

JOHN G. PEW

A Brief Sketch of Our President, Compiled by the Editor

In 1886 the Peoples Natural Gas Company of Pittsburgh hired a new pipefitter's helper, a lad of 16 who had followed his brother to the big city from their humble family home in Mercer, Pa. No one could know that this shy, homesick boy was to become that Company's President, and later would preside over the world's largest shipyard; even John Glenn Pew himself doubtless had no such visions.

So began the career of the man we respect and esteem as the guiding genius of our great Sun Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, the man who has been our leader for the past 23 years, has carried us through in good times and bad, has inspired the many special benefits we enjoy today. But perhaps the best place to begin this brief account of our president is not with Sun Ship, nor even the Peoples Natural Gas Co., but back at Mercer in the year 1870.

Many years before that Mr. Pew's great grandfather, also named John, had been one of the first 11 settlers in Mercer, all of whom received land grants from the government as part of a plan to encourage development of what was then the western frontier. John's grandson, Thomas, was a resident of Mercer when John G. Pew was born, three-quarters of an hour after his twin brother, James Edgar,



In this family homestead in Mercer, Pa. John G. Pew was born, Sept. 27, 1870.



An early photograph of John G. Pew.

on Sept. 27, 1870. This event occurred on his grandfather's 70th birthday. Here the family lived until 1879 when they moved to Pinkerton in Somerset County. Mr. Pew's father, along with a group of other men from Mercer, had organized a lumber company there. The move proved an unfortunate one, for two years later his father met a violent death as a result of being struck by a falling tree. Mrs. Thomas Pew then returned with her family to Mercer and was still living there when her son John left for Pittsburgh in 1886.

Though homesick and shy, as his brother, J. Edgar describes him, young John must have made a good "devil", for after two years he became boss of a "gang" which then consisted of a pipefitter and one helper. Natural gas is still an important fuel in the Pittsburgh district, but in the eighties it was also used for illumination. The Peoples Natural Gas Co. was of major importance to the public, and John took his duties earnestly. His will to get ahead is reflected in his struggle for an education. Having left school at the age of 16, he embarked on a self-



"The good old days" in the office of the Peoples Natural Gas Company about 1905, when Mr. Pew was the vice president and general manager.

training program by taking courses in drafting and engineering subjects at night for the next 14 years. It is not surprising, therefore, to find him steadily advancing through the company as his knowledge increased until in 1900 he became superintendent of the Peoples Natural Gas Co. Forbes Street shop. Four years later when the company was purchased by the Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey Mr. Pew was made general manager and Vice President, and in 1908 upon the death of the president, Mr. J. Strong, he was chosen president. Thus was reached the first great milestone in his career.

There are two steps in exploring the life of a successful man. One is to gather his vital statistics, list the steps in his education, the jobs he held, the organizations he joined, the accomplishments of his business or professional career. These facts are needed to make any biography complete, but it would be dull and lifeless without first-hand accounts from those who "knew him when".

One of these is his brother-in-law, Clyde Weitzel, who tells us this story which foreshadowed Mr. Pew's resourcefulness in other fields. "I remember," said Mr. Weitzel, "when John was a young fellow, courting my sister Eva, and wanted to see her every night, though my mother considered this too much and insisted that one night be left open each week. But John was not to be outsmarted, and would pick that evening to stop by the house and ask me to ride with him. Then, while I was making up my mind, he would have a chance to talk with Eva." The courtship was evidently successful, for Mr. Pew and Miss Eva Weitzel were married in November, 1896 at the bride's home in Wilksburg, a suburb of Pittsburgh.

Mr. and Mrs. Pew had eleven children, eight of whom are living; they are the grandparents of twenty children, the eldest of whom is seventeen and the youngest less than a year old.

Many of the incidents recalled by Mr. Pew's former associates in the Peoples Natural Gas Company reflect his consideration for others. Lee Fleming remembers a Frank O'Brien who "was the kind that would raise Cain on payday. One time when Magistrate McKendy had sentenced O'Brien to 30 days, Mr. Pew heard about it and persuaded the judge to turn O'Brien loose in his care. I always remembered that Mr. Pew believed in giving every man a second chance." Mr. Fleming also tells about a gang of Italians digging a ditch for a pipeline. In the hopes of speeding them up a little the foreman said, "Hurry up boys, here comes Mr. Pew," whereupon one of the group climbed out of the ditch and began to look for him. When asked why, he replied, "Mr. Pew, he always buy dinner when we work late." When a house was blown up by an explosion in Swissvale Mr. Pew spent five days on the job with the men who were changing the meters. "And," adds Mr. Fleming, "he always called at the hospital to see employees."

"Mr. Pew's men always meant more to him than business," says John Sullivan, a retired employee of Peoples Gas. "When he was vice-president he handed me a letter, saying it must be on the next train out of Pittsburgh. It was mid-winter, and as I started out the door he asked where my coat was. When I told him I had left it in the locker, he told me to take time to get it, since I was more valuable



During Mr. Pew's administration of the Gas Company, the old Forbes Street shop was replaced with this modern structure.



This photograph was taken on one of the trips made by Mr. Pew and his associates in search of new gas wells.

than the letter." Sullivan goes on to say that Mr. Pew always had an interest in his employees' families, and any man was welcome to bring his troubles to him at any time.

Oldtimers on the Pittsburgh Police force recall that the door at the Forbes Street shop was always kept open in the winter so they could stop in to get warm.

Mr. Pew's devotion to his Church and its principles stands out in the memory of Adam Tomer, who worked under him at Peoples Gas. "Though working day and night," said Mr. Tomer, "John never missed attending the Third United Presbyterian Church at Squirrel Hill, where he was a member. I recall that he was very broken up by the death of the minister, Robert Miller." Clyde Weitzel tells us that in his younger days John was fond of a hymn called "Tidings and Comfort and Joy," but his sincerity was better thought of than his voice, and he once had the Church vestrymen rolling in the aisles with laughter when he sang it.

Ed Winfield, Mr. Pew's former chauffeur, was once inveigled into going to a prayer meeting with him. It seems Mr. Pew told Ed that his wife wanted to go, and to keep peace in the family he had better

go along, too. Ed consented on this basis, and before he could talk it over with his wife, Mr. Pew paid her a visit and told her the same thing about Ed. So the congregation that evening was swelled by two reluctant worshippers.

His friends in Wilkinsburg recall that at Christmas time young John enjoyed dressing up as Santa Claus, and visiting the neighbors' children.

Christy Payne, secretary and attorney of the Peoples Gas Co., relates this story about the lighter side of Mr. Pew: "During a train ride from Pittsburgh to Columbus he and his three traveling companions, including myself, were passing the time playing cards with matches for chips. At noon we took time out to have lunch in the diner, and on the way back to our car I stopped to talk with a saintly elder in the Sewickly Church who was with a group of churchmen on their way to a convention. John G., the old devil, soon grew impatient and bribed the porter to go back to me and yell: 'Come on back here and finish your poker game.' He would have been tickled pink to have had me excommunicated, as I deserved for being in such company."

"On another occasion," continues Mr. Payne, "we were invited to spend a weekend with Altoona friends fishing for trout at a mountain club not far from that city. As a good Presbyterian elder I refused to play poker Saturday night and took Elder Pew off to bed at midnight so he wouldn't be breaking the Sabbath day. However, the next morning he caught me heading for the stream, and ignorant of the Pennsylvania prohibition against Sunday fishing, was hell-bent for a good time—and a good fine. How he razzed me!"

But many of the little jokes in those days were directed at Mr. Pew rather than by him. He was well-known for his strict regard for temperance,



A typical pumping station on a gas pipe line in West Virginia

and friends would make a point of tripping him up. John Sullivan says one of his favorite expressions was "Any man who drinks is crazy," and tells about the day Mr. Pew, attacked with cramps, sent John out for some medicine. Instead of going to the drug store, however, he stopped at a saloon and returned with some whiskey. Mr. Pew, not realizing what it was, took a drink and shortly afterwards remarked how good the medicine was. Sullivan was very much amused, and triumphantly told what he had bought, but Mr. Pew still claimed it was technically medicine.

Sullivan says that on another occasion Mr. Pew was given a drink without his knowledge, when he was lying unconscious in a cornfield as a result of a serious accident in Kentucky. The accident had occurred when a mountain road gave way and the car rolled over and over down the mountainside. Mr. Pew had all his ribs broken, a lung punctured, and his heart twisted. After a long slow trip to the hospital the doctor discovered that he had a fractured shoulder as a result of a fall from a horse sometime before.

On two occasions Mr. Pew was tricked into providing free dinners for his companions. One of these, Lee Fleming, had been told to buy an American flag for the plant, and since the only one available had 45 stars, he bought that. Ace Davis, realizing that, said to Mr. Pew: "I never thought I'd see the day when you would recognize only 45 states." Mr. Pew claimed his company would never raise that kind of flag, and bet \$25.00 that theirs had the full 48. The result was that Lee Fleming, Ace Davis, Fred Lockbaum and Frank Hadley all had dinner at Mr. Pew's expense.

On a Sunday night Mr. Pew was preparing to show some movies of a pipeline into Wilkinsburg. A friend of his, John B. Corrin, got a policeman to



Mr. Pew is seated at the right side of the table, second from the far end, in this photograph taken at one of the banquets of the Peoples Gas Co.

come in and exact a fee of \$25.00 in lieu of a license which he falsely claimed was required. Corrin later treated the crowd to dinner with the \$25.00.

But emphasis on hard work, and much of it, is characteristic of reports from all Mr. Pew's associates. In addition to the Peoples Gas Company he was interested in several producing companies in West Virginia and Ohio and in constructing pipe lines to supply the Pittsburgh district. His driver recalls that when they were drilling the first deep well between MacDonald and Imperial, West Virginia, Mr. Pew after working all day would visit the district branches until two in the morning, then go out to see how the well was coming along. Sometimes he stayed up all night in the company of Captain Barger who was in charge of the drilling. This operation was five years in process.

Christy Payne has this to say of Mr. Pew's leaving the Peoples Gas Company in 1918: "Mr. Pew left us in forlorn distress at his 'desertion.' It is putting it mildly to say that he was beloved in the



Mr. Pew was always fond of horses and driving. This picture was taken while he was on a trip into West Virginia in search of potential gas sources.

office and throughout the organization, and up to the top in New York.”

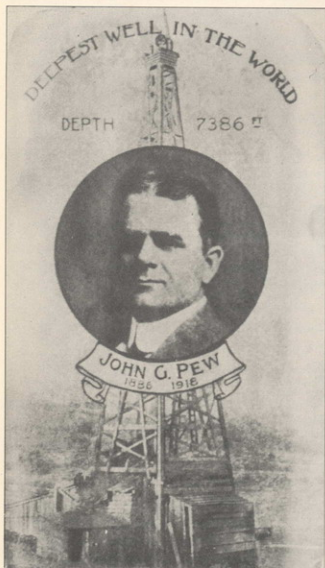
Upon joining Sun Oil Co. in the summer of the same year Mr. Pew's duties were in the executive department, where he had his first business with Sun Ship which had been organized only 2 years before. His work gradually came to concern this branch of the business more and more, until in March, 1919, he assumed full charge, with headquarters in Chester.

His career with our yard is more or less an old story to Sun Ship people, but it may be worthwhile to review the highlights here. During his administration the company has steadily grown in size and importance to American shipping. In 1920 what are



A caricature published in a sketch book of noted Pittsburgh men by W. S. Washburn in 1914. The following verses accompany it:

Here is a man who lights our way
By turning darkest night to day,
Who warms our homes and cooks our meals
And helps to turn our busy wheels.
How cheerless would our existence be
Without this man and such as he.
May all good wishes come to pass
For John G. Pew and Peoples Gas.



This souvenir paper weight was issued in 1918 upon the occasion of Mr. Pew's leaving the Peoples Natural Gas Co.

now Number one and two ways were added, as well as Number eight, making a total of eight shipways in the yard. The first dry dock was built and completed in 1921, and the name was changed to Sun Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company. The Number 2 drydock was purchased and installed in 1926.

The next great period in the company's growth is contemporary history. February, 1941 saw piles driven for the South Yard, the first of the three Maritime Commission units. Two months later the construction of the North Yard was begun, and in



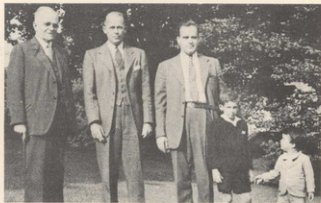
Miss Eva Pew and Mr. and Mrs. John G. Pew and their family in 1920.

March of this year the famous No. 4 Yard was started.

Improvements in our physical plant are Mr. Pew's most obvious accomplishments at Sun Ship. But equally important have been his innovations for the welfare of employees, such as the Mutual Benefit Association formed in his first year here. When he read of a Sun Ship employee being buried in Potter's field, he decided then and there to do something about this for the future. The Life Insurance and Employees' Hospitalization plans were established at his instigation, and his special attention to employees in trouble highlights the recollections of Sun Ship men.

But our President's concern for the welfare of his fellowmen has not been limited to employees. He founded and is still president of the Community Fund of Chester, an organization practically a model in the field of social and charitable aid. No one in this vicinity need be reminded of its important place in our society.

OUR YARD has had occasion to salute many notable men in the past year, both within and out of the shipyard, but it is with the greatest love and respect that at this Christmas season we take off our hats to honor the man who has done most for and means most to us Sun Ship workers. We will not presume to congratulate Mr. Pew on his distinguished career; rather do we congratulate ourselves on being guided by his leadership.



Five John Pews, representing three generations, lined up for a photograph in 1938.