

North Canal Brick Company Factory in area... Respect private property.

Son to Aleksi Garnell, Henry, shares on his 1977 WMPL Heritage line interview: The North Canal Brick Factory began in 1902 and ran for 5 or 6 years. It was on Red Brick Road. Locals invested in the project. One investor was Andrew Johnson from Hancock. Managers were Jacob Ojala, Alex Onkka, and John James.

In 1882 the property was purchased by Opie who had made pottery. Opie sold to Ojala who then sold to the factory investors.

In winter the clay was stockpiled. In summer the bricks were made. The bricks were air-dried. It was not a successful business.

After the brick factory, Andrew Johnson became owner of the property. He took the clay on scows for the mines and sold so it could be used to plug the dynamite holes. (He was in the dynamite delivery business as well). He did this for many years with approx 1000# every year. Then another method was developed and clay was not needed for holes. Andrew's son William took over the property.

Jack Ruohonen in his history document shares:

At the beginning of the century 1902 -1903 a brick factory was established that produced bricks for sale to construction. Several 10's of men worked there. At first the business seemed growing and the product was accepted in the market, but then the quality decreased. The fault was with management because the labor force was transient who took no care in their work. The manager was John James. The engineer was Herman Hermanson and the kiln operator Timoteus Uusitalo.

The brick works was right on the shore of the lake. It produced bricks for the building trade. At first the enterprise was small and the machinery simple, drawn by horses. But as demand grew they obtained larger equipment and got power from a steam boiler.

The first manager was Emil Harjala, the second Jaakko Ojala and Alex Onkka. The third and the last was John James. The engineer was Herman Hermanson. The man in charge of the charcoal kilns was Timoteus Uusitalo.

Now the entire factory area is full of cottages for the city folk.

A Daily Mining Gazette article in October 24, 1964 states:
"The North Canal Brick Co. functioned on land now owned by the Johnson family- Walter, Leonard, and their sister Mrs. Martha Johnson Fisher. Once controlled by the late Copper Country pioneer Andrew Johnson, the land passed down to the late William Johnson and then to his three offspring.

Henry Garnell (neighbor on the road) is salvaging the last house, which serviced the firm, to use the lumber for personal projects. While removing some of the boards he found old French, Finnish and American newspapers. Many of these were of early journalistic efforts in the Portage Lake District. Gazettes and predecessors of the old Hancock Copper Journal were in evidence and still readable although splattered with lime or whitewash. A number of these dated back to 1885 and even prior.

Almost opposite the brick site are evidences of the pilings driven on the Hancock side so that supplies might be unloaded from barges, small steamers and scows.

John Jonas (or John Joonas) was the foreman and resident of the home being salvaged. Mrs. O.E. Holmstrom is the daughter of Mr. Jonas.

(Susan Riutta's document states that Herman Hermanson was the engineer and Timoteus Usitalo was the brick fireman.)

Mrs. Fisher remembers that persons have told her that pottery was made from the bed clay. Others questioned, also, relate that dishware was a likely product in that such dinner utilities were expensive in early Copper Country days and that the clay substance articles could have been made at low cost and serve the same purpose.

From the brick plant also came smelter clay.

At the furnaces the clay could be used for plugging tap holes and for other specified features in the big copper furnaces.

Miners used clay to steady candles on their hats and thus used the material as a holder or form of adhesive.

Garnell (Henry) recalls that tons of the bricks were transported from the area on floats using the Portage channel. He says that hundreds of them were used in the Copper Country and that many left the region via the wharves, the planks of which rested on the piling still evident.

Andrew and William Johnson were stockholders in the venture at Oskar and it is recalled that an Opie family also was concerned.

The Hancock Ojalas also were involved in the plant's maintenance and this goes for both Abram and his father. Abram is recalled as the onetime mayor of Hancock and he also operated a store near the site where the present turnabout is located near the Quincy St. railroad crossing.

Why did the plant close? Competition came into the business at Ripley, lumber became more plentiful, ornamental brick came into use and sandstone exerted its influence."

Richard Garnell (son of early Settler Aleksi Garnell) says: In 1902-03 a brick factory was established on Red Brick Road. It operated for about 10 years. Bricks were used for farmer's chimneys, etc. The bricks got of poor quality and factory slowed down and closed.

Robert Karinen (wife is descendant of early settler) reports that there are clay pits on the Red Brick Road that bricks were made for the Charcoal kilns.

Eddie Jean Johnson (Mrs. Bill) (great grandson of Andrew Johnson) told Barb that horses pulled carts of clay from over 15 pits to the factory. When Nancy Johnson /Norm Kromer (granddaughter of Andrew Johnson) built their home on Red Brick Road it was on or near the site of the factory as when digging foundation the digger found bricks.

Bill Johnson shares: My property (Red Brick Road) has a deed saying my great grandfather Andrew in 1899 was in partnership in the North Canal Brick Company. Andrew died in 1911 and it was before that, when I do not know, when the company disbanded and Andrew obtained the property. He lived out here in the summers for a few years before he died.

There are 15 clay pits on our property. Some are small. Others are large. The pits are full of water, getting water from the hills up by Heinola and coming via creeks to the lake here. The pits drain into one another and finally into the canal.

The pits are 6-8 feet deep. The gravel layer was put near the pit as a berm, which we are walking on now. The pits have filled in some with leaves/needles.

Taped interviewed translated. Copy obtained from Bill and Eddie Jean Johnson 2008.

Tape was done August 11, 1972 with Art Puotinen.

Page 13: Walter says: "... and right here where we have our home now, (his home on Red Brick Road off Houghton Canal Road) this back area here is full of old clay pits and they had a brick factory here. You can still see some old broken brick around here. A lot of it along the shore. And then after grandfather (Andrew) died (1911), apparently that wasn't a very productive business, it shut down and the factory was torn down. The mines began to use a lot of clay especially the Calumet and Hecla for plugging holes down in the mines when they blasted so they used to bring barges here. We had a dock here and we used to keep a few horses here and single 2 wheeled wagons. We used to haul clay from back in the pits and put it on the barge... I don't recall just how many hundred tons of clay we used to deliver to the barges for the C and H to take on their tugs. The men working here used to stay in summer months here with horses in a house."

From Henry Garnell taped interview on WMPL Heritage Line 3-2-1977 at station with Dick Storm. Guest: Henry Garnell on history of Oskar. :

North Canal Brick Company. Began in 1905 and ran for 5-6 years. On Red Brick Road. Locals invested in the project. Approx employees were 35. In 1882 Opie had the property and made pottery. He sold to Ojala. In winter the clay was stockpiled. In summer made the bricks. The bricks were air-dried. Not successful adventure. One stockholder was Andrew Johnson of Hancock. He took over the property after brick company dissolved.

Andrew took the clay and put on scows for the mines and sold to plug the dynamite holes. He did this for maybe 20 years with approx 1000# every year. Another method was used and clay not needed for holes. Andrew's son William took over the property.

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