

GAS BOOM TOWN

The Eastern Indiana-Western Ohio gas boom that started with the discovery of natural gas in 1886 gave a tremendous boost to the industries of the two states. That precious new natural resource put many small communities on the map and gave promise of a prosperous future. Albany, Indiana, was just one of the many communities that benefited from the discovery of natural gas. Its story is typical of many of the small towns of Eastern Indiana and Western Ohio that temporarily enjoyed the bounty of natural gas.

The town of Albany is a small community located in the north-eastern corner of Delaware county, Indiana. At present, approximately 2,400 people reside within the corporation limits. It is felt that Albany is typical of the gas boom towns and that its history would parallel that of most gas boom towns.

Albany was founded in 1833 and grew slowly like the other communities of its size in the midwest. By 1860 Albany was linked to the outside world by a few crude roads. In 1879 the event which all frontier towns awaited with eagerness occurred—the coming of the railroad. The town rejoiced and the community at large was called upon to contribute a bonus lest the railroad should go to Fairview, Albany's economic rival two miles to the east.

Stores began to flock to the place where the railroad was coming. Competition, the life of trade, set in. By 1880, the population was 249.¹ Albany was at that time, and still is, the second largest community in the county.

In 1886, the first gas well in Indiana was drilled just south of Eaton, about five miles from Albany. That was the beginning of the gas boom that was to sweep the area. The Ohio Pipeline Company was quick to move into the area. It soon became the leading gas company in Eastern Indiana. With this company came several new citizens who would add life to the economy of Albany.

One of the men who worked for the company in the community described the situation as follows. "By the early 1890's pipelines were a common sight in the area. Many of the people in the town had gas lights in their houses and yards. It was a common belief that the gas would never run out."² The importance of finding gas in the community had far reaching effects other than just bringing in the Ohio Company.

Many industries were attracted to Albany. The attraction of free gas was something that a forward seeing entrepreneur could not pass up. The presence of gas practically eliminated fixed costs. A company could produce its products merely by putting out some money for labor and materials.

Among the companies that moved to Albany were: The Albany Paper Company, the Shelby Tool Manufacturing Company, three different glass companies, and numerous smaller industries.

The listing below shows the number of some types of businesses that could be found within the town limits in December of 1899:3

Saloons	8
Restaurants	3
Hotels	2
Furniture stores	4
Blacksmiths	4
Groceries	5
Barber shops	5
Livery stables	3

Approximately two years later the stores were still increasing. At one time there were thirteen saloons within the corporate limits of the community.⁴

The growth of the community may also be demonstrated by a list of manufacturers which was compiled from old fire maps. In December of 1899 there were located in Albany the following manufacturers:

1. Feather Renovating, 461 West State Street
2. Benegar Sawmill, 220 North Broadway
3. Baldwin Bottling Company, 208 South Water Street
4. Window Glass Company, Section 32 of town
5. Model Flint Glass Company, Section 29 of town
6. Machine Shop, 705 East State Street
7. Albany Paper Company, Section 4 of town
8. Shelby Steel Tube Company, Hamilton Street
9. Hoosier Manufacturing Company, Washington Street
10. G. V. Griffith Handle Company, State Street

Each of these companies had over twenty-five employees with the possible exception of the machine shop on East State Street.

Albany's economy was on the move. People were streaming into the area to find jobs with the new businesses that the gas boom brought to the area. Manufacturers were well aware of the value of the natural gas that Eastern Indiana and Western Ohio had to offer. It appeared that Albany would soon develop into one of the leading cities in the state.

By 1900 electric railroads, later known as traction lines, were asking permission to move into Albany. In that same year the Indiana and Ohio Railroad Company was given the first opportunity to build an electric railroad through the town of Albany. Two years later that company had not responded and the opportunity was allotted to the Muncie and Portland Company. The Muncie and Portland Company quickly accepted and started laying tracks almost immediately. The traction line offered inexpensive transportation for both people and

freight. This interurban system connected Albany with Muncie and gave people the opportunity to travel at a low price. According to some accounts, getting a ride on a Friday or Saturday was often quite difficult due to the crowded vehicles.

Industry in Albany during the gas boom era centered around the glass factories. Albany was blessed with not one, but three such factories. They were commonly known as the Window House, the Bottle House, and the Model Flint Glass Company. One of those companies' major influences on the community was the attraction of an outside labor force. Many laborers moved to the gas boom towns searching for employment. Some of the skilled labor (glassblowers) came from as far away as Belgium. Among them were the Dehonns, Decamps, and Witteborts.

Albany soon became a center for early glass worker unions. Just before the turn of the century, seven Indiana cities had glassworker unions, one of them being in Albany. Even though there was a union, the effectiveness of the organization is subject to debate since research indicates that the most common salary was only fifty cents for a ten to twelve hour day. That was not a good wage even allowing for the low prices during that period.

The most important economic unit among the three glass companies was the Model Flint Company. This company made fancy glassware such as cruets, creamers, vases, bottles, and dishes, both clear and frosted. This type of glass was quite expensive and is still expensive today (Albany glass is considered a valuable antique item).⁵ There are very few pieces still remaining.

Another major industry in Albany was the Shelby Steel Tube Company or Tube Works as it was usually called. The Shelby Steel Tube Company was founded in Albany in 1896 with a capital stock of \$300,000. This company's large brick building was constructed in the northeast section of town near the railroad. The foundations of the building can still be seen in the area today. The original building had a frontage of 173 feet and a depth of 357 feet. Two additions were later added to the building.

That plant, in 1898, before the additions were added, had a capacity of about four million feet of steel tubing per year. The tubing was shipped to all parts of the civilized world.⁶

Some forms of business did not move into Albany; they were formed there. One of the most outstanding developments in the community was the Albany Automobile Works. It was organized in 1906. The Albany Automobile Works supposedly had one of the most modern automobile factories in the world. It was even equipped with a then "modern" paint shop. Cars were sold from Maine to California and even as far away as England. Mr. J. L. Tulley was president of the company and held the patent on the car. Approximately twenty Al-

bany men had stock in the company.

By 1907 Albany was a growing community in an economic boom. Saloons were packed and an air of prosperity prevailed throughout the town. Manufacturing was expanding at a fast and precarious pace. The population of the town was increasing rapidly, with over 3,000 people living in town at the height of the boom. The town was able to support five physicians. Traction and railroad cars were crowded. The automobile company offered hope of an ever increasing market for the community. The town's paper mill was working at full force. The glass factories offered constant employment for both the skilled and the unskilled. Everything seemed to be going in a favorable direction for the community, but something was about to happen that would spell disaster.

Sometime toward the end of 1907 and early 1908 (no exact date is recorded) something happened that changed the economic picture for the community. Slowly but surely, the gas wells began to quit producing. Attempts to drill new wells were of little aid. The fact came out; Albany was out of gas! The unlimited fuel supply of the thriving community was gone. The people had wasted the gas by unreasonable usage. At the peak of production, it is estimated that over 100 million cubic feet of the fuel was wasted every twenty-four hours in Indiana.⁷

Albany's population fell to 1,289 by 1910. That was a drop of nearly sixty percent over a four year period. The companies which had flocked to the town because of the gas left just as fast as they had arrived. The small stores began moving to other communities. The list below shows the number of a few types of businesses remaining in the town by late 1910 as compared to 1899.

	NUMBER IN 1910	NUMBER IN 1899
Saloons	0	8
Restaurants	3	3
Blacksmiths	2	4
Groceries	5	5
Livery stables	1	3
Furniture stores	2	4
Barber shops	3	5
Hotels	1	2

In the downtown area there were eight vacant buildings in 1910 as compared to only three such buildings in 1899.⁸

Although the end of the gas forced several establishments to move away from Albany, there were some other important events which also hurt the town.

The glass companies were heavily dependent on the gas for fuel, but legend has it that they might have stayed had it not been for a dispute with the railroad. Ironically, the actual cause of the departure of the glass companies may never be known, since the manage-

ment kept the companies' problems as confidential as possible. It is believed by many in the community that the railroad refused to give the companies a side-rail to make shipping more convenient. Coupled with the gas failure, the two problems together were too much for the glass companies to overcome and they chose to leave Albany.

It was also not long until the Albany Automobile Works began to experience trouble. The car, named the Albany, was a two cylinder model. Many larger companies were coming out with four cylinder cars which were much more powerful and dependable than the older, less adequate, two banger.

The list of the manufacturers which employed twenty-five or more men was reduced to two by December of 1910, as compared to nine in December of 1899.

When the gas boom ended, so ended much of the wild enthusiasm that beheld the community. The result was an immediate decline, which, more recently, has been followed by a slow methodical recovery.

There can be only one real conclusion. Boom-town Albany was too dependent on one resource. It thrived and died with the gas.

Although it took Albany several years to recover, many of the people were loyal to their community. Many stayed. This was not true for many of the other gas boom towns. Places such as Powers' Station and Granville, Indiana, all but disappeared. Many knew that Albany would not, nor could not, rise to the economic level that it had enjoyed in the late 1890's and the early 1900's. Many decided to stay because it was their home and they had grown fond of the small, eager community. Much can be said for the people who decided to stick it out.

This has been the story of the impact of the gas boom on one small town. The same story would apply to many small communities in the area; only the names would need to be changed, not the plot of the story.

—Dale L. Flesher & Richard L. Ross

FOOTNOTES

1. U. S. Bureau of Census. *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880 Population*, Vol. I, (Washington: Government Printing Office), p. 149.
2. Interview with William Wilson of Albany, Indiana, March 10, 1967.
3. List derived from Lockhart Fire Maps of Albany, (Chicago: Sanhort Perris Map Company, 1899).
4. *Albany Chronicle*, December 22, 1915.
5. Ruth Herrick, *Greentown Glass* (Grand Rapids: Printing Arts Company, 1959), p. 76.
6. *Albany Journal*, October 11, 1898.
7. Julia Henderson Levering, *Historic Indiana* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1916), p. 507.
8. Lockhart Maps, *op. cit.*