

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin
County Historian

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Angelo Manella restoring the facade of St. Joseph's Cemetery Chapel during this past summer.

-Bob Gates photo

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MEDINA SANDSTONE QUARRY HISTORY PROJECT

Status Report - by Bob Gates

The seven weeks I have spent here in Orleans County conducting research have been very fruitful. The aim of my research was to arrive at a general framework of the history of the Medina Sandstone Quarry Industry and then to fill in the blanks with the rich folklife of the men and women associated with the quarry and with that part of history. By studying various written histories, newspaper articles, and other written accounts I was able to piece together a timeline of events important to the industry. For instance, we know that John Ryan "discovered" the Medina Sandstone in the bed of Oak Orchard Creek near Medina around the year 1837. We also know that he gave it the name, Medina Sandstone, and began quarrying it in that year. At the same time we see that many Cobblestone houses built before that time utilized the stone as quoins (cornerstones). Also houses such as Marcus Phillips' were constructed around that time and were built of stones quarried by individual English farmers in that area. We also know, thanks to newspaper articles, that in 1890 over 2000 men were employed in the trade in the county with a payroll of \$750,000. We know of strikes, the formation and demise of the syndicate, and the rejuvenation of the quarries in the 1920s. (I have left out much here for the sake of brevity.) What we did not know and what I have seen as a focus of my research are the facts that are not revealed by the written sources; that is the folklife or "the everyday history of the common man and woman" who worked or were associated with the quarries. This is the real meat

and muscle that hangs on the skeleton of history.

The folklife of events and people who lived here before the turn of the century can only be revealed through a study of accounts, diaries, photographs and stories that go back to that time. The folklife from 1890 to the present can be mined from the memories of those still alive here in the county. Their accounts are captured through the intense interviewing resulting in tape-recorded oral histories. The aim of my research then has been to gather as many of these sources as possible to get a clearer view of the folklife of the Quarry Industry. The resulting photographs, artifacts and collected oral accounts have reflected a wide range of activities, lifestyles, ethnic heritage, work techniques, descriptions of first days on the jobs, social and religious activities, major events, and community history and folkart. I have tried to cover every conceivable aspect of social history that could be remembered.

I tape-recorded sixteen individuals and the amount of people who could be interviewed has expanded each day I was here. The project could go on for years if everybody who was recommended was interviewed. Besides the tape-recorded interviews there were at least eight interviews conducted with paper and pen. Many individuals gave us papers and photographs to be copied. In addition, over 150 slides were made so that future slide shows could be developed.

The individuals ranged from Lucy Fancher, daughter of a man instrumental in starting the syndicate, to Gregory Monacelli, a stone cutter and operator of the Eagle Harbor Quarry. Angelo Mannella told me about his apprenticeship days in the quarry. His rich descriptions of what he saw gives us insight into how the quarry had been run in the early 1910s and 1920s. Other stone cutters I interviewed gave me more rich details and added to the overall picture. One young man, Charles Martillotta, was interviewed to find out how much quarrying has changed over time. He had worked as a quarryman in the 1960s when the tradition of precision stone cutting had all but died. I talked to many Italians, Polish, Irish and English informants about their own ethnic identity and how it related to the industry. Mary Judwick, for example, talked about her father who came from Poland to work as a Blacksmith here in the quarries. She told of his work but also about the folklife of the Polish community in Albion. Earlier interviews with Sophia Cotriss and Ceil White conducted by Helen McAllister earlier this year and last year gave similar insights into the Polish communities in Medina. Elio Spada and other Italians I interviewed told of the lifestyles of the Italian communities in Albion, Hulberton, and Medina. Their lives and the work they did in the quarries are so inter-related that it is impossible to separate.

In all these interviews I was looking for both stories and personal first hand experiences. The first hand experiences give us rich detail and descriptions of life. The family and community stories can reach back to times before the subjects actually lived. These stories all have a "kernel of truth that can found" and tell us much about what people thought were important events in their lives. By looking at what kinds of stories have been passed down, how they were transmitted, and who tells them today can give us a wealth of information.

I have only in this brief report been able to point out the directions and some of the results that my research has taken. The Second Phase of the project, the analysis of data is now underway. I believe that a very valuable archive is another result of this project. All of the tapes will be transcribed and indexed and many photos and artifacts have been identified in the community that will form a good base for a permanent collection.

I have enjoyed working with the Orleans County Council on The Arts and look forward to seeing you in the future.