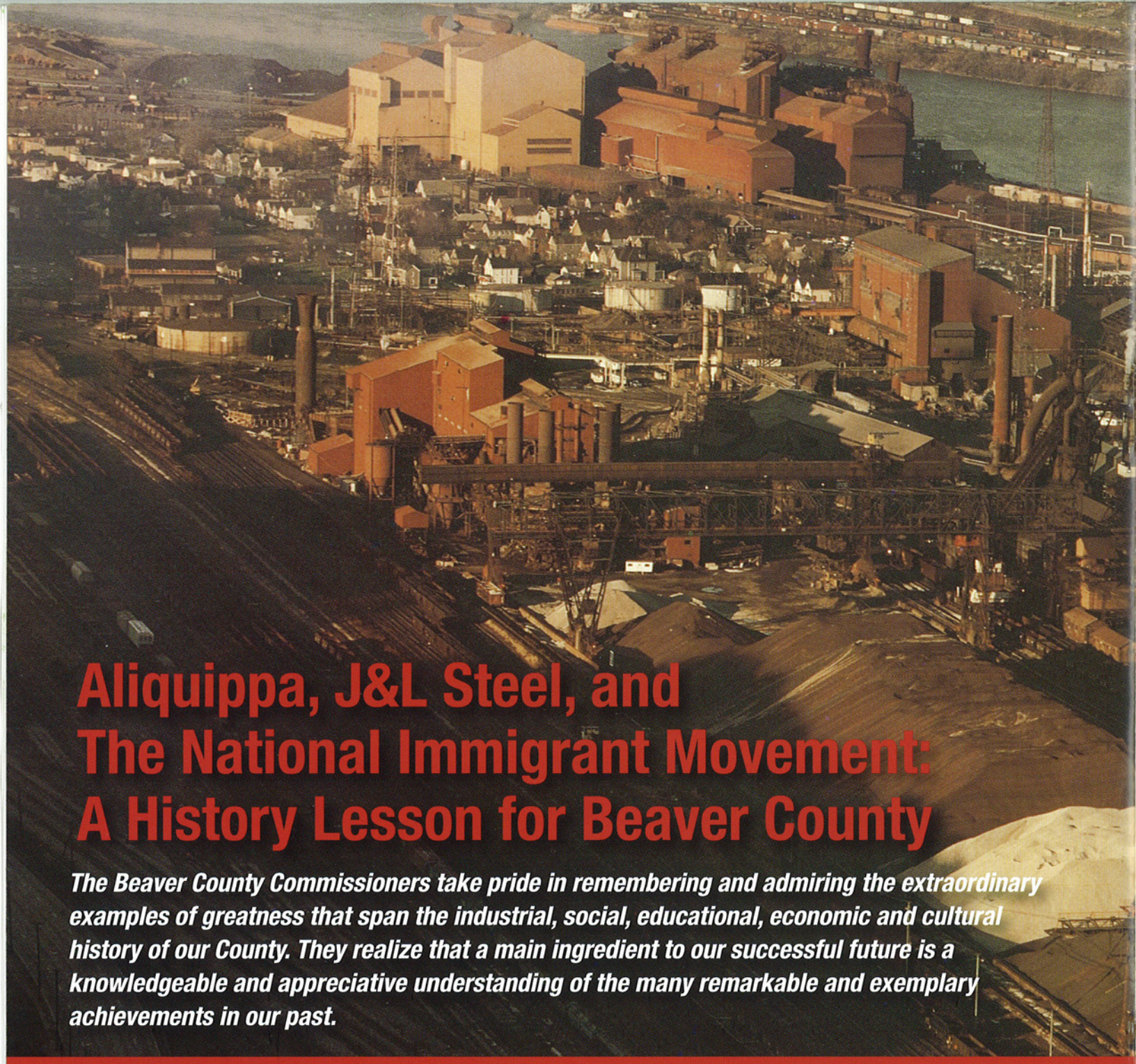

Aliquippa, J&L Steel, and The National Immigrant Movement: A History Lesson for Beaver County

The Beaver County Commissioners take pride in remembering and admiring the extraordinary examples of greatness that span the industrial, social, educational, economic and cultural history of our County. They realize that a main ingredient to our successful future is a knowledgeable and appreciative understanding of the many remarkable and exemplary achievements in our past.

There exists the adage, 'if you don't want to know the answers, then don't ask the questions,' and experience teaches us that the elusive answers to the where's and how's of life are rarely, if ever, blueprinted for us. But as we look back in history, say a hundred years or so, to Beaver County in 1900, the inverse of this timeless reasoning clearly blueprinted a path for the many thousands of immigrants pouring into our County. These were the brave foreigners who did want to know the answers, and were daringly willing to ask life's biggest questions. What they found was that Aliquippa, for many, answered the where, and Jones & Laughlin Steel, the how. What they learned at the same time was a new job, a new language, and a better way of life. What they built was a community that embodied the American melting pot. And although other smaller yet abundantly successful examples of the industrialization of the Beaver and Ohio Valleys did affect the development and population of the entire county, such as Crucible Steel in Midland, Babcock & Wilcox in Beaver Falls and Wyckoff Steel and others in Ambridge, it was the scope and sheer size of J&L in Aliquippa that attracted national attention. Other communities in the county were indeed exemplary, but the gigantic industrialization, represented by J&L, created the greatest demand for an enormous 'never before seen' workforce, and the immigration movement to Beaver County, by needy and tireless Europeans, supplied it.

How the Opportunity Started

In 1900 the town of Aliquippa as we know it, did not exist. Jones

Woods occupied this area along the Ohio River which was eventually leased by the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad for use as picnic grounds known as Aliquippa Park, a site actually located a little off shore on Crows Island. The beautiful land area boasted amusement rides, eating concessions, a dance hall (converted to J&L main office) and Cooper Farm, sporting the best rabbit hunting in the state. The attraction became popular to many Pennsylvanians of the region. Actually, prior to 1905, West Aliquippa and Logstown were far more populated than the village of Aliquippa, and also centers for retail. It was during that year, and primarily due to the lack of expansion land and rising taxes at their Pittsburgh Works, that Jones & Laughlin authorized the Woodlawn Land Company (their subsidiary) to purchase the seven and a half mile tract of land along the Ohio River. A smaller parcel of this tract was the abandoned and broken down Aliquippa Park. Located 20 miles north of Pittsburgh, Jones & Laughlin's acquisition of this land was the pivotal move to what was to become the largest integrated steel mill in the world and the site of the borough of Aliquippa.

A Giant Among Steel Mills

By the following year, 1906, concurrent construction of a steel mill along the river and a well-planned company town jutting west had begun. The community of Aliquippa, at that time, had no idea

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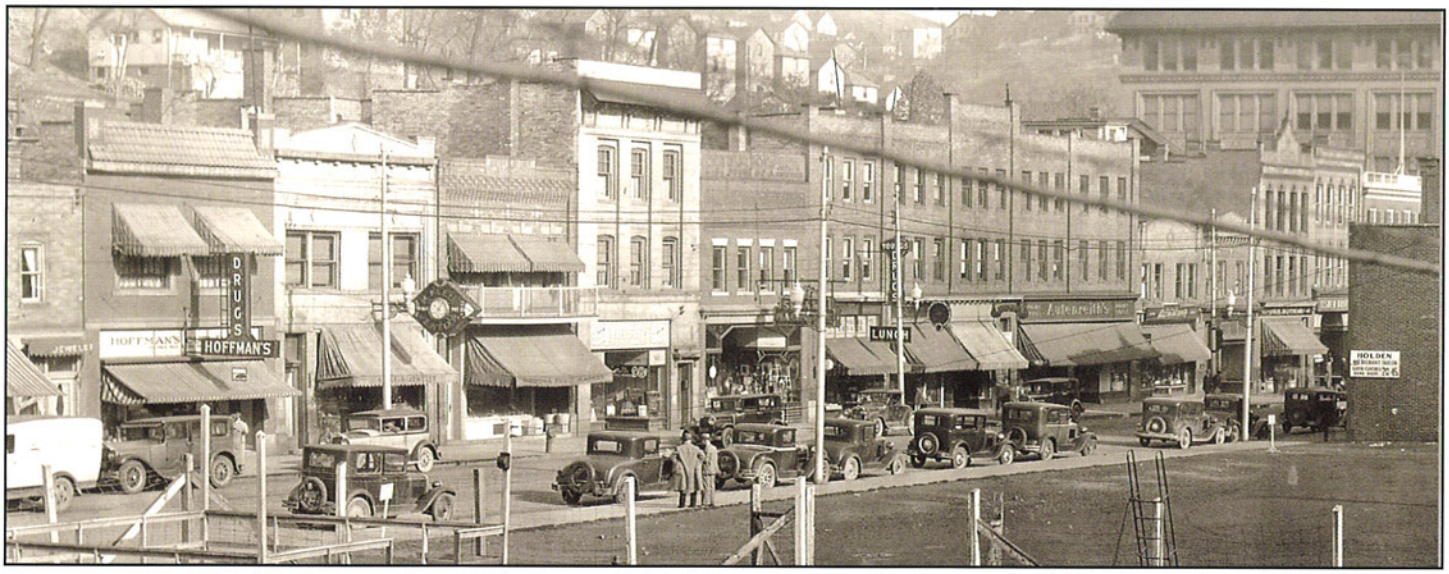

The upper end of Franklin Avenue circa 1916. The empty lot in the foreground is the present site of the U.S Post Office.

of their quiet, yet choreographed adoption by Jones & Laughlin. During the next twenty years, both mill and community development would happen at a pace that was amazingly difficult to monitor. Bordered by the Ohio River to the east, the soon to be borough of Aliquippa to the west, and providing both over-the-road and water transportation for delivery of the finished steel product, the plant rapidly became a virtual wheel of fortune. Stretching seven and one half miles, it was separated into the North Mills and the South Mills. The North Mills were generally more raw steel production and the location of the Blooming Mill, Fourteen Inch Mill, Steel Works and By-Products. The South Mills, where more finished products were run, housed the Welded Tube Mill, Tin Mill, Rod and Wire Mill and the Seamless Tube Mill. The employees of the immense Welded Tube Mill actually created their own Credit Union. The main entrance, through the J&L Tunnel located at the lower end of Franklin Avenue, was the dividing point between the North and South. Construction of the first blast furnace began in 1906, and four additional blast furnaces were completed by 1912. During that period of time, other installations included the many finishing mills, tin mill, and the beehive coke ovens. The total tonnage of molten steel produced during that time was over a quarter million. It was commonly known that both Jones and Laughlin were men of vision and foresight, especially industrially. Rod and wire production was the original plan for the Aliquippa Works, but because of their keen insight into industrial and commercial need, many forms of manufactured steel became part of steady production. Among them were slabs, sheet bars, plates, channel hoops, concrete bars, light rails, tin plates, forgings, beams, skelp (strip metal used to form tubing), seamless tube, with the list seemingly never ending. County citizens were able to locally purchase galvanized products such as watering and garbage cans, nails, and even barbed wire, completely manufactured at J&L. Industrial growth of the colossal Aliquippa Works continued with regularity during World War I and the roaring Twenties. Remarkably, during the national 'Great Steel Strike' of 1919-1920, steelworkers at the J&L Aliquippa Works didn't miss a day's work. Even during the Great Depression of 1929, when other industry production sank to a low 10%, the Aliquippa Works of J&L Steel never dipped below 40% production. The plant was equipped with every provision necessary for employees during a work shift. A fully staffed infirmary, more like a hospital, was located on the plant premises. Security and supervision, to provide a reasonably safe work environment and working conditions, was also fully staffed and adequately maintained. Meal halls were strategically located in both the North and South Mills, and used for double work shifts, and at times, even recreation was planned for the steelworkers. The Aliquippa Works of Jones & Laughlin was nothing less than a 'gigantic industrial city,' eventually reaching a county-wide workforce of over 14,000, and became the leader of a never-before employment opportunity for the dream-filled and inspired American immigrant coming to Beaver County in the Twentieth Century.

Beaver County's ' Model Company Town'

It was once stated that 'as goes J&L, so goes Aliquippa' and during the boom years of the Aliquippa Works of J&L, nothing could have been more accurate. For a period of time extending more than 60 years, the dominance of Aliquippa as the industrial and retail front-runner of the county correlated directly with the prowess of the steel giant. It is true that other reasonably large and industrially successful communities did thrive, and we will always appreciate and admire their unique stories, but none in the county reached the epitome of this company town. At one time it was the largest borough in Pennsylvania, reaching a residential population of 39,000. The interest and support of the steel giant not only provided an extraordinary and sought after means of employment for the hope-filled new arrivals to Beaver County, but also the opportunity to complete what would ultimately fulfill their dream – home ownership in a growing community. Because of J&L, many mill workers could purchase a comfortable two-story home in one of the neighborhoods referred to as 'plans.' Interestingly, a corner lot and home sold for about $2400 and a middle block lot and home for about $2200, and most were all brick. Ethnic background and employment category guided the order of plan choice for employees. The borough was designed and very much administrated by J&L, choosing this strategy to minimize language and social differences. This was the pecking order of the time, questioned by very few and seemingly accepted and taken in by all. For example, Italians were inclined to inhabit Plan 11, and it has been said that the topography of this area reminded them of the seven hills around Rome. The still celebrated and famous San Rocco Festival started on Plan 11 in 1926. Plan 7 attracted many Slavic immigrants of Eastern Europe, and Plan 12, many of Irish-German descent. Plan 8, was in large part, English immigrants. The significant contributions of the African American movement from the south to the borough was primarily delayed until the post World War II period, and settled largely in the Plan 11 Extension neighborhood. The larger and more luxurious homes of Plan 6, especially 'third hill,' were constructed for upper management, and boasted two clay tennis courts. It was said by a Pittsburgh newspaper in 1910 that "Woodlawn was the jewel of Pittsburgh-area communities," and that "There is no more active place in the Pittsburgh district today than Woodlawn with its hundreds of pretty homes, its clean paved streets, its dozens of modern stores, its churches, schools, lodges, clubs and ample transportation facilities." In addition to factory subsidized housing, J&L over many years, continued to contribute heavily to the Aliquippa School District (once rated one of the best in the nation), construction from 1927 to 1929 of the architecturally brilliant B.F. Jones Memorial Library (on the Pennsylvania Historical list), and the major contributor to the construction of the Aliquippa Community Hospital. Actually, one dollar per pay was deducted from mill employees until the hospital mortgage was paid. A closer look at the relationship would reveal that J&L was partner to nearly every aspect of industrial, residential, cultural, educational, political and social development of the borough that was incorporated as Aliquippa in 1928.

The Avenue

It would be unrealistic to describe early Aliquippa and the boom years of J&L without a roll call of what existed on bustling Franklin

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Avenue, the main retail street of town leading directly to the entrance of the mill. Beginning at the J&L Tunnel, and stretching west for nearly two miles to the stone arch area, the very upper end was primarily residential, with the lower two thirds fully retail. Those were the years when sight, sound and smell defined busy retail activity in every direction. From the P&LE Railroad Station all the way up to St. Titus Church, the avenue was a hubbub for thousands moving about, and the automobile traffic was a match to the on-foot pedestrians. Some could have been on their way to the mill, while some may have just finished a shift of work, and others walking in and out of the many grocery, fruit and vegetable, and highly populated retail establishments that thrived because of the success of J&L and its sphere of activity. 'Home businesses' in the County are not new, they actually date way back to this time. Many a wife and homemaker packed and sold daily lunches, under a verbal contract with hundreds of steel workers from all over the valley who rented rooms in the borough for the work week. But the name-game of retailers and storefronts 'up the avenue' never ended. Pittsburgh Mercantile (the PM Store opened cash accounts for mill workers), theaters like the Strand, Temple and State, jewelers like Teper's, Eger's, and Gem's, clothiers like Suldan's, Marsyl's, Staman's, Jacobson's and Oliker Brother's, and Jackson's, Florsheim and S&S Shoes, were just some of the of the many retailers finding huge success in Aliquippa. There were hardware and sporting stores like Cartwright's, Vater's, Sloan's and Sol's. The landmark C&L grocery store, which later relocated to the New Sheffield area, was on Franklin Avenue in the 1940's, opened by brothers Chuck and Lou Borsani. Verified by younger brother and partner, Albert Borsani, it seemed to surprise no one that the name C&L rhymed with J&L. There were busy restaurants like the Capital, Liberty and Ernie's,

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— A quote from a Pittsburgh newspaper in 1910

and drugstores and soda fountains like Young's, Woodlawn, Hoffman's and Thrift. George Keefer, owner of the Woodlawn Drug Store, was actually elected the first Democratic Party Burgess (Mayor) of Aliquippa, in 1936. And of course, there was a G.C. Murphy, Authenreith's and an Isaly's. Could anyone forget the Dairy Queen or the sidewalk shopping of 'Rodeo Days' with the cellophane cowboy hats and bandanas? In 1958, Franklin Avenue was responsible for 60% of all retail sales in Beaver County. A county commission was actually created to study and resolve the congested parking conditions on and around Franklin Avenue.

Remembering is Always Good.....Insightful

And the saying, which was first characterized with hope and optimism, 'as goes J&L, so goes Aliquippa,' still exists, but the sites and sounds that it represented live now only in our memories. For we all know that the steel plant that was once J&L has disappeared. There is a drywall plant in the North Mill area, and some metal fabricating plants in the South Mill area, but what remains of the 'steel giant' along the river is not much more than the former remains of the abandoned and broken down picnic grounds, Aliquippa Park, that occupied the site in 1900. The 'steel giant,' and everything it created, has come and gone. We are aware of how this has affected the once bustling, industrial community called Aliquippa, but do know their love of community is still quite alive. Need and opportunity will always change, sometimes creating greatness, and sometimes not. There seemed to be no reason, then, to give much consideration to the downside of single industry dependence. It was thought that the only thing stronger than steel was the belief that it would never go away. And it is a dismal fact that no other community in Beaver County was affected quite so much by this quiet error in judgment, as Aliquippa. Our Commissioners remain ever mindful of this as they redefine the present and future economy of our County – a future that they know must be characterized by industrial diversity. For it is by fondly, yet objectively 'looking back' that allows us to 'look forward' with an attitude of hope and a goal of productivity. And it will always be with pride and admiration that we remember those hungry and hopeful European immigrants pouring into our County in the early part of the Twentieth Century, who wanted to know the answers and were daringly willing to ask life's biggest questions. And as we remember the 'ups and the downs,' it is experience and history that teaches us that Beaver County possibly offered the best answers to those elusive where's and how's of life. Yet the lessons we've learned from this are far too valuable for us not to redefine ourselves in our efforts to achieve greatness again. What will never change though, is that for many, Beaver County and Aliquippa answered the where, and J&L Steel and others, the how.