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Posted on Thu, Apr. 15, 2010

## Rusted relics of 9/11 come home to Coatesville

By Kathy Boccella

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Forty-one years after they left Lukens Steel Co. in Coatesville destined for the World Trade Center and a sad but pivotal role in the nation's history, 10 of the 50-ton steel columns returned Wednesday to Chester County on a 28-truck convoy from New York City.

The beams - referred to as "trees" because of their distinctive, three-pronged branches on the ends - helped push New York's tallest buildings skyward, and some remained standing after 9/11 to become symbols of resilience in the face of the attacks that killed 2,750 people.

As the convoy of flatbed tractor-trailers rolled onto South First Avenue in the center of Coatesville in the afternoon, several hundred spectators cheered, clapped, snapped pictures, and reached out to touch the rusted relics with the Lukens Steel stamp visible on the sides.

"It's terrible," Fran Scamuffa said, crying as she waved a small American flag and snapped pictures with her 14-year-old daughter by her side. "All those people."

Wednesday's 145-mile trip took the steel pieces from a storage hangar at John F. Kennedy International Airport through a landscape altered by the history they were part of - across Manhattan where the towers stood, down the spine of a state that lost 700 residents on that day, and finally to a Chester County borough where the steel industry has shed hundreds of jobs but managed to hang on.

The "trees" are to become the centerpiece of the proposed National Iron and Steel Heritage Museum in Coatesville, where for 188 years Lukens' steel plates fueled the area's economy and residents' pride.

No one Wednesday could be more proud than William Culclasure, who worked at the mill for 36 years and said he had a part in forging the beams.

"A lot of my blood and sweat went into that steel," he said as he reached up and touched the beams.

Scamuffa, 40, said her father also had worked at the mill.

"It's just overwhelming," she said. "Not only is it moving because of all those poor people that lost their lives, but that steel is a part of history, and it's so thrilling that it's coming back home."

Many other veterans of the mill recalled being there as the 70-foot beams were cut from plates by men in hard hats, placed on railcars, and shipped north to the edge of New York's financial district.

"They were very special," said Maurice Hare, 59, who retired last year from the melt shop. With a camera in hand ready to take pictures, he said he was thrilled something he worked on was returning.

"It's just a shame it had to come back this way," he said.

Lukens produced 160 of the columns, and 152 were used in the twin towers, 19 on each side of both buildings, extending from the fourth to the ninth floors. After the attack, portions of the north and east walls of the north tower refused to fall, creating a cathedral effect that made for a lasting image of the devastation.

More than 1,000 objects from the World Trade Center have been housed at JFK since the attack, said Steve Coleman, a spokesman for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. About six months ago, the agency started dispersing the items, with many going to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at ground zero and other groups wanting mementos.

About 40 of the trees were recovered, and one will anchor the New York memorial.

The Graystone Society, which oversees the Lukens National Historic District, including four buildings that once belonged to Lukens family members, acquired the beams for its steel museum. Plans call for it to be in an unused part of the old steel mill, with the "trees" displayed outside.

Scott Huston, a direct descendant of Rebecca Lukens and president of the Graystone Society, said that plans for the museum were in the early stages, but that within two weeks, one of the "trees" would be displayed outside the Lukens executive offices, which already house artifacts showing how the company's products were used to fuel the industrial age in steam engines, ships, and even the first nuclear submarine.

At its peak in the 1970s, Lukens employed 6,000. It was sold to Bethlehem Steel in 1998 and changed hands a number of times. It now operates on a smaller scale and is owned by ArcelorMittal, one of the largest steel corporations in the world.

The trucks left JFK at 4 a.m. Wednesday with a police escort and American flags covering their load. At various points along the way, people lined streets, blew their horns, and took pictures of the convoy carrying 500 tons of assorted steel pieces and traveling at 15 to 45 m.p.h.

At midmorning, one of the trucks rear-ended another on a ramp from I-80 to Route 309, causing an hour delay.

Loading the trucks was very emotional, Huston said.

"They were born here," he said, "but they lived and died in New York."

With the trucks parked on South First Avenue as a welcoming ceremony began, driver Ed Murray took the opportunity to stretch and splash some water on his face. He had been driving 13 hours.

"It was a wonderful day, overwhelming," said the Western Pennsylvania native. "I have a big lump stuck in my throat, making it real hard to swallow."

Just then, a New York firefighter who had come down for the event passed by and said, "Thank you, brother."

Then someone else passed and said, "I have a cold one for you."

"If you do," said Murray, "I'd appreciate it."


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