

GRAND RIVER HERITAGE MINES SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

January-February-March 1998



NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

This newsletter is a bit later than usual. Apart from the usual Christmas scurrying around, Al and I went on a trip to Oregon to visit family for Christmas. We had a wonderful geography lesson on the plane coming across Canada via Vancouver and returning via Dallas. We saw rocks, lakes, plains, prairies, foothills, badlands, mountains, rivers, clouds, deep snow, but the big thrill was to see Salt Lake and Salt Lake City. The northern shallow part of Salt Lake was a bright mauvish rose colour, owing to the briny shrimp that are plentiful in this season - fascinating!

The Pot-Luck party at Ilse's in late November was a huge success. The food was great and the entertainment too. Joe Clark delivered a lively commentary with his excellent slides of his trip to Russia. Mike O'Byrne provided a video of mining history in Western Canada, which told of brutal working conditions causing many tragic accidents.

I have been invited to speak about the history of gypsum mining along the Grand at the next meeting of Brant Historical Society on January 21 at 8 p.m. at the Brant County Museum. I would be pleased if some of our members showed up.

It is time for members to renew their memberships. A renewal form is enclosed.

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY OF THE PARIS PLASTER MINES, by Jean Farquharson

Piecing together the history of many of the old mines is like piecing together a large 3-dimensional puzzle. You may have pieces that form parts of each side but unless you have the key pieces in place, you may not be able to fit it together. Such is the case with the Paris Plaster Mine. **The unsolved mystery is where and what was the extent of the Paris Plaster Mine?**

There are two kinds of evidence available to historians - primary source material and secondary source material. The primary source material is first-hand factual evidence. The secondary material is basically what persons told us they were told by other people; the latter is less acceptable to historians. Unfortunately we must depend on much secondary material to fill the gaps in our mining history, because **we could never locate maps of the Paris Plaster Mines.**

What evidence do we have? Here are the clues, but not necessarily in the order in which we found them.

1. The Whiteman's Creek Women's Institute has preserved in their *Tweedsmuir History* the following: "From Paris by the Grand, we have been told, in the mid eighteen hundreds, shafts spread out far underground like the spokes of a wheel. One was tunnelled under Lots 11 and 12 North 1/4 of Concession 2. Underground plaster would be drawn to Paris Plaster mills in winter by sleigh. There it was ground and pulverized for sale."
2. Tremaine's *Map of Brant County*, 1858, had on the property at the northeast corner of Mile Hill Rd. and Powerline Rd. the name of **John Smith**, mason. The 1875 *Atlas of Brant County*

confused us, however, because we found John Smith's name on the property to the north of the 1858 property. Upon investigation, however, I found that **John Smith Esquire** was a different person who became the first sheriff of Brant County.

3. I located in the Ontario Archives the will of the both **John Smiths** to clarify this puzzle.

4. Gwen Parkhill, a retired title searcher, and member of our Mines Society, spent many hours researching the property in this area, and she made several valuable discoveries:

(a) A lease granted by Isabella Smith, widow of **John Smith**, mason, to **Thomas Hill**, lumber dealer in the Town of Paris, which allowed him to mine or quarry the gypsum from the property, "together with the sheds, yards, rights,, members and appurtenances thereto belonging and used therewith." Hill was allowed to carry away a maximum of 2000 tons yearly. Any greater quantity was to be paid for at twenty-five cents per ton. He could have "right-of-way and ingress and egress to, from, upon and over the bottom lands and flats for the purpose of more effectually working said plaster beds and hauling the plaster or gypsum..." He could open new drifts or shafts and extend or widen the existing drifts already mined.

The lease was for ten years dating from Nov. 2, 1871, but could be cancelled at the end of the fifth year with three months notice, or if Isabelle Smith died. The payment was \$500 per year, paid half yearly.

Thomas Hill promised to work the plaster bed "in a proper and workmanlike manner according to the usual method of plaster mining, keeping the drifts securely propped up, and the roads and bridges to and from the plaster beds in good repair. If there was not sufficient quantity of gypsum to pay for working the mine the lessee could give notice and desist from mining at the end of any year during the lease.

(b) A lease was signed on December 17, 1867, between **Peter Wilson**, farmer on the north part . of Lots 11, 12 and 13, Concession 2, Township of Brantford (on the south side of Powerline Rd., directly south of John Smith's property) and **Thomas W. Coleman**, gentleman (previous partner with **Curtis** and **Capron**, who had built a large gypsum mill on William St. that later became the Alabastine Company mill). For rent of \$150 per year, he was allowed to mine or quarry the gypsum. He could sink a shaft or shafts from the surface of the lands with sufficient space at the mouth of the shaft(s) to erect derricks or cranes "or other appurtenances or engines or machines." He planned to take out or quarry the gypsum from the north side of the Concession road allowance "unless ejected legally." He hoped to make an arrangement, for up to \$100 per year, with **John Smith** to use the drifts or levels already run by Smith into the bank. The rights would include hauling way the plaster through the bottom lands of Smith as well as using the drifts. The lease with Wilson was for a four year period, but of there was not enough gypsum for a viable operation, Coleman had a right to end the agreement by giving notice. If, however, it did yield in paying quantities, he had the option to buy the mining rights for \$4000.

(c) The mine must have been viable, because on October 3, 1871, **Thomas Coleman** signed an agreement with **Peter Wilson** and his wife Agnes to buy the mining rights including the right to sink shafts, air shafts, etc. This document was located in the Registry Office.

(d) Gwen provided a map of **Compensation Road**, which led from the bottom lands of John Smith to Mile Hill and Washington Street. It would be a direct route to the mines.

(e) She also provided several copies of photos taken at the mines at Mile Hill which she borrowed from the son of one of the miners. He identified his father in the pictures - **Mel Boyce**.

(f) Her land searches brought forth the names in the area of persons involved in the gypsum business in Paris, such as **Elias Conklin**, and the farms of **Martin** and **Miller** which were described in the *Bureau of Mines reports* as the location of the gypsum mines.

(g) Documents in the Registry Office indicated a road collapse along Powerline Rd., and the road had to be located further south. This was in the area described as where one of the mines existed.

(h) Howard Parkhill's ancestors had lived in the Mile Hill-Rest Acres Road area for several generations, and Gwen recalled talking to her father-in-law about the gypsum mines: **John Parkhill**, who regularly visited relatives in the area and lived there from 1908-1920, recalled that the area under the four houses on the east side of Mile Hill Road, and "in fact under the whole Mile Hill area, had been the site of a very large gypsum mine, that the whole area was honeycombed with mining tunnels, and that some of these tunnels extended for considerable distances. He also said that the mine opening which existed on the lands of Maude Jones gave an entrance to a tunnel which led over to the former Hunt farmhouse, under which there was reputed to be a natural cavern, and continued across the fields."

"John Parkhill also told me that he used to watch horse-drawn carts loaded with gypsum being drawn up wagon roads which led from the mines and which still can be seen quite clearly on the property.... The carts would then proceed...to plaster mills which were located in the Lower Town of Paris."

(i) Here is a summary of the Parkhills' interview with a friend **George Hymers**: George Hymers, born in 1915, is the son of the late **William Hymers Jr.**, and grandson of the late **William Hymers Sr.** William Sr., born in 1838, was a miner in Cumberland County, England. When he emigrated to Canada, he first lived on Ball St., Paris, and went to work in the gypsum mines on the west side of the Grand River, which were easily accessible from the Washington St. area. Later, he rented, then purchased the Torrance farm on the east side of the Grand River, and continued to mine gypsum from the small mine on his property. William Jr. had two carts and two teams of horses with which he hauled gypsum to the plaster mill on William Street. There was much less gypsum there than on the west side of the river. "William Hymers Jr. told his son George that when William Sr. used to work in the mines on the west side of the Grand River, he used to walk the full length of some of the tunnels which extended for a distance of two miles."

(j) As Gwen Parkhill traced the ownership of mining rights of the Paris Gypsum Mine, she found records of several transfers of deeds of land, water power, gypsum quarries, the gypsum mill on Willow St., etc. involving dealings among **Thomas Coleman, Alexander Gill, John**

Allan and David Brown, and later the **Alabastine Company**. This included the mine on Mile Hill.

5. At the Brantford Public Library, I located the *1871 Census*, which reported that **Thomas Coleman** owned and operated a large brick mill on Willow Street, where the gypsum was processed. He employed 61 people, and paid \$8000 in wages. He had \$20,000 invested in fixed capital and \$23,000 in floating capital. The plant operated for 12 months of the year and produced 6,000 tons which cost him \$18,000 to produce and grossed \$32,000. Obviously this amount of gypsum was obtained from several mines in the area, but it gives us an idea of the **extent** of the business that year.

6. Members have heard various persons telling the stories they have heard about the mines, some of them suggesting that one mine tunnel continued to Five Oaks and opened up in that area. Some stories suggest that there was air rushing through the tunnel from one end to the other, about two miles of tunnels. It is difficult to believe these stories because in the 1800's, there were no means to provide fresh air in the tunnels. Today powerful fans ventilate the tunnels. In the area of Mile Hill and Five Oaks, air shafts could not have been sunk from the surface because there was up to 100 feet of overburden consisting of gravel, sand and clay covering the bedrock. How could the miners have been provided with fresh air in the tunnels? But why would these tellers of stories lie?

We have been told that the miners used the raceway at the south end of Paris to haul the gypsum in barges to the mill on the flats. We have been told, therefore, that the gypsum was hauled by carts, barges and sleds.

7. On our hikes and field trips, we have found many traces of old mines, roads and raceways. There are signs that there was a mill and raceway on Cavan's flats, but we have found nothing in writing to back up this information. There was definitely a raceway at the south end of Paris, because it was recently filled in and there are still traces of it. It was recorded in the 1875 *Atlas* and DA. Smith's history, *At the Forks of the Grand*.

We have found signs that indicate there are many collapsed tunnels and sinkholes and we have photographed many of them; also we or others have found openings or possible openings in various locations from Heathers' and Piovaty's property to Hammonds.

8. The **Bureau of Mines Reports** written by the **Mines Inspector, Mr. Slaght**, produce acceptable firsthand information. Here is an excerpt from the *1904 Report*:
"At Paris the rock is covered by a thick deposit of post-glacial gravel similar to and probably continuous with that of Brantford. About a mile and a half below the town are situated the gypsum quarries or 'plaster mines' as they are called locally. The Grand has followed out its bed through the gravel which rises to an elevation of 100 feet or more above the high water level, at which point the rock is exposed for a half mile along the river. The method of quarrying is to run tunnels about five feet square into the hillside and to enlarge these passages into chambers where good material is encountered. The product, as brought to the mouth of the tunnel, consists of mixed slate and gypsum, both gray and pure white in colour. The gypsum occurs in irregular cracks in the shale with its fibres arranged at right angles to the walls, or as selenite in ramifying

veinlets traversing the slate in all directions. Some portions of the rock are filled with crystals of gypsum, while in certain places the valuable material seems interbedded. Speaking roughly, the white product would average about 15 percent of the rock quarried. The residue, however, contains more or less gypsum and is ground and sold for land plaster....

“At present three men are working in a tunnel which has been driven about 600 feet into the hillside, and which has been worked for nine years. Previous to this tunnel, fourteen others, some of them extending to greater distances into the hillside, had been excavated. At various other points along the river valley similar deposits occur, and there is no doubt that a practically inexhaustible supply of the material exists in the vicinity.”

To conclude, we believe that the Paris Plaster Mine was very productive for its time. The mine closed about 1905 when changes in the Mining Act made it more difficult for owners and operators to keep within the law, and the mines were made safer for the workers. The Alabastine Company opened a more productive mine at Caledonia, where the gypsum was whiter and purer. The rock was shipped to the plant in Paris to be processed until mills were built to operate in Haldimand County. We have not given up hope that underground maps may yet be found.

NOTES FROM ILSE

This fall, because of the weather we didn't hold many field trips. In October, we met at Powerline Road on the east side of the Grand River. For years we have been watching a steep part of the embankment to the south of the road, a seepage area with a vast build-up of tufa and a small wet fen with many small grasses and plants. A deep wood-lined hole in one area was interpreted by Geologist Bern Feenstra as possibly an air and escape hole from historic mining activities. With nothing recorded, we can only guess.

On the next trip, we drove to Hardy Road to investigate the Northwest and have a good look at the sewage crossing site - very interesting geological features. Directional drilling was progressing on the other side of the river. (Continued Over)

After looking around, we went to the little-explored area near the site of the Davisville Mission. This was the first Methodist mission in our area, where Peter Jones worked with the Indians. Heavy tufa mining took place here with the **tufa** deposited on the surface above the soil. It is still being deposited. The tufa was fired with charcoal on the site, and by scraping you can still see evidence of the fire-pits and the piles of tufa. After heating the tufa becomes soft and powdery. It can be used as a fertilizer or cement. Remains of old buildings can still be found. Some have been bulldozed away. An old barn foundation nearby was constructed of tufa blocks cemented together with processed tufa. The ground here is very spongy, an unstable karst area. In some places, water bubbles to the surface, forming a stream. In this isolated area, herds of deer, cougar, wolves and beaver make this their home.

I continued toward the pipeline construction area. The process of tunnelling under the river is comparable to mining, with much of the same machinery being used. The contractor experienced drilling difficulties due to **fractured rock** and **petroliferous dolostone** (oil-bearing rock). The drill could not penetrate and properly steer the drill-head through the rock. The drill-string became jammed on the north side of the river during back reaming. This attempt was abandoned and the work plan modified. The new plan calls for tunnelling the river at 65 foot depth or more, hoping for stable bedrock. The team will use a pneumatic pipe-rammer to hammer a thick-walled steel pipe through the fractured rock to the level of stable bedrock. Two football-sized pits have been dug on both sides of the river. They are now experiencing groundwater problems and pumps are engaged day and night.

Looking at the geology, one can see the remains of the old lake bed of Lake Warren. A band of bog iron runs through this area, about 35 feet deep. The wall of the pit shows black and white layers of silt called **varves**. The white layer was deposited in winter, and the black was vegetation deposited in summer. The geology and technology are both interesting for our members to see. The City of Brantford's Engineer promised us a set of geological pictures taken underground while drilling. We will show them at our next meeting.

This newsletter is edited by Jean Farquharson. We are not responsible for errors. We are looking for more information about the mining industry in S. Ont. Submissions are