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02 A Local Contribution to the Cold War

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A Local Contribution to the Cold War

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One of the paradoxes of West Chester's history is the conflict between pacifism, as promoted by the Society of Friends, and militarism, which derived from both patriotism and the desire to earn money. The best-known story is that of penicillin, which was mass-produced on N. Walnut Street during World War II, but other West Chester factories turned out bomb parts, searchlights, fire-fighting foam and even kitchen utensils used by the military. Until recently, however, no one talked about the role played by West Chester in developing the hydrogen bomb.



Nuclear test at the Nevada Proving Grounds, November 1951 -- US Gov't. photo

In July 1951, the owners of two West Chester trucking companies, Herbert Smith and Reed Knox made a cross-country trip to Las Vegas by truck. The purpose of the trip was to deliver ten tons of "equipment" manufactured by the Wind Turbine Company of West Chester, and their task was important enough to justify a special ICC permit for the two men. Their 13-day trip covered 5,378 miles (over 400 miles/day in pre-interstate America!) and passed through the "flooded districts of Kansas and Missouri." They even stopped off in Denver, Colorado to visit West Chester native William Ingram and his family.

Wind Turbine started out making wind-driven water pumps -- the kind you once saw throughout the American Midwest. By 1948 the company occupied part of the Hoopes Brothers & Darlington wagon wheel plant on E. Market Street, where they made steel towers for a variety of uses, but especially to support radio antennas. Their brand name -- Trylon is still in production today in Canada, but for several decades, Wind Turbine of West Chester was a major player in the steel tower industry.

The article suggested a small mystery -- why did the two West Chester men make such a long trip? There was a market for wind-driven pumps in Nevada where surface water was scarce, while radio antennas supported communication across long, empty stretches, and towers marked airfields for cross-country air routes. None of these uses justified the expense of sending a truck from West Chester to Nevada and then back again empty. It would have made more sense to load the equipment on a train -- the tracks were right next to the Wind Turbine factory -- and ship it across country by railroad. Major rail lines reached stations in both northern and southern Nevada, from whence a local truck could have easily delivered a 10-ton load. It took a bit of detective work to determine the reason, but a 1956 profile of the T. E. Smith & Son trucking company described some of the firm's most unusual loads including "special equipment in connection with the government's atomic device tests" at the "U. S. Atomic Proving Grounds" at Frenchman's Flat, Nevada.

According to Wikipedia, in January 1951 the US government established the Nevada Proving Ground near Las Vegas and started a series of nuclear tests that lasted for the next forty years. A local man who knew both Knox and Smith recalled the load -- a steel tower that was tested by assembling it at the corner of Market and Worthington Streets, and then disassembled for shipment out West. It is not clear what happened next, but the tower may have been the one used to detonate an H-bomb at a specific altitude on October 22, 1951. Unfortunately, the bomb failed to explode, so for subsequent tests, the scientists relied on air drops and underground tests.

As a result, Wind Turbine got no more contracts for nuclear testing towers, although they got plenty of other government contracts for radio antennas, radar antennas and "Bomarc towers" (an early anti-missile system). Wind Turbine eventually moved out of the Borough in the late 1960s to a larger manufacturing site near Elverson. Meanwhile, the Nevada Proving Ground (later called the Nevada Testing Range) eventually hosted more than 900 atomic explosions, ending in September 1992.

Using the knowledge they gained from their trip out West, both Knox and Smith continued to operate their trucking companies and offered advice to anyone who wanted to make a trip out west. Eventually, small trucking firms like theirs were overtaken by the same forces that did away with mom-n-pop groceries and independent movie theaters. Knox's company -- Knox & Marshman -- and Smith's company were both bought out by the Phoenixville trucking firm of Kulp & Gordon.