

A VILLAGE DIES IN UNION COUNTY

by Stephen Huddy

Local histories are filled with familiar sagas of bravery and treachery, of honor and deceit. The story of the destruction of the Union County village of Alvira at the outset of America's involvement in WWII is a chapter of local history seemingly plucked from mythology, replete with immense sacrifice, betrayal and common-man heroes battling overwhelming forces. But, unlike mythology, this story is true.

It began innocently enough. In the fall of 1941, telling residents they were measuring fields and boundaries for a new roadway over Bald Eagle Mountain, surveyors worked the land on both sides of old Route 44 in Union County passing through the century-old village of Alvira. Then, curiously, they began taking the measure of houses, barns and outbuildings. As concerned White Deer Valley residents began to ask questions, the charade dissolved. The "surveyors" were land agents assessing property they were about to confiscate on behalf of the United States War Department for an undisclosed "war-related purpose."

In two community meetings at Stone Church in the valley on February 16 and March 7, 1942, 400 Alvira and vicinity residents learned that the federal government would commandeer 8500 acres of their land to build a massive TNT production plant, the Pennsylvania Ordnance Works, the largest public works project ever witnessed in central Pennsylvania.

More hurtfully, they learned that the War Department would make property owners only one offer for their land, at dramatically reduced value. From the moment of that offer, residents, primarily farmers, had six weeks to vacate their properties. The avenue of appeal was deliberately difficult: land hearings were heard in Scranton 70 miles distant, and the six-week clock kept ticking during that appeal. Those properties remaining unresolved were immediately condemned, and seized through eminent domain.

The one hope these rural residents embraced was the government's promise at Stone Church to return their land for the purchase price, when the TNT facility was no longer needed for the war effort.

By April 30, 1942, the village of Alvira and its environs, including land stretching east to the Susquehanna River at Fritz Station, had been abandoned. Rural citizens, lives set asunder, fled . . . much as European refugees across the Atlantic Ocean were doing at that very moment.

Frenzied by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor four months earlier, and now fighting a two-front war, the War Department jumped into high gear. Land was quickly cleared; barns and houses were bulldozed and set afire. Amid ashes of the once idyllic village, over 10,000 workers toiled behind 17 miles of 10' high barbed wire fencing, constructing over 300 buildings, 12 complete TNT production lines, a chemical plant and 150 Corbeta-style igloos for TNT storage. Construction was completed in an amazing eleven months; final costs would exceed \$50 million.

On acreage where a year before dairy cattle had roamed, 3500 military and civilian workers toiled around the clock to produce 360,000 pounds of TNT daily, at a facility steeped in mystery and shielded with absolute certainty from the press and public in this wartime era.

Yet a plant seemingly built for the long haul would end its TNT production a mere 11 months after opening. On January 13, 1944, the War Department ceased TNT production at the Pennsylvania Ordnance Works. TNT had been supplanted by more deadly weaponry.

The government's promise to return land seized would prove as barren as the now acid-scorched, abandoned fields of the former ordnance works itself.

The story of this unheralded moment in local history is vividly recounted in the critically acclaimed documentary film *Surrender! The Sudden Death of Alvira, Pennsylvania*, which will screen Sunday, March 30 at noon and 1:30PM at the Campus Theater in Lewisburg. The event will be a fundraiser for the Union County Historical Society.



Stone church, 1938

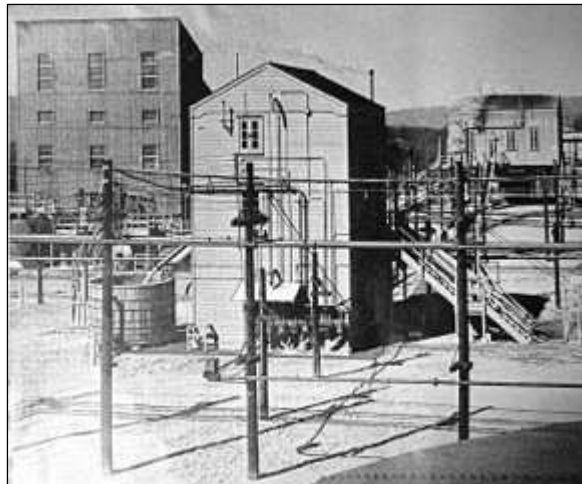
In February, 1942, War Department officials met here with 400 White Deer Valley residents to inform them that the government would be seizing 8500 acres of their land. They also promised to return the land taken after the war . . . a promise broken.

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Nitric acid production plant

Making TNT required vast amounts of nitric acid. It was produced at the Pennsylvania Ordnance Works by distilling ammonia delivered to the facility in miles of tank cars that entered the facility via a rail spur from Allenwood.



Nitrating houses on TNT line

The Pennsylvania Ordnance Works had 12 TNT lines, each with a complex of nitrating houses used to saturate toluene with three different intensities of nitric acid, hence TNT: (T)ri-(N)itrated(T)oluene.

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Storing TNT at 1 of 150 igloos

Storage of TNT produced was in 150 "igloos" on site. Each igloo held 250 pounds of TNT in 50-pound wooden crates, ready for rail shipment to East Coast arms manufacturers.