

Recollections of Buckeye Steel Castings

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Back in 1998, I worked for Buckeye Steel Castings for a short while to bring in some extra money while my wife was on maternity leave for six months. Back then you still looked for jobs in the “Help Wanted” section of the newspaper. I saw a job opening at the plant for a Safety and Security Technician, and as I was at the time a full-time firefighter/paramedic, and had taken college courses in Fire/Safety Science, I thought I’d be a good candidate for the job. And since I only lived about five minutes from the plant, that was a bonus too. I’d lived in the southeast part of Columbus for many years and had passed by the plant for many years, and for me, it held the same kind of intrigue and fascination as to what went on in there as someone might have to pass by Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory.

When I went in for the job interview, the Lead Safety Tech that was interviewing me explained the job, which didn’t sound all that difficult. It basically was monitoring the cameras around the plant, making rounds at the plant once a shift, checking trucks in and out, and providing any first aid needed if a worker was hurt. One thing in the interview struck me though, he said “We’ve been doing good on safety, we haven’t had a fatality in eighteen months”. I remember thinking to myself “Holy crap!!”, although crap wasn’t the actual word I was thinking of. Needless to say, I was hired and started working the third shift every third night to accommodate my fire dept. shift of twenty-four hours every third day. I’d work the night in between shifts taking naps before and after the shifts. My experience working odd shifts, and then working at a busy station with little sleep prepared me for this odd work schedule.

Anyone who’s ever gone by Buckeye Steel Castings (later Columbus Steel Castings), knows it’s a HUGE plant. At one time it was the largest steel casting floor in the world. When I worked there, the three main parts made were couplers, side frames, and bolsters for rail cars. They did do a lot of other smaller pieces too, and the largest castings I saw them make was a

double sheave pulley, about ten feet in diameter, and it looked like it was made for a five or six-inch thick cable. On the casting floor, most of the time you couldn't see end to end for all the smoke and dust in the place. Most every place in the plant was dirty and dusty, covered in 90 years of grit and grime.

As a Safety and Security Tech, we had to make our rounds every night of the entire grounds. We worked out of the administration building mostly, with one person stationed at the security booth at the delivery entrance at the south gate, usually, there were three of us on shift. Doing your route usually took about an hour and a half, and you had certain places where you had to swipe a reader to show that you'd been there. Most of the time the one near the electric furnaces wouldn't read because of all the electrical interference from the electric arc in the furnace if it was running, so there was never any flak from the management if that wasn't recorded. We had to inspect almost every building in the plant, including the Luntz Scrap Yard, and the plant that made the chromite sand for the casting molds. Both of these were separate businesses located on the plant property that supported the plant with materials. I believe Luntz sent most, if not all their steel scrap to Buckeye Steel, as I don't recall any scrap being loaded in a gondola that looked like it would be allowed out on any railroad. The chromite sand facility had a couple of two-bay-covered hoppers that were used on the property, and I believe they may have shipped some off-site as well.

There were many interesting things and buildings on the property. Of course, there was the casting floor where everything started, gondolas loaded with scrap were brought in and unloaded by overhead cranes with giant round magnets next to the furnaces. These cranes would then charge the furnaces with the scrap, and large triple electrodes, about sixteen inches in diameter would be slowly lowered into the furnace melting the scrap steel. Once melted, the liquid steel was loaded into large insulated ladles to pour into the molds. Since Buckeye Steel didn't make ingots, all the ladles were unloaded by a bottom outlet instead of tipping the ladle. The ladles were lined with fire brick, with a large rod ringed with cylinder-shaped fire brick and a bullet-shaped tip to facilitate the unloading of the molten steel from a spout on the bottom.

Ladles waiting to be loaded had to be preheated first. Huge gas jets would be used to heat the interior, which sounded like a hundred cutting torches. Twice in the time that I was working there, the fire brick lining in a ladle failed, resulting in huge messes. Once, we were in our office when we started hearing a lot of chatter on our radios about bringing multiple fire extinguishers to an area on the pouring floor. I went down to see what was going on and saw a scene out of Dante's Inferno on the pouring floor. The fire brick stopper had failed, causing the ladle to self unload, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. The bucket had been near the crane operator, so he had to move the ladle away from him as fast as he could. This resulted in molten steel being poured over the floor and everything in its path. It took about ten large extinguishers to put everything out, and they had to wait until things cooled down to begin cleaning up. Back then I was told that a ladle of steel was worth about \$40,000. The other mishap resulted in a leak in the side that wasn't so bad.

As I said previously, Buckeye Steel was a really dirty place to work. Probably the dirtiest job in my mind was the guys who worked recovering excess sand under the mold machines. Excess sand from the molds and cores being made fell out from the machines to pits below. Several men shoveled this black sand out from under the low space under the machines (I think the clearance was about five feet) to be reused. They would come out looking like coal miners from the 50s, just covered in black dust from head to foot. Another bad place to work was the grinding and chipping area. After the sand was removed from the castings, workers had to grind, cut, or use pneumatic chisels to remove casting lines and flash from the parts. The noise and dust from the constant use of the chisels and grinding wheels were incredible. All the workers had to use heavy aprons, gloves, face shields, and hearing protection. In the winter it was freezing, and the summer was sweltering. It wasn't so bad for me going through these areas, I had on a hard hat, safety glasses, an ear plug, and a heavy dust mask. I wore a uniform, and whatever else I needed depending on the temperature. In some of the older bathrooms in these parts of the plants, with toilets looking like they were the original ones installed when the plant was built, you could see that guys would hold themselves up off the seats rather than sit

down, as it would be easier to wash their hands than their backsides.

Probably one of the best places to work is in the newer machine shop. It was an insulated metal building, with numerous milling and horizontal lathes in it. The machinists would set up their pieces needing machining, punch in the settings into the computer, and then sit back and read the newspaper while the machine did its thing. It was relatively clean and only moderately noisy, with the hum of electric motors and hydraulic pumps, and the smell of steel and cutting oil. It was one of the few places that had a relatively steady temperature. The pattern shop was one of the other neat places, just a big woodworking shop where they made the original patterns for the different parts that they made. There were all types of woodworking equipment in the shop, but they never operated during the third shift. This is where they also would store the plant locomotive at night in colder or bad weather.

When I worked there, they had a pair of SW600s that did the in-plant switching. There were probably a dozen old, beat-up gondolas on friction-bearing trucks used for moving scrap and parts around the plant. Most every large building had a rail spur going into it. They also used flat cars for moving parts around as well. One old flat car used on the casting floor had Bettendorf type trucks on one end, and Archbar trucks on the other! Like they say in model railroading, there's a prototype for everything. One of the most unusual rail cars on the property was a California Zephyr observation car, which was kept under the Rt. 104 overpass which crossed the southern corner of the property. I believe it was owned by John McConnell, the founder of Worthington Steel, which had merged with Buckeye Steel Castings at the time. Occasionally, loads of couplers, side frames, or bolsters would be shipped out by rail in gondolas, sometimes by box car, but most went out by semi.

The route we walked every night took us by more interesting things as well. There was the hull of an M-88 tank retriever in the south corner of the property, I don't know if it was a canceled project, or the quality wasn't up to spec. There were both the old and new testing facilities, with the older one being completely mechanical and no longer used. It was the southernmost building on the property. The new facility was across the street in a modern steel

building, and it was quite eerie at night with parts getting wear tested by hydraulic machinery constantly pulsating to simulate wear on the parts. In the middle of the main parking lot, there was an old office building which I can no longer remember what its use was back then, or its original purpose. But on the entire second floor was a huge HO-scale train layout operated by a model railroad club. The club members were never there during my shifts, and I had intended to visit while they were in operation, but that never happened. The other building I found interesting was the powerplant building located to the west of the main office building that supplied compressed air to the entire plant. There were several huge air compressors, some looking entirely ancient, with huge flywheels and electric motors. There may have been backup generators, but I can't remember for sure. Touring all these buildings in the middle of the night, I often thought about the men who'd worked here for decades.

There wasn't much to do when it came to security, it was kind of hard to walk off with a coupler. There were two notable events, neither were very intense, but the first one was kind of funny. One night we noticed a couple of women in the parking lot, which was clearly unusual, as few women workers worked at night, other than our little crew. We could follow them on our cameras, as they could traverse and had zoom capabilities. They started to mess around with one car and did a couple of things that I won't relate. They soon left, and we were able to find out whose car it was, and we called him out to survey the Damage. It turns out an angry ex-girlfriend had scrawled a bunch of obscenities on his car with Her lipstick. He was about as amused as we were. The other incident was when I was called Down to document an employee who was getting written up for keeping a tool from the tool crib in his locker. It was a tool he had to use constantly, so he decided to keep it in his locker by his workstation rather than have to constantly go to the tool crib to check it in and out. He didn't try to hide it and was frustrated since he was just trying to be more productive with his time. I was sympathetic to his situation and I tried to write the report to benefit his side of the story. I don't recall what happened to the man after that.

The other duty we had was to perform first aid to any injured workers, until the

Columbus Fire Dept. arrived, if they were needed. The original plan when I was hired was to have all the Safety and Security Techs trained as basic EMTs. Since I was a paramedic at the time, I was ahead of the game. The plant had a clinic, and an old crusty company doctor, along with a nurse that worked there. I think they mostly did physicals, and I was told if you could drag yourself to the clinic after being injured, they'd treat you. The plant nurse was under no obligation to go out into the plant though. I brought up the fact that EMTs would have to operate under a protocol and a doctor's license, and the old company doctor would have none of that, so that idea of EMTs was scrapped. I also wrote up a request for about \$3,000 worth of first aid equipment, as much of it was ancient. They ended up spending \$30 on new backboard straps. A couple of workers received significant injuries requiring a trip to the hospital and lost work days, but nothing permanent. Those incidents weren't on my shift though. I don't remember treating much more than a few very minor things, mostly removing grit from a worker's eyes. One of the most dramatic stories that I heard was that a person had committed suicide by jumping into a ladle of molten steel. His body was completely consumed, but they had to get the permission of the coroner to use the steel. I've never seen any documentation on this, but that's the story I was told.

Overall, it was an interesting six months that I worked there. I'm glad I didn't have to work at Buckeye Steel Castings as a career out in the plant, it took a toll on a worker's body. My particular job at the plant didn't pay much either, so I wouldn't want to do that either. The plant is completely gone, along with all the jobs. But I still got the chance to see what it's like for steel workers and to appreciate how hard of a job it is to do. And being a train buff, it was interesting to see the process of the car components being made.