The Ashton Valve company

The sound of a steam train whistle in the distance can stir your imagination. The Ashton Valve company offered locomotive whistles in sizes up to 48" tall. The beautiful brass gauges in the cab of a locomotive and the safety valves on the engine also could have been manufactured by Ashton Valve. For over 100 years the company was one of the leading manufacturers of railroad related items. One Ashton item was an innovation that saved lives. How? If the engine's boiler happened to build up too much pressure, the Ashton pop safety valve would activate or "pop" and let the excess steam blow off, preventing a possible boiler explosion. We have Henry G. Ashton to thank for that life saving invention.

Henry G. Ashton was born in Norfolk England in 1846. He attended public schools and took courses in mechanical engineering. In 1869 he arrived in Boston Massachusetts with his wife Emma and infant son, Albert. He was first employed by the Hinckley Locomotive works. Soon after, in 1871 he invented his lock up pop safety valve. It was the first effective safety valve to actually work and was an immediate success. He set up shop on Pearl Street Boston with 3 other employees. In 1872 the company secured a contract with the United States navy for safety valves, a contract they held for 76 years. The great Boston fire of 1872 burned their building down out but they persevered and by 1879 they were located at 271 Franklin Street, a location they would occupy for 27 years. The building was 4 stories and business was so strong that in 1900 a fifth floor was added to keep up with the demand. In 1892 they purchased the Boston Steam gage company and began manufacturing steam gauges, a perfect compliment to the various steam related valves they were producing. The gauges were manufactured with the same assurance of quality as the valves were.

After 24 years of managing the company, Henry, the founder of Ashton Valve, died in 1895. His son Albert, who had attended engineering classes at MIT, took over many of the management responsibilities and ran the company for the next 27 years.

Ashton Valve outgrew the Franklin Street building and in 1907 they built a new facility at 161 First Street in East Cambridge. The building was 45,000 square feet and was built at a cost of $67.000. That's $1,797,000 in 2018 dollars. A completely modern building, it had electricity on all floors and modern bathroom facilities. The building still stands today with the Ashton Valve name carved in granite over the front entrance. By this time the company had sales offices all over the world. Ashton products were internationally known for their quality. As their advertisements stated, "higher in first cost but cheapest in the end". The 1920's and 1930's were the peak years and the company employed up to 300 people. Their profits often were in the millions (in today's dollars).

The Railroad division had been the backbone of the company since it's inception in 1871 and was run as a separate entity until the 1950's. They produced separate catalogs for the valves, whistles, and gauges used on trains. Some of the Ashton products produced for the train industry included locomotive muffled and open pop safety valves, steam gauges including the Ashton-Lane-Bourdon locomotive gauge, double spring steam locomotive gauges, duplex steam and heat gauges, air brake gauges, protected dial pressure gauges, air brake recording gauges, wheel press recording gauges, locomotive steam whistles and whistle valves.

With the advent of diesel locomotives, electricity, and gas engines, sales started to drop off in the late 1940's. The peak years were over. In 1948 they merged with Crosby Valve and gauge company and kept the Ashton name alive until sometime in the early 2000's. Today one is liable to see the Ashton Valve name on gauges sold on eBay to collectors and they demand a high price.

So the next time you hear a train whistle in the distance, think of the Ashton Valve company and the steam age they prospered in. It could be an Ashton whistle!