THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE
H. C. FRICK COKE COMPANY

C. S. WARDLEY

The place of meeting of this afternoon has always intrigued me. My first view of the Overholt homestead and the village of West Overton was from the summit of one of the surrounding hills. I was about twelve years of age, and the impression upon me seemed to be, and really was, that of a peaceful atmosphere of rest and contentment. That initial impression has remained with me throughout the years. To those who are interested, reference to page 53 of the Historical Atlas of Westmoreland County, published in 1876 by the Reading Publishing Company, will provide a very interesting view of the village.

It is perhaps a traditional belief that environment has a marked effect upon the development of the individual. This belief may be open to argument. But, I like to feel that it is true. If we may safely accept this premise, then it may be said that Henry Clay Frick was fortunate in the place of his birth.

It is not the purpose of this very brief sketch to detail at length the progress of Mr. Frick towards early manhood. Rather, it is felt that a few brief references to the character of the man will illustrate the line of thought and prove interesting.

Being a resident of Mount Pleasant, I naturally heard many of the traditional stories about Mr. Frick. I recall once having talked with one of the members of the Overholt clan

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1 An address presented, together with supplementary comments by Mr. Clay F. Lynch, at the Frick Centennial meeting of the Westmoreland-Fayette Historical Society, on June 18, 1949. The interesting remarks of a fourth speaker, Mr. John L. Ruth of Mount Pleasant, who recalled "Boyhood Scenes of Mr. Frick," have not been reduced to writing—and would probably have lost no little of their flavor thereby.—Ed.
who had been employed in the mercantile establishment of Uncle Martin Overholt at a time when Henry Clay Frick also was in the employ of the uncle. In response to my request for some anecdote concerning Henry Clay Frick, he stated that one night after they had swept up the store and put the various articles of merchandise in order, they regaled themselves with an oyster stew which was cooked over the heating stove; and during the course of their conversation, Henry Clay made the remark: "I see no reason why I should not become a millionaire during my lifetime." Asked further what were some of the outstanding traits of the young man, he said: "Well, Henry seemed to be a person inclined somewhat to indulge in dreams of the future. He had a passion for neatness, and exhibited a considerable degree of pride in having the merchandise in the store arranged in an attractive manner. He was also meticulous in dress and stressed the importance of a neat personal appearance." Later interviews with others elicited like responses.

It has been a genuine pleasure to me to examine some of the personal account books of Mr. Frick, pertaining to his early business career; to note the extremely neat and painstaking manner in which the records were kept; and the detail in which the transactions were recorded.

These traits apparently had a very definite asset value at a later period, as witnessed by this incident: Early in his business career, Mr. Frick applied to Judge Mellon, of the T. Mellon & Sons Bank, for a business loan of ten thousand dollars. The judge was a trifle hesitant about loaning what, in those days, might be considered a substantial sum, to a person so youthful, and consequently limited as to business experience. But Judge Mellon, in order to make sure that no error of judgment was made, decided to obtain some further information concerning the applicant. For that purpose, he asked a business associate, Mr. J. B. Corey, to make an investigation for him. Mr. Frick, at the time, maintained bache-
lor quarters in one of his company houses, and Mr. Corey arriving on the scene, gained access to Mr. Frick's living quarters without the knowledge of Mr. Frick, and later reported to Judge Mellon that Mr. Frick was a person of meticulous habits, and, in his opinion, a worthy risk. It is needless to add that Judge Mellon's decision to make the loan was a wise one, as events of succeeding years demonstrated.

All of this leads to another angle of life, and that is the development of character, and how it may serve one. Credit has been aptly defined as "man's confidence in man." In this instance I believe that it can fairly be said that it had a very definite and important bearing, for credit played a very important part in the development of the H. C. Frick Coke Company.

To treat this last named subject adequately would require resort to the use of a mass of statistics, and voluminous data, which, at best, would not prove to be particularly interesting. I am disinclined to try your patience by having to listen to such a recital. A few brief facts will provide an outline of the progress of events.

Starting from scratch, the earlier partnership of H. C. Frick & Company, composed of Mr. Frick and the Ferguson brothers, Edmund and Walton, was succeeded by the H. C. Frick Coke Company in 1882, with outstanding capital stock of two million dollars, owned by Mr. Frick and Andrew Carnegie and his associates. The subsequent growth of the company was steady in the ensuing years to 1901, when the United States Steel Corporation was formed. Mr. Frick had relinquished active connection with the company several years prior to this latter date. During the "growth" period the properties had expanded to such an extent that the holdings consisted of 40 plants, 40,000 acres of coal lands, and 11,000 beehive coke ovens, with an annual capacity of 7,000,000 tons of coke.
The interesting fact here, unique and almost without parallel, is that, except as to two plants which were built by the H. C. Frick Coke Company—Adelaide, named for Mrs. Frick, and Standard No. 2, which in a measure was a replacement of the loss by fire of Standard No. 1 shaft—all the other plants were acquired by purchase.

It is not to be assumed or expected that Mr. Frick’s company always had at hand the means to acquire these properties outright for cash. On the contrary, Mr. Frick’s financial standing was such that he could command a high credit standing, and sellers were willing to accept credit instruments for very substantial amounts, which in turn were subsequently paid off out of the earnings of the properties. So that, the recorded investment of $2,000,000, in 1882, had increased to $21,500,000 in 1901, with a potential value vastly greater than that amount.

In conclusion, we may say that character and integrity, in which environment undoubtedly had an important part, were, in a very large measure, the factors that made possible the development of the enterprise.

SUPPLEMENTARY COMMENTS BY CLAY F. LYNCH

Mr. Wardley’s statement to the effect that it was remarkable that the H. C. Frick Coke Company expanded to such an extent, although it built comparatively few new plants, is quite correct. The expansion took place principally through the purchase of competing plants.

I have a letter written by my father, in 1872 or 1873, from Broadford, where he was then employed by Frick and Company. The letter is written on Frick and Company stationery, and in one corner of the letterhead is this notation: “Miners and Ovens at Broadford—Daily Capacity 1000 Bushels.” One thousand bushels of coke is equivalent to approximately sixty
tons of coal. The records of the H. C. Frick Coke Company show that approximately fifty years later, Frick mines had a daily capacity of 75,000 tons of coal, and that such tonnage was actually produced.

The first plants owned by the company's predecessor, Frick and Company, a partnership, were a few small plants located in the immediate vicinity of Broadford. The first construction was undertaken along about 1885 or 1886 when the Adelaide Plant, named for Mrs. Frick, was built on the Youghiogheny River across from, and below, Broadford. No other construction was undertaken by the company until along about 1903 or 1904.

The property of the McClure Coke Company was bought in the early 80's, and although it would not now be considered a large transaction, the purchase caused considerable stir at that time. The McClure Coke Company was owned by Gilbert Rafferty and Charles Donnelly of Pittsburgh, and its plants included Lemont, a fair-sized plant located in Fayette County, and several small plants located in Westmoreland County, one of them in the immediate vicinity of West Overton. The Westmoreland County plants included McClure and Painter, across the hill from here, and Buckeye, Bessemer, Donnelly, and Mayfield, all of which were drift or slope mines.

Along about 1886 or 1887 the Leisenring property was bought. The Leisenrings were successful operators in the anthracite district, and they came out here and bought a large solid block of coal in the territory between Connellsville and Uniontown. They formed a company called either the Connellsville Coal & Iron Company, or the Connellsville Coke & Iron Company, I forget which, and proceeded to build three 500-oven plants and sink three deep shafts. Leisenring No. 2 shaft, which I believe is about 540 feet deep, was the deepest shaft sunk in the old basin.

Up until this time, the larger plants in the district included
200 or 300 ovens and some of them contained as few as 20 or 25 ovens, and all of the mines were drifts, slopes or shallow shafts. Today, even at the prices prevailing in the 1880's, such a construction program would be quite ambitious. Just about the time that the Leisenrings completed their construction program they encountered some financial troubles and the property was sold to the H. C. Frick Company. It proved to be the backbone of what, at the time of the formation of the United States Steel Corporation, was a magnificent mining and coking property.

I cannot give you in chronological order the numerous other purchases that were made before the formation of the steel corporation, but some of them are as follows: Mammoth, including about 500 ovens, was bought from W. J. Moore, of Greensburg; United and Central, each including about 300 ovens, were bought from the United Coal & Coke Company, which was owned by the Coulters, Huffs, and Donohoes of Greensburg. Davidson, including about 300 ovens, located on the outskirts of Connellsville, was bought from the Davidson family of Connellsville. Trotter, with about 400 ovens, and Leith, with about 300 ovens, were bought from the Chicago Blast Furnace interests. Youngstown was bought from a man named Stambaugh, who had a small iron or steel plant at Youngstown, Ohio. The Stambaugh family has today a large interest in the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. A small plant located near Fairchance was sold to the company by a partnership, Bliss & Marshall, the Marshall of the firm being the father of General George C. Marshall. The Schoonmakers, of Pittsburgh, sold their interests in several plants, and the Standard Mine, which eventually included approximately 1,000 ovens, was bought from a family named Hutchinson, who, I believe, were Philadelphians.

After the formation of the steel corporation, another and a different form of expansion took place. Several of the steel
companies that went into the United States Steel Corporation, along with Carnegie Steel Company, owned coke-producing subsidiary companies. For instance, John W. Gates' American Steel & Wire Company owned the American Coke Company, which owned Gates, Lambert, and Edenborn in Fayette County, and in Westmoreland County owned Dorothy and Marguerite, and leased Baggaley from the Ralph Baggaley Estate of Pittsburgh. The Continental Coke Company, which owned the three Continental plants in the vicinity of Uniontown, was owned, I believe, by the National Tube Company. The Illinois Steel Company had two coke-producing companies in this district, the Southwest Connellsville Coke Company, with four plants in the immediate vicinity of Mount Pleasant, and the Eureka Fuel Company, which owned Leckrone, Buffington, and Footedale in Fayette County. The plants operated by these various companies included something in the neighborhood of 5,000 ovens, and after the formation of the steel corporation, Frick took all of them over. Ronco and Bridgeport, coal-producing plants without coke ovens, were acquired in the same way.

After the acquisition of these plants there was a pause for a few years in the growth of the Frick company, and then began, along about 1904, another period of expansion during which new plants were built and more old plants were bought. Along about 1904 construction of York Run, Shoaf, and Bitner, including about 1,000 ovens, was started, and they were very fine plants. A couple of years later, construction of Phillips, Collier, Dearth, New Wynn, and Ronco ovens was started. These plants included 1,500 or 1,600 ovens and were the only new machine-drawn plants built by the company. Later, Filbert, Ralph, and Palmer were built and these were the only plants built by the company without coke ovens. The reason for this was the fact that the by-products oven had appeared on the scene and the end of the beehive oven was in
sight. These new plants were built to develop coal that had been bought years before in anticipation of future requirements. In the meantime the property of the Hecla Coke Company, including about 1,000 ovens in Westmoreland County, was bought from the Thaws of Pittsburgh, and the property of the Colonial Coke Company with three plants, including about 1,000 ovens, located on Red Stone Creek in Fayette County, was bought from the Pittsburgh Coal Company. The last purchase was made in the 1920's when the property of the Washington Coal & Coke Company, including approximately 1,400 acres of coal and about 1,000 ovens, was bought.