



BICENTENNIAL BULLETIN No. 39 **—Sheffield Celebrates 200th Birthday**

The Sheffield Bicentennial Commission will issue a *Bicentennial Bulletin* each Monday throughout 2015 that illustrates the rich heritage of our communities. **View them at — www.sheffieldbicentennial.org or sheffieldvillage.com**

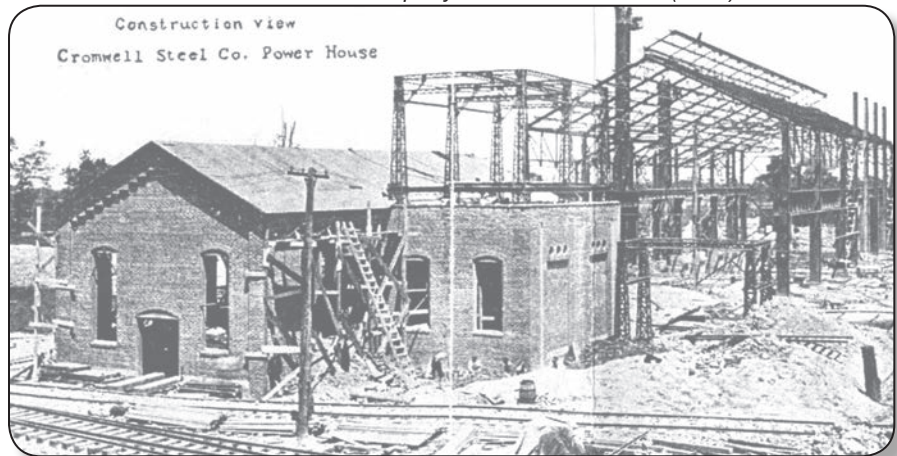
CROMWELL STEEL COMPANY (built 1916—Black River valley's 2nd steel mill) *Foot of Root Road at the Black River*

Johnson Steel Company (later U.S. Steel's National Tube Company) is not the only steel mill that was built along the Black River in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The demand for more iron and steel during World War I was the impetus for another mill—this one located farther downstream on the east side of the river, near the Lorain-Sheffield border. Located on a tract of land at the foot of Euclid Avenue, it was known as the Cromwell Steel Company. To service the mill, the Lake Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad laid tracks across Sheffield, crossing Lake Breeze Road, Colorado Avenue, Abbe Road, and finally Detroit Road just east of the Avon-Sheffield line on its way toward Youngstown. Remnants of the old rail line can still be seen in the bridge abutments and the cinder ballast leading away from the crossing at the French Creek crossing near the Metro Park's Nature Center.

John C. Cromwell built his \$5 million steel mill in 1917 to produce steel for the war effort, but after the Armistice the plant was shut down. It was reopened for several years in the 1920s only to fail entirely. During World War I the mill flourished, but by 1932 the *Lorain Times-Herald* wrote, "Crumbling walls of Cromwell Plant stand like ruins of fallen empire."

In 1916 Cromwell and his associates purchased 233 acres of farmland on the Black River, directly opposite the National Tube Company, for \$140,000. The location was considered ideal because shale deposits only a few feet below the surface provided an excellent foundation, the land was level and needed no grading, the river was a good docking place, and the site was well situated in respect to sources of iron ore and coal, as well as markets for steel.

Cromwell Steel Company under construction (1916)

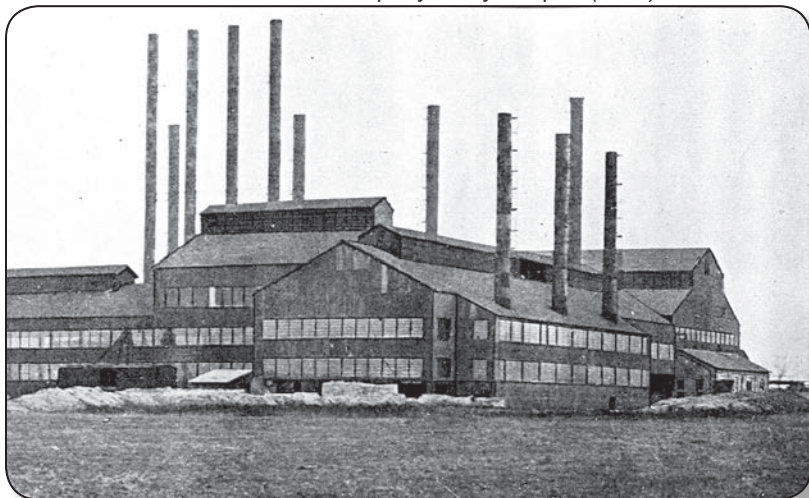


Cromwell Steel Company nearing completion (1917)



Even before construction, Cromwell had secured enough orders to run the plant for six months. Construction was begun with 160 men working day and night. George Crehore, in charge of equipment, worked every day for 569 days until the plant was up and running. Because workers were hard to get during wartime, Cromwell offered high wages. With no streetcars operating on Colorado Avenue, the company bought 16 buses to carry workmen from the “loop” in downtown Lorain to the plant. The plant was modern in all details and could turn out 1,000 tons of finished steel in 24 hours. The plant opened having four 90-ton open hearth furnaces with plans to increase this number to 24, construct 12 blast furnaces, and build a dock on the river bank. The plant had acquired 3,000 feet of harbor frontage on the Black River.

Cromwell Steel Company ready to open (1917)



Cromwell Steel Company in operation (December 1917)



Cromwell instituted a number of original ideas in the new plant. Instead of a blooming mill to roll metal into the desired size, he employed a 20-ton hammer to pound it into shape. This process consolidated the metal more compactly and welded any flaws. As a result, Cromwell’s plant consistently produced metal testing satisfactorily at a 95% rate, while plants using rolls only averaged about 50%. He also charged the open hearths with ore at the top from a raised platform, letting gravity aid the mixing, rather than from the ground level as in other plants. Both of these innovations had some disadvantages too, and never came into universal use.

However, external and internal circumstances conspired to weaken the competitiveness of the plant. The road from downtown Lorain was never paved, and when it rained the buses got stuck in the mud and at times workers that were paid from 7:00 a.m. didn’t arrive until noon. Considerable waste and the high prices that Cromwell paid for material, coupled with the fact that the plant had to buy metal instead of smelting it, was in part responsible for

the plant’s eventual failure. The plant ran day and night to fill orders, but after the war there was no market for the plant’s products, thus in a short time operations were suspended. A plan was developed to dismantle the plant and ship it west on 200 freight cars. It was to be reassembled in Kansas City to serve western markets, but failed when the western group went bankrupt. Later, the plant was torn down and sold piecemeal for what it would bring.