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News

Retired worker reflects on steel

Ex-Lukens employee helped to make structures in 1960s

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By Justin McAneny, Staff Writer

On a sunny day in Coatesville, solid pieces of American history arrived home — 500 tons worth of pieces of history so solid they withstood the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The steel trees, the support structures of the World Trade Center's twin towers, were crafted at the then-Lukens Steel Plant in Coatesville.

Third-generation, retired plant worker William Culclasure, who worked in the mill while the trees were being crafted in the late 1960s, remembers them being made.

"It was just another job," he said. "You didn't think about it at the time."

The men who worked on the trees learned that the structures they made were later used to help support the World Trade Center buildings, when the steel mill received recognition for the work it had done, Culclasure, 64, explained.

"I'd like to think I played a part in it ... working with the steel, but I can't say for sure."

And on Wednesday, those trees were shipped from New York City back to the plant. "I'm glad to see the pieces coming back," Culclasure said while looking at the ground, somberly shaking his head. "But I'm sorry for why they are coming back."

Through the 35 years and eight months that Culclasure worked at the steel mill — he retired September 1, 2000 — his co-workers became close friends and his family was his co-workers. Two of his sons worked there too. And on Wednesday, it was a reunion for him.

Culclasure said he saw grandchildren and great-grandchildren of people he worked with in the mill. He said he tells those children to ask their parents and grandparents what it was like working there, to listen to their stories, like his.

Working at Lukens in the '60s, Culclasure saw segregation at the mill end. The locker rooms were still segregated when he first started working there. One day Culclasure wanted to see what the difference was between the locker rooms for black workers and white workers. So he walked in. One white co-worker protested, telling him he couldn't be there. He ignored that person and kept going. Another white co-worker didn't say a word as he walked through. And he found what he was looking for: "There was no difference," Culclasure said.

He then went on to talk about Sept. 11, 2001. Culclasure said he watched the attacks on TV. Later he said he was told that someone had said, "Lukens steel was the only steel left standing." As sad and tragic as the day was, "I believe we took pride in our work with them," Culclasure said.

Talking about working at the mill, sharing how his grandfather, Sheppard Culclasure, died working in the plant in the '40s, thinking about Sept. 11, 2001, and why those steel trees were returning to Coatesville brought tears to Culclasure's eyes. "It's a

good feeling," he said. "But it brings back a lot of memories."

He is quick to point out that bringing that steel back to where it came from is far better than seeing it being turned into scrap or being shipped out of the country.

"I'm glad to see the trees come back. I'd like to see the buildings still there," Culclasure said. "I'd like to see the lives still be there. But a lot of blood and sweat went into making those trees."

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