

M O D E R N

1918 – 1990

MODERN ERA. 1918 – 1990

The carnage and turmoil of World War I, from 1914 to 1918, certainly delivered one of the major blows to the brick industry in Manitoba, and Canada. But the interruption of the war was not the only blow – a construction downturn caused by an economic recession had already begun in 1912. And it was a simple fact that the building requirements of the province had very much been met – there just was not the need for new buildings, or for the brick that had been so readily available to builders over the previous 25 years.

Before the war there were at least 60 operations going strong in the province, but nearly all of these were shuttered by the war's end, including some of the largest and most productive from that period – Gladstone (closed 1913), La Riviere and Carman (closed 1914), Virden (closed 1915), Edrans and Morris (closed during the war). Only 11 pre-war yards survived past 1919, with three of these lasting into the 1920s (in Winnipeg/St. Boniface, Kelly Brothers to the early 1920s, and in rural areas, Brookdale to 1925 and Stephens in Portage la Prairie to 1928). Some firms made it into the 1930s: Wood's and Winnipeg Brick into the mid-1930s, the Gilbert Plains yard (a branch of the Snyder operation in Portage la Prairie) and the venerable Marion Brick Company (which had claimed the title of "Oldest Brick Yard in Manitoba") which made it to 1937.

A few operations gained new hopeful owners, but typically without long-lasting success: at Morris (where the Western Brick Company was established but only managed two seasons of operations, from 1920-21), at Sidney (where Sidney Brick and Clay Works took over in 1920 and lasted six seasons of operation), and at Learys (where William Leary, son of the original owner, got the place going for several years, 1948-52, until his untimely passing).

Alsips of Winnipeg would remain at their site on the border of St. Boniface and Elmwood, “silent” during the war years, with the clay for their production depleted by the early 1930s. But Alsips took over the yards at Sidney in 1928 so that the still-productive clay beds there could be exploited and material shipped back to Winnipeg for processing. And while the Snyder operation at Portage la Prairie was productive until 1942, it too was also taken over as a clay site by Alsips, which used that site until 1972.

There were just five start-up firms from this period. Two of these were of minor consequence – a small site at Whitemouth started by John Wardrop and only operational in 1920; and at Swan River, where Swan River Clay Products relocated the old equipment from the closed Edrans yard (see below), and was able to burn kilns from 1953-55 and again in 1959 before closing up. The other three yards—the Edrans yard noted here, a second operation at Whitemouth, and a major establishment near Lockport—were much more substantial.

Edrans / National Clay Products

The first version of the Edrans yard, noted earlier, was started in 1905 on the 12-acre site with its “remarkable clay formation,” which was a mound about 40 yards long by 180 yards wide. At its height, the operation had four kilns and although it was highly productive, and producing “good quality bricks,” like many others of the day the plant was shut down early in World War I. In 1924 the National Clay Products Company, Ltd., a creature of the Hales brick-making family, which had operated earlier plants at Rapid City and Brookdale, took over the site. In this case, W. E. Hales, son of the founder, was the President with the firm’s motto being: “Better Bricks for Beautiful Buildings and Bungalows.” Hales and his family would live at Edrans during the building season, and in fact gave a social for the plant employees when production resumed in August of 1925. The bricks were said to be as hard as flint, as well as uniform in size and shape. It was observed that National had put much time and money into research and experimentation – not only for efficient production but also for new brick needs. Edrans bricks came in six different colours, and the firm had

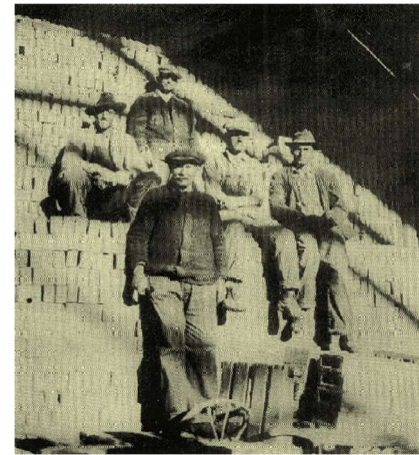
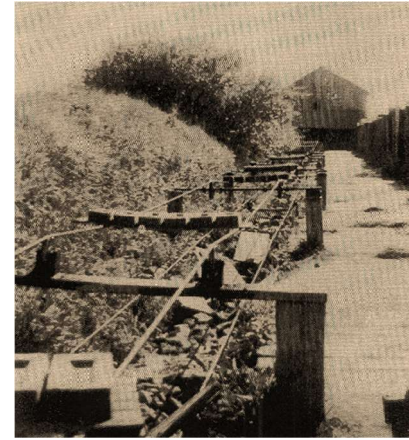
sold half a million between the spring of 1925 and the following November. Hales also planned to make rough-texture and tapestry bricks, both popular new aesthetic qualities sought by architects. In 1926, the family patriarch, Robert D. Hales, came out of retirement to superintend the Edrans plant, and the family expanded and improved the operation by early 1928. National Clay Products became one of the last of the old-time brick plants still producing brick into the 1940s, likely to the end of World War II.

Whitemouth / Wardrop Yard

In June of 1922, Walter Wardrop, brother of John, noted above, purchased the McCutcheon brick yard just west of town. This operation would prove much more successful than earlier attempts at brick-making at Whitemouth, and was run as a family business. At start-up, the yard was producing 26,000 bricks per day, with a proposed increase for subsequent kilns to 40,000. The Wardrop yard is still looked on with considerable local affection, given that it remained open throughout most of the Depression of the 1930s, providing work for otherwise unemployed local men. The Wardrop family continued to run the yard until its sale to Alsip Brick, Tile and Lumber in 1945. Under Alsips, production increased to 1.25 and 1.5 million bricks per year, employing 52 men. The yard finally closed in 1957, and the plant was dismantled the following year, with machinery going to Alsip's Elmwood operation in Winnipeg. There they were put to use in the production of the cheaper and easier-to-make concrete blocks.

Lockport / Red River Brick and Tile

The last brick operation in Manitoba had shallow roots in the province, not being one of the established operations from previous decades. Called Red River Brick and Tile, whose parent firm was 1-XL Industries Ltd., out of Medicine Hat, Alberta, the Manitoba operation ran for nearly 20 years, from 1971 to 1990. The firm located in Lockport for its proximity to rail lines and at least one of its clay and sand sources – at nearby Ladywood. It also hauled in clay from Ste. Rose du Lac. The company was a major producer – with a capacity of 15 million bricks a year. The plant employed 30



Images of the Whitemouth yard of Walter Wardrop; top of the conveyor system, showing brick pallets in use; and below of the brick shed. (Courtesy *Trails to Rails to Highways*)

people for its yearly nine-month operation, and offered bricks in three sizes and twelve shades. While Manitoba was its primary market, Red River Brick and Tile also sold in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario. It has been observed that a labour dispute in 1990 caused Red River Brick to close its Manitoba operations. The large brick-pressing plant and offices still stand, but the huge tunnel kilns were demolished.



Work crew in front of the kiln shed at Walter Wardrop's Whitemouth operation. (Courtesy *Trails to Rails to Highways*)



View in 2017 of the brick-pressing building and main offices of the Red River Brick and Tile site near Lockport.