

## HISTORY ALONG THE SSRT



"A view looking eastward at the remains of the Gorton coke ovens, April 27, 2007. By Jeffrey L. Feldmeier"

### The Gorton Coke Ovens

By Jeffrey L. Feldmeier

Today it is hard to believe that Gorton, circa 1900, then known as Gorton Heights, was a small industrial center with 150 active coke ovens. In 1957, the memories of these ovens were recalled by two long-time area residents who told a *Centre Daily Times* reporter about "the sight of the coke ovens at night, with fire and smoke coming from a circular hole at the top of each dome-like oven, and the skies reflecting the dull red glare."

Coke, used almost exclusively in the iron and steel industry to produce pig iron, is, according to the Sydney (Nova Scotia) Steel Museum website, the "solid residue, consisting chiefly of carbon, that is left behind when bituminous coal is distilled in the absence of air." In addition, "most of the volatile matter is removed by heating (baking) the coal in a closed chamber to retard or prevent burning." This chamber, in the steel industry's early years, was often a beehive oven, a "simple firebrick chamber built with an arched roof so that the shape inside is that of an old-fashioned beehive."

In 1883, two affiliates of the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad, the Clearfield Bituminous Coal Company (reorganized as Corporation in 1886) and Susquehanna & South Western Railroad, a predecessor of the Beech Creek Railroad, formed a traffic agreement. The

CBC agreed to build more than 200 coke ovens within the next year and ship 30,000 tons of coke annually over the S&SW. The timing and number of coke ovens were not achieved but coking operations were in the near future.

Gorton Heights became the center of the coal company's coking activity, if not only location. The initial 100 coke ovens were fired up in late 1887 and an additional 50 ovens were added in the 1898-1901 period. Annual coke production at Gorton averaged about 40,000 tons with a peak of 93,096 tons in 1900. Oddly CBC did not use coal from its nearby Tunnel Mines for the Gorton ovens. Instead slack (or fine) coal from the company's Grassflat Mine supplied Gorton, with lesser amounts from the company's other Grassflat area mines, including Moravian, Pleasant Hill and Knox Run.

The coke ovens were located on the south side of the railroad, just east of the current township road crossing at Gorton. The remains at the site today suggest that the ovens were arranged back-to-back with a rail siding on each side. These sidings likely branched from a single track which in turn diverged from the main track just east of the ovens.

The buyers of the coke produced here are unknown but evidence suggests at least some was sold to Bellefonte's two iron furnaces. Coke bound for Bellefonte likely moved via the Beech Creek Railroad from Gorton to Mill Hall and then over the Central Railroad of Pennsylvania to Bellefonte.

Coking operations at Gorton did not last long. In 1898, the CBC decided to cease its commercial activities (meaning selling its output to others), including coke production. Henceforth all of the company's output was to be "captive", that is, devoted to supplying its parent, the NYC&HR Railroad, with coal for its own use. Interestingly, however, coking operations at Gorton continued into 1905. By this time the Connellsville Coke District had largely supplanted Central Pennsylvania in coke production.

Upon closure, the CBC left the ovens structures largely intact. For decades following the beehive ovens were used as overnight "accommodations" for fishermen who, during the day, pursued brook trout in the Black Moshannon, Rock Run and other nearby streams, as well as transients. Pranksters commonly lit the hay on fire within one of the old ovens to see how fast an unsuspecting occupant might react. The stonework in at least some of the ovens was eventually reused in various area structures, including a nearby hunting camp as well as a tavern and an adjacent residence.

Today, Mother Nature has reclaimed much of the coke ovens site at Gorton. One would be hard-pressed to conclude that this was once an industrial center for a short period in the early stages of our country's industrial expansion.

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