Wombley's Clapboard Factory

An Un-Watched Pot Always Boils

It may come up sooner or later… "What about that day the boiler burst in Wombley's clapboard factory?" Often the questioner seems to be seeking trivia information about the what, when, where, and why of Wombley's. They may miss the imagery the phrase conveys, intended to emphasize events leading to, and the results of, an "inevitable explosion".

There is no obvious evidence that the phrase refers to a specific event, or a real lumber mill. In a manner of speaking "Middleton" could be 'any group' and the burst boiler is any damaging internal explosion, be it allusion to steamboat, locomotive or factory, pipeline, personal, or political.

In most any society of creative and motivated individuals, sooner or later "something like that day the boiler burst in Wombley's Clapboard Factory" is likely to occur, hopefully with few casualties and little damage. 'Tis our nature to generate hot, new, bright ideas, blissfully unaware that their glowing brilliance has blinded us to pitfalls down the shadowed path.

In his Fourth Tradition discussion, Bill Wilson compared the "inevitable explosion" of a creative, well-intentioned group (alias "Middleton") and its bright idea, with one of the most spectacular man-made disasters of the era. An event which produced frightening devastation, and dramatic aural and visual effects. One that was a virtual certainty when regulators and safety valves were faulty or bypassed, or guidelines and experience ignored or non-existent. Bill used a boiler explosion for emphasis. And it's a good one, if you examine it closely.

Ok, with Rule 62, in mind, let's do that… .

The What, When, Where, and Why of Wombley's

In more recent decades, economics textbooks and sample business forms often use a generic company called "Acme" (That's the same company which provides materiel for Wile E. (Ethelbert) Coyote's bright ideas, much to his detriment and the Roadrunner's entertainment.

In previous decades, "Acme" was "Wombley". One example was the fictious company "Wombley's Widgets", which is apparently still active in business today… as in this discussion about online communities … and in this OSHA Training Manual on page 27, where Wombley's Widgets, Inc. has some serious deficiencies to correct. Thankfully, I didn't note a defective boiler in the discrepancies.

Now, Bill was a businessman, stock-broker and promoter, and for him to be unfamiliar with the old standby Wombley would be as unlikely as him getting sober on his own. He chose Wombley's as a generic name. Though an anecdote credited to a former "proprietor" of the Wilson House claims a real Wombley's Clapboard Factory once existed near the Wilson home in East Dorset, Vermont, there seems to be no historical proof it existed. Of course, I suppose a boiler incident could have eliminated any physical evidence…

About those clapboards

Clapboards are 4-6 inch width-tapered boards, about 1/2 in. thick at the deep edge, and somewhat fragile and light. It was the American Thing, and very specifically a New England Thing, to build cozy white clapboard houses with white picket fences. Vermont and New England are covered with 'em. And there were lots of mills turning trees into siding… mostly steam or water-wheel powered. Today, clapboards have pretty much been replaced by vinyl and aluminum siding, and picket fences with zoning regulations.

Boilers and Physics and Phun… Oh My!

Early boilers were the nuclear power reactors of the day… controlled bombs. Come to think of it, nuclear power reactors are nothing but super boilers using nuke heat, not fire.

Get a large container (that won't normally burn or melt, please) and fill it with water. Put a fire under it, (or a controlled a-bomb) and after a time, the water bubbles violently and turns to a vapor called Steam. (Unless you observe it… always remember, "A watched pot never boils"… it's important).

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Now, at sea level, that happens at 212 degree Fahrenheit, or shortly after you quit watching. Since your fire is probably hotter that 212 degrees, the extra heat goes away with the steam, the water tries to stay at 212 degrees, and all's well…

Unless…

…the container is sealed. Then the steam gets hotter and hotter, and as it gets hotter, it generates pressure. Pressure raises the boiling temperature, so the water gets superheated and that increases the pressure some more, and the steam gets superheated…and hotter, and more pressure…etc. etc. etc. Especially if you're not watching.

The Phun of the Physics

Granny vs. Papin's Steam Digester

Maybe your Grandma used a pressure cooker on the stove. That's a boiler with a pressure relief plug. If the plug fails to release the extra pressure and Granny doesn't notice, (because she knows it won't boil if she watches) the pressure cooker explodes. Makes a helluva mess in a kitchen.

Moonshine from the Moon

If you're not too concerned about heavy metal poisoning, get yourself an automobile radiator, and hook it to the top of the pressure cooker in place of the relief valve. Instead of water, fill the cooker with mash (beer) and heat it just enough so the alcohol boils but the water doesn't (around 160 degrees F. at sea level). Cool it & condense it, and when it drips out the bottom of the radiator, you have a 'run' with higher alcohol content. Now run it back through. Do several "runs" of this, and you've got white lightening... distilled in a boiler of sorts. 'Shiners gotta watch it closely so the water content won't boil. But 'Shiners also gotta monitor the product by 'bead' and taste testing. Sometimes they also get beady… from tasting runs. The product distracts the producer from the product producer, and every twig pop is now an imagined revenooer lurking behind the trees.

-Shiners in Space- continued-

And what happens when you don't watch a hot pot? Remember? … The pot gets too hot, too fast, pressure goes beyond the radiator's restrictions, and the still (or radiator) explodes, without help from a revenooer's dynamite stick. That, besides making a helluva mess, also wastes a lot of corn… and moonshiners. Now you know why the man in the moon shines.

Kettles in the Kitchen
Whistling teakettles: When they boil, the vapor pressure pushes steam and hot air out through a little whistler, so kettles don't normally blow up…not with a permanent pressure leak that screams for your attention, since it knows you're not watching.

Humans and sub-orbital flight
Lots of homes and buildings were built with "Steam Heat"… pressurized steam, from a boiler in the basement, flows through pipes to devices called "radiators" whose primary purpose is to warm the room. Like some groups we've heard about, however, they often hissed, and popped and 'hammered', lost their primary purpose, developed leaks and blew out. The first steam carpet cleaner and wallpaper remover.

Once in a while, that basement boiler decided it didn't like it downstairs and raised the roof on it's way up and out. Steam heated homes had to trust the boiler's technology (sleep well tonight… remember your water heater is a controlled boiler) but in large buildings superintendents often lived in the basement, so they could watch the boiler if it started to boil too much. When he went to sleep, and quit watching….well, you know.

What's Watt - about steam engines and Wombley's…

It's that power of steam pressure that James Watt put to work about 1769, using ideas he stole from Thomas Newcomen and John Calley who ripped off Thomas Savery who got it from Denis Papin who stole it from Heronas of Alexandria, who got it from some Olympian god. We call it "the steam engine". Turn water into steam, steam moves a piston or turbine that connects to something like a train wheel or boat propeller, or clapboard milling tools.

Presto! The Industrial Revolution! Finally! About 1900 years after Hero's (Heron, Heronas, whoever) steam turbine (which was directly plagiarized by Charles Parsons in 1884 to run an electric generator). Of course, we took time out to build empires and lose them a few times, and we Crusaded a couple of centuries. Then the Dark Ages (when a bright idea was hot enough to burn you at the stake) and plagues and pestilence and famine slowed us down some more.

But Jimmy Watt helped us make up for lost time… in just a couple of centuries, steam power brought railroads, steam ships, mass production, electricity, and we walked on the moon… Made old Jimmy so famous that even today you pay for watts on your electric bill, instead of heroes, at pennies per kilo. Bought any 75 hero light bulbs lately? Or a 1500 papin heater?

Completely changed the world, old JW did. But those steam boilers had one bothersome characteristic. They were rather cumbersome to manage and regulate. "Boilermen" had to keep glancing at them to slow down or stop the boil.

Watt's not cool about a hot idea…

Some of those pressure vessels held back the power of hundreds of pressure cookers and pot stills, and thousands of teakettles. They powered whole factories full of machines or pulled 150 railroad cars across the Rockies, or floated 500 people across the ocean. They also may have put the first men (or women and children) in low earth orbit.

They had this irritating habit of blowing their cool.

Losing their serenity. Violently. Noisily. Visually. Pretty white clouds of superheated steam severely burned anyone they enveloped. Sometimes the heat source might destroy the building, or ship. If anything remained that would burn. Since many were powered by coal, there'd often be a coal dust explosion, an apocalyptic vision of white and black clouds mixing and swirling together with little pieces of boiler, ship, people… in Wombley's case- clapboards.

Sometimes they'd find the boiler's remains a half mile from the explosion.

The clapboards at Wombley's would have become so many shreds, blown to the winds in a humongous splintery snowstorm. It would have been spectacular. Those lucky clapboards not atomized would have floated and flipped and soared through the air like confetti… Then the rapidly cooling steam and debris would have settled… like the air in a mine after a coaldust explosion; wet, and clammy and dusty with coal and atomized clapboard, … not a life supporting environment. Chokedamp.

Watt's cool about the aftermath…

As Bill writes, when that boiler fallout settled and cleared, wonderful things happened. Most noticeably, stronger safeguards (in our case, the Twelve Traditions) and more experienced "boilermen" (our Old-Timers) who'll pass the experience down so it never recurs. And Rule 62.

The "Wombley" lesson says "A watched pot never boils"… a close eye on the Traditions just might prevent a hot bright idea from causing an explosion. That's what all good boilermen do. Under the precepts called Traditions, the Primary Purpose (The Message of Recovery) is protected by the watchful eye of the experienced boilermen, (our Old-Timers) always monitoring the gauges and regulators…and each other's bright ideas….

In any event, we learn to practice "Middleton Group #1 Rule #62":

"Don't take yourself too damned seriously."

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Mike S.
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