

Old and New Westmoreland

Genealogical and Personal History under Editorial Supervision of

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Although Mr. Wilson's father was a graduate of William's College and his mother a graduate of the Emma Willard School for Girls in Troy, New York, he was never sent to college but received his education under the supervision of his father entirely, from tutors in his own home, and in a private academy in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

Having prepared himself for the engineering profession, at the age of eighteen, William A. Wilson accepted a position with the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company, and was located at Hazleton where, in a short time, he became assistant to the resident engineer and gained valuable experience in the anthracite coal mines. In 1890 Mr. Thomas Donohoe, of Greensburg, acting for a number of coal companies in which he was interested, wishing to make a change in the engineering department, applied to a friend, the head engineer of the Pennsylvania Railroad, asking him to recommend a suitable civil and mining engineer. Mr. Wilson was recommended to him as a coming engineer of exceptional ability and great promise. The position of chief engineer having been offered to him, he accepted and came to Greensburg in November, 1890, at the age of twenty-three years, where his future career served to confirm what had been predicted for him. Upon coming to Greensburg, Mr. Wilson took hold of the work of the companies which were all under the management of practically the same board of directors, with headquarters in Greensburg. These companies were The Alexandria Coal & Coke Company, Madison Gas Coal Company, Arona Gas Coal Company, Claridge Gas Coal Company, Sewickley Gas Coal Company, and Mountain Coal Company, at Dunlo, Pennsylvania, most of which have since consolidated and are now known as the Keystone Coal & Coke Company.

In 1893 he was appointed a mining member of the Bituminous Coal Mining Engineers' Board of Pennsylvania, by Governor Robert E. Pattison, and served on this board until 1898. In 1899 he resigned his position as chief engineer of these companies, and in connection with his father-in-law, Thomas Donohoe, a noted coal and coke operator, and director of the above named companies, purchased about four hundred acres of Pittsburgh coal, and, organizing the Donohoe Coke Company, of which Mr. Donohoe was president and Mr. Wilson was treasurer and general manager, built the most up-to-date plant of that period, consisting of two hundred ovens, and all the necessary machinery, houses and other equipment of the highest character. Upon Mr. Donohoe's death, which occurred shortly after, Mr. Wilson remained with the company for about a year, and then, having placed it in the front rank in the coke industry, he severed his official connection with it but still retained his financial interest in it and remained a director of the company until his death.

He then turned his attention to the Connellsville coking field, and with J. U. Kuhns, a director in the Donohoe Coke Company, in April, 1901, purchased the celebrated Jacob Byers farm with three hundred acres of coal, at the then unheard of price, \$1200.00 per acre, and formed the Mount Pleasant Coke Company of which he and Mr. Kuhns were the sole owners. Coke men of many years' experience shook their heads when they heard of this, to them, reckless purchase, but it must be remembered that Mr. Wilson, though young in years, took with him into the coal fields the mind and training of a scientist and not the unmeasured impulse of the speculator. Upon this farm they laid out the town of Udell, developed the Boyer Mine and built a battery of one hundred and twenty ovens. Success crowned his effort to such an extent that he felt this was but the beginning of his career as a coke operator. In February, 1902, he with Mr. Kuhns and Mr. J. A. Strickler purchased the R. G. Love coal field of ninety acres for \$90,000.00 and organized the Veteran Coke Company, of which he was treasurer. In 1906 the Mount Pleasant Coke Company closed one of the largest coal deals in years by the purchase of the coal underlying the property of the Sisters of Mercy at St. Xavier's Academy, together with a portion of the coal under the farm at St. Vincent's, and several small farms adjoining, and commenced the development of the property, building a plant of one hundred and eighty-two ovens which is known as the Beatty Mine of the Mount Pleasant Coke Company. In 1908, Mr. Wil-

son, Mr. Kuhns, and Mr. Isaac Taylor, of Uniontown, purchased a large tract of coal land near Linn Station, Fayette county, Pennsylvania, on the Redstone Branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and organized the Mount Hope Company, of which Mr. Wilson was a director. Later this was sold to the Snowden Coke Company, at a large increase over the original price.

"Nothing succeeds like success," and spurred on by the results which crowned his every effort, Mr. Wilson then achieved the greatest feat in the history of the Connellsville coal region by the leasing of more than one thousand acres of coal from the Estate of William Thaw, deceased. This coal, which was the very cream of the Connellsville region, had been held by the estate for many years, and the trustees seemed reluctant to let it pass out of their hands. But Mr. Wilson began negotiations at the psychological moment, and the trustees, being satisfied as to his skill, experience and financial standing, turned it over to him and the Mount Pleasant-Connellsville Coke Company was organized with Mr. Wilson, president, and Mr. J. U. Kuhns, treasurer. Then began the building of the plant known as the Mount Pleasant Works at Agnes Station, which is a marvel of perfection. Every invention known to modern science in the development of coal and the making of coke has been applied to the building and operating of this plant, and it stands a monument to the president of the company whose magnificent brain not only conceived and developed it, but whose scientific training and unrivaled energy brought it to its present high degree of perfection. It was a great achievement and built for permanency, for the plant has an estimated life of forty years. With the completion of this work, the Mount Pleasant Coke Company has about two thousand acres of coal, and one thousand ovens and possesses splendid properties of magnificent possibilities. During all the time in which they have been in business, they have never had the slightest approach to labor troubles of any kind; a commentary in itself upon the wisdom and justice of their relations with their employees.

From the time of entering the coal fields as an operator, Mr. Wilson took and retained the active management of all the plants until his death. While engineering and the development of the coal fields constituted his chief business, he had many other commercial, industrial and financial interests which necessarily followed these important operations and in all of which he was eminently successful. Notwithstanding Mr. Wilson's tremendous business interests and the great demands upon his time, he was always ready to join in any of the popular sports of the day. He was an enthusiastic automobilist in the best sense of the word, always standing for its highest principles. He was one of the first men to accomplish the drive over the Allegheny Mountains, and was the first motorist to make the run to Philadelphia in less than two days, which he did in September, 1910, in thirteen hours, and that when the Lincoln Highway was not even yet a dream.

He was one of the prime movers in the organizing of the Greensburg Country Club, and was elected and reelected a member of the board of governors until he declined to serve longer. He was a member of the Westmoreland Polo and Hunt Club, the Elk's Club, the Engineers' Society of Western Pennsylvania, and the Military Order of the Loyal Legion. Although Mr. Wilson was eligible to almost every historical and genealogical society of note, he was content to belong only to the "Military Order," which membership was handed down directly to him by his father. In politics he was a Republican. Baptized and reared in the Protestant Episcopal faith, he was received into the Roman Catholic church before his death. Mr. Wilson was a man of exceptionally keen intellect and great tenacity of purpose. An earnest reader, his choice was of scientific and historical works. Endowed with a brilliant mind, Mr. Wilson was a man of great nobility of character and strict integrity in all of his dealings, of attractive personality, devoted to his home and much loved by his many friends.