

watch it burn up out of the corner of your eye while you were shuffling back to work as slow as you could without getting into more trouble.

Things were that way for a long time. But when I was there, the furnace men had a regular shanty on each furnace floor and they could sit down every once in a while if they really didn't have any work that needed doing right then. Their work was still stinking tough and dusty, sulphury and hot, just the same as before. But now they could think they were human beings for a few minutes between casts and cleanups. They even could relax enough to play pinochle at lunch time and on lucky days have fifteen or twenty minute coffee breaks.

You had to clean up the runners after you tapped out the furnace and let out three or four hundred tons of wildly running liquid cast iron that would pour out into the iron ladles waiting on the track below. And by the time you cleaned those runners, (when you could get within ten feet of them without burning your clothes and scorching your face) the little pools of iron had hardened into red hot globs that had to be gotten out with long crowbars. And the crowbars were so long and heavy you almost got sick just to handle them at all if you weren't used to them.

You sweated like hell both summer and winter. Only in winter you could get pneumonia, because the sides of the furnace floor were open to the icy winds from Lake Erie. Oh yes, the repair gang used to come up in November and nail or wire a lot of corrugated iron sheets over the railings to serve as makeshift walls. They did act as windbreakers. But the cold winds off the frozen lake got through just the same and the drafts hit you like an iceberg coming into an inferno.

There were five men who ran each furnace. They were the hot-blast man (or stove tender), the keeper, the first helper, second helper and third helper. Except for some of the hot-blast men, whose jobs were higher paid and not quite so hard as the others, they were all Black.

The furnace foreman—a "working foreman"—was called the blower. He was white.

Years earlier, the furnace crew had been *all white*. By 1940 it was still about fifty-fifty. When the U.S. got into the Second World War and all the good jobs opened up in aircraft, auto and machine shops in Buffalo, the young white guys went there instead of into the blast furnaces and at the same time the furnace

work was expanding, so more Black guys were hired. The company opened up a couple of old furnaces (A and B—they must have been built sometime in the 1890s or very early 1900s). And the Blacks got the furnace jobs that were vacated. Before long, the furnace workers were nearly all Black.

But the repair gang, always working around the furnaces, once in a while sweating as much as the furnace men themselves to make quick repairs and quick changes while the furnace was running so the company wouldn't lose a lot of money (as it claimed it did if a furnace was shut down even for a few minutes)—the repair gang was ALL WHITE.

It was only once in a while, of course, that anybody in the repair gang really worked as hard as anybody on the furnace floor. But it was no prize of a job, compared to an indoor factory maintenance job, for instance. Sometimes on a winter day with ten-degree or even zero winds coming in off the lake, you could almost freeze to death doing an outside job on the trestle. Or if you were trying to unfreeze a snow-covered four-foot coke oven gas-pipe that went along the hundred yards or so between furnaces and you were using alcohol, which is colder than ice, and getting it all over you, it could be pretty miserable.

The pay was the same for a repair helper as for a third helper on the furnaces. A full repairman got a little more than a first helper. And the keeper and hot-blast man both got the same as a millwright. But everybody knew the repair job was better than the furnace job. Otherwise, why would one be almost all Black and the other all *white*?

The beauty of it for the company was that it was much harder for the workers to get together in any real move to fight the bosses. It was bad enough with the different races and nationalities in the plant, the Irish thought they were so much better than the Poles, and the Italians didn't even get hired very much at all at that time. And it was bad enough that the whites in general thought they were better than Blacks. But in the blast furnace department you had the added disunity of a color-dividing line going right through the department with all the Blacks on the furnace floors and all the whites in the repair gang or similar jobs. The miracle was that there had been enough unity to get anything out of the company at all. But there was.

The company was always way ahead of the workers, though, when it came to lining people up against each other. Here's how