

Joseph William Seigh
&
A History of The Wheeling Can Company

Written by
Joseph C. Seigh, son of Joseph William Seigh.
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JOSEPH WILLIAM SEIGH

Joseph William Seigh was born on June 24, 1892 in Benwood, West Virginia. His parents were from old Pennsylvania German families. His father was Joseph Charles Seigh, born 7 June 1858, and his mother was Elizabeth Foerster Seigh, born 14 February 1861. They were both born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

The spelling of the German family name *Seigh* was subjected to change as the German community became established in Western Pennsylvania. Prior to 1850, the spelling of the family name was found to be *Zech*. Although records show the change in spelling after 1850, my grandmother and most of the Johnstown people continue to pronounce the name as "Sech." This was the name that my father was known as throughout his

life. Today, in the Johnstown area, some remaining Seigh families can be found, but they all now pronounce their name as "Say."

Joseph Charles and Elizabeth Seigh came to the Wheeling area about 1883. With them was their oldest daughter, Stella. Stella remembered arriving in Wheeling by river barge and then taking a streetcar to Benwood. Joseph Charles had experience with Cambria Steel Mill and was seeking work at the new Benwood steel rolling mill. Family history reports that he made railroad rails. The family grew during the first decade in West Virginia with the birth of three more girls, Margaret, Florence and Tempe. Unfortunately, shortly after the birth of a son, Joseph W., Joseph Charles accidentally drowned in Wheeling Creek [[Article, *Wheeling Sunday Register*, 9 Jul 1893](#)]. His death left the family in crisis. Early on, Elizabeth and the older girls had to take in laundry to earn money for food and shelter.

At ten years of age, Joseph W. had to help support the family. The can factory was there and of necessity he went to work to supplement family income. A personal relationship developed with the owner, O. J. Johnson. Also he learned a trade in a growing industry which set the life career of Joseph W. Seigh. From the age of ten his life would always involve can manufacture.

My father's story is the early history of the 48th Street Can Factory. The factory was then known as the Wheeling Can Company. It would later merge with Continental Can Company and become the second largest can manufacturer in the United States. From his personal papers, there is a photo of the 48th Street employees which he has dated 1902 [See below]. It is difficult to believe he was considered an employee, since my father was only ten years old at that time, yet the photo identifies him and his sister, Tempe, as employees. At the time he was working in the bodymaker department. This 25th anniversary publication of the old photo in 1927 identifies him as then the Plant Superintendent.

In 1927 and as superintendent, he wrote a brief history of the Wheeling Can Company. The company clearly was still owned by Johnson and Morse. From that history he reported:

"The 48th Street Factory was organized and started to build in the year 1901. The first factory building was a two story flat roof type constructed of wood and red brick. The first floor consisted of all manufacturing departments and tin plate storage. The second floor was storage for cans. The size of this building was 72' X 120'. Mr. O. J. Johnson, better known at the Fort Henry Club by his friends in Wheeling as Tin Can Johnson, bought a full line of equipment for four lines to make cans."

In 1902 cans were made with soldered bottoms and tops, similar to the condensed milk can of today. My father described the first cans made at 48th Street in his history this way:

"Back in 1902 about the only cans that were in demand were the Hole & Cap cans used for corn, tomatoes, peas and hominy. At that time four lines made a production of 45,000 cans per day, each in 10 hours and 20 minutes, a total of 180,000 cans on 4 lines."

By 1916 a major product innovation occurred with the introduction of the sanitary can. I can't remember ever hearing this term before, but this was the beginning of the tin can as it is seen today. My father's description of this change was is:

"In 1915 this can was beginning to take the country by storm. Because of its advantages over the Hole & Cap can, it being a can without any solder or acid used. The bottom end [was] double seamed on and the other end left open....."

"After going into all these details, it was finally decided that if we did not make the new sanitary can we might just as well get out of the can business. Therefore, one line of machinery was bought and installed in the old building. By 1916 the second line of machinery was bought and we were in the sanitary can business before we knew it."

Between 1916 and 1920, I recall my parents' stories about the can factory. During this period, my mother, Alma Steinman, and her sister Marie were working on the lard pail line. The lard pail was a big business for Wheeling Can. It was similar to a child's sand pail, but was used to distribute lard to grocery stores. It is believed that the lard pail came first, then a market for a child's sand pail plaything followed. Another product, not mentioned too often, was five gallon square cans. This was a major product during prohibition. It was sold, generally in camouflage brown, because the customers recognized that large inventories of unpainted cans reflected the sun and provided revenueurs a means of locating illegal stills among the West Virginia hills.

The automobile and gas station represented another new growth market to small can manufacturers. Early on, engine lubricating oil was distributed in "milk-like" bottles. Breakage and the required bottle returns made the can the ideal container for oil. The oil can market remained strong until after the war.

In 1927, when this history of the 48th Street factory was written, my father had married Alma Steinman, I was about six months old, and my father only had to walk across Eoff Street to get to work. However, by 1933, the Wheeling Can has merged with Continental Can Company and my father has been appointed plant manager of the Kansas City plant. Two years later he advanced to the St. Louis operation. As I remember, he had responsibility for the Memphis and Denver plants as well as the St. Louis plant. Most of these transfers were in association with some major changes in the marketplace. At that time in St. Louis the can industry was moving into the beer can market. Milwaukee and St. Louis represented major brewery centers. The competition between Continental and American was keen. Both companies raced to develop a replacement for beer bottles. An economical container which would be accepted by the consumer was the early goal. Continental developed the crown cap can while American Can Company stood by the conventional flat can. It was a great example of consumer education and American Can eventually got beer drinkers to accept the "church key" to open their beer can.

By 1938 my father was transferred to the East Coast, and was responsible for the Jersey City, NJ.

Passaic, NJ and Wilkes-Barre, PA plants. He saw to the expansion of these plants for commercial markets in spite of the introduction of a new product called frozen food. World affairs also affected many businesses and the can industry, as all others, found itself in the defense and war efforts. The Jersey City plant was converted to make wings for the B25 bombers, work that was subcontracted to them by Martin Aircraft. During this time he was promoted to corporate headquarters in New York City, and for the first time he did not walk or drive to work. He had to commute by train and ferry to NYC. He was responsible for the east coast operation. This included plants from Montreal to Cuba. The major market expansion at this time was orange juice cans. To remain competitive, can companies moved bodymakers closer to customers causing an increase of small satellite operations throughout Florida and Cuba. An interesting letter in his files is of the secret withdrawal, over a holiday, of Continental personnel from Cuba and the abandoning of company assets to the Castro government.

While I was at college, there was a falling out between my father and the then Continental management. He was not idle long. The Reynolds Aluminum Company had a strategy to move into the container business. This strategy involved an impact press, making can bodies by extruding a slug of aluminum by a high impact, into

a can. My father was hired to consult on the development of this technique of can making. The results are seen today in the mass beer marketing strategy.

My father's formal education was, by his own admission, no greater than sixth grade. The 1902 photo showing him employed at ten years old, places some doubt on the validity of his admission. I am aware that he continued to educate himself. He taught himself mechanical drafting and most of the mathematics. I know he had a knowledge of geometry and algebra.

I am including a photograph of him sitting aboard the Continental Can Company executive plane. It is a typical photo of him, since none of us remember him without a Wheeling stogie in his mouth. I can report that no matter where we were, every week a box of Wheeling Nails was sent to our house.

Some technical notes:

* A bodymaker was the name of the machine which made the cylindrical part of a can by forming a flat piece of tin plate and soldering the seamed sides.

* A crown cap can was a can top with a regular bottle cap, thus not requiring a special opener.

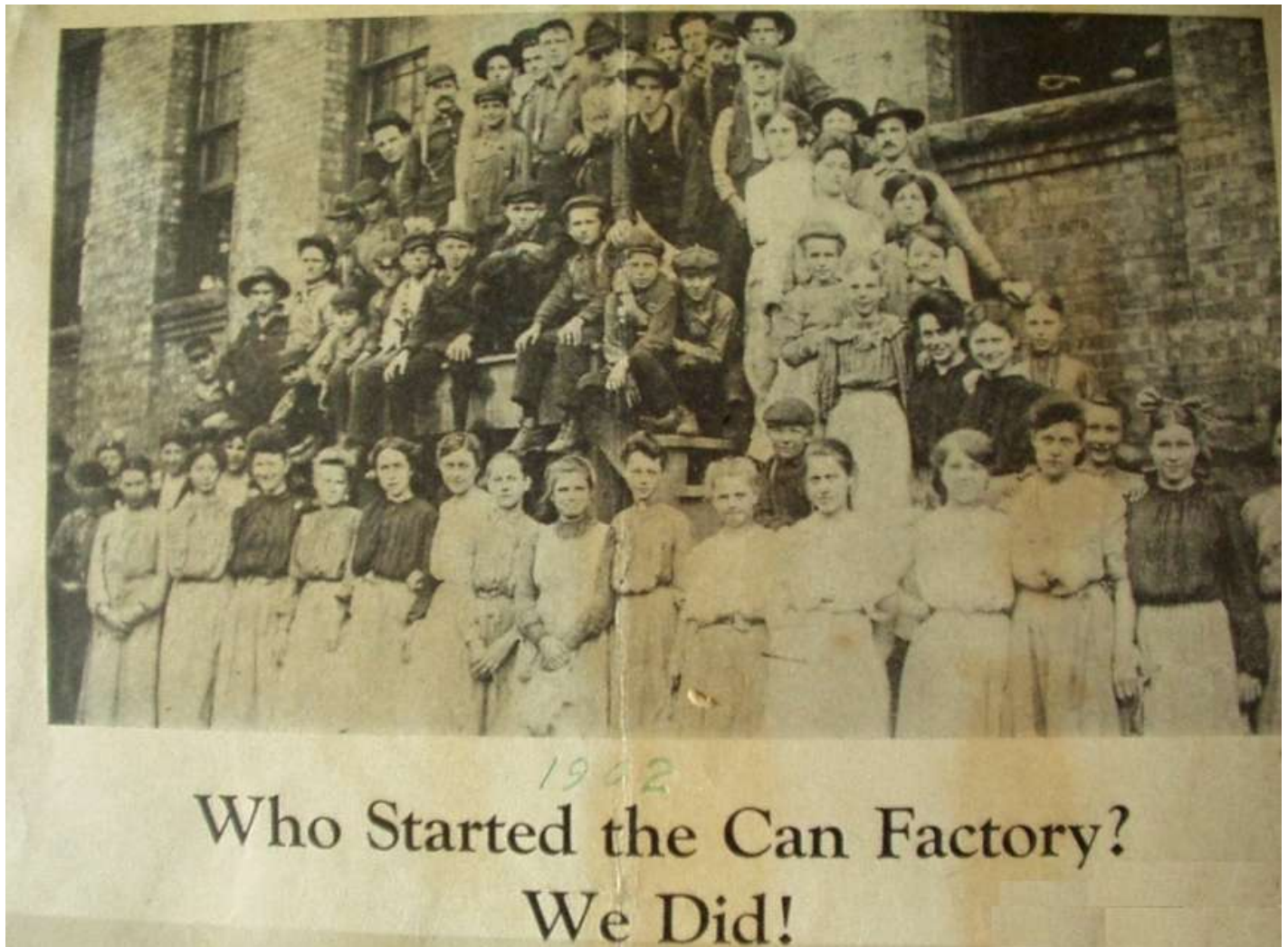


PHOTO TAKEN IN 1902

Published in *Wheeling Steel 'Safety Hints'*, circa 1927.

Twenty Five years ago, Mr. O. J. Johnson, founder of the Wheeling Can Company, called his first employees from their duties in the Factory to have this picture made. To date it has been kept in absolute seclusion, only to be looked upon by the eyes of those who owned it, but they have finally decided to give it to the public through the medium of this magazine.

In the old days the children started to work not only early in the morning, but early in life, and child labor laws were not in existence, hence some of the people in this picture are still young and still employed by the Wheeling Steel Corporation, most of them living in the community.

The owner of the picture is a born statistician as may be seen in the detail in which he has traced the men and women after the lapse of twenty-five years, and it is very interesting to see how many of them are today with the Corporation in one capacity or another. Don't fail to read the names for there is sure to be an acquaintance among them and we are forced to admit that twenty-five years is often flattering to a person.

Left to Right, Standing on steps:

Sam Simpson, Machinist. Now a Machinist at Ferry Factory.
Joseph Pennybacker, Lineman. Now master mechanic of Dravo Contracting Co.
Theodore (Pete) Rolf, Header Foreman. Now an officer of the City of Benwood.
John Duff, Repairman. Now in the Simon Cleaning. Works on the Island.
John Rail, Can Piler. Now a welder in the Tube Mill at Youngstown.
Carl Shane, Handy Man. Now machinist at Bloch Brothers.
Sandy McFershin, Can Repairman. Now a farmer at Parkersburg, W. Va.
Floyd Rogers, Bodymaker Operator. Now rubber worker in Akron, O.
Cliff Shane, Floater Operator. Now a plumber in New Philadelphia, O.
John Squecsic, Can Repairman. Now Repairman at Warwood Factory.
Matt Cain, Gang Press Operator. Now a Die Setter at Warwood Factory.
Frank Ebeling, Machinist. Now an instructor in Henry Ford Trade School at Dearborn, Mich.
Onie Coe Foreman of the Floater Department. Now a farmer at Parkersburg.
Joe Anderson, Feeder on bodymaker. Present home in Gary, Ind.
Harve Heil, Die Setter. Now with Quality Gas Station, Wheeling.
Bob Coster, Tester Operator. Now Engineer at U. S. Steel.
Katie Byers, Press Operator. Married to Charles Martin, of Fairmont.
Clint Rogers, Bodymaker Operator. Now tire maker at Akron, O.
Katie Rigby now residing in Parkersburg. W. Va. Married Wm. Pennybacker.
Jess Winship, Header Operator. Now loader and Cutter at Yorkville Mine.
Essie Pennybacker, Press Operator. Deceased.
Tempe Seigh. Deceased [Note added: died in 1922; w/o Elmer Cunningham] .
Sofie Metzner, Header Feeder. Married John Fowler of Cleveland.
Mollie Ryan, Header Feeder, Married Otto Clegg of Wheeling Factory.
Annie Baker [Becker], Press Operator. Married William Healed [Healy] of Boggs Run.
Mary Metz, Press Operator. Married and living in Pittsburgh.
Annie Jenkins, Header _____Deceased.

Sitting on Steps Left to Right:

John Sonnawalt, Can Piler. In — ed at Benwood Works.
Frank Pennybacker, Bodymaker _____ment. Now with Dravo Construction.
George Baker, Can Piler. Deceased.
Bill Vandry, Can Piler. Now with Phillip Carey Co.
Frank Leithe, Can Piler. Now machinist at 48th St. Factory.
George Leithe, Can Piler. Now tin plate handler at 48th St. Factory.
Charles Rider, Can Piler. Bus driver for White Star Line.
Thomas Miller, Can Piler. Wheeling Steel Office.
Midge Workman. Can Piler Deceased.
Bill Steineke, Can Piler Deceased.

In Window

Albert Tuskie, Floater Box . Now with Wheeling Steel Corporation in Benwood.
J. W. Seigh, Bodymaker Department. Now Superintendent of 48th St. Factory.

Bottom Row Left to Right:

Elmer Davis, Can Lifter in Car. Now with Wheeling Tile Co.
Bob Clegg, Floater Boy. Bodymaker at Warwood Factory.
Frank Erazmus, Scrap Bailer. Employee of Benwood Works.
Lulu Yaeger, Header Feeder.
Lester Humes, Header Operator. Nosy runs filling station up Boggs Run.
Mary Downing, Tester Girl. Married Charles Kessler.
Thomas Pennybacker, Bodymaker Operator. Deceased.
Mary Kessler, Press Operator. Married Russell Lewis, Welder at Benwood Works.
Annie Winship, Crimper Girl. Married Mr. Edwards of Baltimore, Md.
Elizabeth Zeigler, Tester Girl. Deceased.
Elizabeth Steineke, Press Operator. Married and lives in Martins Ferry, O.
Amelia Wrdezeske, Press Operator. Married and living in Martins Ferry, O.
Annie Downing, Header Girl. Married John Conner of Wheeling.
Annie Fisher, Header Girl. Married Charles Landers of Wheeling.
Unknown
_____Hafer, Header Girl. Married to _____and in Cleveland, O.
_____ Shultz, Press Operator. Deceased.
Minnie _____, Tester Girl. Deceased.
Kate Ryan, Press Operator. Married Mr. Hummel of McMechen.
Lulu Cottwill, Header Operator. Deceased.