

Books Preserve History of Salt Mines

Donna Eschenbrenner, August 8,, 2014

Former Lansing Elementary School fourth grade teacher (and current Lansing Town Historian) Louise Bement used this rich industrial heritage to teach some of her students about the practice of history.



Photo caption: The International Salt Plant in Lansing is shown from about 1960. It closed and operations were moved to Watkins Glen in 1962. (Photo courtesy *International Salt Memory Book*)

Industrial development in any given region is usually dependent on the area's natural resources, and one of Tompkins County's most abundant natural resources is salt. Hundreds of millions of years ago ocean waters spread across much of New York State, and massive lagoons of salt water evaporated, leaving huge layers of salt, some hundreds of feet thick. Covered over by sediments over eons, many of these layers can now be found under Cayuga Lake.

Native Americans knew of salt springs in the area and early European settlers tried drilling for salt, but none of the efforts were commercially successful until the 1890s. In Ithaca the Remington Salt Company was established on the east side of the lake in 1901. The Cayuga Lake Salt Company was formed in Lansing around 1892 and merged with the International Salt Company in 1904. Immigrants came from Syria to work at the International Salt plant and the neighborhood where they lived overlooking the plant came to be known as Syrian Hill. In 1962 the plant closed and operations moved to Watkins Glen. Other salt concerns include the Rock Salt Corporation (1915) and the Cayuga Rock Salt Company (1921), which was later bought out by Cargill, still present in Lansing today. According to their website, Cargill's Lansing facility "processes approximately 2 million tons of road salt that is shipped to more than 1,500 locations throughout the northeast United States."

Former Lansing Elementary School fourth grade teacher (and current Lansing Town Historian) Louise Bement used this rich industrial heritage to teach some of her students about the practice of history. The results are fascinating. The classes wrote two books: *International Salt Memory Book* (1977-1978) and *The Rock Salt Mine – 1916-1985* (1984-1985). Both books follow a similar format: The students describe their interest in the history of the salt industry and then proceed with a patchwork of reminiscences of former salt company employees, family members, and descendants. Brief sections of writings from the students themselves are interspersed throughout, relating their experiences of the research process, and their impressions. Both books are illustrated with photographs from the Lansing Town Collection or from personal collections. The results are delightful: Part youthful engagement, part historical insight and revelation.

International Salt Memory Book starts almost like a children's fairy tale: "Once there was a salt plant that was started in 1892 but now it is not there anymore. It was called 'The Ludlowville Salt Block' and a lot of men worked there. They liked the salt plant and made good salt. There were three fires at the plant but the men would not stop working at the plant. They would build it right back up and start working again." Student Brian Cleveland wrote that in 1977. We learn that fires aren't the only hazards that the workers faced: Heavy machinery caused injuries and sometimes even deaths. We also learn that salt had to be dried after it was taken from the ground, originally by machines called centrifugal extractors, which were later replaced by more modern rotary and drum dryers called exhausters. Salt was transported in bags, first made of burlap, then cotton, then later still of heavy paper. Female workers, some smiling for the camera, are pictured loading salt into bags.

The best parts of the books are about the people – the workers and their families, like George Varga who came to Lansing from Hungary in 1909 and worked at Cayuga Rock Salt for 33 cents an hour, six days a week. "He married Annie in 1911 and had seven children and seven grandchildren." Mrs. Solomon (perhaps one of the women who was hired to bag the salt) once knocked over a donkey cart spilling tons of salt, but she never got reprimanded because "she was just too nice a person to scold."

The *International Salt Memory Book* and *The Rock Salt Mine* are available to read at The History Center. Special thanks go to Mrs. Louise Bement and her fourth graders from those long ago classes for the memories.

Donna Eschenbrenner is the archivist at The History Center in Tompkins County