

A Remembrance of General Cigar Company in Lancaster County

By Jean Maysilles

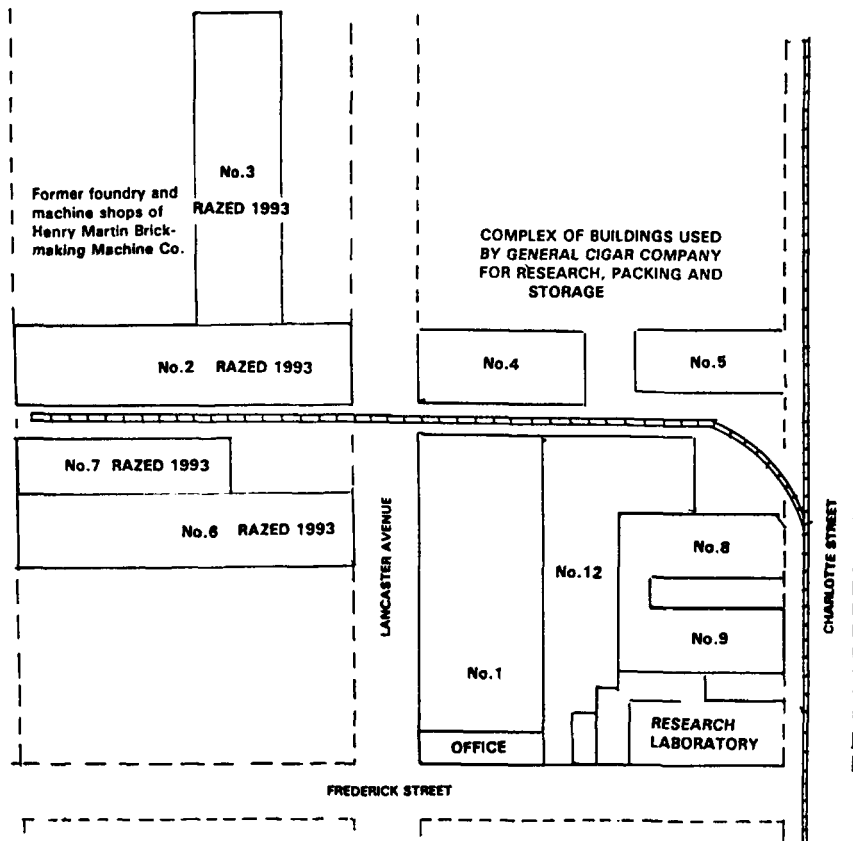
In the early 1900s several men in New York, already involved in the cigar industry, got together and formed a single company to produce and market their cigars more efficiently. They called the company United Cigar Manufacturers. In 1917 or 1918, the name was changed to General Cigar Company.

At that time, cigars were being hand rolled at several locations in Lancaster County for United Cigar Manufacturers and, presumably, this was continued after the name was changed to General Cigar Company. By the early 1930's, however, General Cigar had centralized their cigar making in Lancaster at a plant in Ephrata; and toward the end of the 1930s, discontinued cigar making in Lancaster County. However, they remained active in buying Lancaster County's Pennsylvania tobacco and processing it to be used in the filler for their cigars.

A cigar has three basic components—the filler which is the innermost portion, the binder to hold the filler together, and the wrapper which is the outermost part. When General Cigar first came to Lancaster, Pennsylvania tobacco was used as a major component in the filler for many brands of domestic cigars. Binder tobacco was grown mostly in Wisconsin and Connecticut. Wrapper tobacco came from Connecticut and Florida, although some was imported from the Dutch East Indies.

General Cigar maintained a Leaf Department in the building at the corner of Frederick Street and Lancaster Avenue. This department (with George Carmine supervising until his retirement and eventual succession by Stanford Goldstoff) was responsible for the purchase of appropriate tobacco from Lancaster County farmers. The buyers visited tobacco farmers, inspecting the crops as they grew in the fields and as they were harvested and hung in the

barns to cure. Eventually offers were made to buy and contracts were signed. When the tobacco was sufficiently cured, the farmer took it from the barn, stripped it from the stalks, packed it into paper-covered bales, and delivered it to one of General Cigar's warehouses. At various times General Cigar had tobacco warehouses in Lancaster at several sites on Charlotte Street, on Elm Street, on Frederick Street, and Lancaster Avenue, in Salunga, Florin, Landisville,



Millersville, Blue Ball, Quarryville, and most likely in other county towns.

The growing and harvesting of Pennsylvania tobacco is very labor intensive. It was probably more so in the first half of this century because its use in cigars required certain handling that is no longer necessary, since now Pennsylvania tobacco is used almost exclusively in smokeless tobacco products. I grew up on a farm in the 1930s, and I remember distinctly each step. First the steam traction engine lumbered around early in spring to sterilize the tobacco seed bed which was simply a small plot of ground surrounded

by boards about 12 inches high. The tobacco seeds were sown and the bed was covered with muslin. When the plants pushed up against the cloth and all danger of frost was past, the muslin was removed and the plants were carefully plucked from the bed—only the largest ones at first, thus permitting the smaller ones to develop.

The tobacco planter was a horse-drawn contraption with a large drum to hold water located just behind the driver's seat; beyond the drum were two more seats very low to the ground. Two people sat on these seats, each holding a great bundle of tobacco plants in her lap on a piece of canvas. Between these seats was a metal arrangement that provided a spurt of water from the drum and then drew soil up around the spot. The trick was to get the tobacco plant in the right place to receive the water and to hold the plant upright until the soil was pushed around it; and to do this over and over, back and forth across the field.

When the tobacco plants were all in, fingers were crossed with the hope for rain and sun in appropriate amounts. After the plants were well established came the hoeing. The soil was loosened around the plant and the weeds chopped out—and it was done plant by plant, row by row through the whole field. When the field was finished, it was time to start over on the first plant.

When the tobacco plants were large enough to contend with the weeds themselves, they started to produce flowers. These had to be removed (except for a few always saved to produce next year's seed), for the aim was to grow tobacco leaves, not flowers. This chore was called topping and was followed by suckering. During both tasks hands got very black and sticky with the gummy sap exuded by the tobacco plant. It was unpleasant, but not nearly as unpleasant as picking off the great green tobacco worms that fed on the leaves. My boy cousins would pinch them in half and drop them. I couldn't bring myself to do that so I dropped them and stepped on them. When they burst open, green goo oozed out.

All summer long the plants were vulnerable to storms with high winds that could damage the leaves or hail that could make holes in them, yet rain was still essential to the growing plants. In the fall there was always the risk of a killing frost before the tobacco plants reached full maturity and could be harvested.

The harvest started with cutting each plant at ground level with long-handled shears. The plants were left where they fell long enough to wilt so the leaves would be less susceptible to damage from subsequent handling. Then the stalks were threaded onto a tobacco lath over a metal spear fit onto the end which could be removed when the lath was full. The spear was then placed on the next lath. The lath of tobacco stalks was loaded on a wagon which had a frame just wide enough to receive the lath and high enough from the wagon bed to permit the tobacco stalks to hang free. The laths of tobacco

were transferred to the tobacco barn and suspended in a like manner on frames starting up close to the roof, where they were permitted to cure until winter.

With winter came tobacco stripping. The laths of tobacco were placed in a cellar with a dirt floor so that the damp atmosphere could soften the leaves. The leaves were then removed from the stalks, tied into "hands" and packed lengthwise into a large wooden box which had been lined first with several lengths of binder twine and then with brown paper. When the box was full, a wooden press was applied and the brown paper secured with the binder twine into a bale. The bale was removed and stored and the process continued until the crop was all stripped and baled. Sometimes this would not be finished until well into February. The crop was now ready to be delivered to the designated warehouse of the buyer. At General Cigar, this incoming tobacco was sorted according to grades and sizes and repacked in wooden crates always with the leaves uniformly oriented, and stored in unheated warehouses for the first part of the fermentation process, which was called the natural sweat. The tobacco cases remained in such storage for a minimum time of one year, i.e., a freeze and a thaw. After a year, or longer depending on manufacturing needs and how well the natural sweat had advanced, the cases were opened and the tobacco hands removed and dipped in water, drained and repacked in the cases. They were then placed in heated rooms of high humidity for the "resweat" part of fermentation. Each case would be opened from four to eight times at appropriate intervals, the tobacco unpacked, shaken (aerated), and repacked. All the handling of tobacco cases was performed by a group of employees referred to as "The Bull Gang."

The resweat process was carried out under the supervision of different managers over the years (the last two being David Walnek and Alfred Sulzberger) in a building adjoining the Leaf Department on Frederick Street which was called Frederick Branch, or more familiarly "The Sweat Plant."

The next step in processing of Pennsylvania tobacco was called stripping (a different process from what the farmer called stripping) where the mid-rib of the leaf was removed by hand. This was performed at the plant in Ephrata, or it also may have been stripped at one of the cigar factories which, at various times, were located in Kingston, Forty Fort, Wilkes Barre, Nanticoke, Mt. Carmel, and Allentown in Pennsylvania; and in New Jersey, Kentucky, and Illinois. Later, cigars were also produced in Philipsburg, Pennsylvania, in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica.

During processing and cigar manufacturing, it was always necessary to keep the filler leaves uniformly oriented for they were rolled to form the filler and if a part of the leaf became crosswise in the cigar the draw of that cigar would be obstructed.

It is obvious that processing of filler tobacco required many man-hours (this in addition to those expended by the farmer). The processing of binder and wrapper tobaccos, although slightly different, was also arduous. These

processes usually were performed in Wisconsin and Connecticut respectively, but for a time binder tobacco was processed at Elm Street and at Chester Branch on South Lime and Chester Streets in Lancaster.

In spite of careful handling during processing and cigar manufacture, tobacco leaves were broken; the resulting pieces were called byproducts or scrap or, if very small, "fines." In an effort to recover some of this loss, General Cigar started to manufacture a chewing tobacco at the Ephrata plant sometime in the 1940s. The product was called "Sun Rich." It was not a success in the marketplace and was discontinued in a few years. Robert Burns Cigarillos, manufactured in Allentown, were the first General Cigar product to use these byproducts as filler, starting in the mid-1940s. It was called short filler, as opposed to long filler, which used whole leaves. Today, only the more expensive mostly "handmade" cigars use long fillers.

Sometime in 1939 or 1940, Bernhard G. Meyer, then President of General Cigar, met in Cuba with Dr. Walter Frankenburg, who was awaiting re-entry as a permanent resident into the United States from Germany. Dr. Frankenburg was a physical chemist, highly regarded in Germany in his specialized field of catalysis. As a result of this meeting he was hired as a consultant by General Cigar to study the chemistry for fermenting Pennsylvania tobacco. For the next several years he spent time in Lancaster becoming familiar with the fermenting processes while also consulting both at Johns Hopkins University and for the petroleum industry.

In 1943, General Cigar hired Dr. Frankenburg full time to study the chemistry of Pennsylvania tobacco, and he moved to Lancaster County, settling in Millersville. Thus, General Cigar instituted the first industrial research department for cigar tobacco, which they located in the building at Lancaster Avenue and Frederick Street. Bernhard Meyer remained very supportive of scientific research as did Julius Strauss, who succeeded him as president of General Cigar Company.

Frankenburg's first project was to study the chemical changes taking place in tobacco as it fermented. To aid in this research, Alfred M. Gottscho was employed. What they found was that fermenting caused tobacco to lose its nicotine content and certain compounds were formed that are also present in the human body, among them niacin and cotinine. One metabolite was oxynicotine which was the subject for Gottscho's master's thesis at Franklin & Marshall College. For those tobaccos whose nicotine content was not sufficiently lowered in fermentation, they found the addition of manganese and iron to the water used in the resweat did the job. This was the first practical application of their research.

With the knowledge of the chemical changes occurring during fermentation, they started to look for ways to reduce both the time and labor required in the fermenting (resweat) process. To eliminate the necessity of shaking tobacco during the resweat, a large iron vacuum tank was used—alternately

pulling and releasing the vacuum and thus flushing the tobacco with air. This procedure replaced the manual operation of repetitively unpacking and shaking the tobacco.

Research was started on a means for using the fines and byproducts by developing a homogenized tobacco sheet to be used as the binder (later called HTL). Patents had been granted as early as the mid-1860s on such ideas, but no practical application had ever been accomplished. When General Cigar's research had developed to the point that a pilot plant was required to actually produce such a sheet, the department moved from Frederick Street to occupy a warehouse known as the Martin House (it and others General Cigar purchased on Charlotte Street were originally owned by Henry Martin's company manufacturing brickmaking machinery), at 602 North Charlotte Street.

By 1950, a pilot plant was set up on the first floor using crude and makeshift equipment and a tobacco sheet to be used as a binder was manufactured. Patents were granted to Frankenburg and Gottscho. Laboratories and offices occupied the second floor. More people were hired—scientists, technicians, office staff; and Raymond Young was transferred from the cigar factory in Allentown to supervise the manufacture of Homogenized Tobacco Leaf (HTL).

In 1952–53, General Cigar invested in full-scale machinery for the production of HTL and a pilot production plant was opened in a warehouse on the 600 block of Lancaster Avenue with Raymond Young in charge. The plant was enlarged to double its capacity and several shifts were run. In 1954–55, a second plant was built in Mahanoy city for the manufacture of HTL. Licenses were eventually sold for the manufacture of HTL to Consolidated Cigar Company and to Bayuk and Tobacco Nuforms in Red Lion, as well as to several companies in Europe.

Dr. Frankenburg was active in the organization of the Tobacco Research Chemist's Conference, an annual meeting of tobacco scientists where papers are read on the most recent advances in the field. He was also instrumental in the creation of a Research Committee of the Cigar Manufacturer's Association. In the late 1940s, he was the first industrial tobacco scientist to receive this organization's Award for Distinguished Scientific Research, an award also presented to Alfred Gottscho in 1973.

Dr. Earl Hess, founder of Lancaster Laboratories, also worked under Frankenburg. After Dr. Frankenburg died in 1955, Hess was in charge of research and Gottscho was in charge of development. Eventually Alfred Gottscho became Director of Research and Development with John B. Fishel in charge of research and Irwin B. Perlis in charge of development.

By the late 1950s a tobacco sheet suitable for use as a wrapper on straight cigars had been developed and a patent was granted to Earl Hess. A pilot plant was set up next to the HTL Plant on Lancaster Avenue under the supervision of Dr. Irwin B. Perlis and a pilot production of Ultra Cigar

Wrapper (UCW) was begun. In 1959-60 a new manufacturing facility was built on Lancaster Avenue just south of the schoolyard at Wharton Elementary School. It was called the Ultra Manufacturing Pilot Unit (UMPU, pronounced "umpoo").

Another wrapper sheet which could be used on shaped cigars was developed at the R & D Center in the early 1960's. This was called Ultra Star and the patent was granted to John Townend. Ultra Star sheet was produced in the pilot plant on Lancaster Avenue and by the mid-1960's three shifts were being run.

In the meantime, the cigar industry was using short filler in more and more cigars and Pennsylvania tobacco was no longer the main tobacco used in cigar filler. The Leaf Department increased its purchase of foreign tobaccos which were used for all components of cigar manufacture. The processing of filler tobacco was a whole new story. After a natural fermentation, it was treated in the vacuum tank, cut and blended. These operations were started at the Sweat Plant on Frederick Street and then continued at Ephrata or the Chester Branch under the supervision of William Krailing.

Using short filler, binder sheet and wrapper sheet, cigar manufacture now could be completely automated. John Dreher at General Cigar's Kingston factory developed much of this machinery for General Cigar and eventually for other cigar manufacturers as well. Some of the early development work on automatic cigar machines was done at the Elm Street location in Lancaster. One of the mechanics working there was Clinton Reidel, who was employed by General Cigar in 1957. Reidel was also a well-known local magician who had traveled extensively with his magic show. During and after his performing years, he invented and produced magic tricks for other performers—a practice he still continues today even though he is well into his eighties. The Elm Street location was eventually sold to St. Joseph's Hospital and the building razed. It is now the site of a parking facility for the hospital.

When the first Surgeon General's Report on cigarettes came out in 1964 there was a great surge in the sale of cigars. General Cigar's facilities in Lancaster were insufficient to meet the demand. Land was purchased on Pitney Road and by the late 1960s processing of filler tobacco was almost fully automated in a new plant there, the Scrap Plant, resulting in the eventual closing of the operations at Frederick Branch, Chester Street and Ephrata. By the early 1970s another plant was completed on Pitney Road for the manufacture of wrapper sheets—the Pitney Road Ultra Plant or PRUP. UMPU on Lancaster Avenue was closed. In the early 1980s HTL manufacture was moved to the Pitney Road location and the plant in Mahanoy city was closed.

General Cigar also had an Engineering Department in Lancaster housed in the building at the corner of Lancaster Avenue and Frederick Streets. Harold Cahn was chief engineer until his retirement, when William Theros became chief engineer. The Engineering Department was responsible for the company's

facilities in all locations including the planning and construction of the plants on Pitney Road.

In the early 1960s Edgar Cullman, whose family was well established in the tobacco industry, became president of General Cigar Company. The shape of the company started to shift. The name was changed to Culbro Corporation and General Cigar became a division of Culbro.

In the 1970s, the Garcia y Vega line of cigars was purchased from Bayuk and production of those brands continued in a Dothan, Alabama factory with components shipped from the plants on Pitney Road and research conducted at the R & D Center on Charlotte Street.

Slowly but inexorably the cigar factories in Pennsylvania and other states were closed; all General Cigar products are now manufactured in Dothan, the Dominican Republic, or Jamaica.

Culbro purchased the Exlax company and ran it for several years before reselling, and the R & D Center in Lancaster did some research for them.

About 1980, Culbro purchased Helme Tobacco Company. This company included Bloch Bros. producing chewing tobacco in Wheeling, West Virginia, Helme Tobacco in Helmetta, New Jersey producing snuff, and Bachman in Reading, Pennsylvania producing pretzels, potato chips and other snack foods. Culbro ran the Snack Foods Division for several years but eventually sold the pretzel part back to Bachman and the rest to Borden.

In 1986, Helme Tobacco Company was sold to American Maize Products of Stamford, Connecticut who had earlier entered the tobacco industry with their acquisition of Swisher Cigar Co. The sale included most of the R & D Center, except several employees and some equipment which were moved to PRUP on Pitney Road. Helme continued to rent the building on Charlotte Street from Culbro until 1989 when the R & D facility was moved to Helmetta, New Jersey and the building was eventually sold, as were the rest of the buildings in the Lancaster Avenue/Frederick Street/Charlotte Street complex once completely occupied by General Cigar Co. The warehouses in Lancaster County were also sold off over the years as the need for Pennsylvania tobacco declined.

In the mid-1980s, Culbro sold the Scrap Plant on Pitney Road to Lancaster Leaf Tobacco Co., who continue to process filler tobacco for the General Cigar Division as well as tobacco for Helme Tobacco and other manufacturers of tobacco products. In the early 1990s, PRUP on Pitney Road was sold to Brown & Williamson, who also continue to make both binder and wrapper sheets for General Cigar. Now the only General Cigar employees left in Lancaster were three people in the Engineering Department and three in research, all of whom were housed in space rented from the new owners of the building at Frederick Street and Lancaster Avenue. By early 1994, these departments were disbanded and General Cigar was completely gone from Lancaster County.

It has been estimated that in the peak years of the 1950s and 1960s, General Cigar employed between 300 and 400 workers in Lancaster County. Today there is none, or very little, if any, Lancaster County tobacco used in their cigars. Helme Tobacco still maintains an office on North Prince Street and warehouses, to buy and store Lancaster County tobacco for use in their smokeless tobacco products.

General Cigar in Lancaster was instrumental through its scientific research in permitting the complete automation of cigar manufacture which makes it possible even today to buy a 5-cent cigar. But with hindsight it becomes clear that this innovative accomplishment was the first step toward the demise of General Cigar Company in Lancaster County.

A Selection of General Cigar brands:

Wm. Penn	Gold Label
Robt. Burns	Macanudo
Tiparillo	Partagas
White Owl	Shakespeare
Garcia y Vega	

A Selection of Helme chewing tobacco brands:

Mail Pouch	Apple Jack
Chattanooga Chew	Silver Cup
Lancaster	Penn Stripped
Country Blend	

A Selection of Helme moist snuff brands:

RedWood	Judd Wintergreen
Judd Natural	Cooper

A Selection of Helme dry snuff brands:

Lorillard	Three Thistles
Square	Tops
Railroad	Society

Jean Maysilles, before retirement, was employed for 25 years at the R & D Center for General Cigar and Helme Tobacco. Since retirement, she has been able to indulge her interest in history by serving on the board of trustees for Old Zion Church, Brickerville and by volunteering at the Lancaster County Historical Society.

The author wishes to thank Alfred M. Gottscho, William Krailing, Clint Reidel, John Townend and Raymond Young for their invaluable help in putting together this history of the rise and fall of General Cigar Company in Lancaster County.