

Carroll Yesteryears

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Carroll Was Once a Hub for Tobacco Farms, 'Factories'

By David Buie

The September 4, 1896, issue of "Tobacco" carried a front-page story featuring a unique store in Westminster owned by Charles Valentine Wantz. The store, located within the Wantz Building located at 25 East Main, had a unique feature: the walls were papered with cigar labels neatly and artistically arranged. Lithographic firms for cigar manufacturers made these labels. According to the 1896 article, "There is a border of twenty-three inches wide made of the small end labels or 'outs,' and the balance of the walls are covered with the large or 'inside' labels, over 8,000 of which are used, these having been received by Mr. Wantz over a period of five years."

When one thinks of cigar production, one does not think of the rolling hills of Carroll County. However, cigar production in Westminster led by Charles Wantz, Walter Hanson, and Charles Masenheimer, plus William Gettier in Manchester dominated the industry in the 1870s. With their success, others began to follow. By the turn of the century men such as George A. Bixler (1867-1936), Harvey W. Stern (1870-?), John Leffert (1856-1915) in Westminster; John Esteline, W.H. Shoemaker and Heinman Brothers in Hampstead; E.C. Sauerhammer and F.S. Staley in Taneytown; and C.E. Bette & Company and Chas. Brilhart of Manchester entered the market. More cigar factories appeared in Bruceville, Harney, and other municipalities. According to the "Annual Report of the State Comptroller for the State of Maryland for Fiscal Year Ending 1903," the number of employees in the county's cigar industry totaled two hundred and fifty-four with a product value of \$278,050.

Although referred to as "factories" in the report, the buildings were usually small, even the second floor of a home. In pictures on the walls of the Manchester Historical Center, men and women pose in front of their work sites, many wearing large aprons, looking neat, clean, and quite relaxed. Some factories employed only men while others welcomed women; most had between 10 and 30 workers based on old photographs. By the 1920s, women dominated the workforce, so when the cigar industry gave way to garment making, they filled the new jobs.

According to the descendants of the men and woman who worked in the factories, "workers came from Westminster and Hanover, Pennsylvania, as well as Manchester. In the evenings, a large number of local children and older adults worked at home stripping the main ribs out of the tobacco leaves by hand. Each morning someone stopped to pick up the stacks of stripped leaves and deliver them to the factories."

The source of tobacco appears to have been local growers, at least during the early years. In 1879, 88 Carroll County farms produced 134,000 pounds of tobacco, mostly in the Freedom and Franklin districts (Eldersburg and Taylorsville areas). Tobacco was a very labor-intensive crop, so farmers only raised a couple of acres.

Gone are the days of cigar production in Carroll County and the camaraderie of a community producing a quality product. Several books as well as the local historical society can help research cigar production in Carroll County if this article has sparked your interest.

David Buie, is a Taneytown resident who has a passion for Carroll County and its place in history.



Photo credit: Submitted photo

Photo Caption: An example of an Indian Chief Cigar Box which was produced by Charles Wantz's Cigar Company in Westminster around the turn of the century.