Winding through West Virginia

My visit to an STLE section there involved an interesting chapter in Civil War history and the first-ever CLS holder.

ONE OF THE BENEFITS of being STLE’s President is that I am invited to visit local sections. Houston is my home section, and like most people I’m biased enough to believe that my home section is probably the best. I don’t have anything analytical to support my belief, it is just a feeling.

Recently I received an invitation to attend a meeting of STLE’s Upper Ohio Valley Section in the city of Wheeling, West Virginia, which I gladly accepted. The first step was buying plane tickets, but I didn’t even know where Wheeling was located. Waco or Wichita Falls is not a problem for me, but Wheeling?

It turns out Wheeling is in the northern panhandle of West Virginia in the Ohio River Valley, about 11 miles west of Pennsylvania. In 1861, the western counties of Virginia held several differences from the rest of the state over issues such as slavery and loyalty to the Union. At the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, those western counties seceded from Virginia. On June 20, 1863, West Virginia was admitted into the Union and became a key border state during the Civil War.

Wheeling now has about 30,000 people and must have had a very wealthy past. I say this because of all the amenities in town. There are two beautiful parks, several golf courses, a public pool, a ski slope, a planetarium, a zoo and a year-round hockey rink. For a town with 30,000 people, that is a lot of public infrastructure.

The chairman of the Upper Ohio Valley Section, Tom Lantz, picked me up at my hotel and took me on a tour of the town and surrounding areas. First up we visited Oglebay Park, which was once a summer retreat and a model farm for a well-off fellow named Earl W. Oglebay. He donated his estate to the city in 1926. The park is owned by the city but set up with its own board of directors and endowment. If the city ever uses the estate for anything other than a park, the land goes back to the family. Clever. After the tour, we were off to the city hockey rink, where the meeting was held in one of the public rooms.

The section meeting had about a dozen attendees with a wide variety of backgrounds. These folks were warm and friendly, and I quickly felt welcome. There were people from steel mills, filter companies, lubricant and additive companies and the West Virginia Department of Transportation. All had one thing in common—they are responsible for lubrication.

Also at the meeting was the man who received our first CLS certification 20 years ago. I didn’t know who that individual was the first time I was asked about it, but it turned out to be Wheeling’s very own Tom Lantz, my host and chair of the Upper Ohio Valley Section. Wow. To put that into perspective, my CLS number is 386.

How did the CLS certification, now one of STLE’s signature services, come about? As Tom tells the story, he was a fluid power engineer responsible for hydraulics at a steel mill. He also was responsible for lubrication at the steel mill, but there was no recognized certification for this body of knowledge. He wrote STLE’s president suggesting STLE sponsor this certification. That is how Tom became the father of our CLS program some 20 years ago.

From those humble beginnings was born a program that confers instant credibility on a recipient. Studies also have shown that holding the CLS leads to higher positions and increased pay. Tom is one of a dozen individuals who have held the CLS for 20 years. The program’s success is an ongoing tribute to the great job done by STLE’s CLS Committee.

The kindness of the members and the unique location made my visit to the Upper Ohio River Valley section memorable. I had such a good time that I may need to rethink my bias about the Houston Section. I look forward to more section visits during the time I have remaining as president. Hope to see you soon.

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