NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE ALUMINUM INDUSTRY

On November 25, 1938, the society joined with the Aluminum Company of America in the unveiling of a handsomely embossed aluminum tablet marking the site, on Smallman Street above Thirty-second Street in Pittsburgh, where the first commercial production of aluminum was begun fifty years ago. A large tent—with flooring, chairs, rostrum, and decorations—had been provided for the comfort of the guests, and a goodly number braved the somewhat wintry weather to attend. The Honorable Robert M. Ewing, former president of the society, presided; Mr. Robert E. Withers, senior vice president and treasurer of the Aluminum Company, made the presentation address; Master Richard McMasters Hunt, youngest grandson of the founder of the industry, Captain Alfred E. Hunt, unveiled the tablet; and the Honorable Robert Garland, long a vice president of the society and member of city council, responded for the society. Among the honored guests were Captain Hunt’s widow; his son, Mr. Roy A. Hunt, present president of the company; and Mr. George H. Clapp, Captain Hunt’s junior partner at the time of the event commemorated.

In opening the ceremonies Major Ewing spoke as follows:

The story of the early pioneers who opened up this western country and paved the way for a later commercial and industrial development is a matter of history. Some of this story, but not enough of it, has been told in the form of markers, of tablets in bronze, and of enduring structures. There is another story—that of the great industries that followed in the wake of this earlier civilization. Industries began and developed here that have made Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania famous throughout the world as the greatest of all industrial and manufacturing centers. It is to mark the beginning of one of these great industries appropriately that the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania sponsors the erection and unveiling of a memorial tablet made of the material that was first produced commercially at the site of this gathering. Here, fifty years ago, was first made a product, then little known, called “aluminum.” Here was laid the foundation of an industry that is now the gigantic Aluminum Company of America, known throughout the civilized world. Of the origin and growth of that industry you will now hear more at length.
The chairman then introduced Mr. Withers, who spoke on behalf of the Aluminum Company as follows:

We are today, in a sense, celebrating a birthday. The custom of observing birthdays is usually indulged in childhood and old age. In the former, it emphasizes growth, in old age it calls attention to maturity. Those in middle life deem anniversaries relatively unimportant; their youth is far behind them, and they give but little thought to the day in which they will lay down their work and rest.

Businesses, in this respect, compare with human beings. They are born, they flourish, they grow old. Where, we ask ourselves today, is the proper place for the aluminum industry? We cannot call it an old industry, for it goes back only fifty years. We cannot conscientiously refer to it as an infant industry, for it is too big. Thus, by elimination, we seem to imply that the aluminum industry is in middle life and not interested in birthdays any more.

Yet this is not exactly true. The anniversary which we are celebrating today marks a milestone at which we may properly halt, for a moment, and review that which has gone before. We find, upon examination, that we have traveled far in a very short span of time, and indications certainly point to the fact that we shall go very much farther. This should be a matter of pride not only to those of us who make our living from aluminum, but also to western Pennsylvania, which is the cradle of the aluminum industry in this country. Here, in this very city, seven men, Hunt, Clapp, Sample, Scott, Cole, Hunsiker, and Lash, met on a summer's day in 1888 and founded a business which was to play an important role in the aluminum industry later. These names may not be as well known as they should be to contemporary Pittsburghers, but they are the names of those who had faith in the future of a material that was light and strong and durable. George H. Clapp is the only survivor of this group who is able to attend this ceremony. There are other names which have become well known in connection with aluminum: A. W. Mellon, R. B. Mellon, D. L. Gillespie (director from 1891 to 1926), and Arthur V. Davis.

Only a few days ago the aluminum industry paused to contemplate its growth by honoring Arthur Vining Davis, connected with the industry since its beginning, and now chairman of the board of the Aluminum Company of America, with a testimonial dinner in New York. We who have gathered here today are privileged beyond those who attended that celebration, as we are actually on the site where aluminum was first made by a commercial process in the United States, and we are in a better position to visualize the progress that has been made by a native concern in the past fifty years.

Right behind me once stood a building, twenty-four feet wide by seventy feet long, which contained all the equipment used in the manufacture of aluminum. It was the only building of its kind in the United States. Now, the Aluminum Company of America has a total of fourteen plants. Here, fifty years ago, as much as fifty pounds of aluminum was made in a single day; now we can make a million pounds of metal in the same time. I have always under-
stood our product was stored in the company safe at night, but my good friend Mr. Clapp says this is a mistake as the safe was a dilapidated affair too small to contain even that tonnage; now we need whole city blocks for warehousing. The building that once stood here, and that housed the entire manufacturing facilities of the aluminum industry, would today not even be adequate for a tool shed. Such is the change that has been wrought in a brief fifty years. These are pleasant comparisons, indeed, to contemplate on a birthday.

To remind passers-by of our district’s rich heritage, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania decided to mark this site with an appropriate tablet, made of an enduring material, which would call attention to the fact that the aluminum industry of the United States was born in our midst. Aluminum was chosen as the “enduring material” for this purpose. If it lasts as long as we believe it will, then we can rightfully exclaim with Horace: Exegi monumentum aere perennius (I have erected a monument more durable than bronze).

Fitting it is that this tablet will be unveiled by Richard McMasters Hunt, who has been selected for this office because he has been steeped in the rich tradition that surrounds the name of his illustrious grandfather, Captain Alfred E. Hunt, the Pennsylvanian who founded the aluminum industry.

We are also favored with the presence of Mr. Roy A. Hunt, president of the Aluminum Company of America, the concern which grew out of the business founded by Captain Hunt, his father. Mr. Hunt has spent his entire lifetime in the aluminum industry, and has been president of his company for more than ten years.

The name of Hunt is one which has been longest and most intimately connected with the history of aluminum in this country, and it is my pleasure to tell you that three generations of Hunts are present at this occasion today. We have been particularly honored to receive Mrs. Alfred E. Hunt, whose sympathy and understanding served as a valuable aid to her husband in those trying first days of the industry. To her he turned for counsel when adversity dogged his footsteps, to her he confided his aspirations in the days that were darkest. The aluminum industry owes her a debt of gratitude which it can never repay, and we are proud, on this occasion, to pay her the tribute that is her due.

I had the honor to know Captain Hunt only a few years. He relinquished guidance of the company’s affairs when he left Pittsburgh to serve the colors in the Spanish-American War. Broken in health on his return from the campaign in Porto Rico, he was unable to continue active business life. He died in 1899. From his energy, foresight, and courage the management gathered the momentum needed to continue the business and to build the industry of which our company is a part.

The tablet which has been attached to the wall of the structure behind me is cast of aluminum and weighs about twenty-five pounds. The metal in this tablet cost about five dollars. If this tablet had been made in the middle of the nineteenth century, the metal in it would have cost fourteen thousand dollars. The difference in these figures is the cause of bringing us together today.

When aluminum was first discovered, it could only be made by a very ex-
pensive chemical process, and its price, as a result, was exceedingly high. Many persons received the impression that aluminum was a very rare metal. Nothing could be farther from the truth, for aluminum is the most common metal in the earth’s crust.

A process for making aluminum by electricity was invented by Charles Martin Hall, a twenty-two-year-old youth just out of Oberlin College. He needed financial backing to exploit his discovery, and, after more than two years of disappointment, he was told to take his invention to Captain Hunt, who was a metallurgist of note in our city. Captain Hunt was quick to see the advantage of inexpensive aluminum. In a few weeks he succeeded in interesting a group of men in a new venture, to which they subscribed the modest sum of twenty thousand dollars. They called themselves the Pittsburgh Reduction Company, and that, in brief, was the manner in which the aluminum industry received its start here.

The sum of twenty thousand dollars, when associated with a business enterprise, seems quite insignificant today. Last year we spent more than a thousand times as much just on improvements and the addition of a few plants. But fifty years ago twenty thousand dollars was all the money we had, and we tried to make each dollar stretch as far as possible.

We could not afford the luxury of a telephone in those days. When our people wanted to make a call, Mr. Davis says he would go across the street to the Springfield Foundry Company, where Mr. J. E. Williams, the president, was kind enough to take pity on our poverty. I hereby publicly give voice to our gratitude, and I would like Mr. Williams to know that at this late day his courtesies have not been forgotten. Mr. Williams, still head of the foundry, had planned to be here today, but illness prevented him from attending.

Incidentally, the installation of a telephone was subsequently made the subject of a directors’ meeting, and the approval was duly recorded in the company’s minutes.

These early worries seem amusing enough now, but they were far from humorous at the time of their occurrence. Suppose the little company could not have held its head above water—suppose it had gone under! Then the aluminum industry would have taken flight from this district. Then western Pennsylvania could not have a share in the pride which now animates many other localities where aluminum is made and fabricated.

Fifty years is a very short time for the development of an industry. There are many living today who remember aluminum as a laboratory curiosity, fit for jewelry and trinkets, but for little else. Now, however, the picture has greatly changed, thanks to the sagacity of our founding fathers. The fulfillment of their dreams may be seen in every truck that is made of aluminum, in every automobile engine whose efficiency depends upon aluminum pistons and cylinder heads, in every streamlined train that hurries through the country, and in every plane that takes to the sky from our airports.

Gleaming aluminum pots and pans in the nation’s kitchens are traced back to the little foundry we had here at one time, and the hundreds of thousands
This tablet marks the birthplace of the aluminum industry in the United States. On the site of this building, the Pittsburgh Reduction Company, now Aluminum Company of America, late in November 1883, produced the first commercial run of aluminum by the Hall electrolytic process.

Erected by The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania November, 1938.
of miles of aluminum high voltage transmission cable, which carry comfort into the nation's homes, had their beginning in the first aluminum wire drawn by our company in the nineties. The metal that was first made on this site definitely left its mark on commerce and industry.

All this cannot be told on the tablet. But every Pittsburgher should feel a tingle as he reads the inscription. It should remind him forever of the fact that our community has been noted for its enterprise and daring. When he thinks of his city as a great industrial center, he thinks not only of steel, coal, paint, oil, glass, and electrical appliances, but of aluminum as well.

The tablet was then unveiled by Richard Hunt, and the exercises concluded with the following address by Mr. Garland:

It is a great pleasure for me to be present on this occasion. It might be said that I am acting in a dual capacity, being an official of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and a member of City Council, the legislative body of our municipality.

It is nice to see historic landmarks. Pittsburgh has too few of them. In one respect, from a national standpoint, we have one of the greatest of them all—Fort Pitt, a couple of miles from this spot. There, when the French flag was taken down in 1758 and the English flag hoisted in its stead, the dream of the French king for Latin domination was forever shattered, and this country of ours was dedicated to the English-speaking people; and their language, their laws, and their literature, with their manners and customs, were forever established.

Our great industrialists and financiers are remembered in various ways, as, for examples, through the Carnegie Institute and Library, the Mellon Institute of Industrial Research, Frick Park, the George Westinghouse Memorial, the Henry W. Oliver Bath House, the Henry Phipps Conservatory, Heinz Chapel, and, now in course of erection, the Henry Buhl Planetarium. We also have the Stephen C. Foster Memorial and the Bigelow, Bobby Burns, and Colonel Hawkins monuments. Of course, these memorials I have mentioned are not in the form of historical tablets, but we realize that both monuments and tablets will go down in history.

The Historical Society has made a specialty of marking historical spots by the erection of suitable tablets, many of which have been placed in various districts in western Pennsylvania so that historical records may be preserved. We of the Historical Society are proud to see monuments and tablets erected, and especially so when there is history connected with them as in the present case where this tablet is erected on historic ground in memory of the discoverers who founded the now gigantic aluminum industry on this particular spot. Aluminum has many uses, and it might be said in passing that the city of Pittsburgh in 1933 replaced the floor system and made other repairs to the Smithfield Street bridge with aluminum plates and other parts at a cost of $285,000.
While with monuments and tablets we perpetuate the name and fame of some of our leading people, yet more interesting to the Historical Society is the establishment of suitable landmarks at points of historic interest.

It is a great pleasure and honor to join in a dedication where it is known that we are marking the identical spot. Many markings have been spurious. For example, it will never be positively known whether Henry Ford bought the real house in which Stephen Foster was born, a few blocks from here, as there is quite a division of opinion even in the Foster family itself as to its identity.

At near-by Aspinwall, we find the highway tablet stating that the name was taken from the aspen trees in the neighborhood, but there never were any aspen trees in the district. The state has been requested to change this tablet to show that it was called after the family of that name. The Aspinwalls not only owned considerable land at that location, but it is on the Allegheny County court records that Ann Ross Aspinwall sold to the Aspinwall Land Company a tract of land for which she received $155,000 cash consideration.

Then we have the little town of Armagh in Indiana County near Johnstown, with a highway tablet stating that it is called after a province in Ireland. There never was a province of that name in Ireland, and the sign should read, “Called after the Town of Armagh, in Northern Ireland.”

The state authorities have been asked to change these two markers so that they will be historically correct; and if the present administration does not make the corrections, the new administration will.

This goes to show that some tablets are spurious and others are genuine, but this one that we are dedicating today is genuine because it is certified as the correct spot by people now living. History should not be distorted. This tablet will be an everlasting symbol that ours is a land of opportunity, for on this humble spot a great industry had its origin. Here is exemplified the old saying: “Tall oaks from little acorns grow.”

And now, on behalf on the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, I accept this genuine historical tablet of imperishable aluminum, with sincere thanks to the donor.