

UP FRONT



By Sam MacDonald

Triangle Bar and Grille: Hot Metal and Cold Cuts

Exit the Triangle Bar and Grille's front door, make a quick left, and walk about 100 yards: here, a person can consider the fantastic rise and fall of Big Steel.

The street ends abruptly on a steep, wooded cliff overlooking the Monongahela River in Swissvale, Pennsylvania. Rising from the weeds below is the hulking, rusting Carrie Furnace. Erected by Andrew Carnegie in 1884, it produced molten iron for the Homestead Works, located right across the muddy river. Site of the

infamous 1892 battle between union activists and Pinkerton strike breakers, by World War II more than 20,000 workers toiled there.

The Triangle opened during those boom years. Established in 1945 and named for its oddly angled building at Monongahela Avenue and Agnes Street, the business catered to workers trudging their way to Carrie Furnace, or traveling to the Homestead mill or Braddock's Edgar Thomson Plant. It lured in Big Steel's huge appetites with an equally gigantic sandwich — the 27-inch "Battleship." Less ambitious eaters could opt for a 12-inch version called the "Destroyer." Reportedly, a former owner christened the huge sandwiches with nautical names because he had been in the navy.

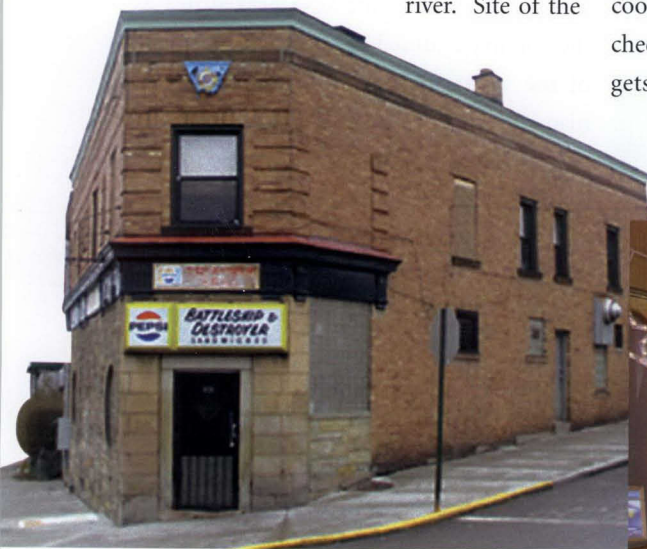
The Battleship is just as big today, with over a pound and a half of cold cuts overhanging its bun: 10 hefty slices of cooked salami and six of cooked ham, as well as five slices of provolone cheese. (Want even more ham? Another dollar gets you the "Super Battleship.") The soft, Italian bread is still baked down the street at the aptly named Gigante Italian

Bakery. Toppings such as lettuce, tomato, onion, salt, pepper, and oregano come standard, and the menu promises never to add mayo unless you request it.

The Triangle's ambience is hometown nostalgia. The door opens to a long wooden bar on the left, fronted with stools. Small tables for eat-in customers occupy the tiled floor. The décor includes a shot of opening day at Forbes Field, an etching of Roberto Clemente, and the battered hood of a Triangle-sponsored racecar. Most customers are drawn, however, to the sandwich counter in the back of the room.

Owner Tom Crombie, 39, says his father bought the Triangle in 1982, after getting laid off from Bethlehem Steel, and then another local mill. With six kids, "He took a chance."

It paid off. According to Crombie, the entire family pitched in to make the business succeed and it continues to do so today. Crombie says that the Triangle goes through 325 of the 27-inch loaves on an average day. That volume might come as a surprise to people familiar with the Mon Valley. Carrie



The Triangle Bar and Grille, Swissvale, Pennsylvania, has served mill workers, celebrities, and loyal customers for over 60 years.

The interior of the Triangle hasn't changed much over the years. Some patrons have a beer while waiting on their sandwich. Both Sam MacDonald



Furnace and the open hearth plant at Homestead shut down for good in 1983. Other cuts that year left U.S. Steel Corporation with just 9,000 workers, down from 27,000 in 1979: 2/3 gone in just four years. Swissvale's population has declined too, from 15,000 in 1960 to around 9,200.

While the closing of the plants hurt, Crombie says that loyalty to the famous Battleship remains strong. "People who used to work at Carrie Furnace come back," he says. "They bring their kids. It's a legacy."

Dan Marino has long been a fan. Penguin legend Joey Mullen was a regular, too. Far from star-struck, however, the Triangle stays true to its blue-collar roots. The Edgar Thomson Plant, just down the road, still churns out steel, after all. Perhaps that's why the Triangle maintains workers' hours: open at 8 a.m., 10 a.m. on Sundays (9 a.m. when there is a Steelers game), and closing at 10:30 p.m. most days. Crombie says the business is largely carry out, although a few will knock back a beer waiting for their sandwich. Sandwiches are the only thing on the menu apart from a few simple sides (coleslaw, potato salad, and macaroni salad — no fries) and a monumental

Battleship rings up at an affordable \$10.

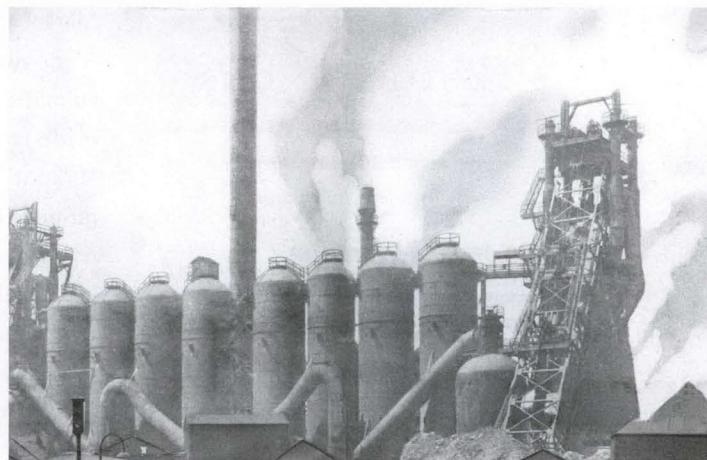
Recent developments in the Mon Valley raise new questions. Developers demolished the historic Homestead Works

in the 1990s to make way for The Waterfront, a booming \$300 million project across the river though Crombie says it hasn't cut into his bottom line.

But an ambitious proposal to redevelop the Mon riverfront in Swissvale and Rankin might pose more challenges. Historic preservationists have kept Carrie Furnace from the wrecking ball, and government officials are committing millions of dollars to refurbishing the 100-foot-tall blast furnaces and creating a lavish museum and steel heritage interpretive center. The "hot metal bridge" that once sent molten iron from the furnaces to the Homestead Works will soon convey pedestrians to and from The Waterfront shops.

Concerned about increased restaurant competition, Crombie is equally aware that traffic in the area could bring more people through his doors. Either way, he says, the Triangle's strong suits will remain: simplicity, value, and the Battleship.

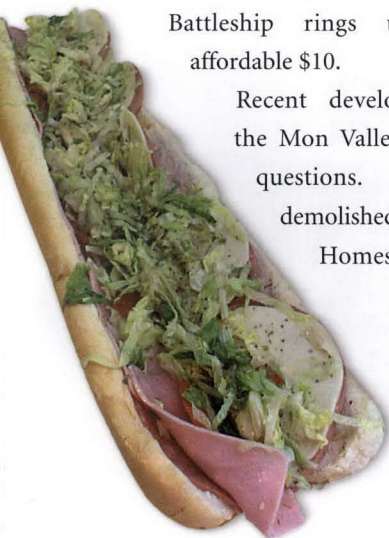
Sam MacDonald was born and raised in Ridgway, Pennsylvania. His first book, *The Agony of an American Wilderness* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) explores the explosive battle surrounding logging on the Allegheny National Forest. He lives with his wife and twin boys in Pittsburgh, where he is teaching composition and pursuing his M.F.A. at the University of Pittsburgh.



A heaving Carrie Furnace, circa 1940.

Courtesy of Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area

- ¹ John P. Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline of the American Steel Industry*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 87.
- ² Franklin Toker, *Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 271.
- ³ M. Ferguson Tinsley, "Generations of hoagies: Swissvale's Triangle builds clientele, giant subs for 60 years," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 9, 2005.
- ⁴ Information about the Triangle and Crombie's family come from an interview conducted at the Triangle on December 28, 2005.
- ⁵ Kenneth Warren, *The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation, 1901-2001*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 335.
- ⁶ Historic population figures for Swissvale and other municipalities in the region, along with a wealth of other demographic data, are available through the Southwest Pennsylvania Commission's Data Store: http://www.spcregion.org/data_datalib.shtml. Numbers for 2004 are available at www.census.gov/.
- ⁷ Ann Belser, "County's purchase of Carrie Furnace Property sparks visions of past and changes to come," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 16, 2005. See also "Preservation act: Carrie Furnace can forge redevelopment," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 18, 2005. A series of press releases from Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato's office also shed light on the details. A few can be viewed at www.county.allegheny.pa.us/news/250613.asp and www.county.allegheny.pa.us/news/250825.asp/.



The 27-inch Battleship sandwich loaded with over a pound and half of cold cuts. Sam MacDonald