

Do You Remember?

By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian



Brick Companies in the Valley

On the north bank of the Arroyo del Valle on Joseph Black's property, a 30-acre clay deposit was discovered. In March 1875 William B. Merrill leased the clay bank from Black to start the Pleasanton Brick Company. According to Dan Mosier's information in his on-line web site, "California Bricks," the brickyard, employing about 20 men, made common red hand-molded bricks and shipped more than one million bricks to San Francisco annually. The *Enterprise*, an old Livermore newspaper, on 13 May 1880 reported that 48 Chinese laborers had a contract to turn out 22,000 bricks per day during the coming months.

Janet Newton in her book, *Stories of the Vineyards and Wineries of the Livermore Valley*, told of Ethel Brodt of Pleasanton describing the brickyard: "There was bustling activity, the jargon of the Chinese coolies, some with trays of undried brick, some carrying loads ready to be burned in the kilns, some driving carts filled with clay."

In 1881 this business was bought by the Remillard brothers, Peter and Phillip. The Remillard Brick Company operated from 1881 to 1935 at the same site, on Stanley Boulevard near Pleasanton. Southern Pacific built a spur line to the brickyard. Three new kilns were built, and 65 men, but no Chinese, were employed. In 1890 the company purchased an additional 41 acres and put up two more kilns and a large smokestack.

The Raboli brothers, Charles and Peter, worked at the brickyard when they first came to Livermore from Lombardy, Italy, but by 1891 they had saved enough money to buy a Livermore saloon and send for their wives from Italy. Most of the red common brick used in the valley during the plant's years of operation came from this brickyard. The familiar Johnston Building and the Firehouse in Pleasanton, the Raboli winery in Livermore, the old Alameda County Courthouse (torn down in 1950), the Alameda City Hall, the Berkeley Wells Fargo Bank, and the Odd Fellows Hall in Fremont are all built with Remillard bricks. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake cracked all the plant's chimneys,

and they had to be torn down and rebuilt. In June 1935 a fire destroyed the plant. The Remillards transferred their business to San Jose.

It is fitting that the stores across from Valley Memorial Hospital on Stanley Boulevard should have a brick façade and be named the Brickyard Shopping Center. In 1910 the Livermore Fire Brick Company began operating on that site, and the business continued with several different owners until spring of 1949. This was Livermore's first non-agricultural industry. The company had been encouraged to locate in Livermore by local businessmen who contributed financially, and the town trustees voted to use leftover 1906 earthquake relief funds to purchase land for the plant. The company promised not to maintain any cottages, bunkhouses, or company stores on site, so that employees would live and trade locally. A plaque at the shopping center, surrounded by various bricks made at the brickyard, tells of this history.

No significant local source of clay was found, so the company had Southern Pacific bring clay from Amador and Placer Counties on gondola cars. Southern Pacific built a spur line to the brickyard. The first bricks went to Sacramento, but the factory also sent bricks to exotic places far from California—the Philippines, Hawaii, Alaska. Operation became intermittent, based on demand. When business was good, the plant employed between 30 and 40 men. Walter Petersen remembered that his father, Chris, worked at the factory. Chris Petersen was a sparring partner with Max Baer in the late 1920s but had to quit when his ribs

were broken; his regular work at the brickyard went on, however painfully.

The 1930 U.S. census listed thirty brickyard workers in Livermore or nearby in unincorporated Murray Township, making the factory one of the larger employers in the area during the Depression. In nine months of operation in 1937, the company payroll was \$45,000. The Livermore plant contained a large wooden building housing the power plant and brickmaking machinery. Many smaller buildings were at the site: a drier shed, a molding building, an office, a laboratory, a blacksmith shop.

The brickyard manufactured fire brick, face brick, ornamental brick, hearth and mantle tile, and terra cotta. Former workers recalled that the complex had small kilns that held about 20,000 bricks and larger ones that held 40,000 to 60,000. The kilns were heated in the beginning with oil and later with gas. Ordinary red brick required a temperature of 1,800° F, but fire brick needed 2,250° F; sometimes the fire brick took a week to cool down. The operation was capable of producing 30,000 bricks daily, according to Mosier. There were several tall brick chimneys. Percy Groth was foreman of the brickyard from 1918 until 1948, and Louis B. Mueller was superintendent from 1936 until 1948. The fancy architectural details on the exterior of the Bank of Italy Building in Livermore came from the Fire Brick Company. The Tribune Tower, the Student Union Building on the UC Berkeley campus, the Martinez City Hall, as well as many buildings on downtown First Street in Livermore were all built with Livermore Fire Company bricks. During World War II, brick from the Livermore factory lined furnaces of industrial plants and the boilers of naval and merchant ships. The Livermore Fire Brick Company was run by several different companies, but finally closed in 1949, and the remains of the plant were demolished in early 1953. Dynamite blasts on 10 February knocked down its last landmark—a 60-foot chimney.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com)

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