Etna Celebrates its 125th Anniversary

Part One: Etna's beginnings and glory years

By Frank X. Sowa

In Part One: Etna's Beginnings and Glory Years, the Guyasuta Gazette will look at Etna from a historical perspective from the 1600's up to the 1930's. In Part Two: Etna's Community and Milltown Years, the Guyasuta Gazette will take at the families that settled in Etna that have established multiple generations who have lived in Etna, some dating back to the early 1800's, and how those communities grew up in the Great Milltown that Etna was from the beginning of this Century through the 1960's. In Part Three: Etna's 125th Anniversary, the Guyasuta Gazette will look at Etna's more recent history and people, looking at the community changes since the 1960's, the merger of Etna High School with Shaler, and the devastating floods.

It is interesting that many in Etna know little about the communities grand roots. They know even less about the significant world figures that had some impact on the Etna area over the years — names like George Washington, Chief Guyasuta, General William Wilkins, the Marquis De Lafayette, George Croghan, James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, Henry Spang, J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller — all have their names tied to Etna's beginnings.

Few have learned in their history classes that Western Pennsylvania's entire iron and steel industry had its humble beginnings not in the Monongahela Valley, as the Steel Heritage people might want us to believe, but in Etna along the Allegheny River. Few have learned that the world industry for natural gas production was the product of Etna called the "Peoples Natural Gas Company," or that steel piping has its roots there at the Spang Chalfant Company. Where would the oil behemoths be today, if it weren't for the breakthroughs in steel piping technology that had its roots in Etna. In all, Etna is the heart and soul of a lot of the growth in Western Pennsylvania, and in this paper's three-part series which will be published in this July issue, as well as the August and September issues, the Guyasuta Gazette will attempt to bring alive some of that history.

The Borough of Etna was founded in September 1869, at the site of one of the first trading posts west of the Alleghenies, established in 1747 by George Croghan. Before that, Etna, which is located at the juncture of Little Pine Creek and Big Pine Creek where they flow into the Allegheny River, was a Seneca Indian community, and was made famous by the "father of our country," George Washington in the early 1740's.

According to George Washington's journal,

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Communities are said to be the assemblage of many functional institutions, and the people associated with them. The church, industries, the community organizations, the government, and the school are considered the key institutions that breathe life into a community. As the Borough of Etna prepares to celebrate its 125th Anniversary of incorporation on September 16, 17 and 18, the Guyasuta Gazette has decided to take a look back at the roots of Etna, and how the borough grew into the community that it is today.
while surveying in the winter for the Virginia Land Company he and his guides came under hostile Indian attack near the mouth of Big Pine Creek (future site of Etna), and barely escaped using Big Pine Creek as their escape route. It was just south of Etna, where he almost drowned when Washington slipped under ice flows as he fell from a raft while crossing the Allegheny River.

The Senecas who lived where Etna is today, were ruled by "Great Chief Guyasuta," in the 1700s. They were a proud and advanced hunting, trading and warrior tribe who found the Pine Creek Valleys and the Allegheny rich with natural food and mineral treasures. It was a great place to establish a settlement and an excellent location to trade with other Indian communities in a huge trading network that reached as far north as the Hudson Bay in Canada, as far east as the Atlantic Ocean, as far west as the Iron fields in northern Minnesota, and as far south as the Iroquois tribes in South America. In the 17th and 18th Centuries the Senecas and other local Indians expanded their trade to also deal with the "whiteman" trading peacefully with both the French, and British fur traders at a site near the mouth of Big Pine Creek. In fact, Guyasuta was one of the Indian chiefs who befriended George Washington and helped to guide him to his first meeting with the French, moving up Pine Creek to a location somewhere near where Evans City sits today. And, it was also Seneca scouts who informed the British about the construction of Fort Duquesne by the French, a development that could have altered history should the French have reinforced Pittsburgh before British garrisons marching on the Point forced Fort Duquesne's surrender.

Croghan, the famous fur trader, was a former Dublin Irishman with a "rough-hewn" reputation. He had married a beautiful Seneca Indian princess and established his trading post at the mouth of Big Pine Creek on the Allegheny River, a few years after Washington had surveyed the area for the Virginia Company. Through help from his Indian connections, and primarily the Senecas, Croghan was able to become one of the largest, most well-known (and possibly wealthiest) trader west of the Alleghenies. His trading territory extended from Erie and Buffalo, to Louisville and parts of Kentucky, throughout the Connecticut Western Reserve lands (now Cleveland and most of Ohio), and the holdings of the Virginia Company (now most of West Virginia and Southeastern Ohio). His trading post boasted of over 200 horses and pack mules, 150 canoes, and a multitude of rafts.

Croghan would trade guns and powder, cloth, home furnishings, and farming tools for furs and wild animal meats. His trading method was despised by the French fur traders, and the Jesuit priests who also laid trading stakes to areas north of the Allegheny River, because he offered guns to the Indians as well as white settlers, he made more generous offers for the furs and meats than the French which cut in to their profits, and he promoted permanent settlements with his sale of farming implements — something that concerned the Jesuits, who feared Indian uprisings.

Croghan along with Simon Girty, of which Girty's run was named after were true mountain men. Girty, who lived a mile downriver (where Millvale stands today) was a friend of Croghan, and did his trading at his post. Girty travelled with the Indians throughout the tri-state area, hunting, trapping and trading from the Union Hotel, shown here circa 1903, on the corner of Butler and Main Sts. was a meeting place for the world's financial moguls and businessmen. The list included J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefellar, Andrew Carnegie and many others. The hotel still stands, and is known today as Mitchell's Deli.
the 1750's through the 1770's. He came to re-
spect their ways.

A loyalist to the British Crown always,
Girty aided the British against the French in
the French-Indian War with his knowledge of
troop movements through the western terri-
tories in what is now Ohio. Girty became a
British Agent during the Revolutionary War
and organized brutal attacks against area set-
tlers during and after the war. Girty taught
his adopted savage brothers how to scalp the
dead to throw fear into the enemies — an
uncommon practice among Indians until Girty.
Disowned for his terrorist ways by his new
country, Girty became an adopted son of local
Indian tribes. In 1814, Girty died fighting for
Tecumseh in Ohio and Indiana against the
white man. Eastern journalists wrote many
articles about the “white savage” Girty and
about his friend Croghan and their frontier
antics. James Fenimore Cooper, said to have
used stories about Croghan and Girty to
create some of his “white savage” fictional
characters that made his writings famous.

Eventually, the Seneca did not like the
British incursion and settlements on their
prized hunting grounds, and the clearing of
the forests for farming. When Chief Pontiac
decided to side with the French to drive the
British colonists out of the New World,
Guasata decided to join the French against
the British. It was Seneca Indians who
attacked the British soldiers under Washington
who were moving to reinforce Pittsburgh
during the French-Indian War. When the British
won the French-Indian War and established
Fort Pitt at the Point (Pittsburgh), they made
peace with Guasata, and agreed to protect
his hunting areas.

Guasata was loyal to the agreement, and
even fought first on the side of the British
during the Revolutionary War, but later changed
sides and fought against the British. When
British garrisons tried to clamp down on his
fur trade to American colonists demanding
that taxes be paid. Congress and Washington
rewarded him by making him and his tribe
landowners in an area just north of Etina along
the Allegheny (near where the boroughs of
Sharpsburg, Aspinwall, Fox Chapel and
O’Hara and Indiana Townships stand today).

After the Revolutionary War, soldiers were
given land deeds by Congress in areas west of
the Allegheny Mountains as payment for their
services to the country. Because of the popula-
tion growth, as a result of people moving
west over the Allegheny Mountains, Alleghen-
cy County was created in 1788 from parts of
Westmoreland and Washington Counties (with
the river town of Allegheny (North Side) as
its hub). It was later divided into seven town-
ships, including Pine Township, which occupied all
territory north of the Allegheny River
within Allegheny County, including what is
Etina today.

As the first land owners in the Etina
area was General William Wilkins, who be-
came a federal judge and U.S. Senator.
Wilkins, after which Wilkinsburg and Wilkins
Township were named, built a large mansion
on what is now Freeport Street construction in
the early 1800's. The "Blue House"
When searching for oil, the drillers began to use iron pipe to bring the oil to the surface. Riverboats were refurbished along the Allegheny River near today's Etna. The Pennsylvania Canal, which cut through the heart of what was to be Etna, was a boon to trade and mail dispatch with communities along all the Rivers, along Pine Creek, and along the major highways that cut north from Pittsburgh through the area. Etna was also one of the last stopping points on the canal route, before they reached Pittsburgh, for travellers to cities in the west — cities like St. Louis, Railroad speculators, and oil and coal magnates like John D. Rockefeller moved through Etna, and Pine Creek, and along the Allegheny River buying up right-of-ways on the speculation that a Railroad would eventually be built through Etna to deliver people and cargo from points north to Pittsburgh. Local mining immigrants from Scotland and Germany continued to build the coal industry.

By September 1868, the industries in the village had grown so much that there was a constant glow from the fires of the industrial furnaces of Stewartswood. When the furnaces were opened for improved oxygen flow (to make them hotter) fire and sparks of ash erupted fifty-to-one hundred feet into the night sky, lighting up the Riverside community for miles. Riverboat and canal travellers commented about how as they rounded the bend on the Allegheny River which was a quiet-wooded bank, "the combination of the glowing sky, and the rumble of the industrial operations filled the air and aroused the senses — as if one were witnessing the eruption of a volcano." It must have been a notable site, because early sources of information on the area indicate that the name of Etna was finally chosen for the borough, because the topography of the area surrounding the town was similar to that found around the famous volcano in Sicily, Mt. Aetna. Etna, the borough, was born.

In 1870, the Robber Baron era was beginning, and companies who understood production efficiencies worked to monopolize all segments of their industry. Spang Chalfant was no exception. In order to provide the now even larger iron mill facilities with enough fuel to keep them running around the clock, to meet booming market demand and to cut fuel costs, Spang Chalfant Company, along with banking and industrial magnates from Pittsburgh and Butler, began to sell stock in a new venture known as "The Peoples Natural Gas Company." It was to be the first natural gas company in the entire world, and it was to use Spang Chalfant six-inch pipe laid just west of Big Pine Creek through Glenshaw, to link gas wells in Butler to the industry and community of Etna — a gas line of 17 miles.

As a result in 1874, Spang Chalfant was the first industrial facility in the world to switch over to piped-in natural gas to heat their furnaces and provide lighting. And, Etna was one of the first communities in the world to purchase the excess gas, and use it to light and fuel the community, along with all of its industries. The distribution pipeline through the end of the Nineteenth Century was expanded in to Pittsburgh, making Etna the hub for natural gas distribution, until even better-financed competitors out of Pittsburgh began to cut in to Peoples market share. The technique of piping natural gas over long distances, was the beginning of the present-day natural gas distribution networks that extend across all areas of each continent throughout the world. And, the Peoples Natural Gas Company, now a part of Consolidated Natural Gas, has remained one of the largest distribution pipeline owners in the world, and still maintains its pipe routes in Etna.

Not long after laying the gas line, Spang Chalfant Company had another major breakthrough in ironmaking technology. Because the natural gas was cleaner, and more evenly, they were able to refine the process of making steel-ally pipe which had a significant superiority over iron pipe. Soon, steel pipe replaced iron pipe in use with water utilities and within the oil and gas industries, and all of Spang Chalfant's former customers were now digging up their iron pipes and replacing them, providing an even larger market for the company.

In 1876, Spang Chalfant Company began to look for a more economical way to get raw materials from Butler, Freeport and other points north to its facilities. Highway travel at 1-4 miles per hour was entirely too slow. Forming another venture with many other Pittsburgh industrial magnates, with J.P. Morgan, the pre-eminent banker of the late 1800's, and J. Edgar Thompson (who went on to create the Pennsylvania Railroad) they formed a narrow gauge railroad company called the Pittsburgh-Butler Railroad that connected Pittsburgh with Butler and Freeport and ran through Etna. It was completed in 1877, and had a average speed of between 6-12 mph. The investment group liked their success, and met often to take a look at the operation. They had meetings in Pittsburgh's downtown, and in Etna's Union Hotel (now Mitchell's Deli) on the corner of Butler and Main Streets.

Three years later, the rail lines were replaced with steel track and were made of standard gauge giving them higher speeds on the level areas of between 12-18 mph. with top speeds near 40 mph. (By comparison, today's trains which run through Etna are capable of speeds of around 100 mph, but travel through the borough at 25 mph.) This railroad was sold to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1920, which merged with the Chesapeake & Ohio (Morgan's Railroad) in the 1970's. Hence, it has remained under the same management since its beginnings.

As a result of the modern advances in and around Etna, other major industries began to locate near the borough: Rossing Bronze Company, makers of brass and bronze ingots opened just north of Etna in 1891, followed in 1895 by the Glennshaw Glass Company.

In 1888, because of the natural gas piped through Etna which also fueled the Isabella Furnaces, and because of the steel-making breakthrough at Spang Chalfant which caused the iron making furnaces at Isabella to switch over to ferro-manganese production (a critical component of steel), another steel entrepreneur began to eye Etna as an ideal location for one of the major steel mills in his empire. His name was Andrew Carnegie, and he was a frequent guest at the Union Hotel as well, while he worked out the details to make Etna a part of the Carnegie Steel empire. He never got the chance to complete any deals though. In 1900, J.P. Morgan bought out Carnegie, forming the United States Steel Company. Morgan and his officers, no strangers to Etna because of the railroad business, took over the Isabella Furnaces in a hostile takeover in 1909, using the purchase to effectively remove the pricing advantages of steel pipe made at the Spang facility. The U.S. Steel facilities remained open through the mid-1960's.

In 1900, Etna also established its first electrical utility plant, as was common in the early days of electrical power. The plant provided electricity for lighting and industrial use to Etna and parts of Shaler, and most were linked into the service by 1908. Early service was rationed and could not be used until after 4 p.m. In 1908, the electric plant caught fire and was destroyed. It was replaced with a new upgraded facility that provided unlimited service. That facility continued to produce power into the late 20th Century. Other industries joined Etna in the early 1900's: Enamel Metals Company in 1905; Sheridan Machiné Shop in 1917; Etna Concrete Block Company in 1918, Pittsburgh Saw & Tool Company, National Valve Manufacturing, Etna Broom, and Pittsburgh Broom were just a few of the early companies.

The Butler Short Line Electric Railroad, which connected Pittsburgh to Butler via Etna along Mt. Royal Boulevard began trolley car passenger service in 1907 and continued with many service upgrades until 1931, when Ford's inexpensive Model T automobiles along with fairly good roads around Pittsburgh made such rail service uneconomical.

Formal education started in Etna as early as 1837. Between 1840 and 1900 six elementary schools were built in Etna. In 1915, the first high school in Etna started operation as a classroom in the Wilson Elementary School. The Etna High School served students from as far north as Butler, until the neighboring communities were able to develop their own programs. Increased enrollment in the high school made it necessary to construct first a wing at the elementary facility, and later a new building, which served Etna from 1925 to 1970 when state mandates forced the facili-
Etna's education system was said to be one of the most advanced programs of its time, founded on principles used in the German school systems (an approach that the Pennsylvania Department of Education is now trying to redevelop via Outcomes Based Education). The program was nationally-recognized for its excellence throughout its tenure, and even in the days preceding the merger with Shaler. The first parochial school in Etna was All Saints Roman Catholic School founded in 1902.

Six churches provided the religious roots in Etna. The First Congregational Church was established in 1849, and was of German and Swiss origin. Calvert Memorial United Presbyterian Church was founded in 1868 by Scottish immigrants. Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized in 1900. Presbyterian Mission Church was founded in 1902, as was All Saints Roman Catholic Church. And, the Church of the Nazarene was founded in 1929. Churchgoers also had an abundance of churches to attend besides these in the neighboring communities of Glenshaw, Millvale, and Sharpsburg.

The Depression Years took their toll on Etna forcing many businesses to cut back or close, and others to lose their ownership. Etna's largest employer, Spang-Chalfant was no exception. In 1930, the Spang family sold their business to National Supply Company which operated the mill until the early 1960's, when National Supply merged with Armco Steel out of Butler. Eventually, this merger led to the shutdown of the Spang-Chalfant facility, which was purchased by the Tippins Machinery Company (Etna's current largest employer). The Spang-Chalfant mill's facilities still exist. They are the large buildings owned by Tippins off of Butler Street.

During the Robber Baron days, companies sought to monopolize their own activities. Spang Chalfant was no exception. Shown here is the Spang Land Company circa 1874. Courtesy of Etna Antiques.

The Calvert Memorial United Presbyterian Church, shown here, was founded about the same time as the borough of Etna. It was built in 1898.
Part Two: Etna's Community and Milltown years

...between 1885 and 1914, Western Pennsylvania led the American transition into a modern industrial society, and Etna was right in the middle of it. Andrew Carnegie, George Westinghouse, R.B. Mellon, Andrew W. Mellon, Henry Clay Frick, Charles R. Speer, J.L. Dawson, John Eichhorn, A.W. Painter, General Fitch, Chief Justice Shira, Albert Childs, Major Phipps, S. Shoyer Jr., Max Morchard, and Etna's Charles Spang, Cambell, Herron, and John W. Chaffant became the "movers and shakers" of the Pittsburgh industrial era by forming the Duquesne Club in Downtown Pittsburgh.

These capitalists, almost singlehandedly, made Western Pennsylvania the center of capital goods manufacturing for the entire world. Etna's industry grew solid during that era centered around some forty different capital goods manufacturers and their supporting suppliers. The Spang Chaffant & Company Pipe Mill operation, which included the Vestvius and Mt. Etna Railroad, the Pittsburgh and Butler Railroad, the Peoples Natural Gas Company, the Spang Land Company, the Isabella Furnaces, and many other smaller operations of some of the largest economic vehicles in the community. Spang's monopoly on Etna, that began in 1898, was thwarted in 1909, when J.P. Morgan's U.S. Steel Company took over the Isabella Furnace Works, creating two major corporations to be supplied in Etna.

The blue collar workers often worked for below-stubstance wages, put in long hours, and worked under prevailingly dangerous working conditions. By the turn of the century, cost-cutting "vertical integration" often had manufacturers replacing highly-skilled workers with unskilled immigrant labor as quickly as technical advances permitted, forcing wages still lower.

To counteract the growing power of the corporations, skilled craftsmen began to form craft guilds in Etna that eventually organized into locals of the larger area labor unions. According to Duquesne Club records, Samuel Gompers' labor movement was of deep concern to both Spang and Chaffant in 1881. And, by 1899-1905, when Chaffant was president of the club, the industrialists spent much of their meetings planning reactions to the confronational labor tactics. At first, such tactics were to incorporate to minimize liabilities, which Spang Chaffant did in 1899. Later, by the 1920's, the firms started what they called "welfare work" programs for the benefit of the communities in which they operated. It was through these "welfare" work programs that the relationship between the company and worker families began. And it was through these that the industrialists were finally able to overcome the growing power of the labor unions.

Spang Chaffant & Co.'s welfare work included a bureau of medicine, where all employees were treated free by Dr. William E. Hart, a graduate of Hopkins Medical School, a dental clinic, providing free dental care, and run by Dr. H.A. Anderson who graduated from the University of Michigan; a bureau of cemeteries that each year gave the borough of Etna lots of money for "Etna Day," area beautification projects, company picnics at National Park (an amusement park in Aspinwall) and West View Park (an amusement park in West View); a company compensation bureau that built and sold senior laborers with company housing and utilities; a public affairs bureau that allowed outside groups such as the Eastern Service Station Legion, the Sewing Club for Young Girls, the Firemen's Club for Young Boys, the Women's Club of Spang Chaffant & Company, and the Ex-Service Club to hold meetings in their meeting facilities.

In addition to these, the mill companies like Spang Chaffant and U.S. Steel offered extensive recreational opportunities. Both companies boasted of a number of very successful semi-professional sports teams in baseball, football, tennis, track and field, wrestling, swimming, boxing, bowling and basketball. Spang Chaffant operated two outdoor swimming pools, one indoor swimming pool, a gymnasium, a bowling pool for children and a "modern" playground, and numerous facilities for "outdoor amusement and sport." In these recreational facilities, which is Etna's Elks Building today, Spang Chaffant spent $450,000 to build Etna's first banking institution, the Etna First National Bank which was completed in 1926 (just in time for the 1929 stock market crash). Spang Chaffant also put money into building a number of Etna theaters including the "Helena Theatre" on Butler Street (next to the First National Bank of Etna building) that was purported to have the finest collection of pipe organs in Pennsylvania.

In 1908, the heyday of early American baseball, the Spang-Chaffant, semi-professional team known as "Our Boys," played an exhibition baseball game at the West Etna Ballfield against the Pittsburgh Pirates. Schools and businesses in Etna closed for the game, which ended in a disputed score.

In 1911, Etna faced a devastating flood, one of many to plague the community over the years. The flood waters rose high enough to literally lift boxcars off the tracks and slam them into the production buildings of Spang Chaffant. The flood cost Etna dearly. Production figures that outperformed most of Western Pennsylvania, virtually guaranteeing job security fell as workers took months to reconstruct what had been lost. Lives were also lost as the torrential currents pulled people out in an undertow to be washed up miles downstream on the Ohio. It took weeks to restore electrical and gas utilities.

But, with the commitment of local industrialists, bankers from the Duquesne Club, and the government assistance of Pennsylvania, Etna recovered. In 1916, Etna was flooded again. This flood wasn't as devastating as the 1911 flood, but it began a pattern that still has not been solved.

A number of Etna companies aided the war efforts during the Spanish-American War and World War I, and the Spang Chaffant Company was no exception. During these wars, the companies paid a lot of respect to the veterans, and spent a lot of time aiding their spouses who remained behind. The Etna companies produced a great variety of munitions, in addition to pipe, car forgings, pipe coils and bends, and other articles of iron and steel. They also helped fund the Etna Ex-Serviceman's Club, a forerunner to today's Veteran's of Foreign Wars.

Etna was also a home to the early women's suffrage voting rights, temperance (anti-drinking), and Salvation Army movements, with parades through the borough staged about once every other month. These movements never had the involvement that was seen in other communities nearby — where such involvement made them nationally famous.

With the growth of the factories, Etna's blue-collar saloon business, and the breweries to serve them, took off as well. By 1907, Etna had six operating mini-breweries, and a saloon, tavern or bar on every street corner. These facilities became the home of "all
Within Etna, the community spirit grew. In addition to civic events and those planned by the local corporations, unions threw functions, and private parties abounded. Wealthier managers of the mills threw some lavish parties at their estates reminiscent of the Great Gatsby at their estates that dotted Etna's hillsides, or at their summer homes in nearby Glenshaw. Tennis, lawn sports, and bowling became pastimes for this more sophisticated crowd, while team sports were the choice of the blue collar workers. Etna also built its first playground in 1924.

With the passage of Prohibition's Jones Law in 1922, which provided that persons convicted of manufacturing, importing, exporting, selling or transporting liquor could be fined $10,000 and sent to jail for five years, Etna's fledgling brewery business died. During Prohibition, Etna was home to "at least four speakeasies (two located near the corners of Butler and Main Streets on the second floors of the local buildings)." Etna's "brew" came from homebrewing, or from larger stills that were operating in secret in places such as in one of the the Shaw Houses in Glenshaw. Prohibition was big business to local crime groups throughout the Depression Years, and Etna and Sharpsburg, milltowns that loved their liquor were major selling areas. Crime, though always present in the area, expanded into local union activities, liquor distribution, gambling and prostitution in Etna during this period of the late twenties. Unlike, other area communities who called themselves "quiet suburbs during the twenties," one would have to call Etna "vibrant."

By 1930, there were over 3,000 residential structures in Etna. The population had shown steady increase since the 1920's with the most numerous population between 24 and 34 years old. Only 16 percent of the population was over age 65.

When the Stock Market crashed in October of 1929, the U.S. plunged into the Great Depression, and took Etna with her. Recovery, at first, was guaranteed by all involved, to be rapid. In fact, in March of 1930, local economists "tested the resiliency of the American marketplace, and how it was able to take such a massive hit, and keep on functioning as if nothing had happened." But, Etna's largest employer, Spang-Chalfant didn't wait to see if the economists were right. In 1930, the Spang family sold their business to National Supply Company which operated the mill until the early 1960's, when National Supply merged with Armco Steel out of Butler. A number of the largest employers in Western Pennsylvania did the same, forcing major downsizing, or moves to sell off their operations. Smaller supplier firms were caught totally off guard and unprepared. These industrialists went through the Depression Years on the coattails of the sale of their companies. The average resident wasn't so lucky.

Just three years after the economists' rosy predictions, on Saturday, March 4, 1933, the Stock Exchanges closed because of bank difficulties. Pennsylvania's governor, Gifford Pinchot, ordered all the banks in the state to close. The Pittsburgh Stock Exchange closed, and banks in Allegheny County were not permitted to operate again until March 14. In Etna, it was the end of the borough's gilded age. By 1934, both Spang-Chalfant and the Isabella Furnace had shut down. The effect on the average citizen was severe. Of the 163 businesses mentioned earlier, only 43 survived the Depression. Over 1,300 of Etna's young residents left the borough during the Depression in search of job opportunities elsewhere. Etna would never be the same.

Adding devastation to depression, Western Pennsylvania was hit with record flooding on St. Patrick's Day of 1936. On that March 17th, flood waters in Etna reached the second stories of many of the downtown buildings. Downtown Pittsburgh waters peaked at 42 feet above flood stage. With life savings lost in the Depression, and the floods wiping out what was left, Etna could not hope to recover without outside assistance. Some of this came through when Etna was declared a disaster area and the government stepped in with its first plans to end flooding in the district.

During the last half of the 1930's, and into the 1940's Etna began a slow road to recovery as work projects of the Roosevelt Administration and World War II production reopened the major mills in Etna, and with them, many of the supply businesses. The war buildup brought hiring at the mills up to all time highs.

In the 1940's Etna sent its best and brightest to fight the Nazis and the Japanese Empire. Many of Etna's young never returned. Etna's population aged overnight to where over half were of retirement age or better.
Etna also fell behind in maintaining its housing standards. Etna was cited in a 1940 study as having one of the worst housing conditions in the Greater Pittsburgh area. While this meant federal subsidies, it was a bad blow to a community that was trying to get back on its feet. New residents looked toward the greener pastures north of Etna borough.

By the 1950's, the post-war boom had brought Etna back to life. New suburbs, needed sewage piping, and the aging Spang-Chalfant facility, now owned by National Supply, grew rapidly in the late forties and early fifties to meet that demand, while the old Isabella furnaces also increased output. Etna's major employers, and retail district, began hiring again. But the freedom of the automobile, made it easy for workers to live throughout the Pittsburgh area and commute to work. The appeal of living in Etna was not as great as it was in the 1920's. Still Etna began to look like the great milltown it had become again, and its future looked deeply rooted in iron and steel manufacturing.

The revival of Etna brought forth an effort to revitalize the downtown. Many buildings were either torn-down, or they were faced with modern fronts that covered up the older, outdated architecture. With government support, Etna Borough, instead of the corporations, took the lead in such revitalization. By the mid-1960's it looked like Etna would survive and grow.

Then a new kind of disaster hit. The outdated facilities at Spang-Chalfant and Isabella were replaced by more productive, modern steelmaking facilities located elsewhere throughout the United States. They both closed during the decade of the fifties, bringing Etna to its feet once again, and wiping out the steel industry that had made Etna such a proud community for so many years, forever.

The 1960's began with Etna seeking new ways to revitalize.

The September 15, 1911 flood, one of many to hit Etna through the years, was devastating to local businesses. The Spang Chalfant pipe mill shown here was under water for almost three days. Notice the railroad car that had been picked up by the flood waters and thrown against the building (seen in the middle of the picture).

The Etna "Our Boys" took on the Pittsburgh Pirates in an exhibition game shown here, at West Etna field in 1906.