

Baltimore

The Glory Years



In this the first of a three part article explores the growth and glory years of the Bethlehem Steel facilities at Sparrow Point, Maryland and the positive impact that the steel mill had on Baltimore, the city of my youth. Baltimore's fortunes were tied to its manufacturing base and like many other cities, the politicians failed to see the changes on the horizon for manufacturing and therefore didn't make the changes necessary to ensure continued employment for its citizens. Baltimore is one of the most historic cities in America. Its [Fort McHenry](#) is where Francis Scott Key wrote the National Anthem. Baltimore is the birth place of Babe Ruth and Billie Holiday. It is where Johnny Unitas and Alan Ameche carried the Colts to a championship. Where Earl Weaver, in 1971, used the arms of Jim Palmer, Mike Cuellar, Pat Dobson, and Dave McNally (all of whom won 20 games - the best four (4) man rotation of all times) to win the American League East baseball championship, with a record of 101 wins and 57 losses. After sweeping the Athletics 3-0 in the American League Championship Series they fell one (1) game short of winning the World Series, losing to the Pittsburgh Pirates 4-3. Baltimore is where you drank National Bohemian beer and gorged on blue crabs steamed and seasoned with "Old Bay Seasoning". Baltimore native screen writer and director Barry Levinson filmed "Diner," "Tin Men," "Liberty Heights," and "Avalon" in Baltimore. This was my city, Charm City a

blue collar town of close knit neighborhoods, a small town with a big heart, a special place where special people lived and special things happened.

The economic foundation of Baltimore was the [Bethlehem Steel Plant at Sparrows Point](#) in Baltimore County, MD. The plant was founded in 1887 as Maryland Steel and was acquired in 1916 by Bethlehem Ship Building Corporation and renamed. It grew to be the largest steel mill in the world and held that position for 35 years. Bethlehem Steel's flagship operation at Sparrows Point was a powerful symbol of American industrial manufacturing leadership. During the 1960's the plant employed some 30,000 workers who made the highest blue collar salaries in the area. Many of these workers had immigrated to Baltimore from the south because they heard that there were plenty of high paying jobs to be had in Baltimore. To Baltimore Bethlehem Steel was the "Goddess of the Steel Industry" pumping billions of dollars into Baltimore's local economy. The city was on-fire and the middle class was one of the strongest in the country. Bethlehem Steel's business model was a perfect fit for those boom years - "More production with higher steel prices." They were supplying steel for the skyscraper and office development industry up and down the east coast. Raw materials were 85% of operating cost using this model, but they ignored the high operating cost because the money was flowing and sales were good. We now know that these alarmingly high operating costs should have raised eyebrows but

times were so good and orders for steel were coming in at such a rate that no one paid attention to the company's manufacturing inefficiencies. They missed the warning signs and saw no need to improve or change their operating model. The populations of Sparrows Point and Dundalk grew rapidly during the glory days of Bethlehem Steel. My fraternal great grand parents lived in a small enclave just south of Dundalk called Turner Station. Individuals employed at the Point moved to these towns, whites in Dundalk and Sparrows Point, Blacks in Turner Station and a couple of streets in Sparrows Point. The lifestyles of the families who lived in these towns were profoundly shaped by their employment at Bethlehem Steel and as it continued to grow this phenomenon spread to Baltimore City.

Bethlehem Steel had a direct impact on me and my family during those glory days. My fraternal great grandfather immigrated to Maryland from North Carolina to work for Bethlehem Steel. Indeed, a significant portion of the workforce were 'born into' life at the mill; that is, it was a place where multiple generations (grandparents, parents and children) found employment up until the plant closed. Many families had two to three generations working at Bethlehem Steel at any given time.

I lived in a middle class Black neighborhood in East Baltimore where at least 30 to 40 % of the residents worked at Bethlehem Steel or as we called it the "Point." Many of my relatives from all over town worked there. I had aunts, uncles, and cousins who worked at the Point. My brother-in-law, his grandfather and several of his uncles and cousins worked at the Point. One of his Mother's cousins was one of the first Black men selected to work as a crane operator. One of my paternal uncles was also one of the first Blacks to get a job as a crane operator. Crane Operators

were the highest paying blue collar jobs at Bethlehem Steel and up until the late 60's had always been reserved for white workers. Times were good. Anyone who wanted work could find work in Baltimore if not at the Point, than at one of the other large manufactures located in or near the city.

Every payday Friday the city would come alive for the weekend. The high blue collar wages were spent in establishments all over Baltimore City and Baltimore County. Bethlehem Steel employees owned their homes and were the pillars of their neighborhoods. For Baltimore City these were the roaring sixties and seventies!

The tax base was high and the schools were very good with new schools being built all over the city. Athletics were great. The Colts, Orioles, and Bullets were all winning. Wes Unseld, the popular Bullets Captain, teamed up with Bethlehem Steel and Leon Howard started the [Baltimore Neighborhood Basketball League](#) (BNBL) which led to an immediate rivalry with Washington DC. Skip Wise versus Adrian Dantley was a classic game and brought attention to the high level of basketball that was being played in the high schools of both cities.

I have fond memories of the men and even some women standing out on streets that were the routes driven by Bethlehem Steel employees holding out their brown lunch bags or their lunch pails hitching rides to the "Point." Federal Street was the major route to Sparrows Point from East Baltimore. Cars that were not full would stop to pick up the worker and charge them \$1 to \$2 for a ride.

Next - How all of this came tumbling down....the decline of Baltimore City

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