

Dynamite Bill, A Blasters' Blaster

Every community has its share of characters, people that are larger than life and provide more than their share of fodder for storytelling. Plymouth's George Gardner, better known as Dynamite Bill, a veritable Paul Bunyan of the blasting profession, was one of those characters.

Born in Door County in 1887, Gardner started his life in demolition as a powder monkey in a stone quarry. Two years with the Rainbow Division's demolition squad in World War I honed his skills with dynamite. After the Great War he returned to Plymouth and made a name for himself, leading a life that alternated between celebrity and hermit.

The following are blurbs from an interview between Gardner and an unknown journalist. The anecdotes are filled with accounts of skill and celebrity.

Two farmers had a sizzling feud going over a tree stump that straddled the fence between their properties. One wanted it removed, the other didn't. Dynamite Bill settled the feud for good by blasting out one-half of the stump, leaving the other half intact.

Some boasted Gardner could blast a setting hen off her nest without cracking the eggs. He could set off a blast in front of you and not flick the ash off your cigarette.

When the construction of a TV tower outside Milwaukee presented the problem of bedrock under the soil and other dynamiting experts demurred, they called in Bill to blast the formation.

When Bill dynamited old interurban rails from the Sheboygan's downtown section, traffic streamed by uninterrupted and not a single cracked shop window resulted. He used a blanket of tires threaded together with a cable, for cover. The trick was to keep the cover a little above the rails, otherwise the tires would blow sky-high, too. The tires work like fish gills, letting air through, but blocking solid material.

When an ice jam on the Sheboygan River piled up to eight feet under the Penn Avenue Bridge it was Bill who, without aid, crawled out on the treacherous mound and blasted the jam loose.

Customers shopped in Prange's Sheboygan store while Bill blasted out a huge portion of the basement beneath them. Not one dish was jarred in the china department adjoining Bill's operations.

He deftly annihilated the concrete steps leading to the Franklin Hotel Bar in Sheboygan Falls, between beers, as his drinking companions continued quenching their thirsts inside, completely unaware of Bill's activity, so quiet and unobtrusive were his operations.

Building a raceway to run water from the Fox River through Kaukauna's Thilmann Pulp and Paper Company's generator station was too risky for eight other dynamiting firms. Bill was called in and accomplished the blasting of a tunnel 86 feet wide and 13 feet deep without disturbing the alignment of the machinery within the plant one iota.

Gardner's fame is such that his mail requires no other address than Dynamite Bill, Plymouth, Wisconsin. But, he lives a life closer to that of a hermit than a celebrity. Over his door hung a

sign, stating simply Dynamite Bill. The building, a former cheese factory, was located right next to the downtown section of America's cheese center, Plymouth, Wisconsin.

It looked ordinary enough from the outside. Once inside, though, the ordinary ceased and the fantastic began. From the mammoth potbellied stove, a century old, to the antiquated mahogany back bar attached to one wall, Bill's home was something out of a housewife's nightmare.

Cut up logs flanked the stove. A discarded TV antenna served as a drying rack for an assortment of grey union suits. Pin-up girls of the Theda Bera era- still looking pink and plump in spite of layers of dust, adorned the back wall. A small sink pump and slop jar were the only plumbing facilities in evidence. A dozen hats, one dirtier and more misshapen than the other, clung to the back bar. Although only one dim bulb struggled against the glow of the stove, there were six crusted, ornate chandeliers dangling from the high ceiling. The rosy reflection of the fire reverberated from stacks of shiny aluminum milk cans, hundreds of them in temporary storage for the new cheese factory across the street. The place was nearly that of a hoarder.

Gardner working into his seventies, razed a church in Holy Cross, while its minister watched from twenty feet away. Diabetes eventually claimed his eyesight and ability. He died in 1965 at age 79.

He believed experience was fundamental to safety. Knowing just how much and where to place dynamite, and never for a moment forgetting it was dynamite was imperative. He also stated sincerely, "I never once walked away from a charge without repeating the Lord's Prayer."

Quirky, talented and definitely unique, George Gardner is certainly one of Plymouth's most fascinating residents.

The photos seen here came from a collection donated by Wally's Studio of Sheboygan Falls. The interviewer who garnered this priceless information is unknown. For more information on Dynamite Bill, please visit The Sheboygan County Historical Research Center, 518 Water Street, Sheboygan Falls.