

# **Slater Brothers Brick and the Story of Brick in Lehi by Richard Van Wagoner**

Peter Johnson, who arrived in Lehi from Denmark in 1874, built the first brick home in town the following year for Peter Christofferson. The small home at 99 West Main (present site of the Lehi City building and old State Bank of Lehi building) later became a Congregational school (New West School or Lehi Academy).

The brick for the Christofferson home and all other brick structures in Lehi until the early 1890's was shipped by rail into the community--an expensive process that few townsmen could afford. The August 14, 1891 "Lehi Banner" noted "the starting of a new industry in our midst, by two of Lehi's energetic young men."

Messrs. (Franz)Salzner and Gray had visited brick works in Salt Lake City and afterwards purchased a brick-making machine from George Lowe. When the machine arrived by rail during the first week in August it was set up on the site of present-day General Refractories (Lehi Junction).

Prospects for the Lehi Brick Company looked bright. "The old style adobe house is getting out of date" the August 14, 1891 "Lehi Banner" reported; "you can't afford to build an adobe house when you can buy a first class quality of brick in your own town. By all means encourage home industry and build up your own town."

Salzner & Gray's machine had a capacity for making twenty thousand bricks per day and employed twenty men in the process. The first kiln of brick was burned during the last week of September 1891.

By mid-1892 Lehi Brick, under new management (Joseph Meirs, Newburn Butt and William Simmons), became Lehi M. and B. Company. One of the first orders filled by the firm was brick for the large two-story portion of Broadbent & Son.

In 1893 Nephi W. Slater applied for work at a Lehi Junction adobe pit being operated by Andrew Fjeld and Abel John Evans. Told there was no work available, Slater and his brothers James S. and Joseph, and brother-in-law John Mitchell, purchased Lehi M. and B. Company from Meirs, Butt, and Simmons.

The clay in this area lay on the surface; no stripping of overburden was required to reach the material. Two different types of clay were available in Lehi Junction deposits. The top twelve inches was a uniform red-colored material, whereas the underlying six or eight feet was a light, yellow clay.

The clay was loosened by a two-horse “Mormon scraper” which moved the materials into a clay pit where water was added. After the mixture was allowed to temper for twenty-four hours, the gooey substance was shoveled into a horse-powered pug mill where it was thoroughly mixed. After being removed it was thrown into the three-brick molds, marked with a large S, and allowed to dry in the sun.

After hardening the bricks were emptied from their molds and stacked in a kiln which the Slater brothers had built on the site. The brick oven, twelve feet high, sixteen feet wide, and thirty feet long, held 120,000 bricks. The heating (coal was the fuel source) and cooling process required about twenty days for a complete cycle.

Slater’s brickworks required six men. A day’s work was considered finished when one unit (five thousand bricks) had been taken from the pit, molded, and stacked in the kiln.

Many homes and buildings in Lehi and surrounding communities are constructed of Slater Brick. The old Third Ward Chapel (the Ross Lamb home today) and the lining of the Lehi High School gymnasium (demolished in 1987) were built of the local brick.

Eventually Nephi Slater’s brothers drifted into other concerns, and John Mitchell opened a competitive brickyard at the Lehi Junction. “If you are going to build a house that your children can inherit buy your brick of J. Mitchell at Lehi Junction,” he advertised in the August 3, 1899 “Lehi Banner.” But he, like James Powell and Henry Kemp’s brickyard (c. 1906), did not stay in business for long.

In 1914, Slater and his friend Olaf Holmstead formed Slater and Holmstead Brick Company, but Holmstead withdrew the following year. Eleven years later another prominent Lehi mason, Chase Featherstone, bought out Slater’s interest. Within a few years, however, this brick yard became defunct. Little commercial activity, outside the railroad, occurred in this area until World War II.

Immediately after the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the

Defense Plant Corporation (D.P.C.), a federal agency, began constructing defense plants at strategic locations throughout the Intermountain region. The Geneva Steel Plant, which provided jobs to thousands of local people, was built during this period and then leased to U.S. Steel Corporation.

A product essential to steel production is fire or refractory brick, which is used to line steel reducing furnaces and coke ovens. Lehi Mayor Dean Prior reported in the April 30, 1942 "Lehi Free Press" that the D.P. C. had decided to construct a fire brick factory for supplying the furnaces and ovens at Geneva, on the site of the old Slater Brick Yard.

Ryberg Construction Company began work on the \$600,000 plant in July 1942. When completed the facility was first leased to the California-based E.M. Smith Company (1943-45), then to Gladding, McBean & Company (1945-46)

In August 1946, William A. Hauck, head of the steel division of the War Assets Corporation, came to Lehi to inspect the brick plant. He declared the facility surplus property (the war had ended), and announced it would be placed on the bidding block.

General Refractories Company (GREFO) of Philadelphia, which bid \$375,000, became the new owner of the Lehi plant, which at that time included the main manufacturing building, six beehive kilns (each with 100,000-brick capacity) a locker/shower building, office building, storage shed, machine tools, and brickmaking laboratory, and testing equipment. Wilson C. Rhone, who had been serving as Gladding, McBean & Company superintendent, was hired in the same capacity by General Refractories.

By 1949, GREFCO employed forty-five people with an annual payroll of \$110,000. The 450,000 bricks manufactured monthly at the plant were shipped to Geneva Steel, Bethlehem Pacific Coast Steel Corporation (Seattle), Columbia Steel (Pittsburg, California), Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation (Pueblo), and the American Smelting and Refining Company (Garfield, Utah).

In 1973, Ralph V. Lawrence, division vice-president and general manager of GREFCO, announced a \$1 million expansion program at the Lehi Works. The new grinding and burning facility, which created fifteen additional jobs, specialized in direct-bonded brick wrapped in steel casing. This product, previously available only from a Gary, Indiana, plant, is made by heating the raw materials until they fuse together without a bonding agent.

This process (patented by GREFCO) allows the brick to be used in the hottest applications such as Geneva Steel's open-hearth furnaces. This prolongs the life of the brick by preventing the furnace gas from circulating in the brick linings.

Under the 1992 supervision of plant manager Steve Miller, GREFCO manufactures several hundred varieties and sizes of brick. Products range from nine-inch brick to intricate shapes and skews. Despite advancements in mechanization, much of the work at the brick plant is still done by hand. Stacking the kilns, which must withstand temperatures of over 3,000 degrees, for example, required five days. The oven is then heated to 2,720 degrees for approximately ten days. Cooling requires another ten days and the removal of the brick an additional five days.

In recent years GREFCO has expanded its clientele beyond Geneva Steel. The plant now supplies dozens of other mills and factories around the country. Raw materials for GREFCO's bricks are shipped to Lehi from a multitude of exotic places including Austria, Greece, the Phillipines and Africa.