

EXCERPTS FROM MR. McBRIDE'S TALK
ON HIS YEARS AT IMPERIAL

(Given before General Research meeting 12/2/44)

At the time when I came with Imperial in 1907 the plant was a single building containing 10 machines, 5 downstairs and 5 on the far side of the second floor. The business had not been too successful. Mr. Tait, who had been a wall paper salesman all his life, was General Manager and Mr. McCabe was first Vice-President. Mr. McCabe had started his career as office boy at the Campbell Wall Paper Plant.

About 1906 Imperial had hired a man by the name of "Banana" Kelly. "Banana" was a rather sloppy individual who had been a laborer with the C. M. Childs Company, a leading manufacturer of pulp colors at that time. Kelly, although only a workman, was an extraordinary person possessed of considerable ambition and drive. After leaving Imperial he went to New Brunswick, N. J. to work. There he attended night school at Rutgers and subsequently graduated. Since then through the years we lost track of Mr. Kelly.

The original color works was a building 50' x 90' x 9' at the east end of Mill 1 under the present Factory laboratory. The striking tanks were placed as high as possible in the room to permit drawing off the pulps by gravity. The solution tanks were fish casks with a 2 ½ inch hole with a pine plug on a string. When you wanted to strike a color you knocked out the plug and pulled it up on the platform by a string. If you wanted a slower strike you bored a small hole.

Our agitators were fashioned from long poles shaved down to convenient hand size with a piece of board fastened on the end and braced to the pole. Two men manipulated the poles walking around the tanks in such a way that a certain agitation effect was secured. Careful synchronization was necessary to get us the supposedly correct agitation. (In other words this paddling was an art.)

Different shaped tanks were used for different colors. A shallow wide tank was supposed to be best for lemon yellow; an elliptical tank shaped like a bathtub was reputedly best for reds.

Filtration was accomplished by running the color slurries into large crate-like filter boxes, made from 1" x 1" slats and lined with muslin bags. When the box was full it was pushed into the corner and allowed to drain for several days. Subsequently the boxes were taken outdoors, their sides were let down and the color was dumped out in a muslin package on a concrete block.* After 5 or 6 such packages were piled up on the block a large iron beam weighted with concrete and weighing five tons was lifted onto the pile and let down rapidly enough to squeeze out the water without splitting the cloth packages. Then the color was shoveled into barrels with wooden shovels.

* not quite the story

It should be noted here that the early color men were not chemists but were empirical workers guarding their secrets jealously and passing their craft from father to son.

In 1906 "Uncle Leo" Emerson of Warrensburg, "Dad" Underwood and Vice President McCabe managed to set aside an appropriation of \$1,000 to start a color plant. I was contacted by correspondence at the Pittsburgh Wall Paper Plant at New Brighton, Pa. where I had been employed for four years in manufacture of colors. I was unhappy and dissatisfied with my job here because of many things. One illustration will serve to show you what I mean: A certain individual who was president of a color company made regular monthly visits to our plant. We wondered why he always stayed overnight and seemed to take a patronizing attitude toward all the color mixers and craftsmen. Subsequently Mr. Updegraff the brother of the Westinghouse's private secretary (formerly Mr. Westinghouse's secretary) and I found out that this man had a desk in a certain back room and he was called on in order by the aforesaid craftsmen. We pushed in ahead of a workman and were cordially greeted by this man who called us by names on a list not our own, asked after our families, and handed us an envelope containing a monthly pay check equal to our weekly salaries. (Apparently this was graft paid the craftsmen to persuade them to use the color of this certain company.) After this mess was cleaned up, Pittsburgh Wall Paper wanted me to stay as manager of their color plant. I agreed to stay 3 months only, (which was 2 months longer than my successor stayed.) *

Imperial had practically no color manufacturing equipment whatever when I arrived. I am afraid I exceeded by \$200 my appropriation to get started manufacturing color. I had a laboratory built over the clay bin from rough ship-lap fished out of the canal on its way to what is now the Griffin Lumber Company. This of course dried out so that you could stick your arm through the cracks and the clay dust came sifting in. I had asked the management for certain equipment. One item was a balance. I was assured that the company owned an excellent balance. This turned out to be closer to a crude set of apothecary's scales than to an analytical balance.

In 1907 we made 60% of the color used in the Glens Falls Plant. In 1908 Imperial purchased the William Campbell plant at Hackensack, New Jersey. This was a large wall paper mill in those days. In 1908 we made not only all the color used in Glens Falls, but also all used at the Campbell plant, and part of the requirements of the Stanton plant at Toronto.

Early wall paper colors were made as cheaply as possible, as bright as they could be, and if anyone happened to show signs of being lightfast it was promptly discarded.

For considerable time I worked alone. Finally it was decided that perhaps the company could afford to hire me a helper, so Fred Gardephe was secured. I had my eye on a promising young man who started work in the wall paper sample room. He

*Wrong

subsequently became my first lab. boy but did not stay with me because Mr. McCabe refused to pay him \$18.00/week. (Subsequently this Mr. Bullard rose to the high rank he now holds in the Finch Pruyn Company.)

There was a big row over this. I felt strongly that it was a mistake in judgment not to bring this young man along. After this experience I was made General Manager of the Imperial Color Works.

About 1910-11 we made our first drying experiments. We started drying quercitron lake placing screen trays over coils with 100 pounds steam pressure. (We didn't know about steam reducers in those days.) We learned to our sorrow that this extract was exceedingly inflammable. The plant burned down, leaving only the foundation and the tank hoops. And we couldn't collect the insurance on the hoops. At this time Mill 1 was built. This marked the beginning of our experiments with mechanical agitation. We found that by putting a plank on a post and turning the post with a motor we could at least do as well as by hand. Later we hit upon the idea of improving the agitation by installing breakers. An interesting commentary on mechanical agitation was the fact that Mr. Brown and I on a trip to United's plant in Newark in 1923 discovered hand agitation still being used.

In the fall of 1912, Mr. Harry Sablon became associated with me as a laboratory and plant worker. In 1913 "Bit" Sablon, Harry's brother, also became associated with us.

One of the favorite pastimes of these early days was exchanging formulas by correspondence. No one ever gave away much of anything worthwhile, not did we receive much benefit aside from the friendships built-up.

In 1914, when war struck, our business was fair but not booming. I recalled that I had an opportunity to take an order for ten carloads of pulp color. Since the management was adversely inclined, I made up my mind that either I would accept the order or take another job which I had located. We took the order.

Then the war started to take hold and business rolled in. The Badische Co. loaned us a number of men, some of whom were well-trained chemical engineers to help us develop logwood and hypernic substituted for German dyestuffs. Mr. Wich, now of General Dye, was one of these men. The arrangement was a purely commercial nature on both sides—to keep their plants going and to make a profitable business for us.

In 1916 we built Mill 2, also the present large, palatial building known as the semi-plant and a maintenance shop.

Practically all of our output was used in connection with the paper industry.

In 1916 the paper industry held a meeting in New York and decided to use no more coloring matter in paper. I had 3,500,000 pounds of unfilled orders on the books at that time.

Happy Sablon and I had to cast around for other customers. One thing that particularly worried Happy was a ton of iron blue which we were stuck with. Harry said that this was more blue than the whole world would use in 10 years. But he sold it in one lump to a paint manufacturer, Briggs-Maroney Company and brought home an order for more. So in 1917 we built Mill 3 for a blue manufacturing plant.

In 1919 "Glen" Greens were developed to replace the Moss greens we had formerly made from quercitron lake and iron blue. These were clean greens and I persuaded Adolph Fuchs to come with Imperial to sell Glen Greens and he sold them. George Knapp came in 1919 and said that Glen Greens couldn't be sold – that all the trade wanted was Moss Greens, -- so Adolph sold his own stock and we shipped the Glen Greens out of George Knapp's warehouse to Adolph's customers.

In 1919 Les Towne came with the company and after being a research chemist on blues for 2 weeks, he took over as a production man which he has been ever since.

In 1920 Mill 4 was built as a raw material storage building. In 1923 Mill #5 was built and Mill 3 became the raw material building. Mill 4 became the yellow mill. In 1923 the lead solution manufacturing process was developed. Bichromate of Soda was \$.25 a pound at this time.

(Mr. Van Wirt then asked Mr. McBride how Mr. Frazier became associated with the company.)

"In 1898 I was a lonesome student at Allegheny College. I met a tall bushy-haired lad who called himself "Bill" Frazier (he disliked the name Albert.) We became firm friends and kept in touch with each other after leaving college. To satisfy his father's desire to make him a professional man, (his father was a doctor or a minister) Bill worked as a cub reporter on the Chicago Times for 3 months.

"Then he went into the lumber business until the spring of 1919. One day when he was in Glens Falls to visit me, I mentioned that my weighing and raw material foreman had just quit and I was going to have to replace him. "Bill" asked me if I thought he might be able to fill in temporarily – and he never left".