LINDSAY'S BRICKYARDS

M. H. McGeough was a Lindsay citizen unknown to present day citizens but a gentleman who had a great deal to do with the building of Lindsay. In fact he was a contractor and builder in more ways than one. As a contractor he built many local buildings and as builder in another sense he was at one time a member of the Town Council.

Tne grandson of this gentleman is well known to many, especially in association with ABEX Company on Colborne Street. This man is Jim McGeough, to whom we are indebted for the following interesting story, the history of brick yards and the brick industry when there were two plants located on the east side of the Scuogog, south of Lindsay. One was the Fox plant and the other was operated by the Curtin family.

It is safe to say that three quarters of the buildings in Lindsay were erected with brick from two sources. These were also the days when the corner at Highways 35 and 7, now nicknamed "Suicide Corners", was for years called Pottery Corners, as some of the first pottery in these parts were manufactured at the above location.

The story of the brick industry is as follows, but first let it be written that Fox became one of the first members of the Ontario Parliament and that Jack Curtin ran the Curtin kilns for many years.

Jim McGeough commented as follows:

"The other day I observed a group of construction men tearing down what, in my mind, was a beautiful brick building. Then I got to wondering if very many people ever saw brick being made.

"It was very heavy, but fascinating work. It started by taking of the top soil off a field, called stripping. Underneath revealed a special clay for making brick. One field had white clay for white brick and the other field had a deep brown soil used for red brick.

"The clay was drawn by wagon to one giant central pile where water was continually run onto it day and night, turning the clay into a somewhat plastic consistency. While this was being done repairs if needed, were done to the brick making machine, such as relacing loose belts or replenishing broken parts of the racks and greasing. The machinery was called a pug mill, pug being what the clay was called and mill for the machinery.

In the early times the power was by oxen and horses, then steam was installed, then came the tractor power and finally electric power took over from all the beforementioned.

"When all was ready the large pile of clay was shovelled by hand into a small wagon which ran on a small railroad track. The wagon was pulled up by winch and side dumped into a steel auger running horizontally, which in turn, fed into another auger running verti-

cally, then, activated by a giant wheel geared to the mill, the wet heavy mud would be forced down into five brick patterned moulds. By inserting a heavy steel pin into the slots the workmen could control or cut off the mud flow down the vertical auger.

"The mold would be ejected and any excess clay was neatly cut off with a large knife type trowel. This would make the brick very flat and smooth on the bottom side. This operation was called striking off. The moulds had to be pre-sanded so the wet clay would not stick to the moulds, thus making imperfect brick patterns.

"The next operation called for a well practiced wrist action. It consisted of picking up the wooden and steel moulds holding 's' bricks, turning them around and flipping them over so that they remained perfectly flat on a revolving turntable.

"The bricks were then lifted off and placed on a special wheelbarrow. I say special because the ordinary barrow could be turned on its side when rounding a corner, and the wheel was placed forward of the load, but in this barrow for bricks the wheel was placed dead centre of the load. When wheeling or rounding a corner it had to be held perfectly level.

"I never mastered the art of wheeling brick but the few following men could do it with great skill: the owner Mr. J. Curtin, the McCabe men, Max Vincent, Abbey Stocker and Bud Palfrey. There was also a school boy boy who used to sand the moulds for us which was done during school holidays, but I am sorry, I cannot recall his name but I do believe he is now in the Canadian Army in Germany."

"When the bricks were wheeled out they would be placed in shelves called hacks. There were four hacks approximately 1,000 ft. long. The bricks were left flat for 3 days, then turned on their side for 3 days, repeating this until all sides had been precured or weathered by air and moisture.

"By a small horse drawn wagon we would start drawing the bricks from the 'hacks' to the kiln. A kiln consisted of 120,000 bricks. These were placed by hand in a honey comb pattern which was for the draft effect when the kiln was fired up.

"When the material was all placed in the kiln the ends would be sealed with old brick and mud for mortar. There were 9 fire boxes on each side of the kiln and these were fired 24 hours a day for 9 to 15 days.

Every hour, rain or shine, a man had to walk around and fire each box. The fuel was usually slab - wood brought in by truck. The owner figured if he had flames shooting 4 or 5 feet over each of the 18 chimneys he had a good fire going.

"The worst enemy of brick making was rain. When bricks were in the hacks dry-

ing, rain would pockmark the clay, leaving them a total loss. Secondly, after the kiln had been started, rain, if heavy enough, would kill all the fires, thus the sudden cooling would cave in the arch roof on 120,000 brick. The roof was made of old brick and mud, so you can see what a mess it would be besides being a total loss. The new brick were somewhat soft and would stand no pressure let alone a roof falling on them.

"Once the fires were all started they had to burn evenly and the man I worked for had a pet system of telling it he had a good kiln going. At one end of the kiln he would leave out one brick at the bottom, and at peak heat, usually about the 4th or 5th day, he would insert an old broom handle. If the handle turned color immediately he had good brick burning. If you looked into a kiln at the top you would see a bluish flame, then at the bottom you would see a molton white heat and hear a roar like a modern steel blast furnace. One evening for fun, I inserted a bottle into the oven on a steel rod. In a few seconds the bottle turned to liquid, running down the rod.

"At the end of the curing time the firing times would be dropped from one hour to two hours and so on until the firing was ceased altogether. Then the brick would be left to cool for two or three days and then we would break down the ends that had been sealed up and the unloading of the kiln would start. the unloading of the kiln would start. Bricks would be piled outside for future shipments to customers.

"Six or seven bricks had to be sent away from every kiln burnt for a Government strength test report. Excellent came back listed as Chicago No. 1 - 2 - 3 etc. Number one brick could be used for any structure not exceeding 10 - 20 feet in height. Thus the whole brick making cycle would start all over again. In the spring and summer we would run as long as the weather warranted.

"The other day I took a walk through the old yard and there is not much left there anymore. The old hacks are all tumbled down and broken, the mill site idle and rusted and the spot where the kiln stood is just a pile of broken bricks and tall weeds. But one thing I noticed and that is that the brick moulds are still as good as new.

"Yes— new modern ways have taken over, such as giant electric ovens and automatic brick making machines and this is all done inside hot sticky buildings but the old way was outside underneath blue sky.

"Many of our homes in the surrounding area are made of material from these brickyards, and, I might add, still look like Chicago A-1 bricks, but also a lot are being torn down and new structures put up. If people had seen the work in making them and had helped make them, I am sure they would not so easily tear them down.

"It is too bad that the old brick mill could not be relocated near our museum and set up in the same rustic way it now stands, with a little story near it telling of its operation, then at least some of our people would know how it was done. A

model of a small kiln could also be built near it. After all, it is only made of old brick and wet mud. Some of our torn down houses might take one into the past in the form of an old brick yard which is, today, to be seen by very few."

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Missing entertainment today is the old time travelling circus. Remember the exciting parade, the bands, the big and small elephants hanging on to the short tail of the one in front, the big, high wagons and on the top deck three or four beautifully painted girls; the well groomed horses including the big white ones, and colorful girls holding the reins, the large red painted wagons, the wild tigers behind iron bars, the caliope with its one lovely tune, the clowns and the monkeys? Ringland Bros. was the famous one. Hundreds of visitors poured into town and warmed to the circus grounds ---the Spratt field on George Street, now the ball park.

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There were other types of parades in days gone by. Tuy Brothers Minstrels, an organization which packed the Academy yearly, paraded to the main street main intersection where the band gave a short concert. The minstrels paraded in long coats and they wore swanky top hats.

This type of parade was copied by the Lindsay minstrels when Hi Meehan, Harold Mercer and Fred Roberts were black faced comedians. The local minstrels packed the theatre and the chorus of males numbered 15 and 30.

Parades were once held by the Marks Brothers, a show that packed the theatre on the last night of the Lindsay Central Exhibition. Parades were at one time the best advertisement for theatrical productions. The popular song, one which is still heard occasionally was entitled "I Love A Parade".