

Monday, April 25, 2011 – Observer-Reporter (by Cara Host)

The PEOPLE's TOWN



An early 20th Century photo of Brave, Pennsylvania, after Peoples Natural Gas Company established a compressor station in the Greene County community.

Greene County in Pennsylvania has been experiencing a Marcellus Shale natural gas boon for the past few years, but it's all old hat for the folks there in Brave.

Brave had its own natural gas boon nearly 100 years ago, when Peoples Natural Gas Co. of Pittsburgh decided this little hamlet on the banks of Dunkard Creek was the perfect place to build what became the largest gas compressor station in the world.

"It was nothing then, just a few farmers," said Jerry Blue, a retired engineer who grew up in Brave but now lives in Ohio.

Blue frequently returns to his hometown and he and a group of fellow Brave natives share a keen interest in its history. The group of amateur historians parlayed their knowledge into a book, "A Village Called Brave," which is in its second printing.

Just as the compressor station featured prominently in the lives of Brave residents until it closed in 1959, the station is also a big part of the book.

James Hoy, a Brave native now living in Virginia, was the main editor, but at least a half dozen other people contributed articles, photographs and personal accounts during the three years it took to write it.

Folks from this oddly named town, which straddles the Mason-Dixon Line in Wayne Township, gather at the fire hall every June to swap remembrances of what it was like growing up in Brave. At one point, someone suggested they ought to commit these stories to paper.

"I think we looked at each other and realized that we're the last link to the past and when we're gone, all of this history is gone," Blue said.

The book has several personal essays of life during the compressor station era, from 1906 to 1959.

The accounts offer rich, private details about everyday life not seen in most history books, such as playing baseball in the field near the elementary school, sewing baby clothes out of feed bags during the Great Depression and swimming in the town's swimming hole, an area between the upper and lower dams of Dunkard Creek.

Peoples Natural Gas Co. built those dams as part of its cooling system. Pipes were placed at the bottom of the creek and the dams created a large pool of water to cool the gas. In the process, the hot gas heated the water, giving Brave residents their own heated swimming pool.

The company also directly or indirectly contributed many other amenities that were considered quite modern at the time. The village had a public water and sewer system, telephone service, an elementary school and an ice plant.

"The company was the community. Almost everybody that lived there worked there. It was a thriving, self-contained little community," Blue said.

Peoples Natural Gas Co. built its compressor station in 1906 to pump natural gas to factories in the Pittsburgh area. Before then, the little village in southern Greene County barely had enough people to justify a post office.

That fact didn't stop Mary Coen, who became the village's first postmaster, from asking for permission to open a post office around 1890.

She called the post office Brave. No one is quite sure where she got the name, but the best guess is she named it after her family dog.

When Peoples Natural Gas Co. built its station, Brave was changed almost overnight. The company provided jobs for about 100 men, so the early landowners divided their tracts to provide homes for the workers. Various stores, churches, inns and other businesses sprung up in the ensuing years.

The compressor station brought prosperity to the tiny village, but it also brought tragedy. In 1917, a malfunctioning valve sparked a huge explosion that could be heard as far away as Morgantown, W.Va., and Waynesburg. Six men died and five others were injured. The survivors carried scars from the explosion for the rest of their lives.

Despite the explosion, the plant and the town continued to grow. "A Village Called Brave" cites an article in the Blacksville High School student newspaper that speculates Brave was destined to grow into a bustling city. "Unfortunately, it went the other way," Blue said.

Peoples Natural Gas Co. expanded its network of pipelines in the 1950s, eventually making the Brave station unnecessary. The company closed the station in 1959.

"I think it will go the way of Kuhntown or Pine Bank or Hero. There will be a few houses there, but not much else," he said.



Wayne Township (Mackin 2007)

2013 Brass Plan still operating on a low-scale production with less than a dozen employees.

By 1965, Accurate Forging Corp. acquired the station and turned it into a brass forging plant. That plant provided much-needed jobs for the people of Brave, but it was never quite the driving force behind the town as the compressor station once was. Cerro Fabricating Products Inc. now owns the plant and a small number of employees still manufacture brass parts in the buildings. Blue noticed that the town has deteriorated over the years and he fears not much will be left of Brave in a generation or two.

Copies of "A Village Called Brave" are available through the [Greene County Tourist Promotion Agency](#) office.

Cara Host is a writer at the [Observer-Reporter](#). This story first appeared in the spring issues of its [Greene County Living](#) magazine.