

TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH

When Bethlehem Steel began to grow in size along the south bank of the Lehigh River in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it was in dire need of an expanding workforce. This was in no small part filled by the diverse groups of immigrants arriving from Eastern Europe. Hiring men to work in the plant was a rather dubious affair. Men would line up at the gates each morning, and foremen would pick and choose the men whom they would hire for that day. I worked with old timers who told almost unbelievable stories of those times.

If you were lucky enough to be chosen from the crowd, you were most likely put into a job where others spoke the same language. In early years, the ranks of the steel mill were composed of Germans, Polish, Hungarians, Windish, and Slovaks. In later years blacks who had moved north in search of better jobs and Hispanics from our southern borders were added to the workforce. The company became a true melting pot of ethnic groups. Training to work on more specialized jobs was more by nationality than by potential aptitude. If you happened to be of German descent and the operator of a drop forge hammer was a German, he would pick you out for training. This method of operation would slowly change as the diverse groups of workers would begin to accept each other.

In the early years of operation, relationships between company foremen and workers were strained at best. Foremen were taught to believe that workers had to be closely watched and they were always expected to keep the men working at all times. One old rigger told me that he would keep a sandwich in his pocket and hide behind a column to grab a bite while his foreman was not looking his way. Foremen could fire workers at their on the merest whim.

Safety equipment and procedures were virtually non-existent. If an employee was working a ladle pouring job at the Iron Foundry and collapsed from heat exhaustion, he would be

carried over to the riverbank to cool off and recover. He was then told not to come back anymore.

Year after year of mistreatment led the men to unite regardless of their ethnicity. Their general mistrust of each other coalesced into a mutual distrust of their hated overseers. Uniting nationalities was the precursor of uniting the workers by joining labor unions. Attempts to unionize the plant in the middle part of the twentieth century became much easier.

When I became a Bethlehem Steel employee in late 1972, relationships between management and labor were well established. There was still an underlying feeling that, as a worker, you were merely a number to the corporation. Foremen were still trained to believe that workers were malingerers, always trying to shirk their duties. The relationship between opposing sides actually changed for the better in the early 1990s when foremen were sent to training classes to learn that if you treated workers decently you could get more work from them. This was entirely true. Rigger gangs would work much harder for foremen that they liked. This story comes from early August 1975, when foremen still thought they had to light a fire under your ass to get you to do something.

For the most part rigger foremen did not think this way. There were a few exceptions, but usually they had become foremen so they wouldn't have to slug it out in the fucking trenches with us. Most rigger foremen came up through the ranks and earned their reputations. Jack Walters, Joe Foley, the Shultz brothers Joe and Mike, Ernie Smith, Doug Kern, Ed Leiby and Butch Horn: these bosses were tough, non-nonsense guys with great senses of humor which was definitely needed when you were in charge of rigger gangs.

The antithesis of these men was our Division Foreman, Jim Chlebove. He was universally disliked by most of the men he commanded as you will soon understand.

I was in a rigger apprentice class in July of 1975 with riggers Brenda Smith and Bruce Ward. The class was every other Tuesday from 8 AM to 4 PM, located in a classroom in the Lehigh Division Electrical shop. It was an I.C.S. mail order course which meant you did your assigned chapter test and spent the other 7 ½ hours drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and reading stories from the latest Penthouse Forum. The class was supervised by a suit from the main offices building. Affectionately known by the classes as Houdini, he would take attendance and then disappear for the remainder of the class.

One of the chapters on reading blueprints in our training manuals was a bit technical, so we decided we required someone who could actually teach us how to read them. After catching Houdini in one of his rare appearances and asking him for assistance, we realized he knew as much about reading blueprints as he did about reading fucking tea leaves. Sensing we would usurp his authority and go over his head, he put in a call to our office and made arrangements to send someone to train us. The following class we met with rigger foreman Joe Foley.

As Lehigh Division riggers we rarely had a chance to work for Joe, who was a Saucon Division foreman. Riggers had great admiration for Joe. A former paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division, he had jumped into Normandy on D-Day, was captured, and spent time in a German POW camp. When the Russian army attacked the camp to liberate it, Joe climbed a flagpole under fire, and hung a homemade American flag which had been made by a fellow prisoner of war. Seeing the flag, the Russians halted their fire. This gave the POWs the chance to stream out of the camp to freedom. They were met by a helpful woman tank commander who pointed them toward the American lines. Joe was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism. He was one of the true heroes from the “Greatest Generation” which the rigger department had quite a few of.

Joe spent a few classes with us, and it was very apparent he knew his craft. We learned more from foremen like Joe and “A” riggers (gang leaders) who had the knowledge and patience to explain the nuances of our jobs than we did from any textbook.

In August of 1975 we had our first taste of a truly massive undertaking: a total rebuild of Blast Furnace “E”. This job required most of the rigger department’s workforce from the Lehigh and Saucon Divisions, plus a large contingent of carpenters, bricklayers, pipefitters, electricians and millwrights. It took several days just to prepare for the upcoming job. Lights were strung over the entire furnace and a communication system was set up for the job which would run 24/7 for four to five months.

A command trailer was installed in the yard east of the furnace for our general foreman Jim Chlebove. We spent the next week working around the clock, preparing the furnace. An entire section of the roof over the cast floor, which was on rollers, was slid back to allow lifting access from the trolley on the superstructure high above. We spent two days lacing cables and installing a 100 ton capacity block that we would use to make the heavy lifts.

One hot night, when we were working a 12 hour 8 AM to 8 PM shift on the charging floor, situated 100 feet above the cast floor, we stopped at around 3 PM to break for lunch. I lit a cigarette and walked over to the railing to take advantage of a slight breeze coming off of the river. I looked over the railing and noticed that our general foreman had placed his blueprint table directly beneath us. His blueprints were neatly thumbtacked to the table to prevent them from blowing away.

Within a few minutes, the elevator brought up workers returning from lunch, adding to the crew which now totaled 25 men. “Little Joe” Palusek, a rigger welder walked up beside me.

“Hey Joe, look! Chlebove put his print table right below us,” I said.

Grinning, with a wad of Redman chewing tobacco in his cheek, Joe looked over the railing.

“Fuck him”. And I heard a soft “phutt” sound. I looked over the railing just in time to see his tobacco juice bomb gently sailing toward the print table. But a slight breeze blew it off course.

Undeterred by his miss, he looked at me and said “Five degrees north, drop for effect.”

He launched his next bomb, and it drifted with the wind and hit dead center.

At this time, out of the collected workforce, only six other workers were chewing tobacco. One by one, they gathered at the railing, bringing the bombing crew up to a total of seven. Adjusting to the wind drift, they carpet bombed Chlebove’s print table into a slimy mess. With a feeling of a job well done, we all drifted back to our jobs.

About 6:30 AM a pipefitter, looking over the railing, said “We’re fucked now.”

Peeking over the railing, I looked down to see our general foreman, Division Superintendent, and assistant superintendent looking up with angry red faces. They headed for the elevator.

This is about the time the solidarity of my union brothers became evident to me. To this day I have no idea whose idea it was, but it was simple and proved extremely effective.

Knowing that the bosses would seek out the tobacco chewers, they very quickly handed out tobacco to the non-chewers. Even our foreman Jack Walters was handing out tobacco. Someone opened the elevator door to delay the bosses’ trip up to the charging floor. With 25 workers chewing and spitting tobacco juice, the bosses were allowed to come up. They came charging from the elevator, over the bridge to the job site. They stood there in disbelief. When

they looked at Jack Walters he just stood there and shrugged his shoulders. Knowing they were outsmarted, they quickly departed.

At 7:30 AM I slung my tool belt over my shoulder. Sweat soaked, dirty and exhausted, I rode the elevator down and headed for the washroom. Crossing the cast floor and passing the print table, I allowed myself a brief smile, thinking of all the time Joe Foley had spent teaching us how to read blueprints. There was absofuckinglutely no way in Hades' Hell that anyone was going to read those fucking blueprints so neatly thumbtacked to that fucking table.

The splattered blueprints were replaced and the chart table was moved out of range, but the battle of wills between union and management would go on for another 15 years.