

Hard Drinking, Unmeasured Mayhem, and Murder Along French Creek: Phoenix Iron Worker's "Celebrations" as Remembered in the *Phoenix Work's Diary*, 1870-1879

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Where the French Creek meanders into the Schuylkill River and the Pickering Valley Railroad joins the Reading sits the town of Phoenixville, some 17 miles northwest of Philadelphia. Since 1827, David and Samuel Reeves operated the Phoenix Iron Works, producing rails for a burgeoning America. The Reeves also owned a rolling mill in Safe Harbor (Lancaster County), a nail works in Bridgeton, New Jersey, and a substantial portion of the Cambria Iron Works in Johnstown. Other interests included Samuel's leadership in the American Iron and Steel Institute and a bridge company in Phoenixville. As innovators they created the Griffen gun and Phoenix column. By the 1870s the third generation, David Reeves II, was on the scene with a Rensselaer education and a bombastic plan to build a 1,000-foot tower for the Centennial. The remaining piece of essential background information is that the Reeves seemed capable of controlling their labor force in a company dominated town complete with company housing. They defeated striking puddlers in 1873, reduced wages in 1875 and 1877, crushed most union activity, paid lower wages than their competitors, and willfully shut down in the face of strikes.¹

Given this Draconian approach to labor relations, it seems reasonable to conclude that Phoenix Iron workers harbored perhaps as much anger, resentment, and frustration as industrial workers anywhere. It logically follows that their need to vent all of this was brutally pronounced.

The *Phoenix Work's Diary* (author unknown) presents history from the top down. It might have been penned by owner and president Samuel Reeves or, perhaps, another member of his family. General Superintendent John Griffen and Chief Engineer Adolphus Bonzano are other strong possibilities.² Daily entries described a losing war between (on the one hand) management and temperance advocates who envisioned an industrial community without hard drinking and violence, and (on the other) iron workers and rum shop proprietors who believe that it is the sacred right of all working men to periodically celebrate as free men—regardless of consequences that offend middle class sensibilities.

The vast body of literature on labor industry and the temperance movement reminds us that there is never any final resolution to the struggle—at any time in history. William Rorabaugh blamed the rise of drinking in the 19th century

Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library

*Phoenix Bridge Collection: October 7, 1898*

on the market revolution and the rise of capitalist values.³ Roy Rosenzweig argued it stemmed from ethnic and class conflict and was essentially about freedom.⁴ E. P. Thompson reminded us not to be judgmental: “We need more studies . . . of tavern life; and we should look at the evidence, not with a moralizing eye (“Christ’s poor” were not always pretty). . . .”⁵

Yet, indeed, the Methodists and Quakers who threw their weight behind the W.C.T.U. in the 1870s were judgmental—or at least terribly “discerning.” Roger Lane reminded us that in the last decades of the 19th century, “Drunken behavior grew less acceptable among the middle and upper classes” and that in the 1870s there was a major push for “control of the streets.”⁶ Jack Blocker cited temperance as the “quintessential middle class reform” that emphasized “self control.” He believed that it was spurred on by bourgeois profit maximizers whose incomes depended on worker sobriety.⁷ Joseph Gusfield, by contrast, dismissed much of the struggle as symbolic.⁸

If scholars can’t agree on the meaning of the temperance battle, they at least, generally, come down on the side of the worker’s right to express freedom through periodic sprees—regardless of how violent or destructive the consequences. (After all, violence can always be romanticized.) The view from

the *Phoenix Work's Diary*, however, will have none of this as the tone ranges from bemused to disgusted. It is frequently patronizing, but this does not include the airy notion that "Boys will be boys." On October 5, 1871, the diarist observed: "finished most of the pay yesterday (considerable drunkenness)";⁹ February 19, 1872: "Joseph Roysterer killed today at Royer Ford (drunk)";¹⁰ August 1, 1872: "T. Dunleavy murdered a young man by the name of McCawey (of course in liquor.)"¹¹

The *Diary* also chronicles some gruesome accidents. For example, a March 15, 1870, entry notes, "A boy by the name of Harron, killed this night by the Plates of Furnace side falling on him—he was killed almost instantly."¹² An August 31, 1871, entry observes: "Mrs. John Carter's . . . boy was run over by cars this afternoon. Mashed his legs considerably." He died the next day in a Philadelphia hospital.¹³

Parenthetically, the death of a prominent leader triggered a great excursion. The *Diary* reported that on March 19, 1871, some 36 rail cars were hired to transport over 2,000 citizens to the burial of company founder David Reeves at Laurel Hill Cemetery, 3822 Ridge Avenue in the Manayunk section of northwest Philadelphia.¹⁴ Rail excursions, in general, were simply enormously popular. For example, local Lutherans sold 2,100 tickets and hired 20 cars for a September 7, 1878, trip to Lemon Hill, an 18th century mansion in Fairmount park that was still sparkling from the glitter of the Centennial.¹⁵

Labor disturbances punctuated the life of Phoenixville and they were noted in the *Diary*. On May 1, 1873, the puddlers struck and marched in a procession up Bridge Street to Main—and then north of Main Street to Tunnel Hill. They were taking the first steps in a dispute they would ultimately lose as furnaces restarted a month and a half later, and the union was dissolved August 13, 1873.¹⁶ What is fascinating here is the possibility of arson as a tool in the labor dispute. A fire on May 23 in the stable of plant Superintendent John Griffen at 2 a.m. represents food for thought as does a fire on May 30 in Nailer's Row (company housing.)¹⁷ While proof of criminal conduct or arson is missing, it would be brutally naive to rule out this interpretation in the face of worker frustration at the apex of strike activity.

Samuel J. Reeves and Phoenix Iron weathered the challenge of the puddler's union very nicely, but at almost the precise time he was dissolving the union he was jarred by the first "Crash of 73." This occurred circa August 12 in Bethlehem, New Hampshire, when a stage coach carrying his son and daughter upset as a result of a 6-horse-team running away. Son David (age 21) was thrown out, suffered a fractured jaw and concussion but ultimately recovered. Beloved Maggie (age 18), however, was thrown out and killed. Close observers believed that Samuel never recovered from this.¹⁸

The second "Crash of 73" was financial. A September 18, 1873, entry notes: "Jay Cooke said to have failed—great excitement in Philadelphia."¹⁹

September 20, "Excitement of failure of Jay Cooke still exists."²⁰ The particular problem this presented to the Phoenix Iron Company was their heavy expenditure to build a new mill to expand capacity, obviously predicated on a rising economy. The net result was a burdensome debt and a mill sitting idle that started to look to some like a museum piece.

In the midst of these financial setbacks worker excesses or criminal activity moved right along. On August 9, 1873, "Washington Roland killed returning from excursion to Cape May—under the influence of strong drink."²¹ Or consider, "Lukemer shot at depot by Joseph Willows. (Drunk)"²²

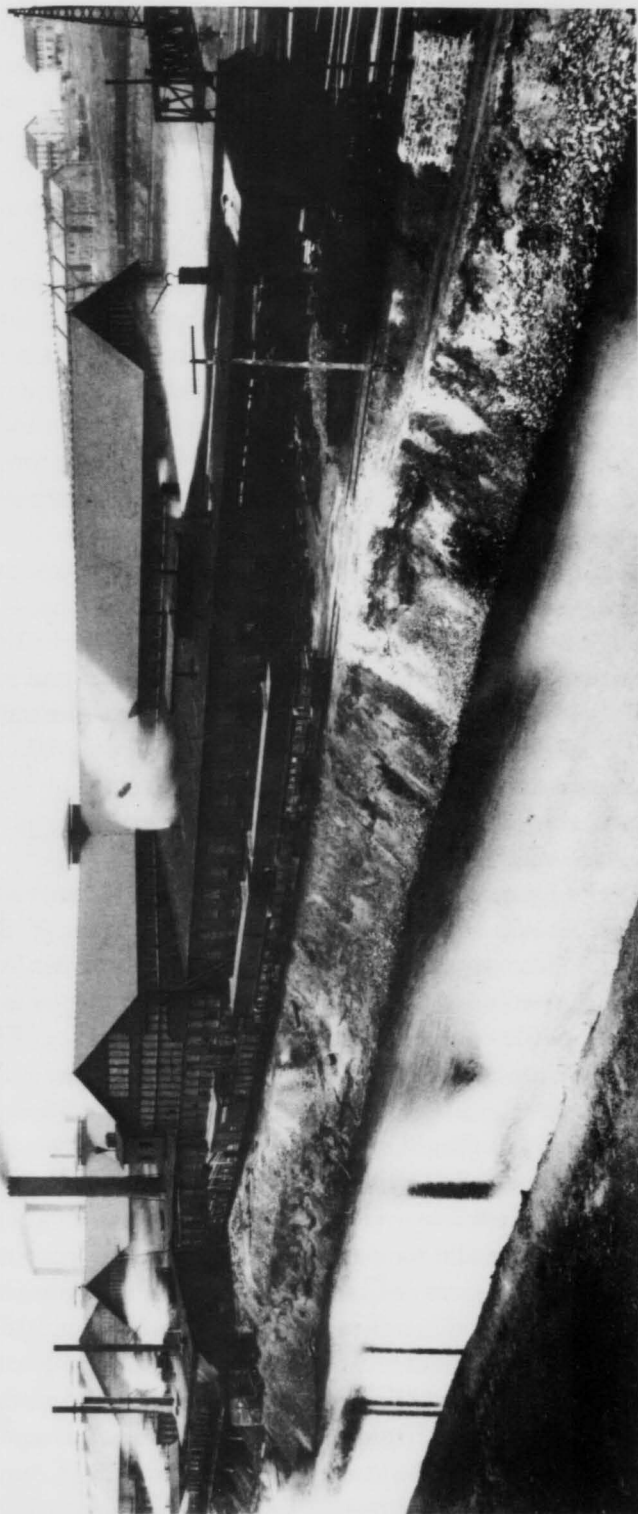
The pages of the diarist mark the tension between religious and secular influence. An entry for May 24, 1874, indicates the Sunday School Convention drew large attendance and a Temperance Harvest House Meeting was held.²³ In addition, "James Keelor arrested for selling liquor contrary to law—bound over to court in January term;" and a cold stark reference to "Udderzook hanged today."²⁴

On Thanksgiving day 1874 the denizens of Phoenixville were in a mood to celebrate as "the drinking houses and shops were in full blast."²⁵ Apparently, they were either very thankful, or trying to forget why they weren't thankful. Christmas that year saw the "closing of the office" and most likely the plant; but also, "Joseph Moor shot by F. Ready—arrested and sent to West Chester."²⁶

Though the *Diary* covers only a decade (1870-1879), a reader easily discerns the rhythm and cadence of life in Phoenixville. The iron works admittedly produces a distinctive milieu and the rhythm and cadence lend a sense of predictability.

The *Diary* reported that on May 24, 1875, "the rum shops in full blast today . . . for the first for two years under local option."²⁷ Perhaps a celebration that the Pennsylvania legislature had repealed the local option law that had made it possible for a city, county, township, or precinct to hold a special election to determine that it would be "wet" or "dry." This local option law sounds democratic enough, but it rarely satisfied radicals in the temperance movement who harbored at least two concerns with it. First, God's eternal truths and will should never be subject to the vagaries of citizens at polling places. Second, eliminating the sale of alcohol in one political locale has little meaning if it remains available in neighboring boroughs or townships.²⁸

Radicals in the temperance movement were encouraged, perhaps even inspired, by an extended campaign that D. L. Moody, the famous evangelist from Chicago, conducted in Philadelphia in 1875 and 1876. Moody enjoyed the support of myriad business leaders, including department store magnate John Wanamaker, and the Presbyterian Church. Put another way, this effort at saving souls benefited from large doses of middle and upper class respectability. Not surprisingly, D. L. Moody incorporated demon rum and temperance in his preaching.²⁹



If the revival meetings in Philadelphia encouraged temperance advocates, they could hardly be expected to alter the cadence of drunkenness and crime in Phoenixville. On June 4, 1875, the *Diary* reported a “great deal of drunkenness in streets last night”³⁰—no doubt it had been pay day once again. Other summer entries include robbers at the Schreiber residence, robbers entering the Samuel J. Reeves residence, and George W. Norris locked up for abusing his wife, no mention of alcohol.³¹

September entries by the diarist include drunkenness on Labor Day and the killing of Michael McDermott at the depot.³² (The depot was something of a social center; consciously overbuilt originally to help persuade the Reading Railroad to make the town a regular stop.) In a more positive vein, a September 30 entry noted: “New elevated road tested by a number of scientific gentlemen from abroad,”³³ This reference is a reference to a newly completed elevated railway line in Brooklyn—the sort of achievement that helped add to the reputation of the bridge builders and iron workers in Phoenixville.

A November 20, 1875, citation, “Market Street bridge burnt,”³⁴ similar to the fires noted in 1873, is as likely to be a product of labor-management troubles as it is any other cause. Again, labor fairly poorly in Phoenixville and had to endure wage cuts in 1875. Logically, if they could not win in direct confrontations, it may have seemed prudent to strike indirectly.

The end of the year marked an opportunity for this French Creek community to usher in the centennial year, 1876. With apologies to Sean Willentz and other historians who have put *workers'* parades under the microscope for the purpose of dissection and social analysis, the marching in Phoenixville was described as a *military* parade—no doubt featuring Reeve's Rifles and Cadets and perhaps other nearby militia units.³⁵ Whether the assertive puddlers marched as puddlers is not clear. The celebration also included the ringing of church bells and fireworks. Unofficially, the “fireworks” were sure to incorporate firing Griffen guns across the Schuylkill River to the mortification (real or figurative) of those living on the eastern bank.³⁶

The burgeoning bridge business was described in the *Diary* by making special note of substantial outbound rail shipments. For example, on June 2, 1876, “19 car loads of rails, beams, channel iron went out of the works this evening.”³⁷ Or, a year later, “15 cars of bridge iron left the yard this evening.”³⁸ (The bridge company, as a wholly owned subsidiary of Phoenix Iron, purchased a lot of product from the parent firm and its completed structures were a great source of publicity.)

An entry for June 3, 1877, suggests the reform element in town might have been gaining on the drunk and disorderly by observing that 100 signed a pledge for total abstinence at an evening temperance meeting.³⁹ This may well have been a very emotional gathering, but it is important to remember the potential for “backsliding.” That is, just as Christian converts might find

salvation more than once at revival meetings, so too must we allow for individuals to go through cycles of taking the pledge, “falling off the wagon,” and taking the pledge again.

In July of 1877 America’s first national labor disturbance made its presence felt in the Phoenixville area when the Knights of Labor-sponsored railway strike generated “trouble and vandalism” in nearby Malvern and Paoli,⁴⁰ including the burning of a bridge. Thus at 2 p.m. on July 22, Reeve’s Rifles and Cadets left for Malvern (most likely by train) and later moved on to Paoli to help quell the disturbance. Apparently, this adventuresome outing was enormously satisfying and started lots of adrenelin pumping for the troops next turned westward to Pittsburgh under a certain General Dobson and did not return to Phoenixville until August 9, 1877. It’s tempting to observe that the Reeves family was so proficient at frustrating labor, they decided to take their show on the road! (A few months later the *Annual Report of the General Superintendent* cited, “repeated reductions in wages of workmen.”)⁴¹

The anonymous diarist seemed pleased to end calendar year 1877 on a positive note: (for the year) “83 murderers . . . hung, 16 of them in Pennsylvania.”⁴² Fascinating entries for 1878 include an expression of satisfaction that Republicans in the state Senate had passed a “bill to provide inquiry concerning the liquor traffic.”⁴³ Democrats almost unanimously opposed the bill. (“What a shame.”)

In May, two young men were “wiped off top of freight car,” most likely by a nearby bridge or tunnel, and killed.⁴⁴ Later that same month there was a fire in the office.⁴⁵ No mention was made of arson. A major celebration in neighboring Valley Forge on June 19, 1878 would have been infinitely more successful if thieves had not used the opportunity to rob so many unattended homes in Phoenixville.⁴⁶ In July, John Sheets was arrested for shooting Benjermin Sterrett on the night of June 20.⁴⁷ Perhaps Sheets suspected Sterrett of robbery on the 19th! In August, William Phillips was “arrested for attempting to burn Fromfield and Askers Barn (drunk of course.”)⁴⁸

A major story on December 18, 1878 concerns the death of Samuel Reeves, president of Phoenix Iron and Steel and son of founder David Reeves. Samuel allegedly died of some combination of disease of the throat and mental overwork—or nervous prostration. This aggressive iron producer, who was a leader in the American Iron and Steel Institute and thus a key lobbyist in Washington, might have succeeded in working himself to death; however, the word on the street in Phoenixville was that he never recovered from the death of his daughter Maggie five years earlier.⁴⁹ Put another way, Samuel Reeves died of a broken heart; a reference that used to sound overly sentimental until modern research linked the mind and body.

Was it time for another twenty-car rail car excursion to Philadelphia to witness the burial of another company president? Was Samuel as revered as his

father had been? Did workers openly resent his heavy-handed approach to labor matters, or did they attribute the difficulties to the superintendent and foremen? These are all good questions, but the *Diary* does not address them.

The final year for the diarist, 1879, includes references to the introduction of electric light into the shops⁵⁰ that created the prospect of work after sunset, and a notation that Superintendent Griffen and Chief Engineer Adolphus Bonzano sailed for England in June, most likely to look at new machinery or furnaces.⁵¹ Yet, the more things change, the more they remain the same. On the evening of April 26, Frank Devlin went on “a drunken spree with others” and shot a young man who died within a few minutes of the incident.⁵²

The all-too-commonplace fires continued. On February 27 at 6 p.m. the paint house of the new mill caught fire and was completely destroyed. On May 17, pay day, there was another fire in the office.⁵³ Once again, in a community in which burning someone’s house or barn seemed to be a popular way of getting even, many of the fires at the iron works may well have been arson.

Conclusion

The aforementioned pages endeavor to produce whole cloth from the strands and fibers that are the terse entries in the *Phoenix Work’s Diary*. The story unfolds in bits and pieces and perhaps only makes sense because of earlier research conducted on Phoenix Iron and Phoenix Bridge.⁵⁴

By the end of the tumultuous 1870s a few things became clear in this one company town along the French Creek. First, despite the apex of the efforts of the W.C.T.U. and the predisposition of management, iron workers were going to consistently and predictably celebrate pay days and holidays with drunkenness in the streets and the attendant accidental deaths and murders. This chaos and mayhem can be viewed as “male bonding” or simply an expression of a worker’s innate right to freedom and free expression. Technically, of course, this behavior was criminal, but no labor historian today labeling it such would have a future in the profession.

Second, while workers rose up periodically to challenge a pay cut, or form a union, or to strike; the Reeves family consistently held the upper hand and was prepared to go to almost any length to maintain it. Parenthetically, Phoenix Iron won another major showdown in 1882 and shortly thereafter imported hundreds of Hungarian, Russian, Austrian, and Italian workers, no doubt counting on the immigrants to be either docile or malleable for a time.

In light of these two conclusions it is tempting to see a connection and argue that the endless frustration and failure that workers experienced in labor-management disputes rendered their drinking, murder, and mayhem more meaningful than mere riotous male bonding.

Notes

1. For background material on the Phoenix Iron Works see, Thomas R. Winpenny, *Without Fitting, Filing, or Chipping: An Illustrated History of the Phoenix Bridge Works* (Easton: Canal Technology Press, 1996.)
2. Marjorie McNinch, Archivist at the Hagley Library, compared a number of writing samples in an effort to identify the author. Her investigation proved inconclusive.
3. See W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.)
4. See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.)
5. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966.)
6. See Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860 - 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.)
7. See Jack Blocker, *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne, 1989.)
8. See Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Greenwood: Greenwood Press, 1986.)
9. The *Phoenix Work's Diary, 1870 - 1879*, October 5, 1871. (Hereafter, *Diary*) The *Diary* is part of the Phoenix Bridge Collection in the Hagley Archives, Greenville, Delaware.
10. *Diary*, February 19, 1872.
11. *Diary*, August 1, 1872.
12. *Diary*, March 15, 1870.
13. *Diary*, August 31, 1871. It is interesting to note that the injured boy was transported to a Philadelphia hospital for care.
14. *Diary*, March 19, 1871. The Reeves family maintained a substantial residence in center city Philadelphia at 1209 Walnut Street as well as several in Phoenixville.
15. *Diary*, September 7, 1878.
16. *Diary*, August 13, 1873.
17. *Diary*, May 23 and May 30, 1873.
18. *Diary*, August 19, 1873.
19. *Diary*, September 18, 1873.
20. *Diary*, September 20, 1873.
21. *Diary*, August 9, 1873.
22. *Diary*, July 4, 1874.
23. *Diary*, May 24, 1874.
24. *Diary*, November 13, 1874.
25. *Diary*, November 26, 1874.
26. *Diary*, December 25, 1874. West Chester is the county seat of Chester County, Pennsylvania.
27. *Diary*, May 24, 1875.
28. For a discussion of this see Richard Hamm, *Shaping the Eighteenth Amendment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) p. 28.
29. For additional insight into Moody's visit see Marilyn McKinley Parrish, "Newspaper Coverage of Dwight L. Moody's Revival in Philadelphia, November 1875 - January 1876," *Masters Paper*, Pennsylvania State University, 1983.
30. *Diary*, June 4, 1875.
31. *Diary*, July 16, 24, and August 23, 1875.
32. *Diary*, September 4 and 27, 1875.
33. *Diary*, September 30, 1875.
34. *Diary*, November 20, 1875.
35. See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.) *Diary*, December 31, 1875.
36. Griffen guns were cannons designed by Superintendent Griffen. Some 1,200 of these were sold to the government during the Civil War.
37. *Diary*, June 2, 1876.
38. *Diary*, August 17, 1877. Brief notices of this sort also appeared in the literature of the American Iron and Steel Institute.
39. *Diary*, June 3, 1877.
40. *Diary*, July 22, 1877.
41. See John Griffen, *Annual Report of the General Superintendent*, Phoenix Iron Works, 1877.
42. *Diary*, December 31, 1877.
43. *Diary*, March 31, 1878.
44. *Diary*, May 5, 1878.
45. *Diary*, May 30, 1878.
46. *Diary*, June 19, 1878.
47. *Diary*, July 21, 1878.
48. *Diary*, August 15, 1878.
49. *Diary*, December 18, 1878.
50. *Diary*, February 5, 1879.
51. *Diary*, July 27, 1879.
52. *Diary*, April 26, 1879.
53. *Diary*, February 27 and May 17, 1879.
54. The author of this paper conducted research on Phoenix Iron and Phoenix Bridge between 1990 and 1996 in the Hagley archives resulting in *Without Fitting, Filing, or Chipping: An Illustrated History of Phoenix Bridge* (Easton: Canal Technology Press, 1996.)