

# The Great Sneeze

James Vale Downie, Writer, 1883-1962

by Rex Downie, Jr.

**F**IREFLIES WINKED IN the growing gloom beneath towering oaks and maples, a cool breeze slid down the ridge through the copper screening and onto the porch, and Slippery Rock Creek<sup>1</sup> murmured to itself and its companions a song of power and continuity on its way to the Caribbean Sea. Insects drawn by our light offered serene accompaniment, drumming softly against the screening.

Fresh corn on the cob had gone its way, dishes were done, and coffee just-perked on the kerosene stove steamed in china mugs on the table. The stream had been swum and wet bathing suits hung, shining in the moonshafts that struck through the trees.

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Rex Downie, Jr., is an attorney in Beaver Falls, Pa. His uncle was writer James Vale Downie, right (c. 1925).

“WHAAAHHGH-AHHH-CHOOOH” came the thunderous explosion from beneath the moustache and averted face of the large man seated opposite me. My father’s sneeze bounced among the boles of the forest hills and returned, strong even as an echo. Seconds passed, we settled in, and the card game continued.

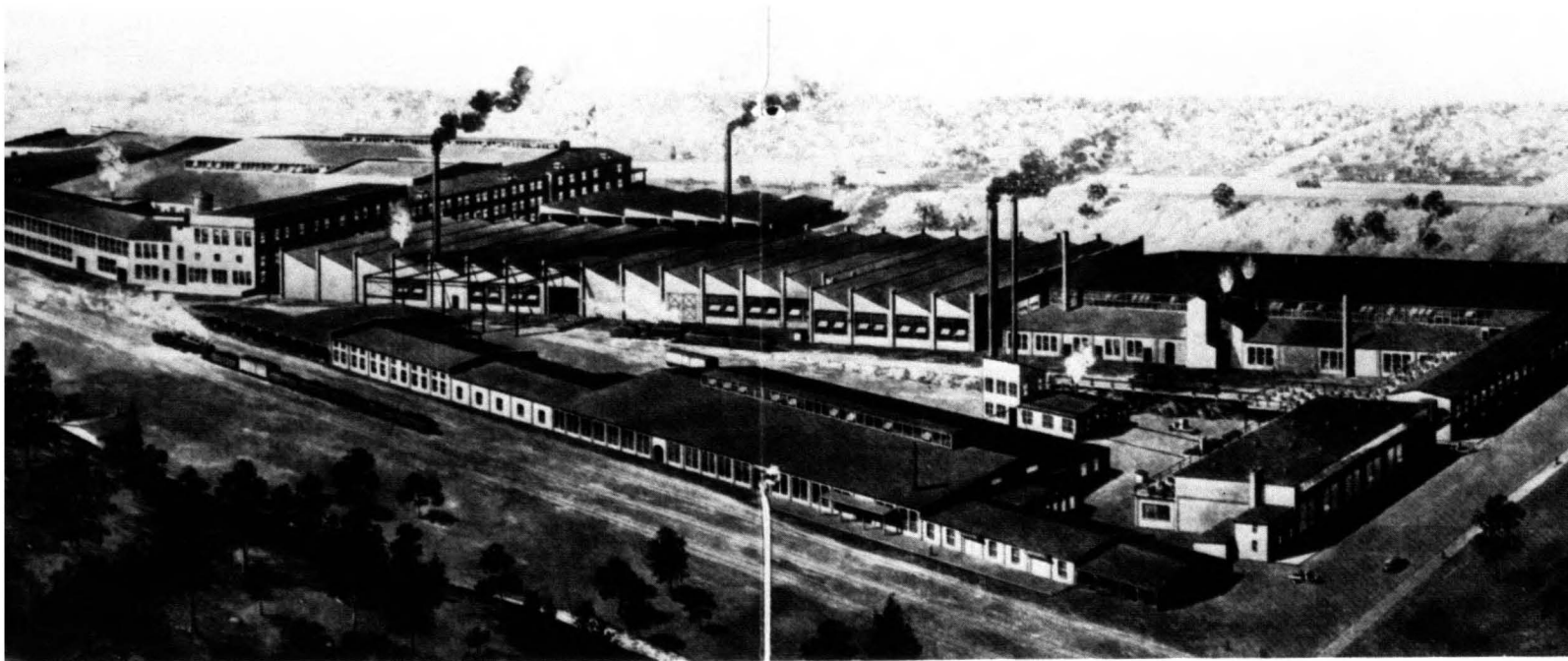
“See, thay-uts a three and thay-uts a dooce — ah mean a two,” said my mother, leaning toward me to press her gentle Alabama-accented words into my left ear. “Re-ux Jun-yah,” she breathed, pointing to the deuce of spades.

Fascination alternated between the cards — how marvelous were their red and black shapes and curled lines — and the tiny glowing rectangles of the Aladdin mantle which had waved and flickered wildly during the aforemen-









**The Downie family business, Keystone Driller Co., employed 600 people, including many skilled craftsmen, at its peak of operations during the 1920s in Beaver Falls.**

tioned barometric disturbance. Moths and lesser bugs swirled about the light; their wings singed off, they tumbled in flames into the chimney to flare and smoke for an instant, and life and death entered the drama.

I squirmed on Mom's lap so I could face upstream, toward the blackness, awaiting the next act of a play I knew by heart, one not so serious as that of Aladdin and the Moths. "QUI-I-I-EE-TT" came a man's strong voice from among the trees.

Again we settled in, Pap finished the deal, and my mother sorted her seven cards toward the inchoate hopes of a gin rummy hand. They drew and re-sorted and discarded before the next act: a second great sneeze, this time not from our party, boomed down through the timber. It reverberated off the ridges, and momentarily hushed the Slippery Rock's happy babble.

Next, Pap laid down his cards, stood, cupped both large hands to his mouth and gave the ritual rebuke to the mock rudeness.

Then the winking silence and cardboardy sibilance of the cards, the night, the glow of Aladdin, the murmur of the creek — the evening reset in its quiet order. Later we slept on canvas army cots.

James Vale Downie, older brother of Rex Downie, Sr., and uncle of Rex Downie, Jr. (the author), owned the camp several hundred feet north of ours on the west bank of the creek upstream from Wertemberg, in Lawrence County, 40 odd miles north of Pittsburgh. Vale Downie was a writer whose work, from 1904 onward, appeared in numerous national magazines. During the years that he was a writer, he also sold earth-moving machinery, traveling considerably from the family-owned company's headquarters in Beaver Falls.

But in the summer of 1939, the company no longer existed, Vale's work was being published again, and I was a kid. Out-houses, kerosene lanterns, and sucker rod pumps with cast iron

handles that held huge watermelons in the well's 50-degree water were not hardships but positive conveniences that year.



Five busy decades later the telephone rang.

"Rex, You know I've sold the house."

"Yeah, Ted, I heard."

"We-ell, I'm up on the second floor cleaning things out and there's these manuscripts of Dad's down here. Did you want to look at them?"

I went right over. Vale's daughter, Ted, and I stood eyeing six large cardboard boxes in a bedroom of the Tudor beam and plaster house that Janet and Vale Downie had built on 32nd Street in the College Hill section of Beaver Falls. "They're in there," she said. "I didn't throw anything away."

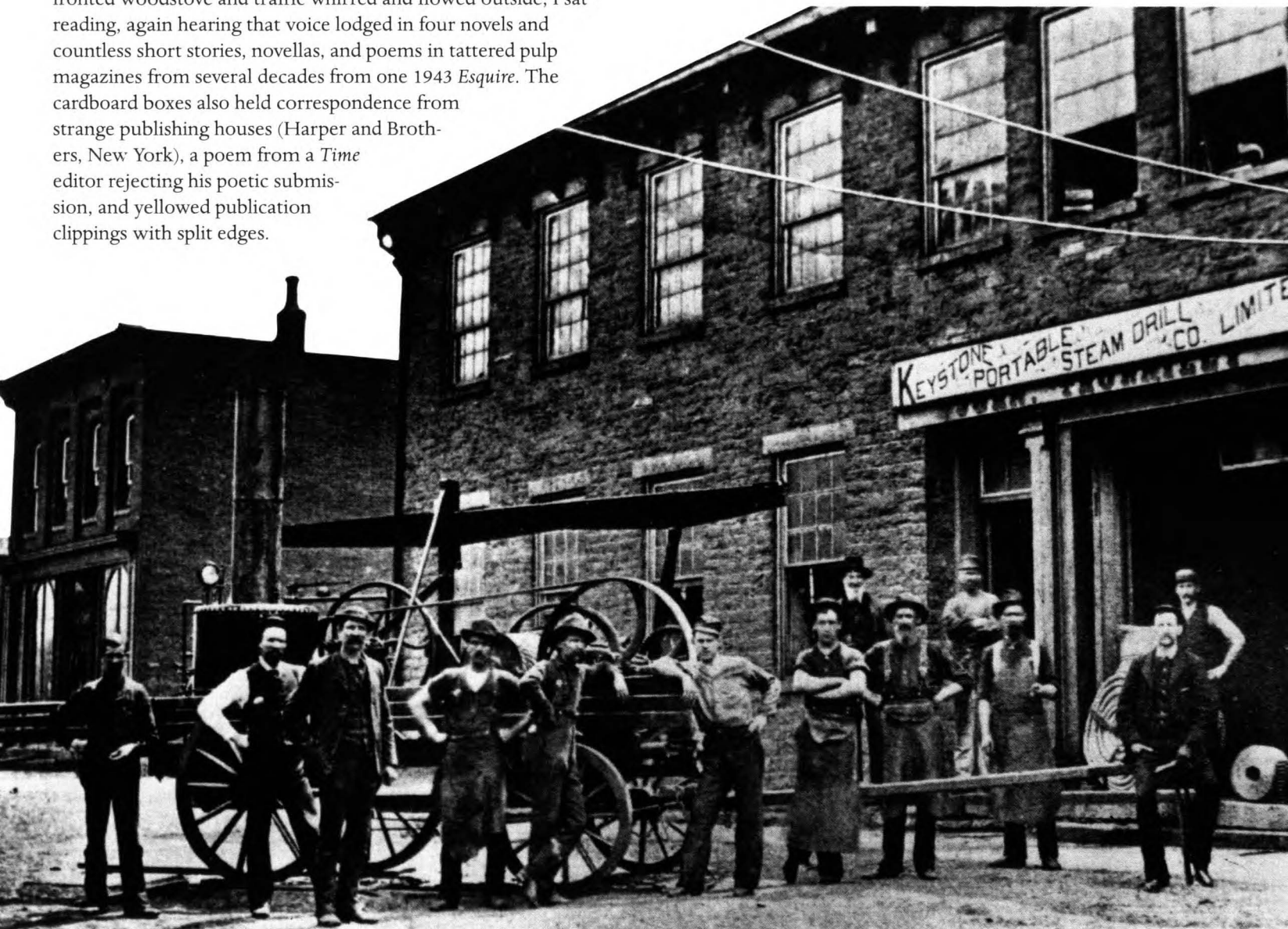
Uncle Vale had passed on in 1962, Janet 15 years later, and since her demise the house had been rented to various tenants. Finally, Ted had decided to sell it.

So, while a fire leapt and curled through oak logs in a Pyrex-fronted woodstove and traffic whirled and flowed outside, I sat reading, again hearing that voice lodged in four novels and countless short stories, novellas, and poems in tattered pulp magazines from several decades from one 1943 *Esquire*. The cardboard boxes also held correspondence from strange publishing houses (Harper and Brothers, New York), a poem from a *Time* editor rejecting his poetic submission, and yellowed publication clippings with split edges.

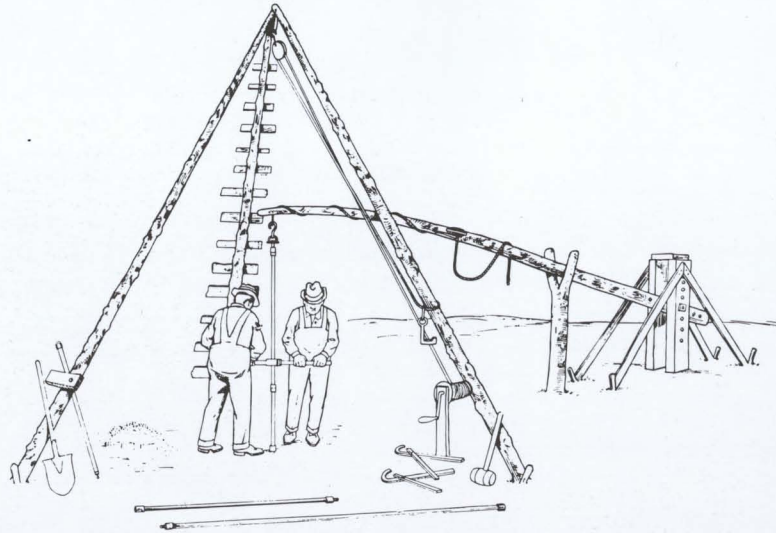
In his scores of anecdotes of drills and machinery, excavations, fear, and mystery, his voice bears an ambience of an age fast slipping away. Although his generation had its distortions, I find in the writing of J. Vale Downie the sense that people knew who they were. They could live and laugh and make great sneezes, and it was a joke that a small boy could comprehend just from the way of it. Calculated explanations and elaborate tutelage seemed less necessary.

In the uncertainty, ambivalence, and rootlessness that brings unique distress to the modern search for the American Dream — can it even be called that anymore? — a great casualty is humor. We are an age on the brink of terminal seriousness. Sound bites and name-calling become more important than reality itself and each of us risk deeming our own cause the only one, even as the media flings in our faces a host of trials that bedevil the global village.

(continued on page 133)







### Stories Published 1904-1958 by James Vale Downie

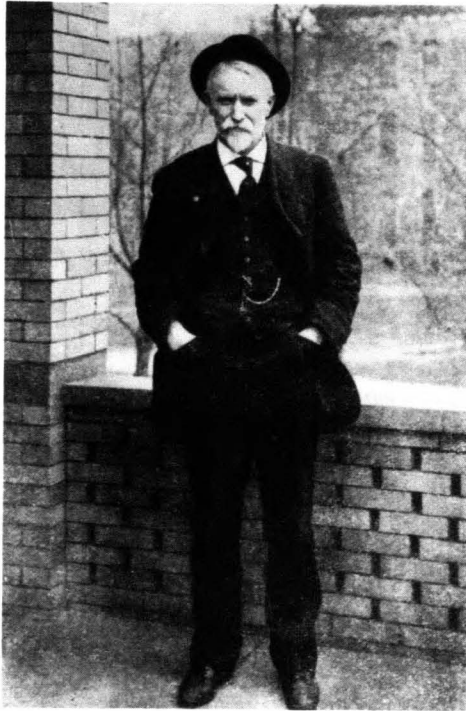
- Jan. 1904 "The Last Jest" in *College Essay Monthly*
- Oct. 1905 "The Bohemian" in *Miss Roberta's Quilt*
- July 1909 "A Stolen Kiss" in *Success Magazine*
- Jan. 1910 "The Ticket Stub" in *The New Magazine*
- Oct. 1910 "Sprinting Sal" in *The New Magazine*
- Jan. 1911 "The Frowardness of Friphey" in *Hampton's*
- Feb. 1911 "The Fatuous Form Letter" in *Advertising and Selling*
- Jan. 1912 "The Musical Top" in *Harper's*
- Dec. 1912 "The Philosopher and The Blue Balloon" in *Harper's*
- March 1912 "The Lady That Smiled" in *The All-Story*
- Jan. 1913 "A Bunch of Violets" in *Red Book*
- Feb. 1913 "A Tall Dark Man" in *Red Book*
- April 1914 "Mary Carmichael" in *Blue Book*
- July 1913 "Thompson the Intent" in *Ainslee's*
- April 1914 "The Confidential Doll Insurance Company" in *Harper's*
- Oct. 1915 "Prester Jim" in *Every Week*
- Dec. 1915 "Fools and the Fairy" in *Romance*
- 1915 "Robin the Bobbin" in *Harper & Brothers*
- July 1917 "The Tom Bain Tunnel" in *Ainslee's*
- Sept. 1935 "Pearly Gates and the Lady" in *Clue Detective Stories*
- Aug. 1940 "Tombi Sink" in *Unknown*
- Nov. 1940 "House of the Retrokron" in *Thrilling Mystery*
- Feb. 1943 "The Moder Mill Affair" in *Detective Story*
- April 1943 "For Drinking Men Only" in *Adventure*
- Nov. 1943 "Manuscript in a Mushroom Cave" in *The Shadow*
- Nov. 1943 "The Dissenting Guest" in *Esquire*
- April 1944 "Visiting Mary (Grievous Guest)" in *Strand*
- 1945 "The Moder Mill Affair" in *All Fiction Detective Stories*
- May 1945 "The Lilac Allegator" in *Adventure*
- Jan. 1946 "Fire and Sleet and Candlelight" in *Doc Savage*
- Feb. 1958 "Straw Feet" in *Fast Action Detective*





**Opposite:** A diagram of the sapling technology that Keystone's steam-driven drilling units replaced in the late 19th century. **Above:** Earth-moving equipment such as Keystone's steam-operated power shovel (c. 1920) dug roads and building foundations throughout America and Europe.





**Butler County native Robert Magee Downie was a principal founder of Keystone Driller in the 1880s. Among local investors were several clergymen. *Opposite:* Keystone oil drilling rigs similar to this one from the 1920s were reported in 1993 to still be operating in Alaska near the Arctic Circle.**

And it is not that J. Vale Downie never faced grief that he could laugh at human foibles. His younger brother<sup>2</sup> died in the blast of a German mine in 1918. His mother perished in a fire and he bore scars to his grave gotten trying to save her. His father died an untimely death from a ruptured appendix. Uncle "Zwingle,"<sup>3</sup> whose boiler blew up in one of Vale's stories, was both a mechanical genius and a profound alcoholic who died in that condition. The very promising family business that employed Vale and many relatives was a casualty of the Depression.<sup>4</sup>

Still, Vale Downie could always laugh, relating in his stories how:

- an entrepreneur from the big city to the south (of Butler County) could mistake a boiler explosion as a ripe investment opportunity ("Uncle Zwingle's Boiler Explosion," printed in its entirety following this introduction);
- a BB rifle shot could become an instrument of Providence leading to passion ("Angel of the Windmill");
- a communion haircut resulted in a fireworks display ("The Communion Present");
- the 23rd Psalm could be sung to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," though the Reformed Presbyterian Church never took him up on it (an unpublished essay);
- a backhoe did battle with a dinosaur ("Tombs Sink," a favorite tale of mine).



Vale Downie, the oldest son of Robert Magee Downie and Martha Vale Downie, was born August 12, 1883, in New Brighton, Pa. He graduated from Geneva College in 1905 and married Janet Matheny on March 3, 1909. They had a daughter, Theodora Koble ("Ted"), who lives today near Zelienople.

His first piece of professional writing appeared in the periodical *College Essay Monthly* in 1904. He then averaged about one published story every nine months over the next dozen years. Increasing professional responsibilities in the 1920s as vice president of sales for Keystone Driller Co.<sup>5</sup> helped to halt his success at placing articles for publication, though he did continue to write. At its prime in the '20s, Keystone employed 600 people and manufactured power shovels and drills<sup>6</sup>: 100 to Russia to drill for gold; 100 to China for coal mining; and scores across the United States and Europe for water well drilling (and in WWI for road-building).<sup>7</sup> Vale was dispatched around the globe to close many of the firm's most important contracts.

In the 1920s, Pittsburgh passed an ordinance forbidding the use of a Keystone hammer in the city, after it not only broke up old concrete on the Boulevard of the Allies but sewer lines and water mains as well. Nobody's perfect.

After Keystone closed in 1931, Vale worked for the U.S. Works Progress Administration until his retirement.

None of his novels was ever published, and there are at least three full manuscripts in the boxes handed down to his daughter (and among the material to be donated to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania's Archives). I was able to make what seems a decent catalog of his work through the correspondence, clips, and magazine samples in the boxes. The boxes still hold upwards of 150 other stories and novellas never published.

In addition to his trademark humor, polemics against various forms of taxation pop up perhaps most often in sagas that fall generally into the literary genres of mystery and adventure. Many of the tales start in unlikely places — in the machinery and construction industry of the 1910s and '20s, during the crest of the Industrial Age, in a region long considered the national capital of heavy equipment, as well as steel. For that reason, J. Vale Downie may be considered a regional writer, and many of his stories are set in Western Pennsylvania towns. A few have exotic settings, such as Africa or South America.

We also had a physician in our family, Aunt Dr. Regina Downie, who told me (her nephew) in the '60s that my inherited condition was “vaso-motor rhinitis.” It caused sudden constrictions of the diaphragm and huge discharges of wind from the upper orifices when my skin registered a sudden change of temperature.

I carry on the tradition but have no older brother to remind me of my manners, though judges make a fair substitute. In ambiance, however, the courtroom can never compete with an Aladdin lantern in the valley of the Slippery Rock Creek. ❁

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> So named during a detour by Col. Broadhead in which an Ensign Jack Ward slipped on a slick rock and broke his leg. He declared, painfully, “From now on, boys, this is Slippery Rock Creek,” and the name stuck, at least according to Allan W. Eckert in *That Dark and Bloody River* (208). I can affirm that a moss grows on the sandstone ledges of that stream that is so smooth that if one stands with feet planted in a modest current, the creek skis one along its bottom.

<sup>2</sup> John Lincoln Downie, Nov. 8, 1895–Oct. 5, 1918.

<sup>3</sup> John Galbreath Downie, (Feb. 4, 1855–May 20, 1917) was the inventor of the Downie deep well pump, the only mechanical pump that could produce a steady pressure head until electric-driven rotary engines became available. Midwestern breweries thought highly of it and I hear of a gas well in north-central Pennsylvania that still has one online as a standby.

<sup>4</sup> Keystone Driller Co., Beaver Falls, Pa.

<sup>5</sup> The serendipitous course of history caused Robert McGee Downie, then a student at the Reformed Presbyterian Seminary, to attempt to earn tuition by drilling wells with the “kick down” method in Butler County in the mid-1880s. The drilling machine was a sapling from which hung a 200 pound bit. Power came from the legs of two men, standing opposite one another, who kicked down on the line, flexing the sapling and dropping the tool, which the sapling then snapped back upward (an action known in the trade as “the peck and the reach of the line.”) Intelligence set in and Robert Downie devised a way of letting a steam engine take the place of his leg. The first machine was mounted on a farm wagon and used the following summer; many times he had to gamble the price of the well to convince farmers that you could get as much water out of a 6-inch hole as you could out of a well 3 feet in diameter. This derailed theology in favor of engineering, steam power, castings and machinery, but both are about power anyway, so not much was lost.

<sup>6</sup> These are percussion drills. A cone-shaped nose on the end of a steel bar is dropped a foot or so, impacts the hole bottom, crushing rock or shale, then is jerked suddenly up, allowing the “mud” to rush in, removing the fractured material. Thus driller’s mud was very important to them, and “Uncle Chuck” Downie (actually a cousin once removed) could tell what he was in — shale, clay, coal, or sandrock by feeling the action of the woven hemp line. A good driller worked on the “peck and reach” of the hemp. The bit ideally should strike just when the line was in full stretch, for it is that jerk-back, the snapping of the line, that puts force behind the inrushing water and mud to erode the hole a little deeper each time. Rotary drills and steel cables changed all.

<sup>7</sup> Keystone drills and shovels can still be seen at local steam power and antique equipment shows at the annual meeting in Portersville, Pa., 35 miles north of Pittsburgh, and at the show usually held in nearby Hookstown. An engineer from Wyoming tells me that when he was on a job above the Arctic Circle in Alaska in 1993, he saw two Keystone drills still running.

