JAMES M. SWANK, PIONEER HISTORIAN OF THE IRON AND STEEL INDUSTRY

JAMES T. SHEEP

The city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, is famed as a center of steel production, yet little is known regarding a son of that city who gave the better part of his life toward benefiting the iron and steel industry. James M. Swank devoted forty years of his life, from 1873 to 1913, to the American Iron and Steel Association, serving in the capacity of secretary and later as general manager. He assumed the role of historian through his recounting of the expansion of this basic industry and its relation to the development of the United States.

He was born in Loyalhanna Township, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, on July 12, 1832, a son of George W. and Nancy Moore Swank. On his paternal side he was the grandson of John Swank, a pioneer settler in the Ligonier Valley, who had migrated from Franklin County, Pennsylvania. The Swank family was German in origin and Lutheran in faith. His great-grandfather on his mother's side was John Moore, a delegate from Westmoreland County to the Philadelphia convention which met on July 15, 1776, to form a constitution and to frame a government for Pennsylvania. From Loyalhanna Township the Swank family moved to Johnstown in 1838 when James was but six years of age. Johnstown then had a population of several thousand and was beginning to prosper because of its location in the Conemaugh Valley at a point where the Portage Railroad joined the Pennsylvania Canal. Here a large basin was located with a weigh-lock for the boats and weigh-scales for the cars using the state transportation system. Johnstown had become a small-scale commercial center and attracted Swank's father in establishing a store.\(^2\)

As a youth Swank attended "subscription" schools until he was

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1 Presented at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 22, 1951, and based upon an extended account of "The Life and Writings of James M. Swank" compiled by Mr. Sheep in partial fulfillment of requirements for a master's degree at the University of Pittsburgh.—Ed.

fourteen. After completing this elementary education his parents decided to give him an academic education, and sent him to Eldersridge Academy in Indiana County, a classical school conducted by Rev. Alexander Donaldson. Later he attended for one year the preparatory school of Jefferson College at Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. Following his limited academic education, he taught in a country school and clerked in his father's store. He read law but the practice of law did not appeal to him and he gave it up for journalistic pursuits.

In 1852, at twenty years of age, Swank was asked to take charge of the local Whig newspaper in Johnstown, which was then without an editor. He would have preferred to continue the name Cambria Gazette, as it was both euphonious and appropriate, but unfortunately was associated with many past failures of the paper. He was urged to change the name as a sign of good fortune. The name given to it was the Cambria Tribune in recognition of the New York Tribune, the leading Whig newspaper in the country at the time.

The Cambria Tribune, like many another beginning newspaper, had a rather uncertain start. The press and fixtures of the office were acquired along with an understanding with a few prominent Whigs of the town that the paper was to be published but that they were under no obligation if the venture failed. As Swank humorously recalled later: "I had not one dollar of capital but I had that which is better than capital, I had friends, and from them I borrowed about $150." This money he used to purchase a new press of long primer type, and with an additional purchase of a few bundles of paper he was ready to begin publication on December 7, 1853. The press used was a very primitive affair. In all probability Franklin would have felt at home with it as it was almost identical in construction and completely so in principle with that used to print the Pennsylvania Gazette. Occasionally something would go wrong with the press, and then all hands were called upon to remedy the defect; editorial dignity counted for little when the paper had to be printed.

An interruption in the publishing of the Tribune occurred on February 5, 1861, when Swank was appointed superintendent of schools of

3 McPherson, 261.
5 Swank, Cambria County Pioneers, 16; Daily Tribune (Johnstown), June 22, 1914.
Cambria County. Following his single term he resumed editorial control of the paper and changed the name to *Johnstown Tribune* on October 14, 1864. He severed his connection with the paper when he sold the plant to his brother, George T. Swank, in December, 1869.

After his departure Swank became closely associated with Congressman Daniel J. Morrell of Johnstown, chairman of the House committee on manufactures of the Fortieth Congress, as the clerk of that committee. With Morrell's retirement from Congressional affairs in 1871, Swank's services with the committee came to an end, but he was appointed a fourth-class clerk in the Department of Agriculture. At his own request he was assigned to the division of statistics. Later he was appointed to the position of chief clerk under Commissioner Frederick Watts. One thing that Swank believed to be needed was an account of the history of the department from its founding, with emphasis upon the functions performed by its various divisions. Soon after becoming chief clerk, he wrote a factual booklet entitled, *The Department of Agriculture: Its History and Objects*, but his position as chief clerk was a comparatively brief one, for he resigned at the end of 1872.6

Following his resignation he became secretary of the American Iron and Steel Association in Philadelphia on January 1, 1873. It was regarded as the most influential trade association in the country and one of which nearly every iron and steel firm was a member.7 Swank actually had no special training for this position except the practical experience gained from his clerkship with the House committee and from his work in the Department of Agriculture. Aside from this, his natural abilities as a writer and statistician were his greatest assets. Having been raised in Johnstown, which was already known as an iron manufacturing town, he was familiar with iron manufacturing conditions.

Swank felt that statistical reports for the American Iron and Steel Association should appear yearly and in a uniform style. In addition he advocated that a directory of the iron trade be compiled and issued at regular intervals. The first of these directories was compiled in 1874. The association had published for several years a small weekly journal

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7 McPherson, 260.
called the *Bulletin*, which was chiefly devoted to the presentation of reports of the domestic and foreign iron markets. Many of the members wished to see this paper improved, but as it was sent gratis to a large number of persons, they did not want to see its size or cost increased. Swank remarked: "We did the best we could, however, with the limited space at our command, feeling our way cautiously in all matters concerning which a larger technical knowledge would have justified greater boldness and demanded greater vigor." An unusual record was made by Swank in that he remained editor of these publications until his retirement in 1912.8

Swank held a responsible post in gathering information and compiling and arranging it so as to give meaning and aid to those parts of the industry which could use the information. His service to the association covered most of the period from the earliest beginnings of iron and steel manufacture in the United States to the time when this country achieved first place among nations in the production of iron and steel. The foremost interests of Swank were to accomplish his part in building up the industry and to record its growth by means of accurately compiled statistics. It is significant that the statistics compiled by the American Iron and Steel Association for the United States were highly regarded and considered as more complete than those of any other country.9

The *Bulletin* appeared monthly, or at times semi-monthly, and was sent to every iron manufacturer as well as to senators and representatives in Congress, a wise gesture in the light of Congressional action. Four objectives were emphasized in this publication: first, to present a condensed review of the iron and steel markets; second, to serve as a medium for important trade news; third, to preserve historical facts of value relating to the iron trade; and fourth, to discuss revenue and questions of public policy as they arose. Much information was given regarding the many aspects and changes of the domestic and foreign iron and steel industries. A great deal of space was devoted to descriptive, historical, and biographical subjects with which the domestic iron and steel industries were identified. A great amount of emphasis was placed on advocating protection of the home industry from foreign competition. The Ameri-

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8 *American Metal Market* (New York), May 27, 1912; *Daily Iron Trade* (Cleveland), January 2, 1913; *Daily Tribune* (Johnstown), June 22, 1914.

can Iron and Steel Association likewise rated tariff interests high on the list and advocated a policy that would adequately protect not only the iron and steel industry but would also establish a precedent which would benefit all industry.10

The directory first appeared in 1873 and became the successor to Professor J. O. Lesley's Iron Manufacturer's Guide which appeared in 1859 and which has been recognized as the only source of information concerning the location of all rolling mills, forges, and steel mills of the United States. The directory fully described and freely advertised all iron and steel works in the United States.

The annual statistical report was published every year and, as may be expected, gave complete returns for the nation in production, including imports and exports, and prices of iron and steel, iron ore, and coal and coke for each preceding year. Another group of statistics published in this report gave the production of pig iron, Bessemer steel, open-hearth steel, steel rails, and other information relating to the industry. David Reeves, president of the Phoenix Iron Company, claimed that the thorough compilation of statistics relative to the iron and steel industry would stand as a monument to Swank's ability. These reports were held in such regard that similar work undertaken by the government was felt to be inferior, compared with the completeness and accuracy of the association reports.11

In a short time following Swank's connection with the American Iron and Steel Association it became evident, through tracts and other publications of the organization, that he was to become a champion of the protective tariff. Assults against such a tariff were being made not only in the House of Representatives but also by the British through their journals and trade organizations. The United States was passing through a trying period, as a panic had gripped the economic life of the country in 1873 and had brought with it all the accompanying results—business and banking failures, unemployment, and loss of confidence. With the first signs of a return of prosperity the benefits of protection were to be reestablished so that no clamor for lowering the tariff would interfere. In 1876, the centennial year, Swank believed that a review of the benefits of the policy of protection was warranted. In the annual re-

11 McPherson, 268; *Philadelphia Record*, August 4, 1897.
port for that year he included two lengthy chapters dealing with the industrial policies of both Great Britain and the United States. In his interest in the tariff question Swank was primarily, of course, interested in the value of the protective tariff to the iron and steel industry, but his explanations presented many facts pertaining to the value of protection for all industry.\(^{12}\)

In connection with the census of 1880 Swank received the honor of being appointed special agent to collect statistics of the iron and steel industry. This work involved a great deal of collecting of facts and figures of this industry at a time when marked expansion was noted throughout the country, but it revealed the meticulous and exacting nature of Swank’s work. Following the statistical results compiled, Swank included a brief historical sketch of the manufacture of iron and steel with a detailed sketch of the growth of the industry and its place in America’s economic development in 1880. The following statement expresses his views:\(^{13}\)

A knowledge of the world’s iron industry must be regarded as forming part of a useful education in an age like this, which is so proverbially identified with a liberal use of iron and steel; while a knowledge of our own iron history is essential to a full understanding of the causes of our national development. To know what the iron and steel industries have accomplished for our own country is a patriotic duty; to know something of their small beginnings and of the humble circumstances which surrounded the pioneers who planted them and their sons who struggled to sustain and extend them is a matter of patriotic pride. The greatness and the prominence of our country today in the production of iron and steel in large quantities and by scientific methods could in no other way be so satisfactorily exhibited as by affording the opportunity for a comparison of these magnificent results with the primitive methods and the meager results which characterized these industries in “good old colony times” or even a few years ago.

Swank’s interest was not confined to the gathering of statistics for the American iron and steel industry. Perhaps his most ambitious writing was his *History of the Manufacture of Iron and Steel in All Ages*. No such record had ever been compiled by any authoritative writer. Previous standard works were more technical than historical and it was


\(^{13}\) Swank to Francis A. Walker, superintendent of the census, Philadelphia, June 1, 1881.
singular that none of the authors of these works ever devoted much attention to the growth of the American iron and steel industry. One of the unique facts concerning the writing of this book was that Swank was able to collect much of the information at first hand from the lips and letters of the leading men engaged in the development of the iron industry.

It was in the field of state and local history that Swank was particularly interested. He held that Pennsylvania history had been inadequately told, and that not enough emphasis had been placed upon it. In his state history, *Progressive Pennsylvania*, Swank charged that the people of western Pennsylvania were so absorbed in developing the natural resources that the less strenuous and the intellectual and cultural aspects were neglected. He further stated that they even neglected to record adequately the industrial achievements they had attained. In the eyes of one who was meticulous in his records and reports, this was a cardinal sin. A desire to record local history was realized when Swank wrote *Cambria County Pioneers*. This little volume dealt with personal accounts and recollections of Johnstown and also included several biographical sketches of the men who were prominent in the founding and development of that city. Despite the fact that he left Johnstown early in life, Swank had a strong attachment to that city and particularly to its iron industry. No small part of the development of the iron and steel industry was laid in Johnstown and the near-by Juniata Valley.

Along with his interest in historical matters of Pennsylvania Swank wrote an account of the manufacture of iron and coal mining in Pennsylvania which bore the lengthy title, *Introduction to a History of Ironmaking and Coal Mining in Pennsylvania*. The construction of forges, furnaces, and rolling mills stimulated Pennsylvania's building of turnpikes, canals, and railroads, and with the consequent demand for fuel the coal fields were tapped for their supplies. Both books, *A History of Ironmaking and Coal Mining in Pennsylvania* and *History of the Manufacture of Iron in All Ages*, were noteworthy for the amount of technical information they contained.

Swank also compiled a collection of his shorter writings into a book simply entitled, *Notes and Comments*. These sketches were primarily of an economic and historical nature although he did include several of

his personal observations. As was customary he sent copies to close associates and friends. After reading the copy sent to him, Andrew Carnegie replied with this glowing tribute: "To the triumph of the Iron and Steel Industry of the United States no man has contributed more than James M. Swank, and it has been a great pleasure to me to cooperate with him, even in a humble capacity."\(^\text{15}\)

In 1912 the American Iron and Steel Institute, an organization incorporated in New York state on March 31, 1908, indicated its willingness to continue the work of the American Iron and Steel Association.\(^\text{16}\) At the same time Swank tendered his resignation as general manager and secretary. In recognition of both the years of service rendered by Swank prior to his retirement and of the change effected by the new arrangement, the directors of the institute adopted the following resolutions on February 28, 1913:\(^\text{17}\)

Whereas, On December thirty-first, Nineteen hundred and twelve, after forty years of service, Mr. James M. Swank resigned his office of Secretary and General Manager of the American Iron and Steel Association; and Whereas, on January first, Nineteen hundred and thirteen,, the work of the American Iron and Steel Association was taken over by the American Iron and Steel Institute; be it Resolved, That the directors of the American Iron and Steel Institute hereby record their profound appreciation of the fidelity and skill with which Mr. Swank discharged the duties of his office during that long and important period and also their high estimate of his character as a man.

During the months Swank lived in retirement he enjoyed looking back over the forty years he had been connected with the American Iron and Steel Association. He could visualize the vast changes that had taken place in the industry. Charcoal as a fuel was supplanted by raw coal and this in turn by coke. The railroad era that had begun in earnest during the early years of his life expanded to such an extent that an extraordinary demand was realized for rail purposes. The iron rail gave way to the steel rail. The iron bridge replaced the wooden type bridge. He had seen a transformation in shipbuilding, the wooden vessel became obsolete and was replaced by the steel-plated vessel. As he observed the skyline of American cities Swank could take pride in the knowledge that structural steel made possible the construction of great skyscrapers.

\(^{15}\) Carnegie to Swank, March 11, 1898.


\(^{17}\) Original citation, presented to Swank the same day.
With his resignation from office, effective December 31, 1912, Swank anticipated years of reflection, but his period of retirement was relatively brief. Death occurred on June 21, 1914, in Philadelphia. According to his wishes his body was brought to Johnstown and interment followed in the family plot in Grandview Cemetery in that city.¹⁸

James M. Swank championed the interests of the iron and steel industry. As a statistician he compiled and recorded the essential facts of the industry in a thorough manner. As an observer he possessed the ability to detect the benefits to be achieved for the iron and steel interests. As a protectionist he believed that the tariff should be established for the purpose of benefiting the American workman and protecting the American manufacturer and investor. As a writer he described the development and expansion of this basic industry in a clear and concise style.

¹⁸ Daily Tribune (Johnstown), June 22, 1914.