Old Frackville Tales

Lorraine Stanton

View from the top

The Plane October 13, 1887

Mahanoy Plane was
a wondrous sight

Mr. McCormick, hoisting engineer of the Mahanoy Plane Engine House. Two men were in the Plane on an eight-hour shift, working one floor at a time and one floor at a time. The Plane was 300 feet long and had a three-car trip every three minutes. Hoisting time was 30 seconds to land a trip. The steam boiler plant used buckwheat, rice and barley coal and the ring sets of boilers required 100,000 gallons of water and 125 tons coal every working day. For the first eight months of 1913 the total number of cars hoisted over this Plane was 878,165 containing 3,448,560 tons of coal. The cost for each hour the Plane worked. Larger engines were installed to operate the plane in 1886 and again in 1910. Both were made at the Pottsville Shops. These engines with 980 horsepower were the second most powerful in the world, the most powerful engines were said to be in the Panama Canal Zone.

On July 29, 1913, a new steel cable was installed at the Plane. The diameter of the cable was 7 inches with a weight of 360 tons. The rope was 3,000 feet long but more rope was needed because it was wrapped around the drums of the new cable. The diameter of the drums were 18 feet. The rope was kept in service about a year or until it reached the guaranteed capacity which was 5,000,000 tons. At each end the rope was hoisted on an average of 250 tons, the combined weight of cars and contents, at an angle of about 10 degrees. The speed made on the plane was 15 to 30 miles an hour while hoisting loaded cars. The height of the plane at the summit was 3,260 feet above sea level or 360 feet above the top of the incline.

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1861 was occupied by Morris Robinson, who had charge of sinking the slope. Later residents to live here were the Anthony Deitch, John Wayne and Coulter families. When mining got under way the land was cleared of timber and houses referred to as the "Company houses" were built by Mr. Robinson for his workers and it was then called "Robinson's Patch." later residents to live in the area were the Anthony Devitt, John Wayne and Coulter families. When mining got under way the land was cleared of timber and houses referred to as the "Company houses" were built by Mr. Robinson for his workers and it was then called "Robinson's Patch." The buildings were used to accommodate the employees of the Coal Company who operated it until the burning of the east breaker in 1910. The old Robinson house sank into a breach as did many of the company houses and the new engine house was ready for operation in 1886.

For many years Stuart Morgan was the superintendent of the Mahanoy Plane. The management of the Plane was under A. J. Farrell, superintendent of the Shamokin Division, and F. A. Farley, assistant main master. The First Mahanoy Plane Engine House was built in 1861 and started operation July 29, 1861. It was situated on the northern slope of the Broom Mountain between Frackville and Mahanoy Plane at an altitude of 324 feet above the foot of the Plane. It had a pitch of 36 degrees at its steepest point and was 2640 feet long. It was occupied by Morris Robinson, who had charge of sinking the slope. Later residents to live here were the Anthony Deitch, John Wayne and Coulter families. When mining got under way the land was cleared of timber and houses referred to as the "Company houses" were built by Mr. Robinson for his workers and it was then called "Robinson's Patch." The buildings were used to accommodate the employees of the Coal Company who operated it until the burning of the east breaker in 1910. The old Robinson house sank into a breach as did many of the company houses and the new engine house was ready for operation in 1886.

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The Plane, one of the county's truly historic landmarks, was in operation for 70 years. Coal was first hoisted May 30, 1862 and the Plane was last operated February 24, 1932. Although working here would not appear as dangerous, it claimed the lives of 148 men and caused injuries to 500 others. The largest steam engines in the world were used in its operation. The Plane was dismantled in 1952.

Plane played big part in town's history

This is a "Plane" story. Yes, a story about the old Mahanoy Plane Engine House! Do you remember it?

An interview with Francis Kiefer, along with several pictures and some old newspaper clippings refreshed my memory.

According to "Punk", as he is most widely known, the history of the Plane dates back to 1859 when the Mahanoy and Broad Mountain Railroad applied for a charter to lay tracks for an outlet of coal to distant markets.

As he explained it, "Frackville was sort of a "hump"—the highest point of the Plane—the coal was brought up from the lower valley over the Plane by engine and then was allowed to drift out to the south end of town and on to the St. Clair railyards. Two shifts of fifty-one men each worked here and many of the laborers were our fathers and grandfathers.

Thomas McCormack was the first engineer to operate the Plane Engine. He was the grandfather of Mrs. Frances Klitch who still resides in town.

Charles Willard of 52 North Second Street worked here for 49 years and was the hoisting engineer for 20 years.

The first house built in Frackville was a double block log cabin on North Balliet Street which was built by two Haupt families in 1854. They lived here until 1859 when the Reading Company bought this cabin, dismantled it and built a frame "boarding house" for the engineers and mechanics who worked at the Plane.

A lot of hold-ups occurred during those days. Miners were robbed as they walked home up the old Mahanoy Plane road or walked along the tracks to the top after working their shift. Workers were sometimes allowed to ride the "barney" to the top when it was available.

Punk remembers the tremendous cave-in which required 151 railroad cars of cinders, ashes, stones, and mine rock to fill the breach. He was there—he worked for the Plane at that time. This occurred in July 1928.

It has been estimated that during the 70 years in which the Plane was in operation, 1,376,400,000 tons of coal were brought up from the valley floor.