

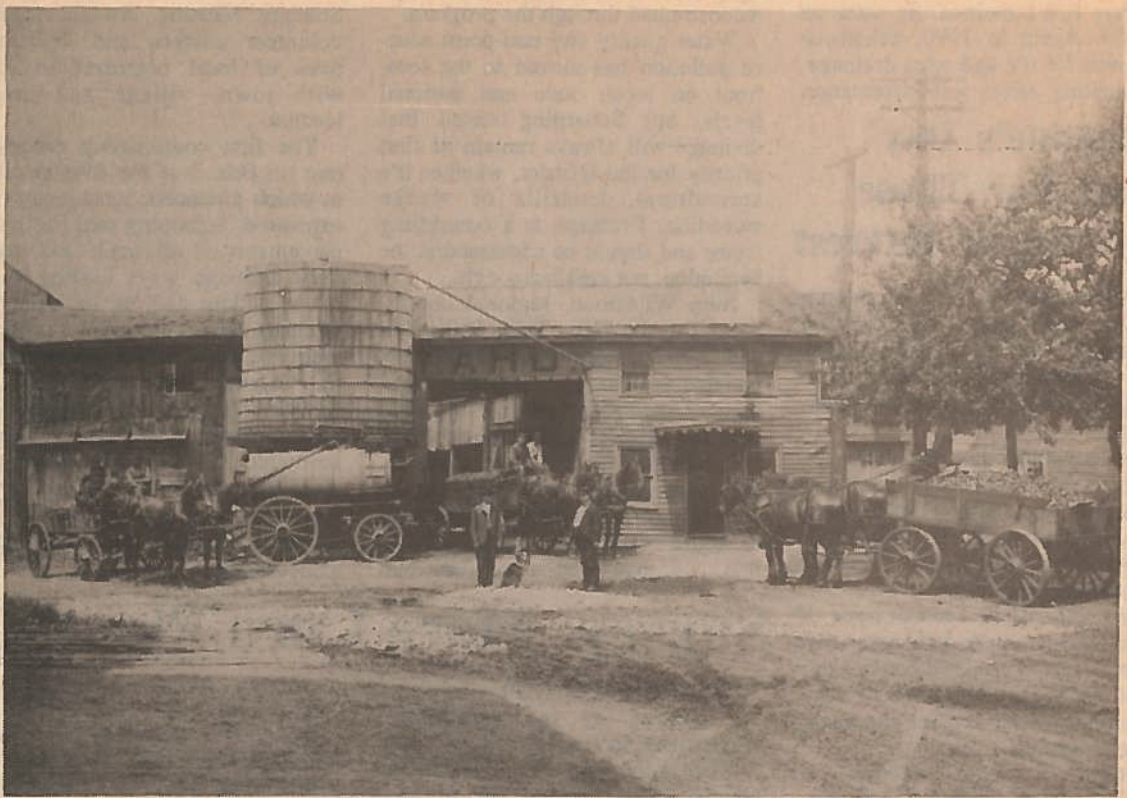
Wethinking of Old Orleans

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COAL

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Coal is something most of us don't personally come in contact with as a heating fuel. Indeed it is something from another period of time for many. Nowadays we can sit back and enjoy automatic heating systems fueled by oil, electric, natural gas or propane. Lots of younger people haven't the foggiest idea just how hard it used to be to keep warm during these cold winter months. But being in my mid-forties, I can remember first hand the use of coal. When I was a child our house had central heat from a coal fired furnace in the basement. This is what might be referred to as an old octopus type, with large round heat ducts and even bigger cold air returns.

The coal which we got from Carl Wolfe, was delivered in a large dump truck which backed over the lawn to a cellar window. A metal shoot was inserted through this opening into the coal bin, made of heavy plank and located near the furnace. The driver would slowly hoist the truck bed, and by adjusting a small sliding door in the rear, would allow several tons of coal to rumble down the shoot into the bin. What a noise it made through the whole house, and what a dusty mess it made too if it hadn't been sprinkled down with water. It seems to me we had about one delivery a year.

We also had a coal fired hot water heater which was sort of a miniature furnace. Both this and the furnace had to be tended at least twice a day. That is, you shook the fire down in the morning and shoveled on more coal. To get it going faster and hotter, you could open a damper. Our damper was connected to a control upstairs by a ratchet with fine chains for adjustment. Of course, once you shook the fire down, you had ashes which had fallen down into the ash pan. These were then emptied into ash cans and hauled up out of the cellar. We always spread ours on the garden or driveway while village residents put theirs out for pickup. At night you again shook the grates, added coal, and hoped it would last through the wee hours. My dad used to swear when he got klinkers. They were large coagulated pieces of ash which fused together. He'd take a poker and try to release them from the grates which otherwise wouldn't operate properly. I remember that some people had stokers which were furnaces that had a very slow-moving conveyer from the bin, that continuously fed the furnace a fine grade of coal. These people used to say, "A skuttle a day". I remember in particular, "blue coal" being advertised. It had a bluish cast and supposedly burned a blue flame which was hotter.

I can also remember when there were a number of coal dealers around in Orleans County, and

when Ralph Vick in Albion, even advertised his coal dealership with a huge piece of coal which was displayed outside his scale house on West Academy Street. The picture which accompanies this article, although way before my time, shows the Shourds Brothers' coal yard in Albion as it appeared in 1905. The photo was taken looking north on Platt Street. This enterprise was situated at the end of the street and backed up to the canal for obvious reasons of incoming shipments on boats. The coal yard was begun in March 1858 by Smith D. Shourds and was advertised as follows in 1905 by his sons: "The oldest established coal dealers in Orleans County. The business has grown from its beginning of 70 tons in 1858 to now about 4,000 tons annually". This in itself suggests the great volume of coal consumed back then. In an earlier ad dated July 26, 1858, it states:

"The undersigned has opened a New Coal and Wood Yard on the Canal in rear of King's Furnace, where he will at all times keep a constant supply of White Shamokin and all other kinds of coal, prepared for the use of stores, families and offices, which he will deliver cheaper than can be bought elsewhere. A good supply of charcoal constantly on hand. Also a supply of blacksmith coal which will be furnished at the lowest rates. Wood of the best quality and of all kinds. Office in King's Stove Store, Canal St."

S.D.Shourds

Obviously when this photo was taken, Shourds Brothers had two or three delivery wagons and a spray wagon. This concern also contracted with village homeowners in the 1890's to sprinkle the dirt street in front of their houses once a week to keep the dust down in dry weather.

From a 1926 article, I found that semi-anthracite and coke were generally selling from \$14.50 to \$19.00 per ton. Shourds was selling their hard coal at \$15.00 per ton. At that time, they were receiving Coal by railroad, shipped from the Delaware and Hudson Coal Company mine at Scranton, Pa. Coal cars on the railroad were a common sight forty years ago. During the depression and before, children of poor families were often sent out to glean the railroad tracks for bits of coal which might have fallen from the cars. And of course, if you were a naughty child, you just might have gotten a lump of coal in your Christmas stocking.

Oh yes, people talk about the 'good old days' but when it comes to coal and hand fired furnaces, boilers, stoves, hot water heaters and the ultimate coal dust, black smoke, klinkers, back breaking problem with ashes, I'd say most of us are pretty well off as things are today.