

# GRAND RIVER HERITAGE MINES SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

## October/November/December 1995



### Field Trip to Excelsior and Cayuga Mines

After the long, hot summer holidays, members of the Mines Society enjoyed a cool clear sunny Sunday for their excursion to the Cayuga and Excelsior Mines. We are grateful to Betsy McBurney for arranging our tour to the Excelsior, and to the owners for allowing us access to the property.

According to the historical records, the Excelsior mine was opened in 1875 by A.W. Thompson, with a grinding mill operating on site until 1879, when Gill, Allan & Co. of Paris took over operations and shipped the gypsum to its calcining mill in Paris. Adamant Manufacturing Co., an American firm, operated the mine from 1890 to 1893. In 1891, they erected a calcining mill on site, then shipped the calcined gypsum to their mill in Toronto where it was processed and bagged as wall plaster.

We were able to locate several old sinkholes, overgrown with bushes and trees, and a few new sinkholes as well. It was estimated that 20,000 tons came out of the mine. There was one main tunnel with four shafts used for air and emergency exits. We found old concrete footings for machinery and conveyors.

Our botany experts, Ilse and Paul, reported some rare finds -- stiff-leaved goldenrod (*solidago rigida*) classified as provincially rare by the National Museum, regionally rare by the MNR, and restricted geographically within the Central Region of Ontario. They also recorded black oak, red oak, White oak, American crabapple, and wild asters.

After lunch, we explored the Cayuga Mine which was operated by the Cayuga Gypsum Co. between 1942 and 1949. There had been a previous operation years earlier, according to local authorities, but none recorded by the Ministry of Mines. This mine was situated close to the Edwards Mine which may have been linked. Since we visited this area last year, we observed new sinkholes, and previous ones have sunk much deeper. One reason may be the dry summer -- without water underground the tunnels can become much more unstable. We noticed that most of the swampy areas were bone dry.

We spotted on the property Chinquopin oak, hybrid Chinquopin/chestnut oak, spirea, giant bullrush, pignut hickory, button bushes and serviceberry bushes. There was a multitude of leopard frogs in a pond created in a huge newly collapsed area. A profusion of golden eyes and green heads bulged out of the white, milky water. This was one of the few places there was any water.

We plan to go back later in the fall to both mine sites to take photos when the foliage is gone.

### THE GRAND RIVER PLASTER COMPANY

One of our members from Dunnville, Barbara Topp, has acquired from a relative three copybooks of letters sent by the Grand River Plaster Company. This was an American firm that operated at Gypsum Mines after the Merritt family sold out in 1883. Barbara is diligently transcribing the letters into her computer. Good work, Barbara! We are proud of you! The following excerpt is from a letter written by Edward Dodd, Secretary of the company, on January 21st, 1889, to Mr. Warren Ackerman, Pres. of the company in New York, describing the Mines and workings:

Dear Sir:

Mining has been going on since the 2nd of January, the plaster coming from the Merritt mine. (Our mine on the Glenny property, 1 mile above the mill, has not been worked for 4 years, and before mining could be resumed there, it would be necessary to drive a new drift, which would amount to practically the same thing as opening a new mine.)

The plaster in the Merritt mine lies from 25 to 30 feet under the surface; the deposit is from 4 to 5 1/2 feet in depth. The plaster varies much in quality in the different workings, of which there are four. At times the plaster will be of superior quality, very white and comparatively free from the bands of stone, and again in the course of two or three days, as the miners advance, the quality will deteriorate. The rock plaster, as it comes from the mine, is carefully looked over and the best selected and piled by itself under the shed for storing plaster. We have now at hand about 200 tons of plaster thus selected. For color and quality it cannot be excelled.

We have at present employed 8 miners, as against 10 employed last year. The miners are all tenants or tenants' sons. Of those employed last year, 4 were not our tenants and as soon as the mining ceased, drifted away. I have thought it best, if possible, to fill our houses, as the men are all able to pay rent, \$2 a month, which gives an income of 6% per annum on the houses occupied. The miners work in couples, two in each working, and are sending out about 5 tons of plaster a day. They are all good workmen and their output of 5 tons may be considered the amount that can be expected from two men working in the Merritt mine.

We are paying the miners 60 cents per ton for the plaster. These are important items in the expense of mining and to govern their supply, should have constant watch, to prevent carelessness and waste on the part of the miners. I have put the following regulations in force, and which at present covers the mining:

1. No shovellings are to come out of the drift.
2. No pieces are to come out of the drift except those placed on the cars by hand.
3. No plaster can come out of the drift in pieces weighing over 150 lbs.
4. All culls will be weighed and charged against the miner or one responsible for the same at the rate of 75 cents per ton.
5. Powder will only be supplied to the miners on request to the Superintendent.

.....

The powder is now given to the miners by Mr. Glenny, who receives a receipt for the amount. The best miners for us are of course those using the least powder and timber to get out the most plaster. I have the miners' receipts for the powder they use as well as their tonnage of plaster. This I follow carefully and they understand it and are more saving.

The Merritt mine is situated on Norton's Creek, which runs out to the Grand River. From the mine to the channel of the river, it is a distance of about half a mile. This creek is too shallow in places to admit the passage of a vessel, except of light draft, to get to the mine. In shipping rock plaster, it is necessary to load our lighter at the mine and pole it out through the creek to the river, and transfer the load to the vessel waiting for a cargo. Our lighter is 70 X 20 feet, and when in good condition, can carry about 110 tons. It has been in poor condition for the last two seasons. Every time before, while using the lighter, it has been necessary to pump constantly. Last summer, the lighter was safe to carry from 50 to 60 tons only at a load, and we were unable to get any rock plaster to our dock at Port Maitland for shipment as the lighter was unfit to make so long a voyage.... The expenses of rebuilding would amount to \$300.....

**Fall Activities:** Field trips begin October 15. Meet at 5 Oaks, 10 a.m. We will finish our observations there so that we may begin writing our booklet about it. **MARK THIS ON YOUR CALENDAR NOW!** Field trips - every Sunday, as weather allows. Phone Ilse to confirm - 519-756-6634.

**Christmas Pot-Luck:** Sat. Dec. 9, 6 p.m. at Ilse Kraemer's, 23 King's Hill Lane, Brantford.

**This newsletter is written and produced by Jean Farquharson. We are not responsible for errors.**

**Contributions are welcome! New Phone #: 519-442-2156, Fax 442-2373. Address: R.R. #3, Paris, ON N3L 3E3.**

## THE GRAND RIVER



WORKS OF THE COMPANY, AT CAYUGA, ONTARIO

# GYPSUM COMPANY

Has entirely new and improved machinery for the manufacture of pure white LAND PLASTER.

By a patent process, not used elsewhere in Canada, the Gypsum, besides being pulverized to a fineness hitherto unknown in the Dominion, is *purified during manufacture*, and therefore the benefits accruing from using this Land Plaster are greater than from any other.

To meet the reduced price of the article, **TERMS ARE CASH**. Plaster shipped on board cars or boat will be thereafter in all respects, at the risk of the purchaser.

**W. HAMILTON MERRITT,**

Office Grand River Gypsum Company,

"MAIL" BUILDING, TORONTO

In order to avoid disappointment, orders should be placed early in the season, as the difficulty of getting cars in the spring often causes delay.

**First Prizes for Rock Gypsum and Land Plaster  
at Toronto Exhibition.**

**FARMERS, TAKE THIS HOME AND READ IT.**

Membership Renewal - Please detach

NAME(S)

ADDRESS:

PHONE: (    )

MEMBERSHIP AMOUNT:

DONATION:

ON THE  
E F F E C T S  
O F  
G Y P S U M,  
O R  
PLASTER OF PARIS,  
A S  
A M A N U R E;  
CHIEFLY EXTRACTED FROM  
P A P E R S   A N D   L E T T E R S  
O N  
A G R I C U L T U R E,  
B Y   T H E  
Agricultural Society in Canada.

---

L O N D O N:

PRINTED BY JAMES PHILLIPS, GEORGE-YARD, LOMBARD-  
STREET.

---

M. DCC. XCI.