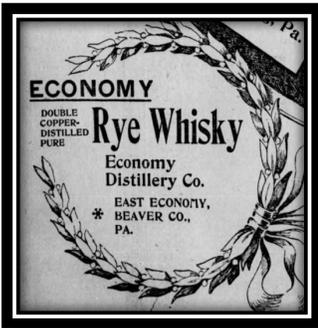


Back in the Country... Bell Acres Stories

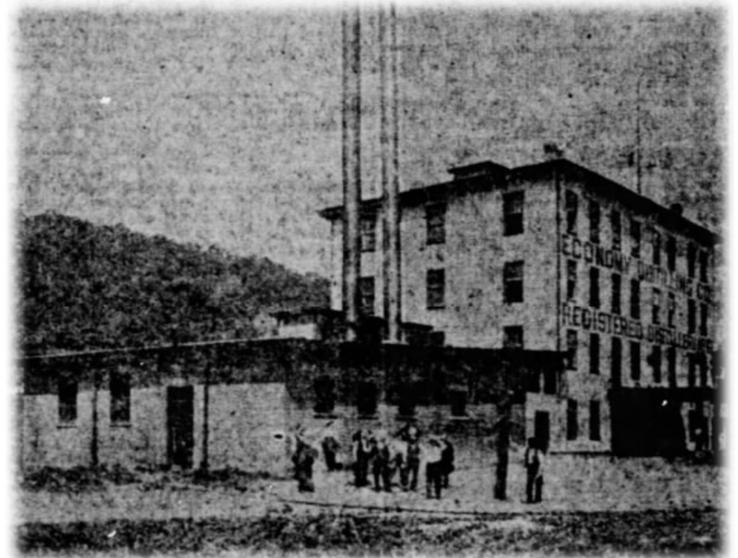
By Debby Rabold

Big Sewickley Creek... Economy Distilling Company

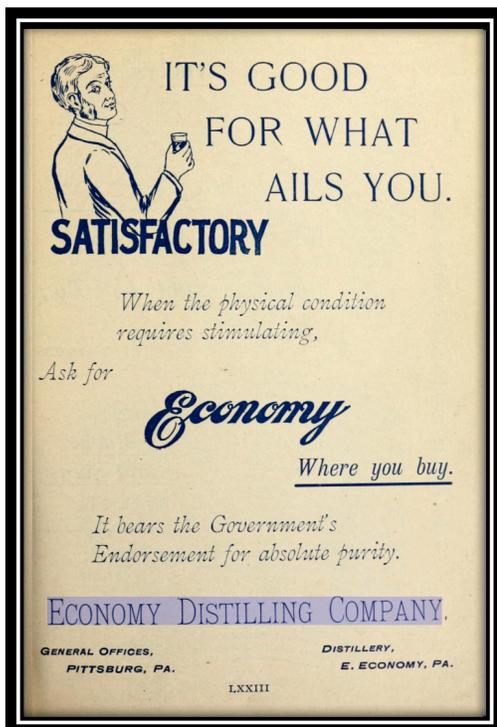


1894 advertisement

Facilities included a four-story building (right) that housed boilers fueled by natural gas wells on the property. Water was obtained from wells and the nearby creek. Five sturdy brick warehouses were built to store up to 30,000 barrels of whiskey. The distillery operated from four to six months of the year.



1902 newspaper photo



1900 advertisement

Harmony Society Trustee John Duss began the controversial process of selling off the Christian communal society's 3,000 acres of rich Beaver County farmland in 1893. One of the first buyers was Jacob J Speck, a Pittsburgh wholesale liquor dealer who planned on building a distillery along Big Sewickley Creek. Construction began almost immediately on three creek side acres in Harmony Township and by 1894, Economy Rye Whiskey was in production.

Five hundred bushels of rye and a lesser quantity of barley could be processed each day. After being cleaned and ground, the grain was fermented then distilled in large copper boilers before being dried and sold as animal feed.

In 1903, a portion of the distilling company's property was sold to the Economy Brewing Company, which was chartered in 1905 and succeeded by the Old Economy Brewing Company in 1907. The brewery and distillery were separate, but shared utilities.





In response to growing public support for Prohibition, Beaver County chose not to renew the majority of liquor licenses for 1917. Only six were approved for the entire county. The Economy Distilling Company and Old Economy Brewing Company were among those whose licenses were not renewed. Old Economy Brewing ceased operations and its acreage was sold in 1918.



Based on information gleaned from news accounts, it appears the distillery ceased operating in May 1914, the year of Speck's death. Barrels of aging whiskey continued to be stored in the warehouses, however, and soon came under strict sales restrictions set forth under the 18th "Prohibition" Amendment (1920-1933). Liquor could only be legally sold to those holding government issued permits, which were mostly for medicinal purposes. A barrel of whiskey was worth as much as \$1,000 on the black market.

There was an unsuccessful robbery attempt at the distillery warehouse in 1919 followed by two successful break-ins in 1921 when thirty-eight barrels were stolen. Arrests made in one incident involved former area police officers.

In May 1922, the company was purchased for \$42,000. In September, a headline grabbing robbery occurred when a gang broke into a warehouse and made off with a truckload of barrels. They were loading a second truck when confronted by Ambridge police officers. A running gun battle ensued, resulting in the wounding of an officer and the death of a robber. Ten arrests of Ambridge residents were made in connection with the incident.

By 1923, the new owners were indicted on 400 charges of fraud for falsifying sales records of 10,000 barrels worth \$300,000 between May and December 1922. The distillery was abandoned in 1923 and the equipment removed. The owners were tried and acquitted in January 1925. Much of the former distillery site is presently Harmony Township's Valley Road Playground, a level grassy field bordered by Big Sewickley Creek.



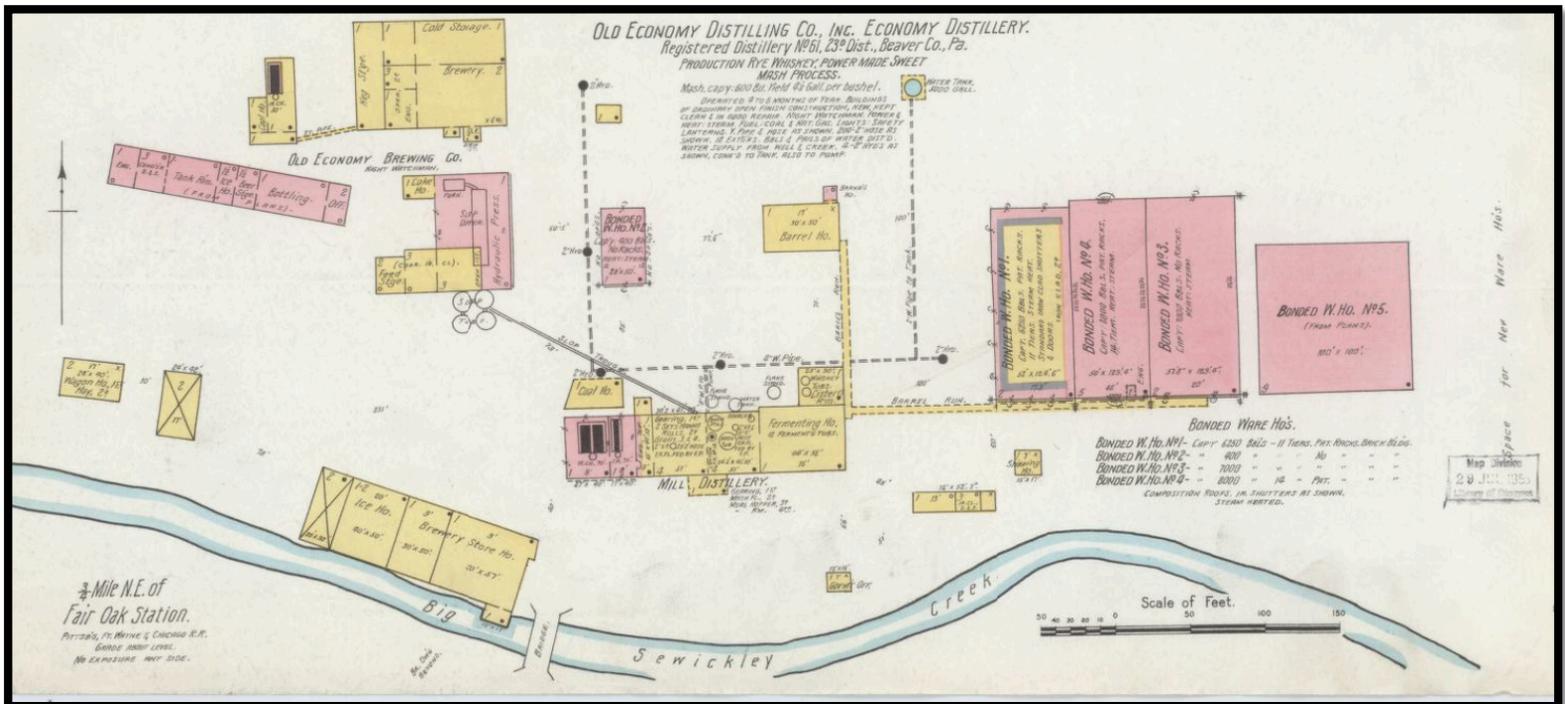


This distillery building photo was taken during the record-breaking flood of March 1907 when flood waters from the Ohio River reached into Big Sewickley Creek. A subsequent flood in 1911 washed away a creek side brewery building and caused the drowning death of four horses. An iron bridge once connected the distillery with the Fair Oaks neighborhood on the opposite side of the creek.

(Courtesy of Laughlin Memorial Library)

“The creek was dammed at the end of Plum Street to furnish water for the plant. On summer afternoons, all the children from the town could be found swimming in the pool beneath the dam.”

Leet Township Centennial 1869-1969



(from the 1905 Ambridge, Pennsylvania Sanborn Fire Map)



Valley Road Playground, former site of the Economy Distilling Company.



Looking downstream from the Valley Road bridge toward Plum Street and the former dam location.

(Bell Acres Photos)



Many thanks to Julie Mulcahy at the Laughlin Memorial Library
and Nancy Knisley of the Ambridge Memories Blog.