

Elizabeth fire claims a storied building

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ELIZABETH — Forty years ago, the buttery aroma of warm cookie dough wafted through the streets of Elizabeth, luring children to the sprawling industrial bakery on Newark Avenue.

This week, as the blackened hulk of the former Burry Biscuit factory continued to burn, a small stream of visitors came to gaze upon the 2 million-square-foot structure as if on some Proustian pilgrimage.

The nearly quarter-mile-long building, most recently a warehouse for more than a dozen companies, caught fire on Wednesday, sending billowing clouds of black acrid smoke throughout Elizabeth that stung eyes and reddened throats. But it didn't stop the knot of onlookers, some with cameras in their hands, from reminiscing.

Scott Stone drove from Bridgewater with his son Neil for a look. Stone was a general manager for the bakery for 18 years, until it closed in 2006. Burry's was most famous for its Girl Scout cookies, but it also made the chocolate wafers for ice cream sandwiches and other products for Quaker Oats when Burry became one of its divisions in 1938.

"There's a lot of history here," Stone said.

In fact, from cars to cookies, it boasted a number of important landmark businesses in its 94-year history. The last was probably Burry's.

More than 900 packers, bakers, testers and inspectors, among others, worked in shifts around the clock to make 120 million pounds of cookies and biscuits a year, Stone said. The building was so massive a road was cut through the middle of it so the trucks could reach the different loading docks.

When Stone heard the news about the fire, his first reaction was pretty basic.

"We had to get down here and feel it," he said.

Margaret Kelly, 67, joined a group of about 50 onlookers watching the blaze on Thursday. Her entire family — parents, two sisters and her husband — worked for Burry Biscuits.



Courtesy of the Elizabeth Library

An undated aerial of the Durant Motor Company, which closed its doors on December 1, 1933. Located on Newark Avenue in Elizabeth the site was first opened in 1917 when Duisenberg Motors build engines for the military vehicles.

"If my husband were alive to see this he'd cry," Kelly said. "This place might look worn down and beat up, but it was an institution in Elizabeth."

Kelly worked in the cookie factory's lab, checking the treats for imperfections or foreign objects.

"We'd use a magnet, run it over the boxes, and if it beeped you knew there was something that wasn't supposed to be in there," she said. "I was the last line of defense against metal or glass or anything dangerous."

"It's a real part of the community," she said.

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Saturday, Elizabeth Mayor Chris Bollwage said the fire was still burning but contained. He doesn't expect the flames to be extinguished until at least Tuesday, when special demolition equipment is expected to arrive to help firefighters access the remnants of the blaze.

BEFORE THE BAKERY

The building in Elizabeth goes back much further than even Burry Biscuits. Throughout most of the 20th century, the city hummed with factories day and night, chief among them Singer Sewing and Burry's. But before Burry's, the plant housed various other companies, including Terry Candy, Vernon's Paper and the Elastic Stop Nut Corp.

The manufacturing facility was built in 1917 out of national necessity when Duesenberg Motors secured U.S. government contracts to build engines for the Army and Navy in World War I. At the time, Duesenberg Racing had just finished second in the Indianapolis 500, according to a history compiled by the Keith Duesenberg & Leik Motorsports company, but one of the main engines the Elizabeth factory built was the Liberty V-12, the first mass-produced airplane engine in the world.

Brothers Frederick and Augustus Duesenberg, born in Germany, resided just two blocks from the factory on Kilsyth Road. With the Armistice in 1918, they soon sold the building to auto manufacturer John Willys, who expanded the plant. When the 1920 recession hit, the Willys Corp.'s assets were sold at auction to William C. Durant, one of the founders of General Motors, who expanded the site to 40 acres and built New Jersey's first assembly line.

"It made sense to build cars here because all the elements were local," said Ken Ward, a trustee and vice president of Elizabeth's Historical Society. "It was next to a railroad, port. Everything's there; it's a fantastic location from an industrial standpoint."

Throughout the 1920s, more than 500 cars rumbled off the assembly line at the Elizabeth plant, according to a history of the company. Even so, there was often a backlog of orders, especially for the popular Durant Star, a five-passenger, four-cylinder automobile that retailed for \$348, which at the time was cheaper than Ford's Model T.

By 1933, however, Durant was in bankruptcy and part of the plant was sold to Big Bear Food, one of the earliest supermarkets, which included in its Elizabeth building a soda fountain and hardware and paint departments, in addition to groceries.

A REALLY SUPER MARKET

According to a history of the pork industry, Elizabeth's Big Bear Super Market was the first large, cut-rate self-service grocery store in the United States and offered shoppers pork chops at its "Price Crusher" rate of 10 cents a pound — half that of its competitors.

In its first three days of operation, the Big Bear supermarket in the cavernous building, sold more than \$3,100 worth of goods, the same amount an A&P store sold in about six months, said historian Richard Tedlow in his book, "New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America."

The hulking warehouse was a fixture for Arthur Lloyd's family. The 81-year-old Union resident's mother worked as a bookkeeper for Durant Motors in the 1920s.

He remembers when the building was sold and became Big Bear supermarket. He marvelled at its size when he and his parents shopped there.

"There was a great big sign out front in the shape of a bear.

It was quite the thing at the time," Lloyd said. "(Inside) there was just stall after stall after stall. There was nothing like it in those days."

Eventually, however, Big Bear folded, too, which began Burry's long run on the now famous Elizabeth block. That's why V. Zawilla had her camera in hand on Friday when the lifelong Elizabeth resident visited the site of the fire for reasons of nostalgia.

"My brother worked here for 20 years," she said. "This is a big landmark."

That's why Joe Gonder, who lives in Woodbridge, came, too. He worked here years ago, and when he saw the smoke from his workplace in Rahway on Thursday, he decided, like Stone and Zawilla and Kelly, that he needed to see for himself the destruction of a piece of his personal history. As Stone and Gonder walked along Newark Avenue, they ran into Jose A. Negron, who lives across the street from the warehouse. He worked at Burry for 22 years.

Often after their shifts were over, Burry employees would step across the street to Nugent's Tavern, according to local history records, just as workers in the Duesenberg and Durant factories had done before them. During Prohibition, however, the tavern was known as the Highway restaurant and was the only place where workers could get a hot, home-cooked meal after work. With the repeal of Prohibition, the



Photo by Robert Eberle

A worker at the Burry-Lu Comppanyin Elizabeth, circa 1983.

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restaurant became a bar, which it remains to this day.

As Stone and his son watched the firefighters punch large holes in the factory's cement walls, Barbara Rebelo, who lives around the corner from the building, passed by. She had decided to take a walk with her children, Erica, 8, and Jonathan, 3, just to check on the fire.

Burry was more like a town than a factory back when Rebelo was growing up. The company fielded darts, bowling, basketball and softball teams. In fact, the Burry Biscuit basketball team was one of the top-ranked industrial league teams in the Northeast, according to a history of Elizabeth.

But for more than 50 years, the children of the neighborhood knew the big butterscotch-colored building across the street for just one thing, said Rebelo:

"It would smell so good."

Staff writers Peggy McGlone, Stephen Stirling and Julia Terruso contributed to this report.

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