

Don Cunningham: Saying Goodbye to Dixie Cup



By Colin McEvoy

ALLENTOWN - It's tough to say goodbye to an old friend.

Over time, companies and employers become like old friends to towns and regions.

The Dixie Cup plant in Forks Township is one of those.

Its current owner, Georgia-Pacific, a subsidiary of Koch Industries, announced last month that the plant will close by the end of the year.

This is Dixie Cup's 100th anniversary in the Lehigh Valley. In 1921, company president and co-founder Hugh Moore, who later become one of Easton's greatest philanthropists and leaders, moved his young company from the crowded streets of New York City to the farmland of

Northampton County.

He placed a giant replica of the company's main product, a paper cup, on the roof of the concrete and steel plant off 25th Street in Wilson Borough.

Lehigh Valley history was born.

When the new plant in Forks was built in the early 1980s and production moved there, a new cup replica was built there to let everybody know that Dixie Cups were made here — in the Lehigh Valley.

The rooftop cup in Wilson remained on the old plant, which has been vacant for decades except for some limited warehousing use. New plans for a residential apartment redevelopment prominently feature the cup.

Dixie Cup initially was called Health Kup. The product boomed during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Health officials sought better hygiene and sanitation in an era when tuberculosis and other contagious diseases were common.

Demand created the need for expansion. New York's loss was the Lehigh Valley's gain.

Ironically, a century later, the next pandemic reversed the region's fortunes. Georgia-Pacific officials said the plant is closing because of reduced sales last year, as the pandemic closed places like amusement parks, movie theaters, festivals and professional offices, large customers of paper products.

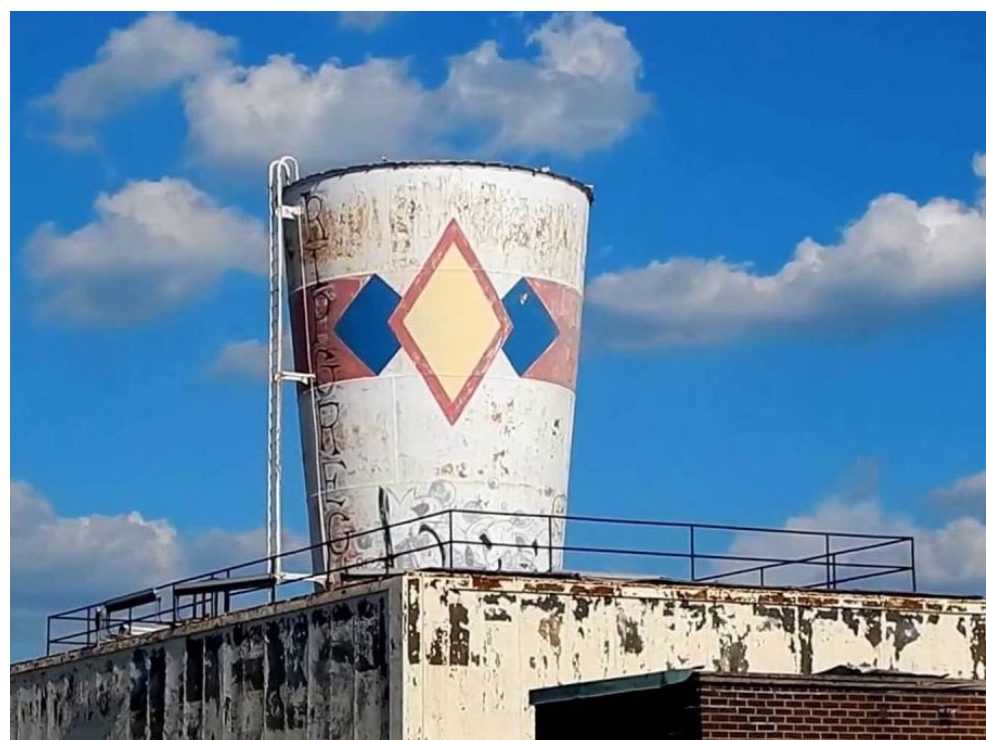
Production will be consolidated in Lexington, Kentucky.

This time, the Lehigh Valley's loss is Kentucky's gain.

Some industry analysts said Georgia-Pacific was likely exploring cost-reducing consolidations even before the pandemic.

Whatever the reason, the remaining 190 workers will be the last to make Dixie products here. Their jobs will be gone by the end of 2021, and so will a proud regional tradition.

My family is part of that tradition.



My grandfather, Joseph Chuck, my mother's father, spent much of his work life at Dixie. He was a machinist. He fixed the machines that made the cups.

"Pop-pop Joe," as we called him, was born in 1922 to immigrant parents. He never made it to high school. He went to work during the Depression to support his widowed mother, who spoke little English.

He was smart and good with his hands and landed in a munitions plant in Bethlehem making pumps for the war effort during World War II. In the 1950s, he went to Dixie Cup, where he remained until retiring in 1986.

He was proud of where he worked and what they made.

As a kid, we never left his house without Dixie products, sleeves of bathroom cups, paper plates and, on good days, the famous Dixie ice cream cups that sometimes had the likenesses of baseball players on the backs of the lids.

A summer highlight was the annual Dixie Cup picnic at Bushkill Park in Forks. I don't know if it was sponsored by the company or the workers' union, but it was a kid's dream.

Under the wooden pavilions, there were all-you-could-eat hot dogs and sauerkraut, open taps of birch beer, and endless brown bags of peanuts. My sister and I would spend the day on the bumper cars, in the Fun House and riding the famous Whip, the Wild Mouse, and the old-time carousel. Pop-pop Joe would save his change all year so we could play as much skee-ball in the arcade as our arms could handle.

Most of all, I remember him with his co-workers, hundreds of them and their families. They enjoyed each other and where they worked. As a machinist, he was popular with the operators, who needed him to fix their machines. Some would bribe him with homemade food and desserts.

Those workers were Dixie Cup. As I'm sure the last 190 workers are today. I feel badly for them being the ones who will be closing the doors.

Hugh Moore sought in the 1920s what manufacturers in costly and crowded urban centers still seek in the Lehigh Valley 100 years later: space to grow, quick access to large markets and a talented manufacturing workforce.

During the last decade, the region has had many more gains than losses. There are now 700 manufacturers in the Lehigh Valley, generating more than \$7 billion in annual economic output, and employing 33,400 workers.

Ten manufacturers located or expanded here in 2020 despite the pandemic-challenged economy. Two new manufacturers have already expressed interest in the Dixie Cup site, which won't be available until next year.

Manufacturing workers are in demand.

Manufacturing is the Lehigh Valley's second-largest sector, accounting for more than 16% of our economy. In comparison, manufacturing is 12.5% of the U.S. economy.

But no company lasts forever. And every loss is painful.

Just like grandfathers, and long summer days as a kid in amusement parks, it's tough to say goodbye to an old friend.



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