "C" furnace came alive with sparks and flames at 10:15 a.m. as workers cut into the furnace for the last time to let the iron flow. A horn sounded three times to signal the tapping of the furnace.

One worker appeared on the stairs from the furnace with a cardboard sign that said "No. 3 Furnace, Last Cast, 11/18/95." Someone had already written "Thanks for the memories" on the door.

The final heat of iron flowed for an hour and 40 minutes, almost until noon. From the levee, workers appeared as black silhouettes against a backdrop of orange sparks and fire. Some had the day off but came to watch.

When it was over, one worker from the furnace floor emerged and threw the headpiece of his silver fireproof suit from the top of the stairs.

A half hour later, a flatbed truck took the first piece of equipment out of the 85-year-old structure. By the end of the day, workers would seal the furnace to prevent gases from leaking and allow the furnace to cool.

Blast furnaces have stood along the Lehigh River in South Bethlehem since the Civil War, and the first iron was made in the city in 1857.

Now the four blast furnaces, including three that already were silent, and the basic oxygen furnaces will be demolished. Bethlehem Structural Products, the plant's main subsidiary, will include only the coke works and a mill to make beams with steel from elsewhere.

A few workers will remain to watch the equipment, make sure the blast furnace cools properly and get things ready for demolition. The small BethForge and Centec subsidiaries will continue within the plant after the shutdown.

Last month, Bethlehem Steel closed the 87-year-old mill that rolled beams for landmarks such as the George Washington Bridge and Madison Square Garden. Executives said the plant lost millions of dollars in recent years in a shrinking market for its signature big beams.

Structural Products President Tim Lewis appeared at the blast furnace as the last cast ended around noon. He shook hands with dozens of workers who stood and watched as iron poured into insulated "submarine" railroad cars for the last time.

"It's very difficult," Lewis said. "It's difficult for everyone that's associated with it. You feel good. You feel proud for the people -- but also sad."

Lewis said workers kept productivity high to the end and avoided serious injuries or environmental lapses. Many of the workers who are losing their jobs spent 20 or 30 years in the plant, as did their fathers and grandfathers, in many cases.

"Certainly there's a lot of pride in what's gone before," Lewis said. "You know there are monuments all over this country built out of Bethlehem steel. Everyone's proud of that and proud of their co-workers."

At the United Steelworkers union hall, things were quiet on shutdown day. Local 2599 will hold a farewell meeting Tuesday night for the workers who are losing their jobs, local President Dan Mills said Friday.

"I see people come over here all day that have been here 30 years and saying their farewells," he said. "It's hard."

It was hard for basic oxygen furnace worker John Haleckho, who left the Emery Street gate after his final shift and said he was "sad, mad and glad." His friend Mike Eck walked with him; they worked there for 30 years.

"I'm just about crying about it right now," Eck said.

In the last few days, almost every shift has included workers who were leaving for the last time. A group loaded its last beams in the shipping yard on Friday, and Jim Kresley of Allentown made his way out of the basic oxygen furnace yesterday at dawn.

Kresley was one of the workers who tried to accept the end without anger. Many seemed resigned to the shutdown after a decade of rumors and more than a year of planning, and Kresley said he'd do what he always does after working all night.

"Nothing unusual. I got to go home and get some sleep," he said. "To tell you the truth, I thought it was going to end before this."

Caption:

2 PHOTOS by TOM VOLK, The Morning Call