

THE PEQUANOC SOFT RUBBER COMPANY FIRE

By: Tom Fox



It was the wee hours of February 26th, 1957 in the small town of Butler New Jersey. Most of the towns people were snuggled in a warm dry bed after a cold blustery day of intermittent rain. Temperatures were in the low 40s and a Northwesterly wind had been blowing throughout the day and now into the darkness of night, bringing a cold winter chill down the dark streets of town.

Over at the Pequanon Rubber Mill the second shift had just gotten off of work and the third shift was settling in for the long night ahead. Nothing was reported out of the ordinary as the shift foremen briefly met to go over the night's events. Unknown to the towns people, the peacefulness was about to be broken and history was about to be made.

The time was 12:10 a.m. when suddenly a small fire broke out in the Mills number 7 dryer. The dryer, a 40-foot-long reclaimed rubber dryer located on the third floor of the mills three story building, had in the past a number of small fires but they had always been quickly knocked down by sprinklers and a steam extinguishing system. This time it would be different.

Three workmen from the immediate area, seeing the fire ignite in the long dryer, quickly grabbed a nearby firehose and started to direct the stream of water at the ever-growing fire. At 12:16 p.m., seeing the fire had now gotten out of control, one of the men on the hose line broke away and quickly ran to the nearest fire alarm box and sounded the buildings fire alarm. Hearing the alarm, the employees located throughout the building began to evacuate the building.

The fire had gotten up to the ceiling and was igniting years' worth of dust and lint accumulated around the sprinkler heads and was now quickly spreading. Additional handlines were put into action by company employees, yet inside the dark choking smoke the fire continued to rage and grow.

The night operator in the boiler house seeing the fire in the early stages, started the plants 1,000 G.P.M. steam driven turbine fire pump to assist in the extinguishment of the fire. At one point, workers thought they had the fire under control, some of them heading back to their work stations.

Then without warning, the fire exploded in size forcing the men fighting the fire back and that would be the turning point. With flames flaring up all around them, the workers knew that this was the beginning of the end for the Pequanoc Soft Rubber Mill Company.

Hearing a shout for “water”, a worker ran down to the indicator post valve to make sure it was open all the way. Unknown to him, the valve was a left-handed valve and he inadvertently turned the water off instead of on stopping the flow of water to the firehoses being used to extinguish the fire.

He then left the valve unattended and returned back to his fellow workers who had been battling the fire but now were in full retreat as the fire was quickly over taking them, the fire hoses in their hands no longer flowing water and now totally useless.

A workman sitting at the local coffee shop located directly across from the mill sipping his cup of hot coffee when suddenly he saw the orange glow of flames high above shooting out the Mills upper windows.

Leaving his coffee behind, he hurried to the nearest fire box down the street where he quickly pulled the lever. At 12:26 a.m., fire sirens began to blow throughout the town. Firefighters hearing the blast of the sirens quickly jumped into action, leaving their warm beds and loved ones behind rushed to the fire house. The Butler fire department was on the way.

Over his shoulder, the worker who had called in the alarm could now see the fire growing in size as large angry flames started to blow out of the building's top floor windows.

In just a few minutes the Butler fire department arrived on the scene and immediately hooked up to the nearest fire hydrant and larger hose lines were put into service. At the same time, workers from the mill operated a large hose line from an adjacent rooftop aiming it at the raging fire. Additional numerous fire sprinkler systems were operating inside the Mill and personal on the scene started to think the fire was again under control. Those thoughts were short lived however when at 12:40 a.m., just 14 minutes after the original alarm was sounded a large high pressure steam pipe burst due to the intense heat of the fire.

The shut off valves, located directly within the area of the fire, made it impossible for firefighters to turn them off. The steam driven fire pump suppression system was now useless as water poured freely out of the broken pipe. The decision was made to shut down the now useless fire

suppression system. The fire was quickly spreading throughout the large mill, fed by dry wooden floor planks and an abundance of rubber that had arrived just the day before.

Additional buildings, part of the mill complex, began to burn and the Butler fire chief ordered Mutual Aid companies to respond. Fire companies from Bloomingdale, Kinnelon, Riverdale, West Milford and Pompton Lakes were all called to respond but as the fire grew in intensity and additional attached buildings started to burn, fire companies from farther away were summoned to help fight the raging inferno. Companies from as far away as Lincoln Park, Wayne, Paterson and Clifton were called to assist in fighting the growing inferno.

The fire, with plenty of fuel available to it, was now consuming building after building. Firefighters fought valiantly trying to save the steam run power plant, their efforts in vain as the extreme heat forced them to retreat and the plant was severely damaged. Flames were now shooting 1,000 feet into the air. Police departments from as far away as Clifton were getting calls to their switchboards, people reporting seeing the glow of the fire high up in the night sky. Firefighters on adjoining roof tops battling the fire were forced to abandon their positions as intense heat from the fire continued to grow hotter and hotter consuming more and more of the Mill Complex.

Finally, after 6 long days, with firefighters battling the fire in shifts around the clock, the fire was officially declared out on the morning of March 3rd.

The fire at the Pequannoc Rubber Mill ended up consuming the entire soft rubber mill complex consisting of 27 adjoining buildings of different heights and sizes. Both the front and rear walls of the largest building were the fire originated, collapsed, the rear wall falling onto the railroad tracks located behind the building blocking freight cars from passing and the front wall collapsing onto the street in front, taking down local phone lines as well as area electric lines.

When all was said and done, a total of 55 fire companies responded to the Butler Rubber Mill fire.

Three firefighters battling the inferno suffered non-life-threatening injuries and six additional firefighters were treated for smoke inhalation. Luckily, there were no lives lost. The final cost of the fire was estimated to be 5 million dollars. The Butler Rubber Mill fire went down in history as being the second largest Industrial fire in the entire nation that year. Within days of the fire being extinguished, Pequannoc Rubber Mill officials notified the Butler Mayor and Council in a letter that they would not be rebuilding the Mill. This came as a devastating blow to the borough residents who had worked at the rubber mill and who were holding onto hope that the Mill would be rebuilt and their jobs would return. The company, already in the process of building a second rubber processing plant in Tallapoosa Georgia, decided to move the entire operation down to Georgia and down size, leaving the economy of the town of Butler in shambles.

In just a matter of hours, 400 workers from the Pequannoc Rubber Recycling Mill found themselves out of a job. An additional 1,000 workers from the American Hard Rubber Company, located directly next door to the soft rubber company, were told to not come in to work due to

the lack of electricity caused by the damage to the electric generating power plant that supplied both buildings with electricity.

In the wee hours of the morning with the backdrop of the fire still raging behind him, Mayor William Dean spoke briefly to the press. “It’s the worst thing in the history of Butler, it’s ruined the town” he said, visibly shaken. As the last trailing’s of smoke finally cleared, the cold hard facts became apparent. In just a few short hours, 95% of the entire town's workforce was out of work.

The Mill that so many of the towns' people worked for lay in ruins. The small town of Butler would never be the same again...