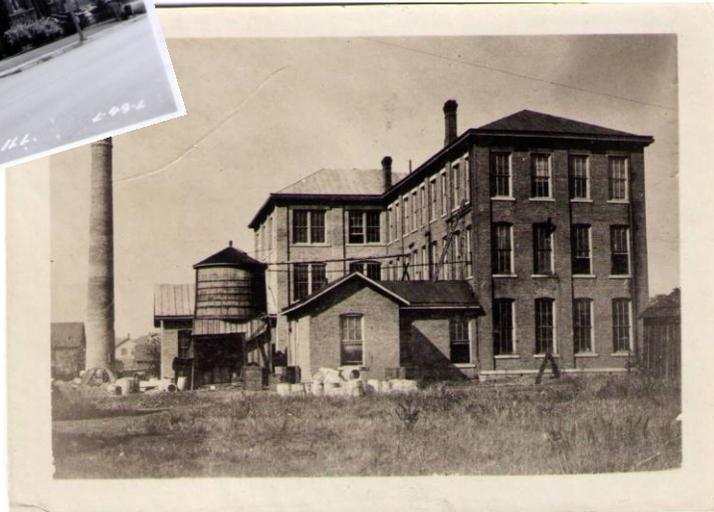


REMEMBERING WESTCLOX

*A Collection of
Stories and Memories*



(Photos Courtesy of the Peru Public Library Local History Collection)

Sponsored by the LaSalle, Peru, Oglesby,
and Richard A. Mautino Memorial Public
Libraries of Illinois

Compiled by Rebecca Witalka

Remembering Westclox:
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June 2012

Introduction

On December 31, 2011, just before midnight, emergency responders received a fire call that would bring a sad start to the New Year and a weeklong effort to quench the flames of a dangerous fire. Fire departments, police departments, and volunteer firefighters from over 25 towns and cities in LaSalle, Bureau, and Putnam counties assisted the Peru fire and police departments with putting out the fire threatening to overtake the old Westclox plant, a historic landmark of the Illinois Valley. The iconic parts of the building, the entrance with the clock and the main building, still stand undamaged, but a part of history went up in flames that night. This event inspired the members of the Peru Public Library, Oglesby Public Library, La Salle Public Library, and Richard A. Mautino Memorial Library of Spring Valley to work together to preserve a part of the history of the Illinois Valley through the memories and stories of those who lived through it. Beginning in January of 2012, the participating libraries advertised our intent and welcomed all of those willing to share their story. The goal of this venture was to gain a new knowledge and appreciation of Westclox, a major employer and part of the Illinois Valley for over a century. This volume of memories is the result of the perseverance of the libraries involved and a willingness of the community to share a more private part of history with the future. With this, Westclox will no longer be just a building but a tangible memory for all.

I hope all who read this find value in the collected stories and memories of our past.

Rebecca Witalka,

Peru Public Library

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Acknowledgments

I wrote my article in memory of my brother, Ronnie, who taught me a lot on those automated lines, and I miss him more every day. Ronnie died at 60 years old from infections received from being a bad diabetic. – Albert Davis

Last but not least – How proud I am of my great-grandson, Zachary Freschi, a volunteer fireman for the city of Peru who worked many hours to extinguish that fire. Not that he was happy, but he said what a feeling when you are up in that bucket on the fire engine & managing that fire hose. It just does something to you knowing that you are helping. I am so proud of him. Love ya Zach. – Clara Wachowiak

Three Memories
By a Former Female Employee

Connection: She was an employee from 1952 to 1958.

3 memories stand clear.

#1. My starting wage was \$.96 per hr.

#2. The operator sitting beside me was male – his wage was \$1.10 per hour.

#3. Westclox was the dating site long before eHarmony.com!

Mueller/Piccato

Somolski/Weide

Janet ?/Moore

Pienta/Smith (deceased)

All in my age group. All became married couples – still!

Traffic!
By Laurie Moss

No one wanted to be “caught” in the traffic when Westclox “let out.” It was something. ☺ Policemen directed walkers to their buses and local traffic came to a halt as all the workers raced to their cars or buses. Many walked as well. My best friend’s dad walked (in all weather situations) twice a day, from 10th and Putnam. He said that after being inside all day it was a pleasure to walk. That’s what I recall the most!

Dad's Stories
By Patricia (Urban) Singer

I am from Ottawa but grew up in Peru. My name is Patricia (Urban) Singer. My dad, Edward Urban, was a quality control supervisor (not sure of the exact title). He has passed away but one story I remember him telling is that one of his job duties earlier in his 35 years at Westclox was to drive to Ottawa to pick up the dials from the luminous plant in Ottawa. They did not paint the dials at the Peru Westclox. As a child I remember Westclox having wonderful Christmas parties for the employees and their families. They had a band playing Christmas music and each child received a really nice gift from Santa Claus. I remember getting a tea set one year, a stuffed Cuddly Dudley poodle game, and a Ouija board. Westclox took really good care of their employees in the earlier years. I also remember that when the shift was over people were running out of the plant to beat the traffic jams that occurred because so many people worked at Westclox.

Clock Sales
By Susan Mitchell

Connection: Mrs. Susan Mitchell worked the stake and staff machine.

I worked at Westclox just before it closed and met many wonderful people and loved the experience. Midnight shift was really different. The building was so big and quiet. Looking out the big back windows on Christmas night with the snow falling was beautiful. Not a lot of work got done that night but it sure is a good memory.

Probably one of the things I liked best was when my parents would drive from Morris to the clock sales. Many of those clocks are still running and used by our family, since my parents passed on.

A Work Ethic
By K. J. Mays

Westclox was a great place to learn, train, and gain work skills still applicable today. My one year at Westclox exposed me to mass working conditions. Duties were “running” interdepartmental memos from office to factory along with the throes of filing – by alphabet or by compartment? Hours were from 7:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. My lunch mates and I walked to Westclox Park alongside the office building where we sat, gabbed, and ate our brown bagged lunches. Sometimes we shared a piece of fudge or pie. The craftsmanship of production, competence, routine, and orderliness enabled everyone for future jobs, transferred and passed on to the present.

Painter's Heaven
By K. J. Mays



Steve Kristapovich

(Photo: 32nd Annual Meeting Westclox Quarter Century Club, December 10, 1949, page 7)

Heaven to Steve Kristapovich was painting every design on Westclox clocks, big or small. Steve Kristapovich lived to mix paints, air brush, and spray the clock palette as though he was an artist depicting the landscape. The clocks became illuminated in grand style through all color hues during Steve's over 25 years at Westclox as a painter.

Steve set aside his plan for marriage and family to support his parents, brothers, and sisters and have a chance at his American dream of owning his own home, located at 325 E. 6th Street, Peru, just one block from the Buffalo Street entrance of the awesome Westclox, designer of durable clocks that lasted and lasted. Some made in the 50's and 60's still tick today. Clocks were labeled different names such as Big Ben and Baby Ben. Styles expanded to battery operated, electric, and hand wound.

Although Steve, his convenient house, and the Westclox facility may not be visible, their memories, their existence will forever be endeared and remembered for who and what their contribution was to society and the world.

On Time
By K. J. Mays



(Photo: Attributed to the LaSalle News Tribune, circa 1960's, Unconfirmed)

50's or 60's photo when women wore skirts, before slacks or jeans integrated themselves into the workplace. People worked on time, note the 4:30 P.M. discharge time, walking across 4th Street in Peru, directed by an officer holding back traffic to allow people to cross.

Serving Westclox
Transcribed by Rebecca Witalka for Carol Schloeder

Carol Schloeder worked across the street from Westclox at Urbanowski Furniture Mart from 1957 to 1961. Urbanowski Furniture Mart was located at 427 5th Street in Peru, where CIF Factory Surplus Furniture is now at, and did more than just sell furniture. It cashed the checks of the Westclox workers, had a gift shop, and sold a variety of other items. Westclox employees were paid every two weeks on a Friday. On this day, the store prepared for the rush and made sure to have extra money on hand for that one day every two weeks. The Westclox employees “would rush over and form a line” at the Furniture Mart to have their checks cashed at a charge of \$0.50. The store would provide every worker who cashed their checks there with a coupon about the size of a dollar bill that could be saved and later used in the gift shop, with other coupons to purchase something, or to put down a down payment.

“Ma Turpen’s,” more formally known as Turpen’s Grocery & Lunch, was located next to the Furniture Mart on 5th Street. It served a luncheon at noon and was one of the few restaurants by Westclox. It served memorable large pork tenderloins that were enjoyed by all, especially those near and at Westclox.

“When they came out, they came out in groups.” The large number of people who worked at Westclox required a policeman to direct traffic and people at 12:00 p.m. and 4:30 p.m., when the workers were leaving for lunch and home. At these times, the town was basically shut down, because “the town revolved around Westclox.” If anyone wanted to go shopping or downtown to LaSalle or Peru, it was necessary to do so before 12:00 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

After leaving the Furniture Mart in 1961, Carol worked at Eureka Savings Bank on Marquette Street in LaSalle, where she once again served Westclox by cashing the checks of the employees. On the Fridays when the Westclox workers were paid, the atmosphere of the bank changed. The four tellers were only allowed to take a half hour lunch, one at a time, instead of the normal hour lunch done in pairs, to accommodate the sheer volume of people coming to the bank. She remembers how the buses loaded with Westclox employees would arrive at noon to cash their checks.

The “Open Air Market” was a farmer’s market next to Westclox, on the southeast corner of 4th and Market Streets. It sold fresh fruit and vegetables to the public and probably much more!

My Westclox Memories Kay Smith Piwonski



Woody Woodpecker Alarm model 515 made in 1959 and 1960. Courtesy of Mike Groleau. \$50-\$350.

(Groleau, Mike. Photograph of a Woody Woodpecker Alarm. 2003. Westclox: An Identification and Price Guide. By Gary Biolchini. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2003. Pg. 80. Print)

I worked at Westclox in about 1959-1960. I worked in the Big Ben department on the line making Keno alarm clocks, which at the time sold for under \$4.00. Our piece work total was 1800 and most days we averaged over 2000, and that was just our side of the line. The other side was making the same thing but for a while they made the Woody Woodpecker clock, which had a Woody Woodpecker that bobbed his head as the clock ticked. I used to wonder what they did with all of those clocks.

Our line alone turned out about 10,000 per week, and I guess they stockpiled plenty because our side of the line was shut down after about 11 months.

There were 6 or 8 assemblers on the line. They took the two sides of the movement and put them together with some of the gears inside. The first person on the line put on the time knob and washer and oiled, the second put on the alarm knob and washer (or vice versa), then I wound the alarm spring. Next came the time spring, then balance wheel and some more oiling. There were at least 2 more people before the end person put on the crystal and bezel and the last person did the inspection. If anything wasn't right, they went in a box and went back to where the mistake was and, as you had time, you corrected the mistake and put the movement back on the line to go through the process again.

What I remember most about Westclox are the friends I made while working there. Most of them lived close enough that they took the bus home for lunch, and since I was from Tonica and drove in, I usually ate lunch in the cafeteria. I really don't remember much about the lunches, so they must not have been either exceptionally good or exceptionally bad. I remember that they had a library and I went in there after lunch and read. I don't remember being able to check books out, but I do remember reading books as well as the Tick Talks and shopping at Emma's Gift Shop on lunch hour. If it was nice we could sit on the benches outside or just take a walk.

Our side of the line closed after about 11 months and I had found another job before I was called back so that ended my Westclox experience.

Remembering Westclox
By Clara Wachowiak

How sad I was when I heard the news of the fire. I've got mostly good memories, some not so good. I started in the Foot Press Department. "Foot Press" Mike was my boss. He was 101% factory man. He watched when we had to go to the john. He watched when you went in & went out. I had 33 years working there & was never laid off. I ended up in the Staff & Pinion Department. Rusty Johnson was my boss – a terrific man. I worked there until we got the bad news that they were closing. The majority of the people were nice to work with.

We had a medical department. When we had an injury or didn't feel well, up to the Medical Department we went & maybe laid down for a while or had our injury treated when needed. Nice nurses were on hand always.

The Christmas parties we had for the children.

The Quarter Century Club was nice too. Then there were the bowling alleys. They had to set the pins by hand. We had many good bowlers on those teams.

If I can remember right, they said we had 4,000 people employed there during war time. We had three shifts going.

Thanks for the memories.

Limburger Cheese By Anonymous

Connection: The author's father, mother, uncle, two aunts, and spouse all worked at Westclox.

My dad started working there at 15, because they didn't have to provide a birth certificate, & worked there for 50 years. He wanted to go to high school but the family needed the money so there was no choice. He worked in the Auto Screw Dept., which made parts. The machines needed lots of oil to run and lots of oil also landed on the wood floors. Some of the guys like to play tricks such as putting limburger cheese in a machine of someone they disagreed with and when the machine heated up, the smell was awful. They would also put that same stinky cheese under the hat brim of unsuspecting fellow workers.

My mother & uncle also had to go to work at Westclox instead of going to high school to help support the family because their dad died of black lung disease from the coal mines. Mom worked in the Foot Press Dept. where there was a MEAN boss, "Footpress Mike." Her job was to put a tiny part in a watch or clock & then pick a pedal to set the part – thousands of times a day. Sometimes they ran out of parts or were done early and instead of waiting hours for their ride home to Spring Valley, they would walk the 5 miles home to save the 5¢ bus fare.

Mom & Dad were married in secret in the church rectory because only the husband (or wife) could work @ Westclox after marriage.

Many of the employees would pay for rides to work (before it was called carpooling) because fewer people had cars. They also rode the city buses which would line up on both sides of the front door and fill up at closing time. The thousands exiting the building at the same time was an unforgettable sight.

Everyone in town had Westclox clocks and watches because employees got discounts. The windup clocks tick loudly but still work.

Knowledge Brings Happiness

Transcribed by Rebecca Witalka for Arthur Kardas

“Its knowledge in the job that brings the happiness,” said Arthur Kardas, a former employee of Westclox in the late 1930’s. He recalls how everyone at Westclox was given a single job that they worked on day in and day out. If necessary, someone would keep learning different jobs until they found their “niche.” Mr. Kardas worked in Trade Repair, where he dealt with incoming mail of faulty or broken clocks, on the Power Press, where plates for the clocks were fabricated, and in Time Movements, where the parts were timed with no more than a minute variation. With each job he was given, he had to know a different role in the Westclox plant and become committed to it. It was this commitment and knowledge of every employee that made Westclox work and produced a high standard of quality products.

He recalls a four story building that was built in 1937 by V. Jobst and Sons, a construction company out of Peoria. It housed the Electric Clock Department, which made movements for the clocks in the Chevy’s and Packard’s and started the electric wall clocks, on the 3rd floor. The basement of this building held the employment center, which was run by Mr. W. R. Wagner at that time. Close to this building was the old Buffing/Plating Building. It was built around 1910 and was one of the buildings destroyed by fire. Behind it was a side road for trucks. In order to make room for buildings such as these, Buffalo and Illinois Streets were permanently closed from 4th Street to Water Street. In the space they occupied, many buildings that were a part of the Westclox factory were built.

Linehead Brothers
By Albert Davis

I was the afternoon Linehead on the 4" assembly line which consisted of 8 women operators on the automatic clock line where I was responsible for the women's presses and all line repairs. I had a stock boy who kept the line plenished at all times. My hours were on the afternoon shift and my now deceased brother (Ronnie Davis) did the Linehead job on the day shift. Our wages were \$4.65 an hour and we did have tool and die makers who would come and work on problems that Ronnie or I could not fix and believe me, the operators' would pester you 'til you got matters fixed. We would produce, on an 8 hr shift, about 5,000-5500 alarm clocks at a very rapid pace and our main concern was that the quality control members would not reject the amount produced. If this happened you had to pull women off the line to go through the rejected clocks, so high numbers were not always best if the quality of these clocks were bad! I then read out the automatic lines on the clocks. One lane was for if the clock's time was fast, one for slow ones. They would be regulated on this line according to which problem was determined. Then an operator at the end of the line would box the clocks after the time was readout correctly. The readout line consisted of 44 CARS, with 1 or 2 being defective with the shelves being bent. The CARS would load automatically. The clocks would be pushed onto the shelves of each CAR¹. I enjoyed working at Westclox from May 1969 to May 1977, when I got a better paying job at Buzzi Cement which laid me off in December 2008 with 32 years of service and where I am pensioned from since December 2009. I met a lot of good people as a young man just out of high school. This was my first full time job. The women could become very close and concerned and treated you like their family and you felt a lot of their pain, too. Before working on the automated lines I worked in the Store Dept. where I would supply the lines with materials and rods for the Staff & Pinion for producing parts needed for both the Alarm and Fuse departments, so I had a rounded knowledge of the plant before I reached the automatic lines. We would also supply containers needed for the automated lines for clock production.

¹ The readout line consisted of 44 CARS or overhead loaders that each had six shelves. The CARS would have to be brought down to be loaded by an automated pusher. The clocks would sit in the overhead for 24 hours to see how well they kept time before being pushed off the CAR as new clocks were loaded. Once they were off the CAR, the clocks would be read out and placed on the fast or slow line or boxed up. Consistently there were always one or two CARS with bent shelves that had to be brought down and fed through empty until they could be repaired. That left about 42 CARS a day that could be used on the line. Using a damaged CAR could cause the clocks to jam in the CAR and stop the production.

Smiley Faces By Mary

Alas, my stint at Westclox was but a mere eight days. I was hired as summer help between my sophomore and junior years at college. I was trained on the assembly line placing yellow smiley faces on the small clocks. I wasn't up to the speed of the women on the line, but I remember they were encouraging and helpful. As a young adult, I could sense these women were like a family. They shared their lives during breaks and lunch. They made plans to meet on their time off. It seemed like they enjoyed being together each day.

Into my second week, the management and work force had come to an impasse and a strike was called. I never saw the women on the smiley face line again, but what a memory I have of working at such a special place.

A Proud Hybki Family Westclox Story
By Leonard Hybki

Connection: Nine members of the Hybki family worked at Westclox at some time in their lives.

What a shock seeing the Westclox complex on fire Jan. 1, 2012 at 6 AM going for coffee. Many memories came to my mind of a family of nine working at the plant for 55 years. This Westclox story started in 1918 with Casimir Hybki Sr. After World War I, the army veteran started working at Westclox in the Power & Light's Department. He was followed by son Cas Jr., in 1938 in the Main Spring Dept. Cas Jr. enlisted in the Air Corps during World War II and retired from the Air Force in 1964 at the rank of a Major. Three Hybki girls followed: Francis, Balance Dept., 1940; Rosemary, Watch Dept., 1942; Agnes, Printing, 1945. All three girls, while at Westclox, got married. Hybki number 6 was son Floyd, who started in 1947. Floyd graduated from toolmaker school and worked in the Tool Dept. till 1970. He was pres. of the Tool Union & was a plant fireman. The last son, Leonard, started in 1948 in the Printing Dept., where he printed many editions of the "Tick Talk." He worked till 1960 when he got laid off. Both Floyd & Leonard were Korean Vets. The 8th member of the family was Mary Szymoricz in 4" Assembly. She married Floyd in 1957. Number 9 was Anita Suarez, Printing Dept. She became the bride of Leonard Hybki in July 1957. Casimir Hybki Sr., the leader, had the longest years of service at Westclox. He became a member of the Quarter Century Club in 1943. Cas was honored with his Hamilton wrist watch for 35 years of service in 1953. Casimir Sr. worked and retired in 1961 with 42 years of service at Westclox.

Please Write
Transcribed by Rebecca Witalka for Millie (Noramczyk) Koscielski

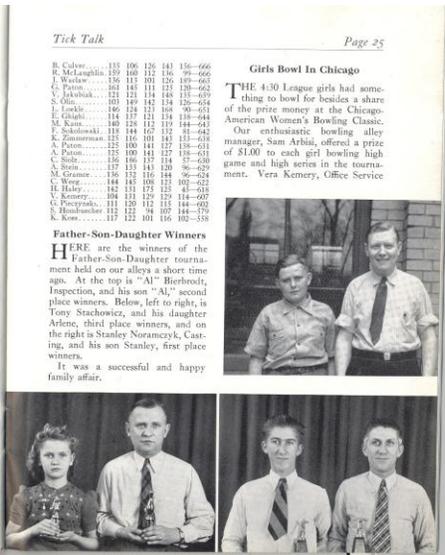
Millie Noramczyk started working at Westclox in 1943, two weeks after her high school graduation, in the 4th Finishing Department. In this department, she worked with pressed cardboard, attached tags, and painted over scratches for \$0.50 an hour. There were five other young girls on her line. Each of these girls would spend hours doing such tasks as attaching small tags to the back of the clocks. They made the job fun by writing their names and addresses and "please write" on each tag. Millie doesn't know what was printed on the other side of the tag, but their simple request was often granted by service men. One such service man was a Japanese man who wrote back to Millie and wanted to get married by proxy. He actually lived in Southern Illinois and came to her door after she was married to Mr. Koscielski. She recalls with a fond laugh how she had to turn him down and explain that she was already married.

After some time of working in this department, she said "I graduated from painting scratches to putting hands and dials on." Part of her new role dealt with hair springs. It was difficult work because the springs had to be held compressed and twirled in such a way that the twirls would be flat and completely even with no waves or the timing wouldn't be right. Here the workers were paid by how many hair springs were completed, not by the hour.

During one of her jobs, she was able to sit by the big windows. This made for a hot summer and cool winter. "We were always yelling at one another," Millie comments. The women in the front always wanted the blinds or windows open or closed because of the temperature inside the building.

During wartime, all of the workers had to wear identification tags with their picture on it to get past the guards posted at every door. If an employee forgot their tag, he or she would need to go to the front office to borrow a blank one for the day. While this time was scary, the employees would brighten their tags. Millie remembers how "some had fancy ribbons holding them; some had beads, to make them fancier."

The Quarter Century Club headquarters was a two story house on the corner of Buffalo and 5th Streets. Next to it was a fenced in lot for the employees to play baseball in the summer and ice skate, after it was flooded, in the winter.



(Photo: Tick Talk, April 1941, Vol. 26, Num. 4, page 25)

The three-story infirmary building is still standing. Employees would go here for illnesses and injuries. If a young girl were to get sick, a wheel chair would be sent down with a contraption to hold a sheet up to hide her while she was being taken up to the infirmary.

Westclox introduced a lot of couples in its time, including Mr. & Mrs. Stanley Noramczyk, Millie's parents. "My dad was in hand casting. What my mother did, I don't know." She does know that her mother worked there in the 1920's. Her father collected all the covers of the Tick Talks from 1925 on. He glued them to cardboard to make his own scrapbook of Westclox.

Westclox gave each of its employees an hour for lunch where they could eat in the "nice" cafeteria, take a bus into town, or do a variety of other activities. "You always knew when payday was, because the noon-time bus going to La Salle to cash their checks was crowded. I think most ended up at Kelly-Cawley's." Millie recalls often playing ping pong after she finished her lunch. Some of the employees would store leftover food in side drawers by their workstation. If the leftovers were forgotten, they would be left with just mouse droppings in the morning!

"I got started bowling there." The four lane bowling alley was located on site, in the building just to the east of the main entrance. Her brother, pictured above with her father on page 25 of the April 1941 edition of Tick Talk, was a pin setter for some time.

The cafeteria would also host the Christmas parties for the employees and their children and relatives. "Santa Claus" would be there to give each child a gift, such as a toy and game. When Millie's daughter was 8 months old, she received her first gift from Westclox – chicken pox!

The "excursion boat" was an exciting adventure for all! Westclox would take their employees and their families to places such as Starved Rock for company picnics and parties.

Millie's parting words: "I still miss the 7:30 and 4:30 whistles. They were really good to us. I never had any complaints."

Perfect Game
By Robert Burkhart

My father, Tony Burkhart, was born in 1900. At the age of 14 (1914), he was hired by Westclox. This was legal at the time. Westclox had, I think, 4 bowling lanes. My dad bowled there and in 1925 he bowled a perfect 300 game. In 1944, I worked there in defense work before I went into the army. While there the bowling alley manager Sam Arbiel showed me the 300 game scoring sheet. He thought it to be the only 300 bowled at Westclox. My dad also played in the slow pitch softball league, pitching to Les Link, fondly called "Peaches." Westclox also had a very good girls softball team. Dad worked until his death in 1958.

Taking Work Home
By Anonymous

My memory of Westclox is that my grandfather Paul Kerp was a foreman there. When he was at home on evenings and weekends, he would work on clocks. He knew a lot about the Westclox clocks & watches. It was fun to sit by him and watch him work on them. He was patient & knowledgeable. My Aunt Joan Kerp Rohs and my Mother Reta Kerp Lemler had worked there too in their younger days. I can remember the buses that picked up the workers and then took them home. When Westclox got off at night it was a crazy place to see all the workers coming out of the building to get to their bus so they could go home. It was always neat to hear about Westclox from my Aunt, Mom, Grandfather and all the friends & family that worked there. It was such a tragic thing that Westclox had to close. It was a good place to work for the people around the area. Sure wish it could have stayed.

November 11th
By Harold Willmer

Connection: Harold Willmer started working at Westclox in May of 1948, right out of High School.

In November of every year, on November 11th, the whistle would blow at 11 AM and work would stop. Everyone would stand and face the east for one minute of silence. This was for the peace treaty that ended World War One.

Moving
By Joan Lee

Connection: Joan worked in the Accounting Department.

I started in Sept. 1952 during the Korean War. I was 18 years old & Westclox seemed to be gigantic. I stayed until Feb. of 1980 & was one of the last employees to leave. Ray Sebastian was my supervisor & getting rid of all the machinery was what we were doing. We moved from the large office bldg. on the north side of the street with just a very few people, 15 or less, to the employment office on the south side area. We had kerosene portable heaters to keep warm as the boilers had been shut down.

I enjoyed my time at Westclox & made many friendships & do keep contact with a few yet today. All in all it was a great experience to work there from 1952 to 1980, & I was sorry to see the factory close.

Al Brady
By Mrs. Albert (Anna) Brady

Connection: Mrs. Brady worked there for 9 years, while her husband worked there for 34 years. He always spoke well of Westclox.

Al Brady worked at Westclox for 34 years. He worked in the Watch Department. He was an escaper. He worked on pocket watches. They had a Quarter Century Club. You could join it if you worked there for 25 years. They had a Quarter Century Club for years. If you worked there 50 years you received a gold watch. Every Christmas they had a concert for these people. They enjoyed that very much. We received vacation pay, as much as 3 weeks. They had a nice library. You could go in during noon hour. There were good magazines and you could buy stamps there. They had a cafeteria where we could eat. We could bring our own lunch or buy lunch there. It was clean. I enjoyed working there. There were buses that some people rode in to work. A lot of people drove cars and took riders who helped pay for gas. My husband always had riders. I enjoyed working there very much. I felt bad that it burned down. I kept a lot of the Tick Talks.

Reel Memories

Transcribed by Rebecca Witalka for John Oberholz

John Oberholz has worn many hats in his lifetime: son, brother, husband, father, World War II veteran, union member, master electrician. He has worked on film sets in Colorado and been stationed in Japan and China. While he did not work for Westclox, he did do contract work with the company and has a unique view of Westclox: through its power.

He was born and raised in the area and recalls quite a few facts from his youth. He remembers Elger's farm, where Illinois Valley Community College is now located, and how he rode his horse everywhere. In order to get across the river, he would need to take the ferry for 10¢, which covered the cost of himself and his horse, because there were no bridges yet. From Water Street, he could see the original entrance to Westclox, and his freshman year in high school cost him \$25 a semester.

He joined the Navy in 1942, where he was stationed at various harbors in China. One memory that stands out during this was "visiting" the Buddha temples in Shanghai. Some might have viewed this as desertion, but he insists that "I did not actually run. I was securing the area."

Film was a big part of his life before and after the war. He was part of a film crew that shot some of the movies and documentaries of Westclox in the 1930's and 1940's on silver nitrate film. Because the type of film used is highly flammable and decomposes easily, most of the films in his collection have not been played before. He has 10 spools of film, which are easily about 18,000 feet long each. He also worked on several western film sets, where he worked and ate lunch with people such as Jean Rogers and Julia Adams.

After serving in World War II, John Oberholz received his Professional Engineering License in 1953 from the University of Illinois. This same year he began working as a plant engineer at Carus Chemical.

He did a lot of work with the electricity at Westclox. As a novice electrician, he was a part of the local chapter of the electricians' union and worked as a member of a large team contracted to take care of the electricity. He got lost a few times in the buildings and remembers the uses for the two tunnels under Westclox. One of the tunnels was for the employees to get across without affecting or being affected by traffic and the other, only accessible for maintenance with the supervisor's key, for the water and heating pipes for the north buildings. An interesting feature he recalls is the four inch oil

soaked bricks set above the hard and jagged concrete to protect the workers' feet in the main factory and south side building.

He was there to put in the electricity and take it out. After the company closed its doors, he was the one to take apart the machinery and ship it to the correct places, such as England, Australia, and various islands. He also disconnected pipes that ran water and heat through the buildings. Once businesses started taking up residence in the buildings, Mr. Oberholz reconnected the electric and redid some of the plumbing. Originally, river water was used for the lavatories and retreated after use and returned to the river. He changed this, though, by bringing in new pipes and reconnecting them. A lot of this work he did through his own business, Oberholz Electric Inc., which he started after he became a master electrician. In addition to Westclox, he was contracted to put new controls in at National Biscuit in Marseilles, Illinois and work on some substations for Illinois Power.

During all the years Westclox was closed to the public, he only recalls two attempted break-ins.

With Fond Memories
By Bill Miller

Connection: Bill Miller worked at Westclox for total of 40 years, 20 as a Time Keeper in several different departments before working in the Sales Department for the last 20 years of his service.

The fire on New Year's Eve Dec. 31, 2011 at Westclox both saddened me and brought back many memories of my 40 years working there.

I started at Westclox in 1943 right out of high school, during the war, as many did. Since we were making military parts, all employees had to be fingerprinted and wear photo badges. I spent many years as time keeper in many departments, some were the ones destroyed by the fire. The plating, paint, buffing, two inch, and foot press, I believe, were the ones. At one time Westclox employed 5000 people and was considered the largest clock factory in the world. I recall we were awarded the "Army/Navy" Award for Excellence during WWII. Westclox was a great place to work. As you entered the large front doors, to the right was a large cafeteria with a full menu that seated hundreds. To the left were 4 ping pong tables. In the southeast corner of the factory downstairs were bowling alleys. We had a ball diamond on the northeast side of Route 6, which is now a parking lot, that doubled as a skating rink in the winter. Many clubs were formed, such as ball teams, bowling teams, golfing teams, photography clubs, and horseshoe courts. We also had a medical department with a nurse on duty. We also had our own down sized fire truck that could drive through the main aisles. As far as outsourcing goes, we manufactured everything from scratch including packaging in our Printing Department in the basement of the main office. I spent the last 20 years in the Sales and Marketing Department in the main office on the north side of Route 6. Westclox had a great office and sales staff that sold 20000 to 40000 time pieces a day. Employees were treated to two great events each year, the "Quarter Century" Club banquet and the annual Christmas party with quality toys for our children. At one time, Westclox had two giant smokestacks that could be seen for miles around that eventually were torn down. It was not all hard work. It was enjoyable and at times fun. Many lasting friendships were made. I recall one incident of many. One of our workers in the Tool Room welded a half dollar piece to a nail and hammered it in the wood floor of a main isle near the main Spring Dept. As luck would have it, the first person to come along out of 5000 was the General Mgr. He borrowed a hammer, plucked it off the floor, put the half a buck in his pocket and walked on!

Westclox, and what I like to call "the Smokestack Industrial Era," is over but the memories will linger on until the last "Westcloxer" is gone. There were thousands of

factories in the USA in the 20th Century. I'd like to think that Westclox was one of the best.

Bicycle Girl
By Mary (Nimee) Miller

Connection: Mary Miller was a mail carrier for the office and factory. Her job was more commonly referred to as “bicycle girl.”

When the fire was discovered on New Year’s Eve, Dec. 31, 2011, it was such a shock. One could only imagine how devastating it would be and the mixed emotions we all had.

I started in 1950 right out of high school as many did. I worked in the 4 in. Assembly for about one month. When they took me to the department I was terrified, hundreds of people hustling and of course staring. Honestly, I didn’t think I was going to last. The people in that Dept. were wonderful and really put me at ease. My dearest friend was bicycle girl. That’s what they called us. I told her I didn’t think I was going to make it in the factory. She asked if I would like a job like her delivering mail. Of course I thought it was glamorous. She gave my name in the office and I was able to start right away. I was handed 3 long sheets with the names of every Dept., their Foreman’s, & assts. All Depts. also had numbers. Of course I was overwhelmed. I later learned to love my job. This job was considered a stepping stone to an office job when one became available. When one came I asked Mr. Damm if there was some way I could stay in the Traffic Dept., that’s where our office was located. The telephone operator and Western Union were also there. He was pleased & brought in a desk for me. I was considered as a refill for anyone who got sick in the Dept. I don’t think many people knew how many Depts. there were. With a pedometer, I walked 5 miles a day. Three runs in the factory and two runs in the office. I might add many employee love notes were also delivered to different Depts.

This was one of the greatest clock factories and was known all over the world and shipped clocks and fuses made during World War II all over the world. I’m sure I speak for many that they were proud to have worked there.

Apprenticeship
By Linda Deichmueller Gaudette

I was employed at Westclox for ten years, from 1959 to 1969. My best friend Shirley and I put our applications in at the same time. We started work right after our graduation from high school. At one time my mother, aunt, cousin, and I all worked there. The first few months were spent on the Assembly Line or repair bench for Baby Ben alarm clocks. The other nine plus years were spent in the Fuse Department working on government contracts. I was now in a new air conditioned building but remembered going down, down, down thru other Depts. to visit my mother in the Foot Press, where she was an inspector. Later she would be an inspector in the Fuse Dept. with me.

Those years at Westclox were a kind of apprenticeship for a very good job later in the Department of Defense in Keppert, WA.

My memories of Westclox are all good ones. I liked the people I worked with and also liked and was good at the work I performed there.

A "Big Band" Party
By Delores Udovic Spelich

Connection: Delores Spelich started at 50¢ an hour. She was employed in the Adjustment or Repair Office above the Rock Island Railroad tracks from 1946 to 1951. There was no A/C and wide bare planks for a wooden floor. When a troop train came past, they would rush to the windows and wave at the soldiers headed east to Chicago.

We looked forward to the charismatic "Paymaster" every 2 wks. He carried a 4 inch deep box at his waist to hold checks & a strap around his neck holding the box up.

The "mail girl" rode her bicycle through the underground tunnel under 4th St. from the north side office to the main entrance cafeteria and delivered to all of the factory depts. As the "buzzer" sounded at 4:27 PM women punched out (men later). We'd rush upstairs, in about 3 minutes flat, & gallop as fast as possible through the 2 block long departments as the men whistled at us. About 7 buses were out front with a police man directing traffic for a hectic 15 minutes. If you missed the crowded bus you walked to 1st St. LaSalle Bank to catch the 5 PM Oglesby bus.

When the spring flood of 1951 closed the bottom road out of LaSalle, we walked to the CB&Q Railroad tracks from Jonesville the next morning rather than taking the crowded bus that detoured through Utica. As we walked on the bridge ties we tried to avoid looking down at the rushing Illinois River below.

Many employees met future spouses at Westclox. Annual vacation time was the first 2 wks. in July. We attended many Thursday evening wedding showers at the "Dom" on East 1st St. in LaSalle. In its heyday, "Dom's" downstairs had numerous Saturday receptions. We chipped in for an employee's wedding gift & the honoree reciprocated with "Snickers" or "Hershey" bars. Cost = 24 per box = 89¢. Sat. weddings were from 8 AM to 12 noon and we often had attended 2 in 1 morning. I took many flash (bulb) photos during the services. At St. Roch's Church (attended 2 in 1 morning) Fr. Mike Zeleznikar kept getting the 1st names of the 2 couples mixed up. So busy!

Our boss, Spencer Gibson, presented each of us (20) w/ a X-mas gift. We usually had our holiday dinner & sing-a-long at the "Peru Hotel."

Frank Yankovic, from Cleveland, and his polka orchestra played in the upstairs ballroom at the "Dom" in LaSalle, where I met my husband. "Johnny Kaye" Orchestra (Peru) often played at dances in the Peru "Turn Hall" & the "Auditorium" in LaSalle. We saw

Donald O'Connor at the Aud. & South Bluff Country Club. We'd see & dance with so many Westclox friends at various "Big Band" dances.

After the war many homes were built w/ Westclox employees' earnings. Women were recruited during the war to work there where as married women (homemakers) weren't encouraged to work during the "Depression years." Couples married secretly before 1941, lest the female lost her job.

My dad lived 1 block north of L-P High School. In 1913, age 15, he worked at Westclox in the Watch Racks. When he dropped one it was deducted from his pay & he figured his 1st pay was six cents an hour.

In their early years our children had so much fun attending Westclox X-mas parties (for 3 yrs) with their grandma & me. They still remember how huge the complex was & receiving Santa's play dishes and puzzles. Several thousand people attended.

Once we attended the dance at "Aragon Ballroom" in Chicago on Sunday night. We returned on the "milk train." Because it stopped at so many small towns, it took several hours to reach the LaSalle Depot. [It reach the LaSalle Depot at] 5:30 AM Mon. We changed clothes at Westclox & punched in at 7:25 AM. L-O-N-G Day!

There was not much flying. Most celebrities traveled "20th Century Lmted." from Calif. to Chicago & N.Y. Several of us would take the "Rocket" train to Chicago. We would see a play, marvel at the X-mas Marshall Field's window displays & State St. stores. We stayed overnight at the "Morrison" Hotel. During the "Big Band" era we'd see Vauderville acts & a movie (\$1.00) at "Chicago" or "Oriental" Theatres. We saw young Sammy Davis, his dad, & uncle, Wayne Newton (18), and Jackie Gleason & his band, who "discovered" Wayne on a train.