WIU Oral Histories Program - Presentation on Brickyard Campus in Colchester, Illinois

Subject: Brickyard Campus; formerly Colchester Brick & Tile; formerly King Brickyard.
Date of Recording: 1995 May 19
Presenter: Tim Schroll
Description: In this program presentation for the McDonough County Historical Society, Tim Schroll discusses the Brickyard Campus. Program held in the Senior Center of the McDonough County YMCA building. Original cassette in vault. Transferred to FLAC, December 2016.
Length: 31:41

MCHS Leader: This is the McDonough County Historical Society Program for May the 19th, 1995. Our program tonight will be on the Brickyard Campus at Colchester, Illinois. And our speaker is the director, Dev.[1]

Tim Schroll: Because, I'm going to talk about the history of the Brickyard, as I know it. Putting in a disclaimer. History does- [tape is quiet; inaudible]

Woman 1: Are you a native of Colchester?

Tim Schroll: No, ma'am. I am a native of Beardstown, Illinois. Ooh, did I say that that loud? Born on the river-

Woman 1: [inaudible] Beardstown, and the ladies down there [inaudible]

Tim Schroll: Well, I wish I would have been that part of the Beardstown [inaudible] to live on. In a nonprofit organization, underlined "nonprofit."

Woman 2: Can't you get him to use the speaker?

MCHS Leader: Hmm?

Woman 2: Can't you get him to use the speaker?

MCHS Leader: Yeah. [To Schroll] Let me pass them out for you. I'm gonna get you hooked up to the-

Schroll: You're gonna get me hooked up?

MCHS Leader: Yeah.

[1] The speaker was in fact Tim Schroll, Dev's husband.

Schroll: All right, I'll let you pass both of those out. That explains some of the things we're doing today. I'll send it back around here and he'll hook me up. This the truth squad?

MCHS Leader: Yeah. Just hook.

Schroll: [louder] Wow, this feels official. Okay. My name is Tim Schroll, and we, my wife Dev and I, live on the property of the Brickyard now. But what I'm going to talk about this evening, I'm going to try to focus a little bit on the history of the Brickyard. But I gotta put on a disclaimer, right at first. The information that I'm about to pass on to you has been orally transmitted to me through many meetings with people who worked at the Brickyard, who have shown up and asked me what's going on, and told me about their experience. I also sat at the Colchester Historical Society's meeting with George Webster, who was the foreman at Colchester Brick and Tile from about 1920 to the mid 50's, or early 50s, I should say. And we had a wonderful meeting one night with him, and he passed a lot of pictures out. I do not have photographs of the old Brickyard. Those are all in different people's hands. We, what we're doing now, historically, is trying to save the structures. We're never going to make bricks there. No, no, no, no. That's a- What we've done now, I'll get into at the end of the program. But what I'm going to do is try to give you, to you, in two segments. I'm going to take you from the beginning of the Brickyard and Moses King, and then I'm going to stop when it closed, and if you have any questions I'll try to answer them and then I will pick up the recent history of the Brickyard and what we're doing right now. So, without trying to say, you know, sound too stratified here, we'll start with Moses King.

Now, this is the man who started the King Brickyard. He came to America in about 1878, 1877. He moved here from England, and he came to Colchester to work in the coal fields. He started his own coal mine. He and two friends, one of them was named William Fish, and the other was Joe Harrison. Not long after that, in 1881, the three of them formed the King Brickyard. Now, Moses King owned the land, which was called Vinegar Knob. So he got rent, 30c per $1,000 on the bricks, beyond the regular cut. In the beginning, because Moses had mined coal in England, and he had also made brick in England. When he got to Colchester there were a lot of different coal fields. He mined as much coal as he could, but the coal market, kind of like corn today, is just soft. There was nowhere for it to go. So during the time he was digging coal there at Vinegar Knob, he noticed that the clay was just an exceptional type of clay. And being an old brickmaker, he kind of put the two together and decided to shift from coal to brick. And he talked his two friends into starting the brick- the King Brickyard. Well he used the coal that he had mined to help fire the brick. Initially, the clay was mixed by kids and their feet.

[05:00]

They would dig the clay and the kids would stomp and pulverize it, similar to doing grapes. You see in the movies where they stomp grapes; they used to stomp clay. And they gave, they just paid kids pennies, to walk in a trough, to pulverize the clay before they added the water and made it into a brick. The bricks were all handmade. They were put in wooden forms, smoothed out and turned over and allowed in the sun to dry. When you fire a brick it has to be dry before you ever heat it up. So they used to lay bricks out and I've saw George Webster, again, had photographs, old photographs of the huge area that they laid these bricks out in, in the sun, to dry, before they fired them. After they had dried for several days they

would put the bricks in a pile, pile wood on top, light the wood, burn all the wood down, and the bricks were hard. And this went on for a few years.

In 1885 there was a problem. Or right before 1885, actually. The three of them had all the bricks laid out. Fish was a preacher. Sunday it started to rain. They had to move the bricks back inside. And Fish refused to do it, because it would have been working on Sunday. He opted out. He just said, "I don't want any more part of it." They had to move the bricks without him. This left the two of them. And they only lasted a short period of time before King bought Joe Harrison out for twenty five bucks and that was it. And this, $25 in 1885 probably was a whole lot of money,[2] but that was when Moses King officially had total control of the King Brickyard.

He, at that point in time, built the first kill, or kiln. They are pronounced both the same way. But this was a way to fire the bricks. The first kill, which is gone now, but there are about 30 feet on the inside diameter. They're 11 feet tall, and the walls are 4 and a half feet thick, of brick. The total structure is held by 10 steel bands that hold the outside together. There is no mortar in the roof. It's a cone shaped roof. It's allowed to, the pressure holds it all in place. They were fired by coal. They had 10 fire pits, all the way around the outside edge. And there's just like, little alcoves that they piled the coal in. Now these are downdraft kills. If you're ever out there, which I hope you all do at one point in time, they're still standing and I can show you how they work. But they're, you'll notice two large chimneys. The kills were connected underground by flues. The floor in the kill is totally brick offset laid, so that you can, air can go through the floor to a chim- to the draft. There's a hole in the roof. The heat from the outside, the little vent in the top, and it causes the draft. And the heat comes in, circulates around the brick, goes out through the floor, and up through the chimney. They built a total of six of these kills between 190- or, 1885 and 1906. 1916 was the last of it, I believe.

In 1924, they built their first factory, where it was totally enclosed instead of open-air sheds. And they were, at this point in time, they had replaced the kids stomping the clay with horses, then they went to machinery. They had what they call a "pan grinder," which was put in in 1924 and it was bought 'used' then, according to George Webster. And that piece of equipment was just recently dismantled. We just finally pulled it apart because we were clearing that space of the factory. But it ran til the Brickyard closed. So, Moses King started the mechanization of the Brickyard, trying to get away from the manual labor. Joe, excuse me, Moses, had two twin sons, Joe and Bernie. And they were helping run the Brickyard, naturally, brought up into it. But when Moses became ill in 1909, Joe seemed to be the one that wanted to do the Brickyard, and Bennie didn't, apparently didn't care much for it, and Joe bought him out. Moses died late in 1909 and at that point at time when Joe became the sole owner, it was changed, the name was changed to Colchester Brick and Tile Company.

[10:00]

Which is what it stood until it closed. But he, Joe, really took a leap forward. Got tractors involved, steam engines involved. He built a very intricate rail system that moved the bricks from the factory to the kill. And it was, it's amazing. There are turntables still in the ground. But it was like a miniature rail system. No

[2] At the time of this recording in 1995, this amount of money would be worth $422.74. In 2021, this amount of money would equal $779.93. [Source: westegg.com inflation calculator]

train, though. It was all pushed by hand. That was probably the biggest problem, was it was very, very labor intensive. A lot of, every brick had to be picked up three times, from the time it was wet, until the time it was unloaded out of the kill. The process at that point in time, when it got mechanized, the process took about 15 days, from the time the wet clay was mixed and extruded into a brick, until the time it was fired.

But now, he had built drying tunnels. They no longer were air dried. They had, we have 85 foot long tunnels, that's still in existence, and they would bring the wet bricks into them on carts. They would load each one of these 85 foot long tunnels, close the door, and fire it with coal. They would heat it to about 300 degrees for about 4 days. And totally dry the bricks out. Then they'd open up the metal doors and the little train cars, cause they stayed on their little cars. And they would go out to the kill, where they would load the kills with about 50,000 bricks in one kill. When they got the kill loaded, and I talked to several men who had done this for a living - well, for short periods of time. I know, nobody really did it for a long period of time. But they would fill the kill completely. They would stack it so high they could reach out the top hole and wave. And then go on down.

When they filled it up, they would brick, actually seal the door shut, with bricks and mortar. Close it up, and start firing it. They would take the temperature up to about 2,500 degrees to fire these bricks. And it took about three days to get up that high, with just coal fire. And they had tenders, young men that kept those, no stokers, just coal fire. Just keep shoveling the coal. And they had a pyrometer in there, so they could tell what the temperature was. And there was a little building that had all the gauges in it, and it was almost like a Rube Goldberg thing. It was just all these little gauges and dials and whistles. But apparently, there were men who knew what the feel of the brick was. There were little portals in the top of the roof, and they would go up with an iron rod. And they could tell by the feel, almost like sticking a toothpick in a cake, they could tell when it was, when the bricks were done, and then it would slowly start letting the temperature die. Get the, they had little vents that they would open up and they would bring it down. It would take a day or so to bring it down. And then when it got about 300 degrees they would break the door open, and let it drop down. And the men said it was a lot hotter than, probably, it probably wasn't near as hot as they said it was. When they went in there to start unloading bricks. But it was, it was, "let's do it now." It was, "we have to get it out." The opposite door was unsealed. There are two doors in every kiln. The opposite door would unseal, and there was the truck. And they would load the bricks as fast as possible, get them on the truck, get them out in the yard, and start loading them back in, to try to maintain the heat in that kill, they would try to make it happen as fast as possible.

The workers were paid minimally, they did a lot of backbreaking labor. It was, it's amazing to watch how they did it, because at, not at one point in time, nowhere, was that brick touched by a machine. It was all human hands, picking each one of them up. And a man explained to me, that had loaded many a brick out there, how they would slide their hands, the wet brick would come out of the extruder, and be cut, and they would have to pick it up flat-handed because the brick would bend, and they would carry it, one brick at a time, and would set them on these carts, and stack them ever so carefully so they didn't stick. And then move them, and keep them, the same way after they dried, one brick at a time. And there was just a pattern that they piled. Everything was handled by hand. Nothing could be picked up. It wasn't a modern conveyance. And I think in actuality, that's what was one of the demises of the brickyard. Because modern technology was taking over and making everything in the assembly line process. No longer did bricks have

to go and sit. They were made at one end of a tunnel and by the time they came out the other end, it was done. And it, the process took less than 24 hours. They were just, it was just modernization. But the Brickyard stayed, you know, the way it was built, in the 20s and 30s, it ran.

[15:00]

In '49 [1949], they were, they had the 6 kills completed. Joe's boys, Verne, Keith, and Jack, were running it then. They had taken it from Joe and it stayed in the family. And they were producing about 28,000 bricks a day after World War 2. Later on in the 50s, or early to mid 50s, the decision was made to try to go to natural gas to fire it instead of coal, because coal was getting expensive. So they were all converted to natural gas, all the kills. There's huge burners. But they found out that that cost a lot of money. Natural gas price, it took a lot of gas to get that heat and to maintain it. And if you talk to some people they say that was the demise of the Brickyard. Some of the older people will tell you, you know the people who worked there said they should never have done that.

The ladies down the street thought it was the greatest thing in the world for wash day, when they went to gas. I heard many of the ladies down the way talk about the day Keith came down the street and told them, "you don't have to worry about your laundry anymore" because the black soot coming out of the chimneys no longer came down on, you know. So it was, it was a, it had to be done, but then again who knows if that was the demise?

But I, what I can tell from interviews with people who have come back to look at the Brickyard and talk about it to me, was labor. Nobody wanted to do that type of work for the money they were getting paid. It's just common, it happened in America, period. Nobody was wanting to do backbreaking labor for pennies a day. And you couldn't afford to charge too much for the brick because he was competing against more mechanized situations, so towards the end they switched to the field tile. The orange tile that I'm sure you're all familiar with, you've seen the orange clay. That, that clay is an unfired color from, or a fired color right out of the ground, from out there. The problem with that was, plastic. The big tubes you see them putting in the ground now, in fields, that's all plastic. And that came out in the late 60s, and they can make extruded plastic a lot cheaper than brick. It's a lot lighter, a lot easier to lay. So the field tile situation just, it just went away. You couldn't afford to hand-dig tile anymore.

But in 1968, the decision was made to close the Colchester Brick and Tile Company. When that decision was made, the factory was still totally functional. In other words, they turned the key off, shut the switch down, and closed the doors. All of the machinery was still in place. Everything worked. The motors still worked, the pug mill still worked, the pan grinder, it all still worked. There just wasn't anybody there. Apparently, a couple years later, the vandals made sure that none of the electric wire was there. They caught, the way I've understood, they caught some, 2 guys with about $5,000 worth of copper wire that they had taken out of, the sheriff did. And they had been stashing it in some rural barn, and they found them and caught them. But that wasn't going to ever be replaced. It was never going to be hooked back up.

So the Brickyard just, more or less, laid idle from 1968 until 77 when Keith King, who still owned the Brickyard, decided to turn the kills into what they, he called, "The Brick Village." Some of you might have

been out there. I was never fortunate enough to see it, but they had a black, not a blacksmith, a black powder shop, and a leather shop or something. There was, Keith tried to get the kills to be dry. He put electric lights in them, and tried to promote the village, but apparently the interest in it just couldn't be, it just couldn't generate enough money, and Keith was fighting the kill roofs. These roofs are, like I said, they're mortarless bricks. The roof actually is like 4 bricks thick and they're laid on forms, and when the forms are removed, the pressure of the brick downward is all that holds them in place. And the bands around the outside keep the walls from coming out. Well, when it rains, the water finds its way through. He tried putting tar on them. And because the movement of brick, expansion and contraction, he couldn't keep ahead of it. Every time he'd tar, it'd crack. Every time it got cold, it would, you know, and it would leak again. So he finally gave that up and sold it to his, sold the Brickyard to his daughter, and another couple who I'm not really familiar with. And it laid idle from 1978 until 1991.

[20:00]

Which is where Dev came in on it. And that's the modern version of what's going on there now. So I've kind of given you what happened up until now. So if there's any questions I can try to help. But like I said, the information I've given you has been from a lot of people who I've talked to who show up at the Brickyard, almost on a daily basis. Men will walk in, women. Mostly men. Wives. And they'll look around and you'll know what they're, they're just sit-, they're staring. And then they turn around and shake their head. "It's still standing." And I think too, the chagrin of several of them, some of the older ones that had worked there in the 1930s, I've talked to, they didn't think it would make it. You know, they couldn't think they could find enough people to work that hard. But the average age seemed to be about 18 to 21. That's about as long as you lasted before you finally figured out, "my back hurts when I do this," "I can go work for 60c an hour down the street, so let's get out of here." But it was a lot of young men doing a lot of backbreaking labor. But it was the, you know it was a, was one of the big manufacturers of Colchester. It employed a lot of people. Minimum wage job, but it employed a lot of people, so. Anyway, that's what I've got, information wise, on the history, up until 1991. So if there's any questions I could possibly answer, or many? And if not, I'll pick up from there and kind of let you know what we're doing now. Because I've got some show and tell here, of present day. In the, since 19- Oh! Yes?

Audience member 1: In regards to the heat, you mentioned involving those kilns, we used to have a W.S. Dickey Clay Manufacturers[3] that made the tile, here, and they claimed that when they unloaded those kilns, they would throw a pine board in there, and if the board didn't light, they'd unload it.

[all laugh]

Schroll: I'd have to agree, because the people, the men that told me, they said, they used the term 'three hundred degrees.' That's an awful lot of heat. I mean, really. I would imagine it was probably in excess of 150.

Audience member 1: I knew some of the men that worked in those kilns out here with me, some men, and they said they'd throw a pine board in there and if it didn't burn, why they'd go ahead and unload.

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[3] W. S. Dickey Clay Manufacturing Company (1931-circa 1941-1942)
http://illinoisarchaeology.com/ceramics/McDonough%20County%20Report.pdf

Schroll: That's, it sounds very similar to what they were doing. It was almost scary. They, they. And they would always just, it was just like the bricks were just extremely hot. They had gloves, but it was like, "go in there and do it, now." And they, they did it. And it's, that's kind of right along the line of what they told me. They were using temperatures like 300 degrees, you know, 250. I don't know if the human body would stand it very long, but I'm sure it was very hot. I'm sure it was hot. It had to be extremely hot, you know. The wintertime must have been the best time to work there. I don't imagine a July afternoon at 200 degrees would have been much fun. But yeah, the heat must have been just extensive, and had to be debilitating. Yes?

Dr. John Hallwas: One point worth making is that they didn't operate in the wintertime.

Schroll: Yeah, that's true. I've heard that.

Dr. John Hallwas: Because of course the bricks could be damp when they're first made, and they'd freeze. So in October, it was over with until late March, early April.

Schroll: That's interesting. George Webster made mention that they did a lot of maintenance on the machines. He talked about fixing the pan grinder one winter. Welding strips on the wheels. And he had mentioned that in the wintertime they didn't do brickmaking. And I didn't know why, but he just said that that's when they fixed machinery. The way I figured was there was no way they could heat that factory.

Dr. John Hallwas: No, [inaudible] bricks freezing.

Schroll: That's, the bricks freezing. Well that's interesting. That is cool. I'm sure, it does get cold out there in the winter, let me tell you. We're out there a lot. Anyway, if that's all I'll go on to the next little section, and kind of tell you what we're doing now. I've passed the flyer out that tells about the Brickyard, and I'll give you a short synopsis of what's happened. The article here from the Illinois State Journal in 1992 will tell you a lot, and the photographs will kind of fill you in on what's going on. But what happened was Dev Genovese knew Keith King through a mutual friend, and she had seen the Brickyard when she lived here in the 1970s. And one thing led to another. Keith said, "You ought to own the Brickyard," and Dev said, "I've always wanted to own the Brickyard," and it was hammered out. [clears throat meaningfully] And she bought the Brickyard off of Keith's daughter and the other man.

[25:00]

And, her first instinct, she is an artist, and she felt that there needed to be a place for the arts. For people to be able to do their art. She is a stained glass artist and knows so many people that are in ceramics and watercolor, and people who are visionaries in their field. And they're spread all over the United States. Well she made a few phone calls and said, "Look. I've got an 8 and a half acre brickyard that's been abandoned since the seventies, and if you really look hard you can find it in the weeds. Or you can dig through the iron or the bricks and the rubble." And immediately the people rallied. And she formed a not for profit organization, and she became hooked up with the Earth Center for the Arts, which is in Adelphi, Maryland, and this became the Brickyard Campus. In fact, the organization in Adelphi, which is right

outside of Washington D.C., had no physical space. They were in rooms like we're in here. Rented rooms, trying to have workshops on art. And the Brickyard was their first actual space that they owned. And it was a place for people to come and do the workshops in hot glassblowing, in raku pottery, in weaving, in visual arts, in mental arts, in yoga, in places where people could sit and just talk and be, and write.

What happened was a real slow process. But through volunteers, through a lot of wonderful people in the Macomb and Colchester area, and people from out of state, this place, it's almost like the phoenix. It's slowly coming out of the ashes. We have planted almost 700 trees in the last three years. We have pushed back all of the vegetation to the point, some of the poison ivy vines are as big as your wrist, that had come and, and we had four and a half inch diameter trees growing out of the kill roofs. We have pushed this back, we have dealt with a couple of scrap people, which I won't go into, but the metal is gone. [clears throat meaningfully] Not to our enrichment, but the metal is gone, and we have slowly worked our way to the point where workshops are an ongoing event now. Macomb Park District does raku pottery. We have Jerry Hovanec, who is a nationally known glassblower, came out the first year and held a workshop for a week on how to build a glass furnace out of scrap. And they took iron, bricks, metal, welded, and a gas line. They laid a gas line, and built a hot glass furnace. Melted, blown glass. The next week was a workshop on how to blow glass. And they put this all together and had a show. It was called the Blues Arts Ball, and the first one was in 1991. And it was a dream that was real slow.

We have a real problem with bricks and mortar money. As you know, in being a historical society, there's a difference in the world. We've applied for grants, and been- wonderful people in the Illinois Arts Institute, the Two Rivers Arts Council, a local art organization, have helped us to do workshops, and to do things like this to provide people with a space. The second Blues Arts Ball was very, very successful. We had thirty artists show up from all over, and we had about eighteen hundred people go through. In Colchester! From all over! And we sold a lot of art, we had a little blues bands playing all day long, and we had a hot glass workshop. And it really hurt, financially, to put this on. Dev became a *real* not-for-profit organization after we paid for the port a potties, the lighting, and all this other stuff. But we laid off for a couple years, and now we're getting ready to do the next one. This is the third one, but we've recouped our losses, and went into this one with a little bit of different attitude. We applied for grant money early on, last year. We went to the Macomb Visitors and Convention Bureau, and went to Two Rivers Arts Council. We went to local people to do, the Macomb Park District is gonna do, involved in it now. We've got Walch Stained Glass Studio involved, out of Springfield, Illinois.

[30:00]

We've got the blues clubs out of Springfield, Peoria, and Keokuk to donate music, and I mean donate music. Musicians, bands, are coming. We also got local people to do music. We've got a band that formed in the last three weeks, of good musicians who want to come out and help. We've had 35 artists show up or send back their forms. We've got a half a dozen people in town to do purchase awards. We are looking forward to a phenomenal show, and what we really want is people to understand that this area, Macomb, Colchester, this whole area could use a place like this. It's taking the Brickyard and using it in a new way. It'll never make bricks again, that's one thing a lot of people ask us. We'll never mix clay there. But we're saving the buildings, they're going to look exactly like they used to. If we can save them. That's the key. And what we're doing now, we do this to raise money. This year we had a wonderful artist, and you'll see

a little flyer, this one here will give you an idea, this Sue McClain Burgess, sent Don and Laura, through them to us, a wonderful watercolor that she did of the Brickyard, and she said in her letter as you can see, we were supposed to do something with it. Well this got us thinking about a raffle, because she said we could raffle this artwork.

[Tape Cuts: 31:41]

Transcribed and researched for Western Illinois University Libraries by Julia Thompson in April 2022.