DEVELOPING

Dow sinks 500 points over falling oil prices

JOBS & EMPLOYMENT

Home / Business / Jobs & Employment

http://pilotonline.com/business/jobs/at-longtime-worker-didn-t-think-he-d-outlive-the/article_973ca042-279f-5d8a-a368-66d799a7dd18.html

At 102, longtime worker didn’t think he’d outlive the mill

The Virginian-Pilot
May 2, 2010

Ross Taylor| The Virginian-Pilot

George Steinbach, 102, poses for a portrait in his home in Franklin on Wednesday, April 28, 2010. Steinbach wc paper mill in Franklin from 1937-1973.

Share G+1

FRANKLIN

George Steinbach started working at the paper mill outside Franklin in 1937, even before it began making paper. He never expected it would stop in his lifetime.

But two weeks ago the machines shut down. International Paper will phase out employment at the mill and officially close it in June.

Steinbach retired in 1973, long before International Paper bought the mill in 1999 and in January, he turned 102, making him perhaps the oldest living former employee. He even remembers when the mill produced only brown paper.

In the living room of his home, a mile and a half from the mill, Steinbach looked back one morning last week on a life fully lived and a career free of regrets.

He refused to grumble about the mill's demise, preferring to linger on moments during his 36-year tenure there, including the struggle to find housing his first night in Franklin and his ultimatum to the higher-ups when they asked him to become superintendent of the pulp mill.

Steinbach didn't offer a formula for his longevity, though he said it wasn't due to abstinence from alcohol or tobacco.

He spoke in a deep voice alternately strong and halting, with an undercurrent of a Midwestern accent. Steinbach was born to German immigrants on Jan. 29, 1908, in Tomahawk, Wis. He was the seventh of 10 children.

"Those days, it was a whole lot different from today," Steinbach said.

He remembered when electricity came to his parents' house, in the form of a light bulb hanging from a ceiling. They had no phone. The only one in town was "in the tavern across the river from us."

Steinbach quit school in the eighth grade. His first jobs in Wisconsin included working in a machine shop ("I had to heat the rivets") and a lumber camp, where he got up before dawn and cleared brush to make trails for the horses accompanying the workers.

He returned to Tomahawk to work at the paper mill. It was a job he liked and intended to stay at. But in 1937, his boss told him about a new paper mill opening in Virginia. He'd have more opportunities to advance there. Besides, the boss said, "the paper industry is moving south."

It wasn't an easy decision – he'd just bought a new house and was among the first in town to get an electric stove and washing machine – but he chose to head East.

Steinbach and two co-workers took a train out of Tomahawk in November 1937. (His wife and children would move the following spring.) They took a detour to Norfolk to see the big city. A delay in the next train got them to Franklin late the night before their first day on the job.

They stopped at the Stonewall Hotel on Main Street. No rooms available. Other new mill workers had grabbed them up. Could they sleep in the lobby? No, that wasn't permitted.

They considered seeing if the jail had space, but ended up at another hotel outside town.

They arrived at work the next day to see three hulking digesters, standing three stories high, but not yet fully built. Digesters remove lignin, a chemical compound in wood that discolors paper, and other byproducts from the pulp fibers.

It didn't take much longer to get them going.

The first rolls of paper came out on New Year's Eve, but Steinbach didn't see them. He was working at another location, the pulp mill, which converts wood chips into material to be made into paper.

In the early days, Steinbach said, the mill put out only brown paper and "corrugated medium," used inside cardboard boxes. It began producing "bleached," or white, paper in the '50s, he said.

Listening to Steinbach brings home the intricacies of the papermaking process, with its multiplicity of steps and wood products.

Take the "continuous cooker," an innovation during his time there.

It was a huge tank. Wood chips and "white liquor," a liquid mixture of chemicals, were fed through the top and emerged from the bottom. The liquor would be distilled from the resulting solution, remixed with more chips and fed back in.

Steinbach rose to superintendent of the woodyard.

"One man was killed in the woodyard," he said. "Other than that, I always had good recommendations for safety."

When there was trouble in the pulp mill – "we weren't making a good grade of bleached paper" – he was asked to take over as its superintendent. On one condition, Steinbach said: "If I can't make it in the pulp mill, I want to be able to go back to the woodyard."

Management decided to make him superintendent of both sites, adding an assistant superintendent at the woodyard.

His success as a boss, Steinbach said, rested on a basic principle: "I always treated them the way I wanted to be treated myself.

"I respected them no matter what job they did," he said. "If they did a good job, they knew I would back them up. If they didn't, they knew they'd have to answer for it."

He'd send back wood chips if he thought they weren't clean enough.

He was tough at home, too, even when his daughter Shirlie started seeing Billy Camp, the third generation of the Camp family, which ran the mill.

Steinbach had his doubts. And he wouldn't bend his rules.

He remembered seeing them parked in front of the house one evening. He got out and hollered for Shirlie to come inside. It was close to her curfew: 11 p.m.

She was 21 at the time.

Soon after, Shirlie and Billy married in 1954.

Two years later, Camp Manufacturing merged with Union Bag and Paper Corp., eventually becoming Union Camp. "I was a little worried, but it was a good move," he said, attracting more top workers.

He retired in 1973, about a quarter-century before International Paper bought the mill. "I guess International Paper did all right as far as supporting things in Franklin from what I know," he said.

Shirlie Camp interjected: "Daddy doesn't like to say anything bad about people."

And Steinbach didn't criticize the company for closing the mill, which will eliminate 1,100 jobs. The decision surprised him, but he hasn't thought much lately about the mill and hasn't been there for at least 15 years.

"I hope they get something back in there, and I think they will get something," he said.

Steinbach didn't think he'd be around this long. "He always said he expected he'd be dead by 65," Shirlie said.

"I figured I would go first," he said. His wife, Frances, was 5 years younger. She died in 2008 at the age of 94.

Steinbach's not sure why he's made it to his second century. He liked to drink beer and smoked until shortly before he retired. "He smoked everything that would burn," Shirlie said.

Maybe, she suggested, it's because of his balanced diet and aversion to medications. And his full-throttle dedication to hobbies the same way that he threw himself into work.

For many years, he made furniture. He formed the Bronco Rod and Gun Club on the property of the paper mill, dedicated to hunting and fishing. He and his wife participated in the Peanut Promenaders, a square-dancing group.

Steinbach lives alone in the house he built in the mid-'50s. He has two caregivers, in the morning and afternoon, who accompany him when he walks in the house. Except when he gets to his cane lightning-quick and starts up by himself.

"When the weather warms up," Steinbach said, "I want to get to walking more and maybe get back to cutting the grass."

That's what he did last summer, his daughter said.

Philip Walzer, (757) 222-3864, phil.walzer@pilotonline.com

Share G+1

SPONSORED: YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

Sponsored Links by Taboola

Why Guys Are Ditching The Drugstore For This Razor
Harry's

Forget The iPhone 6. Next Apple Sensation Leaked
The Motley Fool

4 Ways Your Sales Team Can Help Build Your Brand [E-Book]
Salesforce

10 Online Dating Sites That Really Work
Top 10 Online Dating Sites

BK 7 Flat Fee $595 $0 dwn

File Now Pay Later Stop Garnishment Awarded #1 top BK firm in AZ 20Exp

Learn More