

Bethlehem Steel: The People Who Built America

Segment One Run Time: 21:43



Overview

The beginning of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation can be traced back to 1860, to a man by the name of Robert Sayre. He was the owner of an iron manufacturing company located along the Lehigh River which produced iron rails for the North Penn Railroad development. In the early 1900's Charles Schwab purchased Sayre's company and began the development of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation.

In 1916, Eugene Grace took over as the President of Bethlehem Steel while Schwab remained positioned as the Chairman of the Board. Grace's vision of a powerful corporation is what led to the national recognition of the Bethlehem Steel. World War I boosted the profits being made in the steel industry and created many jobs. During the war, Bethlehem Steel employed 37,000 workers. Then, in the 1940's, the workers at Bethlehem Steel began to voice their feelings about the plant conditions as well as the extremely low wages they received. With World War II on the horizon, the workers and management came to an agreement which eventually led to the installation of a union known as United Steelworkers of America, Local 2599. Throughout WWII, steel was a necessity in the production of airplane engine forges, giant cannon forges, and several parts for warships. With the men overseas, the women in the Lehigh Valley filled the vacant roles in the Bethlehem Steel and were essential in the continuous production of these parts.



Discussion/Questions

1. Name three important buildings or structures that were built using the steel from the Bethlehem Steel.
2. Do you feel that the succession of Eugene Grace and the success that he brought to the Bethlehem Steel was created by the vision that he had for the company or that he was just lucky to be the president during times of war?
3. List several reasons why the addition of women working at the Bethlehem Steel was essential during the time of war. Do you feel that the outlook of women being employed has changed today? Explain your answer.

Activities

1. You are a steel worker in the early 1900's at the Bethlehem Steel. Create a journal entry expressing a typical day and thoughts of a steel worker as well as some of your personal views of a hard day's work.

Spotlight: Robert Sayre

Robert Sayre was born on October 13, 1824. At the age of sixteen, Sayre worked for the Lehigh Coal and Navigation along with his father. There, he learned many skills that would later help him develop his own iron rail company. When a flood occurred in January 1841 and partially destroyed the Lehigh Canal, Sayre and fellow corps were sent to the canal to fix the problem. He spent the entire winter of 1824 fixing the canal. Following the canal's completion, Sayre was then focused on the company's rail lines. His management skills were apparent, as he was promoted to the supervisor of all of the company's rail line operations.



Several responsibilities that Sayre had included: conducting detailed surveys and constructing the Back-Track Railroad, creating inclined planes, and developing the coal mines of the company. He then married a woman by the name of Mary Evelyn Smith on April 15, 1846. They had nine children in total, though only five lived to adolescence. Sayre then was introduced to a man by the name of Asa Packer. He was offered a job as Chief engineer of the Delaware, Lehigh, Schuylkill, and Susquehanna Railroad at the age of twenty-seven, and went on to run the railroad that would later be known as the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

More information

National Canal Museum, 30 Centre Square, Easton, PA 18042
For reservations call (610)-515-8000
For information call (610)-559-6613
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Academic Standards

Bethlehem Steel: The People Who Built America is designed to address the Academic Standards for History as set forth by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This program supports the successful achievement of standards 8.2 Pennsylvania History, as defined under grade 12 measurement criteria:

8.2.12. B. Identify and evaluate primary documents, material artifacts and historic sites important in Pennsylvania history from 1890 to Present.

C. Identify and evaluate how continuity and change have influenced Pennsylvania history from the 1890s to Present.

