

AIRDRIE

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As one travels the West Kentucky Parkway between the Central City toll booth and the bridge over the Green River, one sees the stacks of the Paradise Steam Plant, south of the Parkway. This plant is located on the Green River and is operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority. About one mile downstream from, or north of, the steam plant one can find the only remains of a period of history to which this paper is directed. Although nothing remains of the town of Airdrie, spelled A-I-R-D-R-I-E, this paper is devoted to the town, its history, its people, and its failure.

The story of Airdrie begins with the birth of Robert Sproul Crawford Aitcheson Alexander in 1819 at Frankfort, Kentucky. Alexander's father had emigrated from Scotland, where the family was engaged in the production of iron. Robert's uncle William, actually Sir William Alexander, owned the business and operated it. William was a bachelor, and in due time induced his favorite nephew to come to Scotland, where he received an education at the University of Edinburgh and a home with his uncle. At the death of William, Robert became Lord Alexander and the owner of the business.

The iron business was located in the central lowlands East of Glasgow, near the city of Airdrie. The presence of coal and what was known as "Black Band" iron ore led to a profitable business of selling iron, especially to the shipyards of Glasgow. One ex-resident of that part of Scotland is very well-known to Americans. His name was Andrew Carnegie.

About 1850, Lord Alexander realized that the iron ore and coal deposits in the area were nearing exhaustion. That realization, coupled with a desire to be near his brother and two sisters, prompted him to send a father-son geologist team to America to find the right home for a new empire. In 1851, that team of Charles and Alexander Hendrie reported to Lord Alexander that the perfect spot existed along the Green River in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky. There were large amounts of coal and iron ore there, and the river could provide transportation for the iron. Accordingly, Alexander purchased 17,000 acres of land, mostly along the Green River but including 5,000 acres known as the Buckner-Churchill Tract, on which an iron furnace had been operated between 1837 and 1842. The furnace had produced good iron but the business failed largely because of the long overland haul to the Green River for transport. Alexander had in mind using the ore on that tract, but not the furnace itself. The Buckner of that operation was the father of General Simon Bolivar Buckner, the Confederate General who surrendered to Grant at Fort Donelson.

Alexander began making plans to move to America. He believed that the Scots who worked for him were the best iron-workers in the world, so he offered transportation to and employment in the New World to those who wanted to seek a new life there. In late 1854, the works in Scotland were closed and the adventurous workers and their families made the move on a ship chartered for that purpose. Alexander Hendrie, the geologist, had already laid out the town and had started building it, using local masons and carpenters. The timber was cut on the property and sawed by the George Haden Sawmill near Paradise.

When the new settlers arrived, they set to work completing the town, starting work on the furnace, and opening up the iron and coal mines. Alexander was a wealthy man and has been accused of being more concerned with the well-being of the Scots than he was with the success of the venture. Every man employed at the Airdrie Furnace was provided with comfortable housing, no matter what his position with the venture might have been. The town of Airdrie, when completed, consisted of 20 3-room frame cottages, several 2-story frame dwellings, and a 2-story frame hotel. Also in the area was a large house built earlier by William McLean. Lord Alexander enlarged the McLean house and lived in a portion of it. This house would later become the residence of General Don Carlos Buell, about whom we will speak later. The house was the last dwelling standing in Airdrie when it burned in 1907.

The building of the Alexander empire was completed in 1857. The Scots, in whom Alexander had such great faith, had opened up the coal seams and had dug a shaft down to the iron ore. One team of miners was in charge of this operation, and it consisted of two brothers as formen for the two shifts. We will return to these brothers later. There, in the middle of the 19th Century, they dug a shaft $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet by 18 feet to a depth of 430 feet, using only picks, shovels, ropes, and buckets. One can only marvel at the industry and fortitude of the men who completed this monumental task without mishap. The stonemasons did their work, building the furnace with a 50-foot tall stack and the 3-story machinery building from stone found at the site.

Finally, in 1857, the Airdrie Furnace was ready for production. The boilers were fired, the furnace was charged with ore, and a few days of blast produced a small quantity of inferior iron. The first run was stopped when one of the boilers blew out. After repairs were made, a second run produced little besides a broken saddle on the walking beam, or pittman. The superintendent decided that the problem was that the raw coal did not produce enough heat to adequately refine the ore. Accordingly, he prepared some coke for use in its place. For some reason, however, he did not use it in the third try, which was halted by a broken fly-wheel shaft.

Alexander had great faith in his Scots, but he also had ~~a great deal of~~ ^{limited} impatience. He announced that if the furnace were not producing good iron by a certain date, he would close the furnace. The date arrived before the machinery was ready, and Alexander proved that he was a man of his word. Having spent some four hundred thousand dollars, Lord Alexander closed the furnace and retired to his stock farm near Lexington. The name of the farm was Woodburn and consisted of 3200 acres. Alexander, still a bachelor, contented himself with raising fine horses and cattle until he died in 1867, reputedly the richest man in Kentucky. He left his farm and his Muhlenberg County holdings to his brother and two sisters. Woodburn is now considerably reduced in size but is still in the hands of Alexander heirs. Fittingly enough, it operates as the Airdrie Stud Farm.

We will never know what Airdrie would be like today if Robert Alexander had not been so impatient. We will never know if his Scots would have developed a process to properly handle the raw materials at hand. We do know that there is no iron industry there today. Few people could tell you where the town site is today. Let us now trace what happened after the man who built Airdrie abandoned it.

When Alexander left, he engaged one S.P. Love to look after his holdings in Muhlenberg County. Love was followed by a Tom Bruce, who was succeeded by David B. "Squire" Roll, who was in charge when General Don Carloss Buell appeared on the scene.

General Buell, who was known for saving Grant's campaign at Shiloh, came to Airdrie in 1866. He thought that there was oil on the land, and took a 40-year lease from Alexander on the entire 17,000 acres. Operating as Airdrie Petroleum Company, he drilled extensively on the property. He moved into the McLean house, which he developed into quite a showplace, with its own park and boat dock. Every steamboat sounded a greeting as it passed the house. The drilling for oil was not as imposing a venture as was the house, primarily because coal kept getting in the way of the drilling. After Robert Alexander's death in 1867, a court battle developed between his heirs and Buell. The heirs did not like the terms of the lease, and a deal was struck whereby Buell was granted a deed to

1,000 acres, including the Airdrie Furnace and the home. In return, Buell gave up his lease on the rest of the property, which was sold piece-meal.

General Buell finally gave in to the inevitable, dropping the oil business and developing the coal properties instead. He had gotten a good start on this project when he ran into a snag which would deprive him of his bonanza. I am indebted to the late Agnes Harralson of Central City for this story of political intrigue relating to the Green River. Agnes had a lifelong love of the river and especially the boats that plied the Green in trade. She chronicled them in a fascinating book entitled "Steamboats on the Green and the Colorful Men Who Operated Them".

The Commonwealth of Kentucky was in dire financial straits after the Civil War. It repaired the locks and dams on the Green but could still not make any money. A group of men, all with vested interest in river transportation, formed the Green and Barren Rivers Navigation Company and got the Legislature to lease those rivers to it. Thereafter the Company's boats paid no tolls while competing boats paid high tolls. General Buell was in this category, and had to stop shipping coal because it was not profitable. He fought the Company in the Legislature for 20 years. In 1888 the Green River was turned over to the Federal Government, but not entirely because of General Buell. The Company did not maintain the river facilities properly, and the dam at Rochester had fallen in. Also, the railroads were by then crossing the country,

making steamboats less attractive for the movement of freight. Time had taken its toll on General Buell's facilities and on his energies, and he did not re-enter the coal business. Buell continued to live at Airdrie, even though by that time he was the only resident. General Don Carloss Buell died in 1898 in Airdrie and was buried in St. Louis. His heirs sold the land to a coal company. We can assume that some coal was mined there until Pittsburgh and Midway Coal Company removed the last of the coal by the strip-mining process. This process also removed all remaining traces of the town of Airdrie. The only remaining evidence of Alexander's empire is the Airdrie Iron Furnace, which stands today despite the ravages of flood, weather, blasting and other factors, a monument to the man who envisioned a grand empire and to the dedicated Scots who forsook their homeland to build it. The concluding portion of this paper will take a look at the character of these people.

Before we take this verbal look, let us take a photographic look at Airdrie, past and present. This look is limited by two factors. The past for the most part predated the photographic process and is therefore limited to photographs taken from Agnes Harralson's book and Rother's "History of Muhlenberg County". The present is limited by the complete absence of the town and by geographic features surrounding the furnace. The first slide shows an artist's rendition of the furnace and stone house, obviously after time had done its work on the wooden parts. The furnace is built on a sort of secondary river bank probably 15 feet or so above the level of the Green River at normal tide. The distance between the river and the

furnace is grown up with trees and underbrush. It would be impossible to get this view of the structure today without first bulldozing the area. The furnace on the right is a 50-foot stack built atop a base that is 26 feet square and some 10 feet in height. The other building is referred to as the stone house and is 3 stories high. It housed the boilers, engines, cylinders, and other machinery necessary in the blast process.

This slide shows the work of a stonecarver of long ago. It is located on the east side, or river side, of the stone house and reads "Airdrie 1855".

This slide is the best overall view that I could find during my second trip to Airdrie last November. It is taken looking north on the river side.

This slide is taken from a high bank of the river on the west side of the furnace. The siting of the furnace beside this bank allowed the coal to be brought directly from the opening of the mine to the furnace, probably utilizing a ramp built for that purpose.

This slide is of the furnace itself. This view makes me think of the "Watch on the Rhine" in Germany.

This slide shows some of the houses in Airdrie as they looked in 1895.

This photograph was taken in 1900, showing further deterioration of the now-dead town of Airdrie.

This photograph shows the hotel building and was taken in 1895.

This is a photograph of the old McLean House, last occupied by General Buell, along with its park and boat house. I do not know where it was relative to the furnace, but it was apparently on a lower river bank than was the furnace.

This last slide gives me the title for this paper. The steps were built from the furnace level up the high bank to the town area. They are located on the south side of the stone house, and were cut by hand tools. There are about 50 steps, and the fact that only four or five of them have fallen indicates the prowess of the stonemasons. The title of this paper is "The Steps to Nowhere". As I trod these steps, a flood of nostalgia washed over me. You see, four generations of my family before me have used these steps, including two generations that used them when they were new.

My Great-Great Grandfather, Andrew Duncan, was one of the foremen for the sinking of the shaft, mentioned earlier. He had come to America before work started at Airdrie, not on the ship chartered by Alexander. He had spent a year or so in the coal fields of Pennsylvania, along with his father David and a brother before the rest of the family came. David and his

wife stayed in Pennsylvania. David was buried there following his death in a mining accident. All other members of the family wound up in Airdrie.

Andrew was among the group of Scots who must have felt devastated by Alexander's closing of the Airdrie Furnace. He did allow them to live in the houses but left them stranded in their adopted country. Andrew apparently stayed in the area for several years, mining coal. He eventually owned a mine at Mining City, which was near the present town of Aberdeen, on the east side of the Green River near Morgantown. He sold that mine and went into partnership with Colonel Henry McHenry, operating mines at McHenry, formerly Hamilton, and at Echols. Andrew, along with a number of my relatives, was buried in Render Cemetery on the north side of McHenry.

Andrew's wife Mary must have been quite a character, and I will use her to illustrate the staunch Presbyterian faith of the Scots. "Aunt Mary Andrew", as she is known in family writings, had this faith in spades. After Andrew's death, Aunt Mary continued to live at McHenry. She was in church one Sabbath, as usual, when someone came in and told her that a house on her street was on fire and they thought it was hers. Without hesitation, Aunt Mary replied "'Tis not!. I left my house in the hands of the Lord and He wouldn't let it burn". After services were over, she returned home to find that her faith in her Lord was completely justified.

Andrew's oldest child was William Graham Duncan, born in Holytown, Scotland and named after an uncle who died at age 15. W.G., as he was known, came to America in 1853 as part of the family migration. I cherish the memories represented in an old wooden trunk, called a "kist", in which my family's possessions made the trip to America when WG was 2 years of age. I may write a paper with him as the subject, so I will close this paper with a tribute to the faith and stature of this man, my Great-Grandfather.

W.G. had married Mary Helm Hamilton, who was born at Airdrie in Muhlenberg County. They had brought 4 children into this world, one of whom died at the age of 2. Mary Hamilton was pregnant with another child when, in 1888, she went to Huntingburg, Indiana to have some dental work done. The following was written in a Bible:

Mary H. Duncan died at Huntingburg, Indiana May 8, 1888 where she had gone to visit our brother and sister. After a sickness of 61 days, borne without a murmur, her soul passed peacefully away to the God who gave it. She gave us the most assuring statements that she was going to be with Jesus and while conscious gave us all an affectionate goodbye, asking us all to meet her at the great white throne in heaven. Her remains were buried from the McHenry Schoolhouse where Rev. M.B. Porter had services and the funeral conducted by the Order of D. of R. assisted by the good templars to her last

resting place on earth, the burying ground at Hamilton,
Kentucky, where her remains now are. Written by her husband
"Amen".