

George Kummel Last Collier to Work in Wharton Forest

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George Kummel (also Crummel and Kreml), whose grandfather was reportedly a full-blooded Indian born on the Indian Reservation at Brotherton (Indian Mills), was the last collier (charcoal burner) working in the Wharton State Forest.

George set up kilns over the years in the vicinity of Jenkins Neck off County Highway 563, and later in an area just to the east of Godfrey Bridge along the south side of the Washington-Jenkins Road, only a stone's throw east from the West Branch of the Wading River. He worked this area from about 1950 until 1954 when the Wharton lands were purchased by the State of New Jersey. George passed away in 1959 in the 80th year of his age.

Kummel lived in a one-room cabin close-by his workings. The cabin was occupied during "off times". While his coaling was in progress, he spent his time in readily portable "watch cabins".

George moved his pine cuttings by a horse drawn sledge with oak runners and with posts at the four corners. The crude affair probably held about a half cord of pine. The lone horse was stabled next to Kummel's crude home.

There are no records available to indicate how much charcoal he produced, where it was sold or how much he was paid.

Judging from the hundreds of whiskey bottles piled high in back of his shack, it was easy to determine how he spent his spare time or "off season".

On the other hand, it would appear that he was quite industrious. In the approximately 50-acre expanse of his workings, are the remains of literally dozens of his charcoal kilns, the results of approximately only four years of burning.

It is known that George continued to coal on private acreage in the same general area after he was obliged to leave the Wharton Tract in 1954. He was 75 at the time. In 1955, the late Hollis Koster of Philadelphia and Hermann City, conducted an extensive interview with Kummel that appears in the booklet titled *Charcoal Burning in New Jersey From Early Times to the Present* by Robert J. Sim and Harry B. Weiss. The booklet was published by the New Jersey Agricultural Society, Trenton, 1955.

Collier Herbert W. Payne of Whiting spent his entire working-life as a charcoal burner. So did his father and his grandfather. He would probably still be coaling had he not been laid low by a stroke in recent years. Now at age 68, Payne pursues his former vocation in a very reduced scale by constructing charcoal kilns for craft shows and fairs, mainly in Ocean and Monmouth Counties.

When interviewed by the writer and Jack E. Boucher in February, 1963, Payne was producing sufficient charcoal in his "back yard" to provide a comfortable living as indicated by his spotless, tastefully furnished cottage of which he was justifiably proud.

Perhaps Payne's procedure for constructing a charcoal kiln was somewhat unorthodox in that it was different from most, but nevertheless quite efficiently productive.

Instead of beginning his kiln with a center stake, he constructed what he termed a "pig pen" with cross members 2' by 6" and erected between two and three feet high. Six-foot logs began about 2' from the ground and were filled in with kindling and unburned charcoal. Random lengths of wood were added until reaching a height of nearly 12'. During erection, the "pig pen" or chimney, was continued to the top from whence the kiln was fired by ignited pieces of kindling dropped down the chimney.

Payne's kilns were usually 12' tall that took 3½ days to assemble and another day and a half to cover with sod, or floats, and sand. The circumference of the pile was 35' at the crown which was about 2/3 of the way up. The wood in the kiln consisted of 18 cords that took him two weeks to chop. By the time the kiln was completely constructed and burned, a whole month had elapsed from start to finish.

According to Payne, 3 cords of wood would yield 1 ton of charcoal. A cord weighed about 5500 pounds;

thus, 3 cords would weigh $8\frac{1}{4}$ tons. Hence one ton of charcoal required $8\frac{1}{4}$ tons of hardwood.

Twenty years ago, charcoal was bringing \$75 to \$80 per ton. Inasmuch as Payne's kilns usually yielded six tons, if all went well, or a gross income of \$500 from 18 cords of wood.

"The best grades of charcoal," said Payne, "comes from oak, maple, gum and poplar". However, in a strictly convenient and economic move, Mr. Payne would use, and with good results, just about any sizeable wood that he could salvage; from railroad ties to fence posts, to non-creosoted utility poles and heavy debris from construction work.

Payne said that the fire must be strictly controlled — burning would produce nothing but ashes — it must smolder. The kiln must be checked out at least three times daily. Peep-holes were punched through the sod and sand to determine if the fire had reached the outer edges, then recovered.

After making sure that the wood had been "cooked" the sod was removed with the sand falling into the charcoal. Payne always allowed two more days to insure that the fire was just about out. "It is never completely out", according to Payne. "Water must finish the job".

During construction of the kiln, draft holes were punched through the sod close to the bottom of the kiln; two rows about a foot apart — none was placed on the windward side. He claimed that winter was a poor time to burn because strong winds need nearly constant attention to prevent "blow outs". The finished charcoal was about $\frac{2}{3}$ the size of the original wood if dry, and only $\frac{1}{2}$ the size if green wood was used. The charcoal usually broke into convenient sizes when handled with a multi-tined fork.

All of Payne's coal was sold to private buyers mainly from Trenton, Bordentown and Tom's River. A few telephone calls to regular customers, and the word spread that Payne had a "burn". Within a few days he was sold out. The charcoal was used mostly in grills and barbecues. The coal was bagged weighing 4, 12 and 30 pounds. He produced 8 to 10 kilns annually.

In closing our interview, Payne related that a "helper at Colliers' Mill was killed a few years back when he climbed the side of a fired kiln to check the fire down the chimney hole when the kiln caved in".

Charcoal burning is an ancient industry and dates back to pre-3400 B.C. Black pigment from charcoal was used in tomb passageways during the 19th dynasty (1350/1200 B.C.). Charcoal was also a prime factor in the transition from the Stone Age to the Bronze/Iron Age.

It is probably that charcoal was first used in New Jersey in connection with iron-making at the Shrewsbury Furnace that was in operation from 1674 to 1746.

Between 1830/40, cordwood shippers realized that charcoal brought more money than pinewood. Weymouth charcoal was used exclusively during the 1840's by the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia. Shipped by 8-mule team wagons, many of which were lined with zinc or tin to prevent fire. Even then, they all carried water just in case. Much charcoal was carried in ships out the Mullica and Great Egg Harbor Rivers.

Charcoal burners, or colliers, and their families were not held in high regard due largely to the hovel-like, squalid conditions in which they lived. No home could be really called a permanent home. Early burners received $\frac{6}{8}$ cents per bushel. The average kiln of $\frac{8}{10}$ cords of wood yielded $\frac{240}{300}$ bushels of charcoal or about 30 bushels to the cord.