

THIS ISSUE'S INDUSTRY SPOTLIGHT:

PENN BIG BED SLATE COMPANY



Penn Big Bed Slate Co., Inc. president, Pete Papay

Four generations of slate quarrying have honed the craft of slate roofing production into a fine art at Penn Big Bed Slate Company, Inc., near Slatington, Pennsylvania. Here the quarry pits, as deep as 350 feet into the ground, glisten with blue water against a backdrop of rolling green hills in the heart of Pennsylvania farm country.

In the bustling quarry office, Pete Papay, president of the corporation, and Erik Eitner, office manager, field calls and handle customers on a typically busy day. There is a demand for high quality roofing slate, and Penn Big Bed's customers know that Pete is one of the few people who understands the nuances of removing slate rock from the ground, grading it for shingles, and crafting it into the world's finest roofing material. Pete's expertise should come as no surprise — the man first entered the quarry pit at the age of three months!

Pete's grandfather launched his family into the slate business in 1934, when he acquired a 40-acre tract of land in a barter exchange for seven squares of roofing slates. He later added 60 more acres, drawing Pete's father and uncles into the business, which was once called the "Papay Brothers." During the heyday of the industry, there were 129 slate companies in eastern PA. Today's Penn Big Bed Slate Company is one of three remaining roof slate quarries in Pennsylvania. It produces more than just roofing slate, with a product line including structural slate, stepping stones, sills, treads, risers, fire place facings, floor tile, slabs, walks and even slate turkey calls. Also offered are slate tools such as hammers, rippers and cutters.

The term "big bed" is derived from a type of slate — the biggest bed and best quality slate in the quarry, the "big bed" being typically 28-30 feet in length and running miles deep. Penn Big Bed slate quarry has 70 beds; each are different from the other and about 30 of these are suitable for roofing slates, producing black roofing slates ranging from S2 to S1 in quality. Of the 70 beds, 40 are currently being quarried at Penn Big Bed.

Pete Papay explained how, back in the old days, quarrymen didn't properly grade the slate used to produce roofing material from some Pennsylvania quarries and low-quality slates were produced which didn't last long on roofs. This has given Pennsylvania roofing slates a bad name in some circles, but you don't have to go far to see examples of high quality Pennsylvania roofing slate. The "old factory," a barn-like building adjacent to Penn Big Bed's office, dates back to the 1840s, according to Pete, and still has the original Penn Big Bed slates on the roof.

The quarry operators are the ones who choose which quarried slate goes into roofing production and which goes into structural slate — an art now practiced by Pete's 28 year old son, Pete Junior, and cousin, Steve Bandzi. Another cousin, Steven Papay, operates the diamond saw that cuts the slate blocks into manageable sizes.

Truly a family enterprise and a collection of rare artists in today's slate quarrying industry, Penn Big Bed Slate Company is one to contact when you want to talk with real experts. Their mailing address is PO Box 184, Slatington, PA 18080. Their office and quarries are at 8450 Brown Street, Slatington, PA 18080. Or give them a call at 610-767-4601. ☒



Pete Papay, president of the corporation at Penn Big Bed Slate Company, grades and marks a slate block in preparation for cutting with a diamond saw.

