

BUILDING LOCOMOTIVES IN BLOOMSBURG

By the Editor

There used to be a locomotive factory in Bloomsburg? Really?

That was my skeptical reaction when the Society received two inquiries recently about the “Bloomsburg Locomotive Works.” Well, yes, it turns out, there was such a factory. For a decade beginning in 1919, industrial and mining locomotives were built in Bloomsburg. Intended for local industrial hauling, not for inter-city trains, these engines helped excavate tunnels and transport logs as far west as San Francisco and as far south as Chile in South America.

The locomotive-building factory came to Columbia County in 1919 as the production arm of a New York City firm known as the Bell Locomotive Works. Public-spirited citizens of Columbia County raised \$50,000 to convince the firm to move its factory from New Jersey to Bloomsburg, where it took over the empty foundry and machine shop of a company which had manufactured brass tubes and sheets. After just two years, though, the Bell Locomotive firm couldn't pay its mortgage, the bank foreclosed, and ownership of the plant passed to trustees for the local subscribers, who chartered a company called Bloomsburg Locomotive Works. This new firm prospered for a few years, manufacturing a variety of industrial locomotives, but then it in turn failed by 1928, and no more locomotives were built in Columbia County.

The fascinating story of this factory begins in Yonkers, New York, where the local agent for the Stanley Steamer autos was an enterprising young man named Harvey Bell. One day in 1908 he drove his gleaming Stanley Steamer out to tour the construction of the huge Catskills Aqueduct which was planned to bring pure, cold mountain water to a million New York City faucets. Noticing the oil-fired locomotive which labored to haul excavated dirt away from the site, he remarked to the construction supervisor that he thought a steam-power locomotive might haul the load faster at half the fuel cost.

Bell set to work to design and construct such a locomotive. His first effort was little more than a Stanley auto on railroad wheels, but after many refinements he left his job with Stanley and opened Bell Locomotive, Inc. The firm had offices in New York City and sold locomotives for specialized industrial, logging and mining uses all across the Americas. Sales leaflet No. 134 from the early 1920s exhibits an array of nine different models, each of which was available in different sizes and could be adapted for any track gauge (see illustrations).

Bell locomotives were all steam-driven at first. Innovative features included a boiler wound with piano wire to make it incredibly strong, able to withstand pressures of up to 500 pounds per square inch (and thus producing much more power for the boiler size than other locomotive designs). The locomotives were also made with relatively few moving parts, to keep operation and maintenance simple, and with standardized parts, to make it possible to build a variety of sizes and models at low cost. Other advantages touted in their sales brochure included:

- Lowest in price.
- Uses cheapest fuel: kerosene, fuel oil, distillate or crude oil.
- 50% greater tractive effort than direct connected locomotives of equal weight.
- One man operated.
- No smoke or sparks.
- Only 15 minutes to fire up from cold.
- More speed than any other locomotive of same class.

For unknown reasons, in 1919 Bell was looking to move his manufacturing plant out of New Jersey. The Bloomsburg Board of Trade somehow learned of his intent and set to work to entice the

Bell firm to a vacant factory in Bloomsburg. This energetic group of civic-minded local citizens had organized in 1886 when the iron industry began to fade as the local iron-ore deposits gave out. They worked vigorously to bring new industries to the town; among their successes were the Bloomsburg Mills textile firm and the Magee Carpet Company.

In 1919 the Board was trying to find a new firm to fill the void when a local brass manufacturing firm closed. Originally the Harman Cogger Company in 1902, the brass firm changed name in 1904 to Bloomsburg Foundry and Engineering Works. Within a few years this firm failed and its large shop at the northwest corner of Catherine and Ninth Streets sat idle (the site is now a building-supply lot).

The Board of Trade initiated a public-subscription campaign to raise \$50,000, the price which the Bell firm had stated was needed to move its machinery to Bloomsburg. On March 21st the *Morning Press* reported that the effort was still far short of its goal and noted that when Bloomsburg was only a village \$30,000 had been raised to bring the woolen mill to the area. The day before the deadline, the fund was still \$6,800 short of the target, but in a public meeting in the evening of the deadline day, March 24th, at 9pm the pledge drive finally reached its goal. The company's president, Mr. Stokes, a brother of New Jersey's former governor, arrived that evening "just in time to see the whirlwind finish that put the proposition across."

Over 200 pledges were received for the fund. The subscribers included a broad cross-section of Bloomsburg residents: 36 merchants, 3 butchers, 5 doctors, 8 lawyers, 13 bank directors, 2 automobile dealers, 5 manufacturers, 3 farmers, 1 barber, 2 hotelmen, 2 coal dealers, 7 real estate and insurance, 2 printing firms, 3 plumbers, and 4 teachers.

With machinery quickly moved from New Jersey, the former brass foundry's shops became a locomotive factory. In a complicated series of transactions, ownership of the 1.86 acres with foundry and machine shop had passed from an investor named Friedberg to John and Jennie Bodine of New York City (1914), to Estelle Wohlgemuth, also of NYC (1914, for \$1) to A. Bruce Hartman of Bloomsburg (1915, for \$1), and finally to Bell Locomotive Works (1919, for \$1). Hartman was acting on behalf of the subscribers to the fund to set up the company in the empty foundry buildings.

Walsh's 1922-1923 Bloomsburg Directory lists the Bell Locomotive Works (Inc.), with Robert F. Ensminger as manager. The firm's headquarters had shifted from New York City to Dover, Delaware, probably for tax advantages. When the firm began operations in Bloomsburg, however, it listed Bloomsburg as its corporate seat. A considerable number of locomotives were produced at the Ninth Street plant before the company ran into financial difficulties.

By 1922 the Bell Company was unable to meet its mortgage payments, and the mortgage-holder, the Columbia County Trust Company, foreclosed. On May 27, 1922 the bank sold the land and buildings at public auction for \$1,000; the successful bidders, trustees for the former subscribers, were D. J. Waller, Jr., W. R. Kocher, and A. Bruce Hartman. Waller was the son of Rev. David J. Waller, longtime Presbyterian pastor in Bloomsburg, who had done more than any other single person to change Bloomsburg from a sleepy village to a lively industrial and transportation center. The son, who was the Principal of the State Normal School on the hill at Bloomsburg, followed his father as a civic booster and local real-estate magnate.

Having bought the land, buildings, and machinery, the local trustees on May 23, 1922 obtained a charter for a new company, Bloomsburg Locomotive Works, which was formed "for the purpose of manufacturing and selling locomotives, cars, trucks and other industrial railway equipment." There were twelve initial share-holders, all residents of Bloomsburg; among them were the five directors or officers of the corporation: A. B. Hartman, W. R. Kocher, R. F. Ensminger, E. S. Stackhouse, and D. J. Waller Jr. The firm had a capital stock of just \$1,400, but the previous subscription fund sharers (\$50,000) now held the mortgage on the land and buildings.

The new firm built and sold locomotives for a few years. One of their engines is shown in operation hauling excavated soil from the Western Avenue water tunnel in Chicago; clearly visible on the locomotive's side, cast into the metal, are the words "BLOOMSBURG LOCOMOTIVE WORKS / BLOOMSBURG PA" The firm continued at least until 1925, when it was listed in *Walsh's 1925-1926 Bloomsburg Directory* with A. B. Hartman as head officer and R. F. Ensminger as "sec & mgr." A year or two later, however, the firm failed, and no business is listed for the Ninth Street location in the 1928 directory.

The website "steamlocomotive.com" lists hundreds of still-existing steam locomotives in the Americas, many of them in museums, but not one of those was made by Bloomsburg Locomotive Works. (If you know of any such, please notify the Society.) There is, however, at least one Bell locomotive still in operation, at the Roaring Camp Railroads, a tourist line among redwood groves in Felton, California. Its date of manufacture is not certain, but odds are that it was built in Bloomsburg, the only known example of a once-proud Columbia County product line.

SOURCES:

"Bell Geared Steam Locomotives" on the "Geared Steam Locomotive Works" website at <http://www.gearedsteam.com/bell/bell.htm> (with illustrations of nine Bell locomotive types); and at the same website a transcription of G. W. O'Connor, "Bell Engines," *Railroad*, February 1946.

"The Bell Locomotive," undated company brochure, courtesy of Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, Kennesaw, Georgia.

Articles in Bloomsburg's *The Morning Press* on March 21, 24, and 25, 1919.

Columbia County Deeds 72:677, 88:201, 88:455, 92:314, 97:86, 97:88; Columbia County Miscellaneous Book, 12:209.

Sanborn Insurance Maps for Bloomsburg (NYC: priv. ptd., 1922), pl. 18.

Photo of engine from the collection at the Western Avenue Pumping Station, Chicago, courtesy Kate Corcoran.