HISTORY OF GYPSUM MINING IN BLUE RAPIDS

By ORETHA RUETTI

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Part 1: GYP MINE STARTED IN 1870s

The Georgia-Pacific plant spreads itself across the shoulders of the Blue Valley, hovering protectively over its wealth of satiny white rock hidden below in a network of tunnels and hollow rooms.

This plant, with an annual output of 245,000 tons of raw plaster, is a far cry from Coon & Son's shed where gypsum rock was calcined in a 5-barrel kettle atop a stove in 1872. Coons' crude mill was the first in a long line of plaster mills that shared the history of Blue Rapids and the first plaster mill west of the Mississippi River.

The fact that the gypsum industry and the town of Blue Rapids got off to a good start simultaneously may not have been a coincidence. The town founders came from Genesee County, New York, where there were gypsum deposits and its uses were generally known.

When John Coon of Elyria, Ohio, came to Blue Rapids in 1871, he recognized the possibilities of the outcropping of white rock along the Blue River and burned some to make a plaster. He returned to Ohio with his product. There experts declared it to be good quality plaster and ordered two carloads. Coon and his son Emir tossed together a makeshift shed on the east side of the river below the dam and the first Blue Rapids plaster mill was born.

Even before the Coons experimented with milling plaster, an early settler, Thomas Palmer, had discovered the dirty white rocks that girded his campfire had turned to powder when they burned. In 1857 he used the powdered rock to plaster his cabin northwest of Blue Rapids.

The next year Frank Marshall burned gypsum rocks in a huge log pile to make plaster for his Occidental Hotel, which he built on a lot just east of the of the present Firestone Store in Marysville.

With their plaster business well established by 1874, the Coons elected to build a $12,000 three-story stone mill on the west side of the river. Here with new machinery they reduced the pebble gypsum to raw plaster, which was calcined in a dry kiln. It was then run through a reel lined with a fine-mesh wire cloth. That which came through the cloth was sold for dental plaster and the remainder was used for wall plaster.

Coons' mill ran day and night to produce at full capacity 80 barrels of plaster a day. Rock was hauled from their quarry northwest of town, and the finished product hauled down to the Central Branch tracks for shipment to the east. The Coon mill

was sold in 1887 to M. T. Cummings of Beatrice, who converted it into a corn meal mill, which was destroyed by fire in 1907.

The Fowler Bros., Hiram and Frank, were the next to get into the plaster business in 1887. The gypsum rock, both mined and quarried on what is known as the Dolen farm, was floated down river by barge to Fowler's single-kettle mill in a frame building at the west end of the bridge over the dam. They powered their mill with a water wheel placed in the race north of the bridge.

Fowlers' business flourished until a lengthy litigation over a patent forced the brothers to sell out to the United States Gypsum Co. 1902. The mill was so badly damaged in the 1903 flood that it had to be demolished.

In 1892, A. E. Winters formed the Blue Valley Plaster Co., which erected a mill where a dam had been constructed on the Little Blue River about one-half mile above its confluence with the Big Blue. This site on a rapids in the river, where rock on the west band resembled marble, had been dubbed "Marble Falls" by the first settlers. Upon completion of the mill the stockholders sold to the U.S. Gypsum Co., who moved in and began operations.

The gypsum industry was off and running with investors ready and willing to incorporate a plaster company. The seemingly inexhaustible supply of rock that still flows out of the mine a century later comes from an 8-foot vein of gypsum formed in the Permian Era about 200 million years ago - give or take a few years - when a vast sea dried up leaving large mineral deposits. This brought about the formation of gypsum, a sedimentary rock, through the evaporation of the sea water. The gypsum under Marshall County in the Blue Rapids area just happened to be the whitest and purest west of Nova Scotia.

Dr. Wm. Hunter, H. Russell, Frank, Paul and Jesse Axtell of Blue Rapids and two Beattie men, Dr. W. E. Ham and N. T. Waters, formed the Great Western Plaster Co. in 1894. Their mill, built adjacent to the river road known as the "Narrows" was managed by F. Paul, J. Axtell and Perry Dodge of Ft. Dodge, Iowa, and Dr. Bull of Oketo. They began by employing a crew of eight who brought out 50 tons of rock each day on mule-powered rail cars. Seven years later they sold out to the American Cement Plaster Co. of Lawrence.

Dr. Hunter, Russell, Dr. Ham and N. T. Waters then purchased gypsum rights northwest of Blue Rapids, organized the Electric Plaster Co. and put up a two-kettle mill which was located about one-fourth mile east of the present residence of Bill Torrey. The company purchased an abandoned flour mill at the dam and installed a hydroelectric plant to generate power for the plaster mill and Blue Rapids. In the history of Blue Rapids mills this was the only company that was financed solely by Blue Rapids capital.

HISTORY OF GYPSUM MINING IN BLUE RAPIDS

By ORETHA RUETTI

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Part 2: Local men's mill enterprise short-lived

At the dawn of the twentieth century Blue Rapids was bordered on the north and west by three plaster mills - the United States Gypsum Co., Electric Plaster Co. and American Cement Plaster Co. - all belching foggy white vapor, pouring out plaster and boosting the local economy.

A group of monied men in Marysville had been eyeing all this activity down river and decided it was time for them to get in on the action. They formed the Blue Rapids Co., secured gypsum rights and then put up a plaster mill northwest of Blue Rapids between the Dean and Hamilton properties. The new mill was managed by Frank Hutchinson of Marysville.

Their mill opened in February 1906, but the enterprise was short-lived. Either there was more to running a plaster business than they had anticipated or they jumped at the chance to turn a quick profit, for 10 months later M. Henley of Lawrence was standing by to purchase the mill for his American Cement Plaster Co. It then became known as the American Cement Plaster Mill No. 2 and was used for plaster board production.

The 250 employees of the four mills who shared $15,000 in monthly wages livened up Blue Rapids on pay day. The average miner or mill worker was no doubt a hard-working family man who took his pay check home for his wife and children. However, there was always a rowdy element.

There were no open saloons in Blue Rapids but the ubiquitous bootlegger was never far away on payday. According to the Blue Rapids Times, in 1907 one "peddler of spirits" flagrantly flaunted the law by bringing a wagonload of beer to the town square where he proceeded to dispense his wares, selling out in short order. The newspaper declared the empty bottles strewn about the square the next morning testified to the "debauchery" of the night before.

Because of its isolated location U. S. Gypsum on the Little Blue had difficulty in keeping steady employees. In coping with this problem the company hit upon the idea of a boarding house for their workers and contacted John Avis to construct two buildings southeast of the mill.

A two-story 20x30-foot dwelling was used as a kitchen, dining hall and living quarters for Ike Salvage and his wife who managed the boarding house. The other one story 18x54-foot building was centered with a parlor with five bedrooms on each side.

Ray "Dutch" Heinzelman, Marysville, whose father worked at U. S. Gypsum, says the workers at this mill crossed the river in an overhead cable car, which was rigged up when the Whiteside

bridge went out in the flood of 1908.

Heinzelman's interest in "gyp" mills stems from his first job at the American Cement Plaster Mill No. 1 when he was 14 years old at the close of WWI. He is one of the few men left that can lay claim to working in three of the mills. Heinzelman did not remain in the plaster mills but continued on intimate terms with all the rocks and sand up an down the Blue River in his sand and gravel operations of many years.

American Cement Plaster began making improvements at their mills in 1911 by installing a giant underground tank next to the railroad switch at Mill No. 2, which held nearly three rail cars of fuel oil used to generate heat for drying plaster board.

They purchased two new steel kettle bottoms weighing 3 tons apiece which W. F. Dutton hauled from the depot. The first bottom was delivered to Mill No. 1 without a hitch, but on to Mill No. 2 Dutton's wagon mired down on the hill and six additional horses were used to loosen the 3-ton load from the mud and pull it on to the mill.

There was a flurry of excitement over a vein of gypsum uncovered near Irving in 1911. U. S. Gypsum announced that if tests proved it to be good quality gypsum, the firm would be moving to Irving. Nothing ever came of the gypsum discovered in the Irving area.

The Electric Plaster Co. got into trouble with its " all-electric" mill when the hydro plant at the dam could not produce enough power for peak production at the mill and still furnish electricity for the city of Blue Rapids. When M. Henley of the American Cement Plaster Co. bought controlling interest in the company, operations soon ceased and the building was torn down.

Heinzelman recalled that a man named Ayers was killed when he fell from a great height and pierced his spine with a large spike while helping to raze the Electric Co. mill in 1912.

By this time U. S. Gypsum had exhausted its gypsum supply for the firm had elected to buy land in lieu of leasing and could no longer obtain land in the vicinity of its mill. In 1916 U.S. Gypsum erected a new $150,000 concrete and steel mill south of Blue Rapids on the Yarick Ranch where I. D. Yarick had previously mined some gypsum. The old mill northwest of town was dismantled.

"I sacked plaster at the mill south of town," Heinzelman said as he recalled working for U. S. Gypsum. " My partner was John Walker, a colored man. His father, Isaiah Walker, was the Preacher at a little Negro Baptist Church in the southeast part of town. John's brother was Cong. Jim Strong's valet and chauffeur."

The next time U. S. Gypsum ran out of rock it moved out, taking its mill with it. The entire plant was dismantled, loaded on rail cars and shipped to another state.

In the survival of the fittest American Cement Plaster came out on top. While Mill No. 2 continued as a plaster board plant, Mill No. 1 hunkered sown below the bluff, dusted the surrounding landscape with its fine white powder and produced the nation's finest plaster.

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BY ORETHA RUETTI

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Part 3: GHOST TAPPING REPORTED

When the U. S. Gypsum Co. south of Blue Rapids pulled up stakes, packed up its mill and left town, the American Cement Plaster Co. then monopolized the plaster business where four mills had once flourished.

The abandoned mine site on the Little Blue became a safety hazard when curious children began exploring its cavernous interior. But youngsters were not the only ones attracted to the maze of tunnels; bootleggers were finding the old mine and ideal hideaway for a still.

According to Ray Heinzelman, Marysville, the day the company hired Hank Hurlburt to "shoot the mine in," two bootleggers were trapped in the mine.

"But there wasn't any problem," laughed Heinzelman, "for they'd figured this might happen and had a rope ladder rigged up for an escape through an air shaft."

After 17 years beneath the brow of the hill, American Cement Plaster sold out to Beaver Products of Buffalo, N. Y., which in turn sold to Certain-Teed in 1928.

The mules used to pull the loaded tram cars from the mine were stabled in a barn on the plant grounds. George Moss, well-known mule breeder southwest of Frankfort, and John Harper of the same area furnished mules for the mining companies for many years. One balky mule was swept away when flood waters of the Big Blue invaded the environs of Certain-Teed in 1941 but the greatest loss was $10,000 worth of plaster bags when water reached the ceiling of the company warehouse. The use of mules was discontinued in the mid 1950s.

Mill No. 2 was eventually closed as No. 1 was improved and enlarged. The bustle of beehive activity along the "narrows" indicated mighty important business was going on, but few persons other than mine personnel passed beyond the portals to view the inner workings of a gypsum mine.

Several Years ago Raymond Ellenbecker, Marysville photographer, was allowed to visit the mine where he observed and photographed each step of the mining process: the drillers and powder gang preparing to loosen the rock, inspectors checking the ceilings after the dynamiting and "mule skinners" bringing in and taking out the tram cars. But by request of the mine manager, the pictures were never published.

During his visit to the mine Ellenbecker heard the story of the ghost whose tapping echoes from the west side of the mine. Legend has it that a miner's legs were trapped by falling rock in the early days of the mine. When other miners could not free one leg, a very resourceful fellow whipped out his knife and cut off

the leg. The unfortunate victim bled to death. Later, imaginative miners claimed to hear the ghost of the miner rapping and tapping on the west side as he searched for his missing leg.

The overall safety record in the 107-year history of the plaster mills has been remarkable, for the workers have always been aware and respectful of the potential dangers of their occupation. Retired miners believe there may have been six lives lost through the years, but never a major accident claiming several lives at one time.

Ben Mall, Blue Rapids, retired mill worker who spent 42 years at the plant, recalls there were occasional serious injuries. Men by the names of Arnold, Nelson, Padgett, Upholt and Radford were killed.

"Upholt had come from the coal mines of Kentucky and had only worked about a month or so," Mall remembered, "when a leak from the carbon lamp on his miner's hat hit a powder keg."

Generally the relationship between labor and management has been amicable. There was a crippling strike in the early years of this century that broke up the union and forced several families to leave Blue Rapids for employment in a plaster mill at Fort Dodge, Iowa. Heinzelman said his parents left at that time for a two-year sojourn in Iowa.

"The union was reorganized in 1942," Mall said, "and then later on there was talk of a strike but nothing ever came of it."

Changes loomed on the horizon when Certain-Teed sold to Bestwall as Tuttle Creek Dam lurked in the shadows. When the dam became a reality, plans got under way to relocate the mill atop the hill with Uncle Sam footing the moving bill. But before the new mill could be completed, No. 1 which had stood since 1896, was destroyed by fire in August 1959. The next summer mining continued with the rocks trucked uphill and stockpiled to await milling at the new plant in 1961.

The super structure on the hill is the epitome of mining and milling where a flick of a switch sets electrically- and hydraulic-driven machinery into motion. The 5-barrel calcining kettle of 1871 has evolved into kettles of 15-ton capacity. In 1965 Bestwall merged with Georgia-Pacific and this nationally-known company continues to make improvements at the plant. Currently plasterboard production is being upped from 50 feet a minute to 80 feet a minute to meet the growing demand for the building material.

According to figures released by J. S. Jorgensen, manager, Georgia-Pacific with 125 employees doubles the production of the four 1907 mills with 250 workers. Of the 87 plaster plants in the United States, the Blue Rapids operation is the only one that produces both industrial plasters and plasterboard. Most of the plants specialize only in plasterboard production, Jorgensen said.

Where will 245,000 tons of plaster go this year? It becomes filler in water-base paints, foundations for machinery, casts for broken bones, floor-sweeping compound, seasoning for spinach, filler in dry yeast, floor and deck cement, abrasive in cleaners, dental plaster, artificial marble, retarding cement, rooting

compound, in making chinaware, in molding for silverware, as filler in tires, talcum powder (Johnson & Johnson Baby Powder), wall plaster, match heads, plate glass, plaster lath, insulation, toothpaste, fertilizer, wallboard, figurines, marbles, chalk, snow for movies and television and other products.

A Georgia-Pacific spokesman says there is apparently another 200-year supply of gypsum below the ground here. So there will be two more centuries to add to the story that began that day in 1857 when Thomas Palmer encircled his campfire with some white rocks.