

STORIES of New Jersey

Its pig iron was hauled to the Morris Canal a few miles distant and thence aboard boats to the Delaware, to Philadelphia by the Pennsylvania Canal, and to many towns in New Jersey.

Another peak of prosperity came to Oxford in the Civil War, when iron was in great demand. The Scranton brothers rebuilt the works to a capacity of 12,000 tons a year. They also erected a foundry, rolling mill and a nail factory that turned out 240,000 kegs a year.

Some of the older residents of the neighborhood still tell stories of the days when Oxford was a booming mining town. One of these, a lurid Hallowe'en story, tells of the visit about 60 years ago of the ghost of Jerry Mack. Jerry had been found dead one February day at the furnace. Although the cause of his death was a mystery, it was not long after his burial that the people ceased wondering about it. Jerry Mack was forgotten. But Jerry had not forgotten his former associates. One windy night just before Hallowe'en, workers at the furnace heard a voice above the wind calling over and over "doomed to wander," "doomed to wander." There was a rustling at the stack house door, and as the three workmen looked up, there stood the ghost of their forgotten colleague, carrying an umbrella and dressed in a long-tailed coat. Without waiting for a second look, all three dove through the window and, without stopping, fled for their homes three miles away. Jerry then wandered about and scared the wits out of three more workmen. The next morning the whole town was terror-stricken. There was an investigation of the matter, but nothing could shake the six men of their story. They had seen Jerry Mack; and what was more, not one of them would ever set foot near the furnace again. In fact, they all left town a few days later, taking their families and household goods with them.

The activity of the Civil War period was short-lived. Soon afterward the iron fields of Western Pennsylvania and Indiana began production. Because these new fields were close to the soft coal mines, the operators did not have the expense of hauling coal a long way and were therefore able to undersell the New Jersey operators. Oxford was "blown out" for the last time in 1882. Since then the crumbling stones and bricks have served only as a memory.

But the historic ruins are not the only reminders of a prosperous industry. Behind the furnace there stands a long stone barn that housed the mules that once strained to pull the little ore trucks up the ramp to the stamping mill. Behind the barn is a pile of slag; mountain would perhaps be a better word, for the pile towers more than 50 feet above the houses at its base and stretches for nearly a mile to the north. Slag was considered a waste product once, but now it is used for road construction. So immense is this slag deposit that although thousands of truckloads have been carted away, there is hardly a visible effect on the pile.

The Warren Pipe and Foundry Co. of Belvidere, last owners of Oxford Furnace, decided that the historic value of the furnace should be perpetuated. The company has given the ruins and some land to the State, which plans to restore and preserve it for the benefit of future Americans. The restoration will be under the direction of the New Jersey Historic Sites Commission.