

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

"Brick Yard Bend" Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 513

RALPH L. POWELL

Interviewed

by

Thomas Hess

on

December 2, 1976

RALPH L. POWELL

Ralph L. Powell was born on March 31, 1913 in Steubenville, Ohio, the son of James Clarence and Irene Lysle Powell. After graduating from Toronto High School in 1930, Ralph obtained employment in various grocery stores through the Depression until 1941 when he was hired by the National Steel Corporation. He worked at that occupation until his retirement in 1975. A member of the Presbyterian church, Ralph Powell enjoys wood-working, gardening, golf, hunting, fishing, and reading about local history.

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INTERVIEWEE: RALPH L. POWELL

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Hess

SUBJECT: Manpower, geographic significance, discovery of local clay, important men in industry

DATE: December 2, 1976

H: This is an interview with Mr. Ralph Powell taken on December 2, 1976 at the Christian Church in New Cumberland, West Virginia.

Mr. Powell, you were telling me about the pottery industry more or less being an adjunct to the clay industry here in Hancock County.

P: In this sense the potters in East Liverpool take it back to 1839, 1840, something like that. There were two James Porter's, Big Jim and Little Jim. Big Jim was one of the entrepreneurs of the early clay industry here. It was he who started Chelsea Pottery, but this was the large pottery down on the dismantled site that you can see now. He brought that in because of the clay that was there. Now as far as New Cumberland is concerned, this was an adjunct. Have you been in contact with the American Refractory Institute?

H: No.

P: When we first started the idea of this memorial to the clay industry, I tried to find the old American Clay Institute, but it is now the American Refractory Institute. It's in One Oliver Plaza, Pittsburgh. Mr. Bradford Tucker is the executive secretary. He could probably steer you on this research as to whether something else has been done, something important has been done. At any rate, we determined that when Mr. Joseph Gamble was excavating for a grist mill, for a new sluice for his grist mill, down at Holbert's Run, he uncovered this clay which was astute enough

to recognize as being high quality clay.

H: What year was this about?

P: This was about 1832. He went back east and got some capital.

H: This is a part that I haven't been able to nail down. This capital, there had to be capital, where did it come from?

P: That's right. There is some disagreement as to who were the first families out. There were the Andersons, the Freemans, those were the first two. That was Freeman's Landing down there. It was called at one time Anderson's Landing. See, each of these spots along the river was a private landing. At any rate, the Freeman's came, they were early, the Andersons were early, then the Porters came alone. He got them to set up a brickworks down at mud point, which is the mouth of Holbert's Run where that auto repair shop is.

H: Manfred's?

P: Right. His grist mill was a few hundred feet or yards variously up Holbert's Run. It has been into the 1950's that that brickworks was finally dismantled. I mean the kiln stood there up through the 1930's and 1940's. It was operated early in the 1940's for a brief time as of the last time for brickworks. At any rate, this was the beginning.

In 1830, the census shows from Kings Creek to Black's Island or above, there were less than fifty people. There had to be people brought in. They soon used up all the men and boys available from the farms on both sides of the river, by the way, because there was better communication when people had to go across on johnboats and skiffs and rafts, than there is today. Families, instead of a boy living on this block and his brother on another, they lived on this side of the river and on the other side of the river. They used up all these people. Then it became necessary to have a town. The earliest town site was in the upper town near New Cumberland. Then came the foundry, the carpenter shops, the blacksmiths, all the supporting industries. This helped then to spread the industry up and down on both sides of the river. What occurred on this side was duplicated on the Ohio side. There were never any clay works as such, except pottery within the confines of the town, until you got into upper town.

Now the Clifton Works up there, it was surrounded by the Sewer Pipe Works down this way. Then there were various types of company houses up there. There were brick apartment

rows that stood in among storage yards and so on. They - made all sorts of chimney caps, decorative flue liners, almost anything that could be made out of clay was made here. In regard to the demand, they would devote more and more space in their shops. Now their shops were quite large. There were maybe ten or a dozen times the size of your courthouse complex here. They had almost an acre of big shop buildings. Of course, this is where their grinding went on. Then they would devote little rooms in these shops buildings for the specialty manufacturer.

Everything in this area was built on clay in the 1860's, 1870's, and 1880's. This particularly was the heyday. It was in the 1870's that this area was referred to by the river pilots as "Brick Yard Bend". They didn't refer to New Cumberland or anything, it was "Brick Yard Bend". In 1859 New Cumberland was the third port on the Ohio River in point of tonnage shipped. This was in competition with Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and various others. This was because of the clay products. This was one of the things that caused the growth in the size of barges. The early barges were flatboats. The first ones they used to haul brick. There was no transportation here other than the river and the road until in the middle 1870's when the railroad came in. There again, the dominant clay industry was the reason for the railroad coming in.

When the brick first started, they shipped them on flatboats and then they built barges. There was a barge building works here in New Cumberland. The men would load their barges with the completed brick and then get aboard and float it down the river using poles and some steering sweeps as best they could. After the embargo or the tariff was adjusted in the 1840's in favor of American brick manufacturers, this eliminated the British monopoly. The British brought their bricks over as ballast in their vessels and hauled back American raw materials, such as cotton, wheat, tobacco, and so on. When Virginia politicians were able to get this adjusted, then the sugar planters who were large brick purchasers in Louisiana started to buy brick from people in this area. These men would then float their flatboats or small barges down to New Orleans or Memphis or wherever they were going, sell the brick, sell the barge to be broken up as lumber, and then either walk or take whatever transportation they could back.

The barges grew and grew in size as the output of the clay industry became greater. First it was bricks, then they started to sell; they started to make vitrified pipe; they started to make ornamental clay products and they started to ship the clay itself.

There were two plants in New Cumberland which sold ground clay, one was the Chapman Acme Manufacturing and the other was West Virginia Fire Clay. It went out in carloads from Chapman or by barge or rail from West Virginia Manufacturing. The increasing bulk built up the size of the cargo and necessitated an increase in the size of the barges. At the same time they were shipping coal from Pittsburgh in barges, but because coal was not as heavy as the clay or brick, the clay barges and brick barges had to be built larger.

All in all, I feel that from the research I've done on our little local history here, that Gamble, digging up that clay down there gave impetus to the whole industrial surge in this section of the Ohio Valley.

Economically, the area was changed from a strictly agricultural area in the 1830's to heavily industrial. This was a moving and bustling community. This was increased in scope by the fact that there was an oil boom in the 1890's and early 1900's. Carson Oil Field and Turkey Foot Field brought more people and families in; New Cumberland's population was around 3,000, I think, in the 1900's. It was at its peak. It was probably one of the busiest towns of its size in this whole area.

Most people came here either to work in clay or to operate a business or to work in an establishment that was here because of the clay industry. Clay brought most everybody here. People came from Pittsburgh and all over. Nationalities that were here were mostly Poles, but we had Slovaks and Austrians too. The pottery also brought in English.

Everything that was done here from 1830 on was generated by a man turning over that vein of clay.

- H: Are you familiar with where the capital came from that was required to cause this boom?
- P: No. In the history books that I've read there were two things mentioned: One, that the eastern capital was required and two, that Gambel got the Andersons, Freemans, and the Porters. These people obviously had capital or access to capital, so they were able to get these plants started.
- H: I'm interested in the Chelsea or Cronin Potteries. I understand that Cronin bought Chelsea, right, so that pottery can go by either name?
- P: Right.
- H: What is this china works doing in the middle of a whole bunch of brick yards and vitrified pipe yards?

P: Big Jim Porter was one of the more enterprising promoters and it was he who established this giant pottery building. That was a huge building. The first building under Chelsea China was operated by Porter. I think he sold it before it burned. I don't know at what point the Cronins took over the building, but it was always referred to as Chelsea Pottery. The Cronins stayed here until they moved to Scio and started the Scio Pottery.

You mentioned the demise of the sewer pipe industry the other day. My maternal relatives were chiefly involved in sewer pipe. That business was taken away by cement pipe. People have now come to recognize that cement pipe deteriorates more quickly than sewer pipe. That was one of the reasons for the decline in this area, losing out to cement pipe.

Also, there was a consolidation in the middle and late 1920's. The American Vitriified Products Company bought most of the sewer pipe plants. At that time there were no sewer pipe plants on the West Virginia side of the river. In the late 1920's they were all on the Ohio side. They were all brick on this side. They bought them and then started to move their operations. By the late 1930's these plants had been abandoned and were completely dismantled. These plants started to go before the Depression. I remember people out of work beforehand. The plants were still operating in the 1930's, but on a reduced scale.

H: These early families that came in were mostly of English stock, right?

P: Anglo-Saxon. The Germans flooded in here after the Revolution in 1848. Nearly all of the south side of Pittsburgh is German. Ohio produced several solid German-speaking regiments in the Civil War. The officers spoke English but their men did not. The Germans and Anglo-Saxons didn't come until the brick yards started importing them.

H: Were these people that were brought in at this Polish wave what we call contract labor, where somebody went to Poland and recruited and brought people over, or had a company do it for them?

P: No, as far as I can determine, they did not do this. The Chinese coolies or the Irish were brought in for the railroads. As far as I have been able to determine, nobody ever came in here on a contract basis. Weirton Steel brought Arabs, specifically Yemenites, over for their mills.

H: You mentioned briefly that there seemed to be a company town built up there, with apartments or barracks.

P: At Rockyside there were several double houses. They were - large houses. They had a number of big houses up there. Down farther there were several sections of row type company houses that were rented at a nominal rent to the employees. They were chiefly built out of brick.

H: How did the almost annual floods affect the clay industry?

P: The early floods of the 1920's and 1930's were middle sized floods. They didn't have a devastating effect because there wasn't sophisticated machinery set up. Brick yard and clay machinery wasn't too sophisticated. It consisted of the pans, the grinding pans, screens, the presser and the cutting mechanism, and the forming presses for the sewer pipe and cutting mechanisms for the brick. When they came out with their mastic or moist clay their power was steam power. So it isn't like today where they would have to send the machines to Westinghouse to be rewound.

The clay industry stayed in well from its inception. There was the 1884 flood and 1907 flood and 1913 flood. Those are the major ones prior to 1936. The industries stayed right through those; they didn't let them bother them.

H: Wasn't it after that that the industry really started to slack off?

P: That's right. World War I started to see it go down. There was a recession in the early 1920's; this may have tightened up some of the money that was necessary to keep them afloat. Just before World War I they were still importing a lot of these Polish families.

H: Did you discover anything with regard to folks being brought up from Virginia and the South to work in this area?

P: No, the aspect of Negro labor didn't present itself in anything I have ever researched.

H: What was the attitude toward these Polish people then, did they receive a congenial reception?

P: Going back to the early 1910's and 1920's there was a resistance because these people were different. Their customs, language, and even manner of dress were different. Over the years the Polish people sold themselves on the fact that they were good, moral, law-abiding, respectable people. This became apparent to the earlier residents and as a result a good relationship developed.

H: As people left the area did Weirton Steel, as it grew and mushroomed, absorb a lot of this leftover labor?

P: This was a fortunate happenstance in that as these plants - started to deteriorate and close down Weirton was needing more and more men. Weirton in the 1940's and during the war were recruiting because of the manpower loss that incurred. They were bringing people in from all over the country. It was fortunate that Weirton was growing at the time that clay was diminishing.

I talked to Tucker at the Refractory Institute with the idea of a memorial to the clay industry. He said they were very happy to give us their support. Right now we have a two-foot, bronze plaque being cast in Detroit memorializing the industry. There will be a reproduction of the kiln, a frontal elevation of the kiln with the stacks and the opening and so on and this bronze plaque will be set into the midst of that. There will be a little, brick-paved clearing around there. It should be attractive.

H: Is this a periodic or beehive kiln you're talking about?

P: Beehive kiln. What we're going to have is just an elliptical or semicircular curve front of the outline. It will represent a kiln. It will be a start.

H: In talking to some production people in this project I'm discovering that the beehive is on its way out. The tunnel kiln, continuous fire kiln, is the new thing.

P: Right.

H: One more thing, you mentioned chimney tops and novelty items that went along with the industry.

P: Yes. These don't have the novelty that the clay lions and cats and doorstops had, although they were made in these plants as a sideline because they had the clay products. All they needed was a mold. They fired them right in with the other products.

END OF INTERVIEW