

## WHEN CLARK COUNTY WAS THE CEMENT CENTER OF THE UNITED STATES

*Water-filled quarries and the occasional ruins of a lime-kiln are all that remain today to mark Clark County's former position as the leading cement-producing area in the entire United States. That was back at the turn of the century before the Portland cement industry spread to all parts of the country. The story of the heyday of cement manufacturing in Clark County follows.*

In 1900 there were 13 different cement mills in operation in Clark County, turning out over 2½ million barrels of cement – the peak year of production of the hydraulic or natural cement which was at that time the county's leading industrial product.

Today the old hydraulic cement has been replaced by the quicker-setting Portland cement which spelled the end of the numerous small mills which once dotted the Clark County countryside.

Hydraulic cement was made from a special type of limestone which needs only to be ground and burned to produce the cement. Clark County is one of the few places in the United States where this stone is found and the local deposits are the most extensive known anywhere in the country. It was only natural that Clark County should lead in cement manufacturing. But when Portland cement was developed, it meant the end of the hydraulic cement. Portland cement is a synthetic mixture of the elements which go into cement, and once the process was perfected it meant cement could be manufactured in all parts of the nation.

The discovery of the natural cement in the Falls Cities area was made about 1826 when the Portland Canal at Louisville was being excavated, and soon after the same limestone formations were found in Clark County. The first cement mill on the Indiana side of the Ohio River was in Clarksville operated by Lawson Very who had built a flour mill in 1832 along the river. But in the middle 1840s, with an eye to the future, he switched to cement production, quarrying the limestone along the riverbank.

The cement industry did not hit its full stride until after the Civil War, however. The second mill, the Falls City, was built in 1866 near Sellersburg and in the years following, mills sprung up rapidly around there and near Charlestown. The Speed Mill was also built in 1866 and the Gheen's Mill was opened in 1868 near what was to become the village of Cementville. The Queen City Mill was opened in 1869 near Watson.

While new mills were being opened in other parts of the county, the old Very Mill was sold to William Beach shortly after the Civil War and was operated for years as the Beach Mill. Other familiar names of mills were the Black Diamond, the Hoosier, the Golden Rule, the K & I, the United States, the Clark County, the Glove, the Banner and the Ohio Valley. Near Charlestown were the Haymaker and the Standard Mills, both opened in the 1890s.

Many of the mills were centered about Cementville, a town which grew up around the special freight yard the Pennsylvania Railroad built to handle the cement cars. Some cement workers lived at Cementville, but most of them made their homes in the clusters of little houses which grew up around each mill. At the peak of hydraulic cement production in Clark County over 1,000 were employed in the mills and in the nearby quarries, and trainloads of the finished product were shipped out to all parts of the United States.

The Louisville Cement Company, which operated the Speed Mill, was the only one of the mills to switch over to the manufacture of Portland cement. It was the largest of the old hydraulic cement plants, but its owners realized they would have to meet competition from the new product. The smaller mills were unable to afford the expensive machinery required for the mixing and fine grinding of the Portland cement, and one by one they dropped from the scene. By 1910 only three mills were in operation, and soon only the Speed Mill was left. The Silver Creek limestone from which the hydraulic cement was made is still quarried, however, and is used today by the Louisville Cement Company to blend with its Portland output.

Elsewhere, ruins of old kilns still remain here and there, and a recent subdivision on U.S. 31-E is named Black Diamond Heights, reviving the name of the nearby old Black Diamond Mill which has been closed 65 years. And the old quarries are still put to good use. The quarry of the Falls City Mill provides swimming and boating facilities for summer-time guests at Camp Chelan, owned by the Young Women's Christian Association of Louisville, and the Black Diamond quarry is a favorite spot for many Clark County fishermen.

[Vol. III, Historical Series No. 13]