



Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

“Preserving Mercer County History”

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Mercer County Historical Society

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Essley-Noble Museum

1406 - SE 2nd Avenue
Aledo, IL 61231
Phone: 309/582-2280

Hours

April – Oct: Thurs, Fri, Sat, Sun 1-5:00pm
Nov - March: Saturdays 12:00-4:00pm



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For Genealogy Queries write to:

MCHS Genealogy Dept.
PO Box 269
Aledo IL 61231-2504
Or: email the museum



**Memberships available for \$20/household or \$300
for a lifetime membership**

*For correspondence, membership or change of
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Essley-Noble Museum
Box 269
Aledo, IL 61231



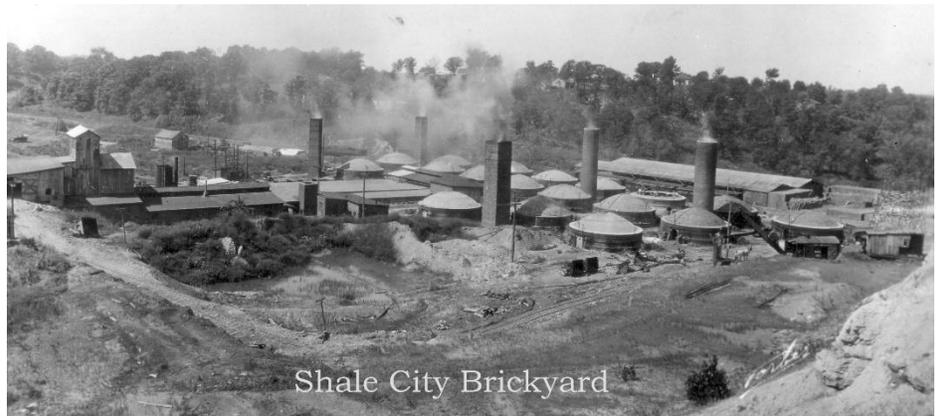
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Shale City Brickyard

by Stephanie Braucht

Did you know that part of Mercer County is in Chicago's Wrigley Field? And in New York's Empire State Building? Yes, it's true! Bricks made from local clay at the brickyard in Shale City were sent to Chicago for building the wall at Wrigley Field. They were also sent to New York as well, to use in the construction of the Empire State Building. At one time, the Shale City brickyard in Greene Township was one of the largest employers in Mercer County. During the 1920s, the brickyard employed 100 men and produced half a million bricks each week.

In the early years of the 20th century, a Mr. Gillette began a brickyard on his farm about four miles northeast of Viola. Before long, he sold the farm and brickyard and it was subsequently managed by a Mr. Buckley. This business was named the Continental Brick Company. Mr. Buckley



Shale City Brickyard

developed a method of making brick that produced colors no other company had been able to match. The Hydraulic Press Brick Company of St. Louis was quite interested in this new process and tried to buy the Continental Brick plant. At first, the offer was refused. Ultimately, the plant, including the community that had grown up around it, was sold to Hydraulic Press in 1915. A Mr. Irwin of Minneapolis became foreman, and he gave the community its name of Shale City. In order to facilitate getting the bricks out to builders, the company built a spur rail line south from Shale City to Gilchrist, thus connecting with the Rock Island Southern Railway.

Nearby cliffs provided the raw material for the bricks. There also was an abundant supply of coal in the area, which was

used to bake the bricks in the kilns. A power shovel scooped up the clay and shale for the bricks and the coal for the kilns and dumped it into wagons. In the early years, horses and mules pulled the loaded wagons to the plant, and they also pulled wagon loads of finished bricks to the railroad spur for shipping.

In the late 1920s, the Hydraulic Press Brick Company (also known as Hy-Tex Brick Company) was the largest producer of face brick in the United States. Face brick is made to high standards of appearance because it is used in the most visible parts of buildings. The plant in Shale City was one of 22 owned by the company. In addition, the Hydraulic Press Company controlled the output of 88 other plants, and shipped bricks throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico. During the height of its production, the brickyard in Shale City produced about 79 different kinds of bricks, some of which were made to order. In the 1940s, it was producing 12 different kinds of bricks. Ultimately, at the Shale City brickyard, there were seventeen giant circular kilns with domed roofs. The walls were three feet thick. Each kiln held about

heated to about 1800 degrees for five days. It took five more days for the bricks to cool to the point they could be handled. In addition to the impressive kilns, other structures for producing the bricks and the shale/clay cliffs were situated on the 200 acres owned by the brickyard company. The rest of the Shale City community on that acreage consisted of about 40 homes for employees and their families, a school, Methodist Church, store, hotel, pool hall, and gas station.



Prior to the Depression, which began in 1929, the Shale City brickyard was enlarged and updated into a very modern factory. The Depression took a toll on the brick-making industry. Then, during WWII the Hydraulic Press Company closed all of its plants due to lack of business. Six men stayed on at Shale City to overhaul the plant and machinery. After the war ended, production resumed at Shale City. By the 1960s, the brickyard employed 60 men and had a weekly payroll of \$6000, which was the largest in Mercer County at the time. The men were producing 400,000 bricks per week.



70,000 bricks. The doors to the kilns were sealed with mud, and their interiors were

In 1966, an upgrade to gas-fired kilns was anticipated, so new smokestacks were constructed. By this time, pre-stressed concrete techniques for building large commercial structures, pre-cut frame systems for residential housing, and the popularity of mobile homes had further

undercut the demand for bricks. Forthcoming air pollution regulations mandating that the coal-fired kilns had to be converted to natural gas seemed to be a questionable investment in light of continually decreasing demand. On October 30, 1969, the Hydraulic Press Brick Company at Shale City received word from its headquarters in St. Louis that the plant would be closed, effective immediately. It took about six additional months to fill booked orders, sell the surplus inventory, and clean the plant before the Shale City brickyard closed its doors forever.

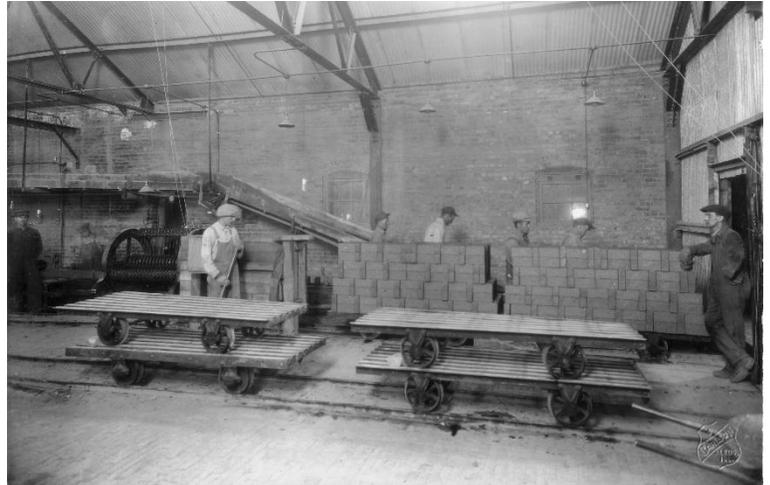
Not only were Shale City bricks used in Wrigley Field and the Empire State Building, they were also used in buildings closer to home, some of which still stand: Rock Island's Fort Armstrong Hotel and St. Anthony's Hospital, the former Winola Grade School, the old Sherrard High School, Aledo's "Northside" School, the Mercer Carnegie Library, and the



Andalusia and Aledo post offices. Interestingly, even our own Essley-Noble Museum is constructed of bricks from Shale City! In the museum, we have several items that were used at the brickyard, including some employment records. We also have a ring binder with photographs and newspaper articles, for those who are interested in learning more.

GPS coordinates for the location of Shale City are 41-13' 11" N; 090-38' 26" W.

Another description places Shale City at the western end of 105th Avenue, where it curves southwest before intersecting with 230th Street. Unfortunately, nothing of the former brickyard remains to be seen.



Curator's Corner

5th Grade Tour for this year was a great success thanks to all the volunteers and the cooperation of all the students and teachers. We want to thank Mike Zecher for spearheading the 2017 Abraham Lincoln Poster Contest. Those 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade Mercer County students honored are as follows:

Natalie Thomson, Olivia Dillavou, Keamiah King

Elsie Cook, Magnolia Showalter, Lauryn Russell

Serenity Schwarz, Ella King, Xavier Woodbury

Jersey Hajostek, Abby Snyder, Darby Balmer

Maddie McCrory, Julia Pence, Christianna Sissel

Aledo Main Street featured our museum in the month of May on the page and Facebook. Thanks to Dana Murphy for thinking of us. Thank you, too, for all of you who helped at Rhubarb Fest with donating desserts and/or helping in our booth.

Veda Meriwether, Curator



Wanted:

Old Mercer County Advertising Items

If anyone has any old advertising items from Mercer County businesses, e.g. pencils, pens, ruler, key chains, etc. and you'd like to find a home for them, the Mercer County Historical Society would love to have them to help create a display. We think people would enjoy reminiscing over a display of items associated with businesses from our county's past.



What is It?

The item in the past newsletter was a spoke shaver, kind of like a pencil sharpener for spokes. The item pictured is made of metal, about 7" long with a spring-loaded snap. What is it?



Coming Events

July 11-15
Aug. 26
Oct. 16
Oct. 28
Nov. 4

Mercer Co. Fair booth in Merchants Bld.
Antique Days Extended hours 10:00-5:00
Tentative date of Fall Open Meeting. Program TBS
Last day of summer schedule
Start of winter schedule. Sat. only 12:00-4:00



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