

2019 WINTER NEWSLETTER



John Franklin Wolf was born in Philadelphia on January 23, 1837. When he grew up, he chose civil engineering for a profession and worked as city engineer there. He moved to Irwin in 1865, accepting the position of Engineer with the Penn Gas Coal Company. He remained in that job until 1884 when he was promoted to Superintendent.

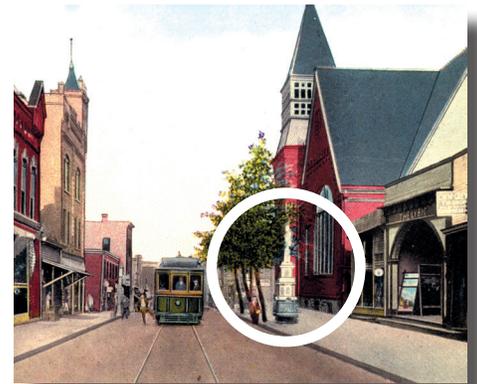
Did You Know?

John Franklin Wolf

Irwin's Forgotten Hometown Hero

by Bob Cupp

In 2005, while looking through some old photos of Irwin, I came across a scene of Main Street with a statue in the background. Looking closer, I could see that it was a life-size statue of a man on some sort of elaborate base. Naturally, my curiosity was aroused. Who was this man? He was, obviously, important enough to have a statue erected in his likeness. Could he have been an early pioneer or, perhaps, the founder of Irwin?



I asked a number of Irwin-area residents, without any success in resolving the mystery. So, I headed for the Norwin Public Library. There, I discovered that I wasn't the first person to have questions about the statue. In 1964, John J. Wilson, Justice of the Peace in nearby Herminie, learned that the statue had been erected in honor of John Franklin Wolf, primarily by miners from Irwin's Penn Gas Coal Company where Wolf was Superintendent. Considering all the ill feelings between miners and coal company management at the beginning of the 20th century, Wilson wondered why miners would erect a statue of a mine superintendent. Wilson sent out letters and contacted people he thought might be able to help him; the responses he received were very enlightening.

A Generous and Kind Man, Respected by the Miners

In spite of the fact that he represented the coal company, Wolf had qualities that made him beloved to the miners. In the late 1880's, the employees of the Penn Gas Coal Company and the Youghioghney Railroad, which was owned by the coal company, established a relief fund for disabled miners. This was unusual in those days; workers compensation wasn't established until 1916. The fund could not have operated without the blessing of the Superintendent. This was typical of the kindness Mr. Wolf showed toward his employees.

He was generous to those in need and was greatly respected by the miners. They knew they could take their problems to Mr. Wolf and he would help

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in any way he could. A son of one of the miners told Wilson that his father wanted to buy a cow, but he didn't have enough money. He borrowed the money from Mr. Wolf and paid it back at the rate of two dollars per pay.

Another descendant told him a story of starving miners' families during a strike; Wolf gave them money out his own pocket to help them buy food.

Penn Gas Coal Company had a band. When the band members needed money for "refreshments," they would play in front of Mr. Wolf's house at 518 Main Street, Irwin. He always made a contribution. One man recalled his father saying that, although there was no union, if any of the men had a grievance, they would take it up with Mr. Wolf when he visited the mine. He was always willing to listen. *"Right was right with Mr. Wolf."*

Wolf was also very active in the community. He was one of the organizers, a Director and Vice President of the First National Bank of Irwin, President of the Irwin Union Cemetery from 1897 until his death, an Irwin Councilman in 1876, and President of the Irwin Water Company.

Irwin Honors John F. Wolf

On May 14, 1900, following a lifetime of good health, John Wolf passed away after suffering a stroke 10 days earlier. The May 15 edition of The Irwin-Standard expressed the sentiments of the community. *"Although occupying the trying position of superintendent of a large coal company employing many hundreds of men, we have never heard from any source anything but the highest expression of respect and commendation for the deceased. His well-balanced judgment, his perfect self-control, his profound sense of justice, and his sincere regard and sympathy for those under him, made him what he was – the model superintendent."*

Now it's becoming clear why a statue was erected in his honor. The whole town of Irwin shut down and turned out for his funeral on May 17, 1900. Looking more like a parade, a band led the procession, playing and marching all the way to Irwin Union Cemetery east of town. It was said to be the biggest funeral Irwin ever had. The miners paraded behind the hearse with their mine lamps burning and wearing their work clothes. The mules and mule drivers came next with their lamps burning. Nothing like it has ever been seen before or since in Irwin.

The next edition of The Irwin-Standard described the funeral: *"The town of Irwin seemed to be represented by nearly all its families, for all were friends of the deceased. The miners and other employees of the Penn Gas Coal Company, and even the Westmoreland Coal Company, testified their regard for the mem-*

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This beautiful statue was erected on Main Street, Irwin, in memory of John F. Wolf by the employees of Penn Gas Coal Co. and citizens of Irwin and vicinity. It was the only statue ever built honoring an Irwin citizen.

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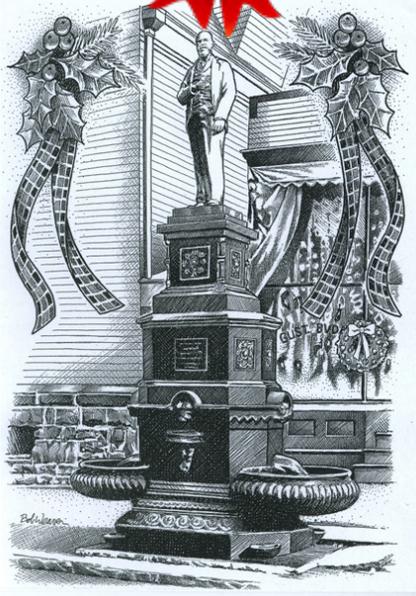


Illustration by Bob Weaver.

ory of the dead superintendent by turning out in a body. It is estimated that fully five hundred employees of the company were present. Four hundred were in line in the procession to the cemetery.”

A Statue was Designed, Built, and Dedicated

Representatives of the Penn Gas Coal Company collected funds to erect a statue with a drinking fountain in honor of Mr. Wolf. A total of 800 employees of the company, citizens and corporations contributed to the fund. The Mott Co. of New York was awarded the contract to design and build the fountain and the Irwin Water Co. agreed to supply free water.

The statue was erected on the east side of Main Street about 50 feet south of Third Street, at the corner of the old Methodist Church, in front of Gust Rudan’s store. A plaque on the front of the fountain read: “Erected in memory of John F. Wolf by the employees of Penn Gas Coal Co. and citizens of Irwin and vicinity.” On each side of the base were watering troughs for horses. Located near the sidewalk were containers where dogs could drink. Near the top and center of the base was a fountain for use by humans.



The John Wolf statue and fountain was intended to supply a never-ending source of water for humans, horses and pets.

The borough dedicated the statue on January 1, 1901, with the event described by the Jeannette News-Dispatch: “The first day of the new century was a gala day at Irwin; it being the occasion for the unveiling of the Wolf memorial fountain. The fountain is a handsome memorial of bronze, 15 feet in height, surmounted by a life statue of the late superintendent, JOHN F. WOLF of the Penn Gas Coal Company. It is expected to supply a never failing stream of water for the use of man and beast and was erected by the miners and other citizens of Irwin to perpetuate the memory of one whom the miners regard as a benefactor.”

“The town observed a genuine holiday in honor of the occasion. The mines were all closed down and every factory and workshop shut their doors to give the workmen a chance to participate in the demonstration. The schools had a holiday and the children took part in the exercise.”

Time Takes Its Toll

As the years passed, the statue gradually lost its sentimental value. When Main Street was widened, the statue was moved to the basement of the borough building. Somewhere in the process of moving and storing it, the fountain portion of the statue was broken. About 1943, after the town obtained the property where Irwin Park is now located, the statue, minus the fountain, was re-installed there beside the flag pole.

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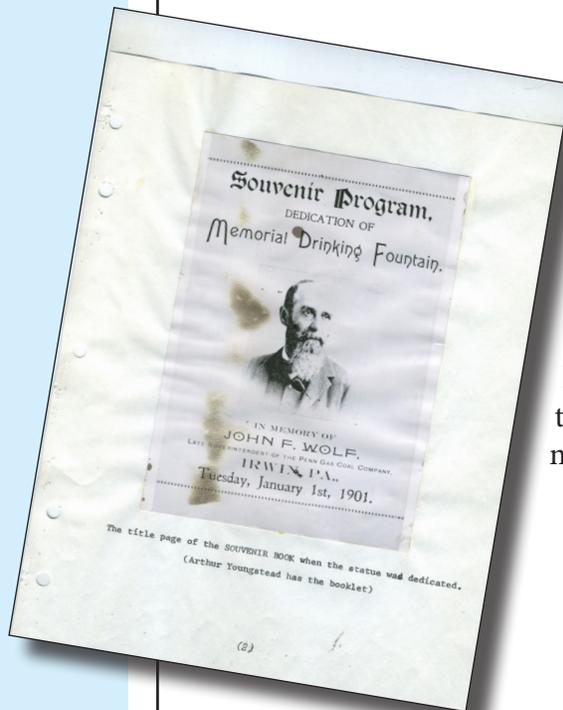
This concrete base of the John Franklin Wolf statue is located at an out-of-the-way spot in Irwin Park. Shoe prints are all that remain of the historic statue.



For years, the statue was painted silver prior to every Memorial Day celebration. When a War Memorial was erected at that location after World War II, the statue was moved nearby, half-hidden and almost forgotten.

One night in 1971, some young men who apparently had too much to drink, toppled the statue and broke it. The pieces were stored by the Street Department with the hope that enough money could be raised to restore it. Unfortunately, due to the high cost of restoring it, that didn't happen and, eventually, when the department moved, the pieces were discarded or scrapped. The head of the statue had disappeared earlier; rumors continue to circulate that the head of Mr. Wolf's statue still exists somewhere in Irwin.

It was the only statue ever built honoring an Irwin citizen. All that remains of this symbol of Irwin's industrial beginning is the statue's concrete base, which was moved to an out-of-the-way spot in Irwin Park.



Wouldn't it be a grand tribute to John Franklin Wolf, as well as the miners who honored him well over a century ago, if the statue could be rebuilt to perpetuate the memory of Irwin's original Hometown Hero?

2019 Annual "Homes for the Holidays" Tour!

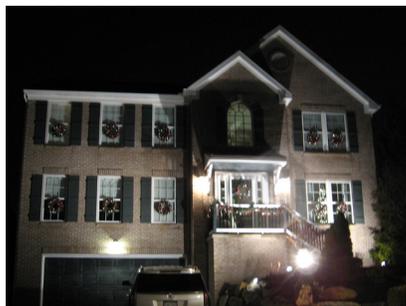


The Norwin Historical Society's Holiday House Tour was held on Saturday, December 7. Tour booklets were provided, which included the seven homes on tour, addresses, directions, a map, and histories and points of interest on each home. As always, we arranged for a "mix" of homes on the tour, with a variety of styles, ages, and architecture.

This is the Historical Society's major source of income for the year, so we're most appreciative of those who provide access to their beautiful homes and to those who participate on the tour.

The popular VIP Shuttle Service made it more convenient for those who preferred to be transported to each home.

If you or someone you know would like to include your home in next year's tour, please email us at info@norwinhistoricalsociety.org.



Many thanks to the house tour committee, the members of the Norwin Historical Society, and friends of the society for volunteering their homes and their services for the evening.

Please consider supporting the Norwin Historical Society!

We continue to preserve our local history, promote the history of the Norwin Community, and embrace the opportunity to educate the Norwin area about the people, places and events that comprise the history of Irwin, North Irwin and North Huntingdon Township.

We are located at 219C Main Street, across the street from the Lamp Theatre in Irwin. Our mailing address is PO Box 623, Irwin, PA 15642 and our email address is info@norwinhistoricalsociety.org.

Name(s): _____

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NORWIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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2019 WINTER NEWSLETTER



*Your gift to the
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helps to preserve our history!*