

Cast in cement: American Canyon's industrial past

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Some of the world's great cities are built around ruins: Rome has the Coliseum; Athens, the Parthenon; Cairo, the sphinx and the pyramids.

While not exactly on par with those ancient wonders, remnants of the Standard Portland Cement Plant, built more than a century ago, have historic and aesthetic value for American Canyon residents. Plans call for "the ruins" up on the hill just east of Highway 29 to be transformed in the next three or four years from a deserted industrial plant to a mixed-use town center.

Today's ruins are remnants of buildings built by two companies at different times. The original cluster of "cement works" buildings, as many called it, were for crushing and manufacturing aggregate rock, the main ingredient in cement. The three silos, the rotunda and additional employee housing were added by Basalt Rock Company in the late 1940's and early 1950's, years after the cement plant had shut down.

Plant Operation and Closure

According to a 1999 Napa Register article on the cement plant written by Rebecca Yerger, a self-described specialist in historic preservation, limestone was being quarried at Napa Junction back in 1900. In 1902, the property owner, Augustus Watson, sold the land to an intermediary for the Standard Portland Cement Company.

Yerger wrote the construction cost of the plant was \$1 million, a huge sum at the time.

The plant started full operation in February of 1903. Up to 200 employees worked one of two 12 hour shifts, mining limestone and clay. Topsoil was stripped away, the clay beneath was excavated, combined with limestone and then superheated in brick-lined kilns to make cement powder.

Workers lived on-site, at nearby boarding houses, or commuted by Southern Pacific Railroad. The 24-hour-a-day operation had it's own machine shop, laboratory, electricity and coopeage. More than 2,000 barrels of cement were produced each day, utilizing eight to 10 oil-heated rotary kilns located towards the back of the plant.

Water was pumped in from Miller's Pond, the largest of several quarries dug into the landscape. The pond was fed by a natural spring and still exists in smaller form today. Extensive tunnels that channeled the water under the plant also remain today, although partially collapsed.

The manufactured aggregate was dumped into a large rectangular storage bin at the back of the plant, sorted by quality and moved by overhead tram to trucks. The trucks were loaded at the oversized bays, huge windows 15 feet off the ground. Finally the product was shipped by rail line or barge. Napa Junction cement powder, shipped across the bay from Vallejo, helped rebuild San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake.

Eventually, all the usable limestone and clay on site was mined and the cost of shipping materials from other locations was too high to warrant maintaining production. Some locals say the plant shut down before 1920 while others say it ran until the 1930's. Workers and their families deserted the plant, often leaving everything behind.

Yerger wrote, "According to the parcel's chain of title, the land was owned intermittently by the Santa Cruz Portland Cement Company, a sister plant of the original company."

Several families who had worked at the cement plant remained and lived on the property with their families after the cement works closed down, passing down the history of the place to new generations.

In 1946 Basalt Rock Company came in, adding new work buildings and employee housing, and taking full title in 1950. Basalt produced aggregate from volcanic rock that was so light it floated in water. It was often used in high-rise buildings to give strength while adding minimally to the weight of the structures. Basalt also manufactured pozzolan, a volcanic ash used as a drying agent, and stored it in silos.

In 1978 Basalt Rock Company closed the plant.

Jaeger Vineyards purchased the property in the early 1980's as a potential vineyard property and as a real estate investment.

But the industrial site was incapable of supporting agriculture, and a vineyard proved impossible.

As the city grew, the Jaeger family formed a limited liability company with Aegis Equity Partners and began planning for developing a new town center.

Life after the Cement Plant

Last November Mike Anderson, chief operations officer for Aegis Equity Partners, toured the site with former cement plant site residents Mary Sanders and Florence Clerici. The two women, now in their 80s, lived there with their families when they were children. Much of the abandoned plant became the girls' playground.

Some of the other smaller buildings, the women recalled, were dusty and powdery and had ledges they walk around on. Clerici shared how some buildings were used for meetings for the 4-H Club and others, as well as for parties such as her aunt's had 50th birthday celebration. The mixer building remains intact, but has large cracks and is missing its doors and windows. Clerici fondly remembered roller-skating there when she was 7 or 8 years old.

Afterwards, she and Sanders would go pick prunes from the prune orchard, now the planned site for the new high school.

Both women remember climbing in the rafters of one of the buildings used to store hay and jumping down into the soft piles.

A tiny building with thick sides sits alone on the hill adjacent to the pond. It was used as the powder room to store dynamite. The women recall six or seven other buildings, but believe Basalt Rock Company tore them down in the late 1940's.

"Our living there was truck farming: Cows, sheep and vegetables," said Sanders. Her father, Angelo Turchet, worked at the cement plant when it was operational and took a position as a watchman a few years after the plant closed. Along with her parents, she and her five sisters and three brothers lived in the old plant office. From a family photo, she estimates she was 4 or 5 when her dad became watchman. His job was to keep an eye on the property and stop people from stealing -- mostly the copper pipes and fixtures.

"There was lots of copper and brass, and big machines," said Sanders. "My dad was supposed to be a watchman but he couldn't take care of it all -- there was too much going on."

Spring water from the largest of the six quarries was used for drinking and washing, livestock and irrigation. There was no electricity.

Sanders likes to tell her granddaughter, "(We) had no lights. When (my parents) got a couple of dollars they got the kind (of lamp) with a pump for the mantle. And no bathroom; no plumbing and I was 18 years old." Smiling, she added, "Those were the good days."

Sanders' mother worked at the City Hotel, a boarding house and dance hall mostly for cement plant workers. The hotel building still stands today. Although painted over, lettering remains faintly visible on the side.

"During prohibition, (mother) had a bar. I can see the sacks of grain and I remember washing the bottles," said Sanders.

Clerici's younger sister Jeanie McClinic, who now resides in the former City Hotel, recalls how bootleg whiskey used to be kept in the hotel basement.

"Joe Negri was the bootlegger," she said.

The hotel, along with several other boarding houses, was later moved down the hill. Sanders remembers the day the boarding house adjacent to Palby's was pulled down the hill by horses. McClinic worked at Palby's for 47 years.

Clerici, like Sanders and many others of that era, came from a large family: Eight children, seven of whom lived up at the cement plant. Her father also worked at the plant, and lost the tips of his fingers on his right hand on a piece of equipment there. Afterwards, he worked for the Vallejo garbage company. Her mother took care of the children and farmed vegetables. "My mother had eight children and didn't even have a washing machine. She used a ringer," said Clerici.

The big quarry was the swimming hole and the source of summertime fun. A photo taken in 1943, when Clerici was 17, shows several quarries nearly full to the brim with water.

Exploring was a favorite pastime for the young girls. "There are big cement tunnels under the mines. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face so we'd make torches out of an old piece of wood so we could see," said Clerici. Decades later, and years before he would become American Canyon's fire chief, a young Keith Caldwell would sneak past the watchman to explore the tunnels and swim and fish in the ponds. Caldwell has fond memories of his excursions. "I swam in Miller's Pond and the one next to it, what used to be Basalt Pond," said Caldwell.

Appropriately enough, the former Basalt Pond will become the location for the new police and fire station. Caldwell remembers fishing at all the ponds. Childhood friend Robert Lee, now a sergeant for the Vallejo Police Department, caught a state record small mouth bass at Miller's Pond. "We never knew who it was -- but someone stocked the ponds," laughed Caldwell.