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Recovering Thirty-Five Years of a Factory Worker's Life

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It can really change your overall perspective and the way you think about things when you realize that even the most seemingly insignificant objects can have deeper historical connections that may require just a little bit of research to fully uncover. I found that this was the case with a personal artifact of my own: a belt buckle that belonged to my great-grandfather, John Kapusta, and has been in my grandmother's possession for the last twenty years prior to my obtaining it. I have come to find that this artifact is connected to a colorful period of industrial history that anyone outside of the city limits would be unaware of, but it was an incredibly important time that continues to live in the memories of the many people who live or have lived there. This buckle is tied to the experiences of one factory worker who, along with thousands of others, was a witness and even a participant in many of the events that, while they were important to the history of this company and town, were also influenced by larger historical events that affected countless other towns and people in similar ways.

The belt buckle measures 1 inch by 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and a majority of the front and back surfaces are significantly tarnished and dirty, making the buckle an almost yellow color with dark smudges covering certain spots. The front of the artifact bears a silver-colored emblem of the letter "W" enclosed in a circle with an etching of a laurel wreath around it. A small etching of a star sits above the emblem with a small, black stone in the center of it. On the back surface, the word "sterling" is engraved in the upper right corner, confirming that, despite its yellow color, the buckle itself is actually made of sterling silver, and "35 YRS" is engraved in the bottom right corner. Both are fairly difficult to make out due to the tarnishing of the metal. The "W" emblem present on the front of the buckle is the insignia of the Westinghouse Electric Corporation, and the "35 YRS" engraved on the back indicates that this buckle was a commemorative service award given out by the company to employees who had worked there for that amount of time.



Image of belt buckle (front)



Image of belt buckle (back)

From the stories of my family members, I have learned that this belt buckle belonged to my great-grandfather who received it in recognition of his thirty-five years of work at the Westinghouse Electric Corporation's manufacturing plant in

Sharon, Pennsylvania which was best known for producing electrical transformers during its time of operation. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate any documentation of when he began work at Westinghouse or when he retired, but I have estimated that he started working there around 1924 and retired sometime around 1959. According to the 1920 United States Census, my great-grandfather was working as a coal miner, but according to the 1930 U.S. Census, he was employed at Westinghouse. I was able to locate his medical card that was issued by the Westinghouse Pathological Laboratory, and the card itself contained his name, blood type, and the date it was issued, which was in 1959. As this was the only card I could find, I believe that it was the last card he was issued before retiring. Thus, subtracting the thirty-five years he had spent there from this date, I estimate that he started work at Westinghouse sometime around 1924, which is possible as the Sharon plant was opened in 1923 under the title “Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company.” According to the Historical Society of Western Pittsburgh (2006), the company opened this new plant as it was experiencing rapid growth and was introducing a wide variety of new products at the beginning of the 20th century. As I have estimated that he retired sometime around 1959, I would guess that the belt buckle itself would have been manufactured sometime around then as well.



Image of employee medical card

I was unable to find any type of written history or information on the manufacturing of the buckle and story behind it, so I instead focused on its connection to my great-grandfather and the years of employment that it celebrates.

Through my great-grandfather, it is connected to a number of notable events that he had both witnessed and participated in during the time of his employment such as company-wide labor strikes and the production of war materials that earned the company government recognition. These were significant historical events for both the company and the town, and this belt buckle serves as a representation of the career of one employee who, like many others, was right at the center of it.

For example, from about 1941 to 1945, during the United States' involvement in World War II, he was an employee at the company and had been for some time. During this time, the United States experienced a new and desperate need for war materials, so manufacturers across the country, including the Westinghouse Sharon plant, were tasked with producing these materials. In the 1940s, the plant was retooled and given the new task of manufacturing torpedoes for the Navy (Bombeck, n.d.). At the end of the war, the plant was credited with producing over 10,000 MK-18 torpedoes that were said to have sunk over 400 naval and merchant ships (Bombeck, n.d.). In addition to torpedoes, the plant was also credited with manufacturing stainless steel vacuum tanks that were later revealed to have been used in the production of the atomic bombs that were dropped in Japan, although the employees were unaware of that fact during production (Bombeck, n.d.). For their contributions to the manufacturing of materials, the plant and all the employees in it were awarded the Army-Navy Excellence in Production Award on September 2, 1942 by Rear Admiral William Carleton Watts of the Navy ("Westinghouse Honored", 1942). A circular from the United States War Department released in 1942 discussing the creation of this new award also includes a description of the awards that were to be given to each employee, saying that the "emblems will have a capital letter E within a wreath of all silver oak and laurel leaves, and horizontal swallowtail wings divided in five – red, white, blue, white, red." The award ceremony itself turned into a sizable event that attracted a crowd of spectators consisting of almost 10,000 workers, family members, and friends ("Thousands Watch", 1942).

I had been told stories by my family of Westinghouse's contributions to the war effort and also that my great-grandfather had been working there on the assembly line at the time. The period of his employment that the belt buckle gives evidence for verifies that he was working in the plant during this time. I also found a small pin along with his belt buckle that matches the description of the awards given out to the employees given in the circular from 1942, which not only verifies that he was there, but that he had contributed to the production of these materials and was among those rewarded for it. This further proves that this belt buckle has

ties to this significant event from the history of both the town and company through my great-grandfather who witnessed and contributed to it and even was rewarded for the work he had done. The United States' need for war materials during this period not only affected the Sharon Westinghouse plant, but it also affected other companies and workers across the nation. The tasking of American manufacturers with producing the materials necessary for the war effort and calling on their employees to help in the actual production of these materials as a way to do their part for their country was widespread in the U.S. and had an effect on the lives of thousands of American laborers. Thus, these experiences my great-grandfather had during his career are a direct result of the impact of world war, and they are most likely similar, if not completely identical, to those of thousands of other laborers who worked in factories during this period.

Another event included in the historical context of this artifact came about a decade later as the company faced a new period of turbulence within its own walls. Despite being plagued with a number of strikes throughout the 1950's, its biggest came in 1955. During this period, business for Westinghouse was booming, and with all of the success the company was enjoying, its employees began to feel they deserved more than what they were getting for their labor as, at this time, the average wage scale for workers was \$2.10 ("8500 Idled", 1955). Many of the employees who worked on the assembly lines at Westinghouse were members of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), and local IUE leaders engaged in meetings with top Westinghouse officials as they tried to negotiate terms for changes in wages, contract lengths, and ground rules for time studies being performed by the company ("8500 Idled", 1955). Members of the IUE Local 617 formed picket lines outside of the gates of the Sharon plant and blocked entrances to the plant's offices at 11 p.m. on October 16, 1955; meanwhile, the same events were taking place at 28 other Westinghouse locations ("8500 Idled", 1955). This strike was the second mass walkout called at Westinghouse within a period of five weeks, and it would turn into the biggest and longest strike in the company's history as it lasted 156 days before the unions and company came to an agreement in March 1956 ("8500 Idled", 1955; Filipelli & McColloch, 1995). From the stories of my relatives, I learned that this strike had very long-lasting effects on the people who had witnessed it. In this strike, the hourly employees of the plant were split into two groups: those who walked out, which was a majority of the hourly employees, and those who stayed, continuing to work and earning extra wages due to the vast number of employees who had left. My family told me that this created very hard feelings between the two groups

and an overwhelming feeling of hostility toward those who remained inside as the picketers began to refer to them as “scabs.” They also explained that this derogatory title would follow those workers for the rest of their lives as even now, more than sixty years after the strike, it is not uncommon for those picketers, or those related to them, to recognize someone by face or by name and instantly remember, “He/she was a scab.”

With my great-grandfather having been employed at this time, I wondered if he had been involved in this strike in some way. Unfortunately, I have no physical evidence that he participated in the strike, but as far as family recollections go, my grandmother insisted that he had walked out as she responded to my inquiry by saying, “Of course he did! He didn’t want to be a scab!” As this strike occurred during my great-grandfather’s time as an employee at the factory and the widespread contempt for those who did not participate in the strike, I believe that my grandmother’s assertions were right in saying that he had participated. This fact would then provide a connection between the belt buckle and the 1955 strike as it would have been one of the many events that my great-grandfather experienced during his time as a Westinghouse employee. The labor strike of 1955 was also part of a larger social issue that was present in the country at this time and long before the 1950s. Unfortunately, there is quite a history in our country of workers being treated unfairly by employers, and this is especially true in the case of factories and their employees. Labor unions and strikes had been utilized by workers to combat these issues since the early years of industrialization and were still being used years later. My great-grandfather’s own experience with the strike of 1955 was a result of a major social issue that had laid its roots down long before then and was continuing to impact the lives of factory workers across the country.

It probably would not mean much to a person by just looking at this artifact, with its tarnished and dingy surface, but by doing more research into its history in both a personal and historical context, it has become very important to me. Prior to finding this belt buckle and diving deeper into its story, the only thing I knew about my great-grandfather was his name. It has given me the chance to learn more about him and what he did in his life that I had previously been oblivious to as well as learning more about the history of Westinghouse which has played such a prominent role in my community and especially my family. In a broader historical context, this artifact also helps us to understand and see how major events that affected our country as a whole also affected people on a smaller, more individual scale. It offers a closer, more personal look into how the lives of

average Americans were impacted by big historical events as well as giving us an insight into the influence of social issues that they were confronted with and what motivated them to make the decisions they did through. This artifact and the additional research I did not only taught me more about the history of my town, but it also taught me so much I had never known about my great-grandfather and what he did during this period of his life. It has truly been an eye-opening experience to realize that something as seemingly insignificant as a belt buckle can help bridge the gap between generations.

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