

Hunting for that one special brick? This is the festival for you

By Anne Li

Nelsonville this weekend is hosting its first Nelsonville Brick Festival, an event where collectors can trade bricks and individuals can learn about the locally made bricks' role in history.



The two-day festival includes a train ride to former brick-making center Haydenville, a "brick swap" and a scavenger hunt during which competitors must find 25 different types of bricks that have been hidden in local stores. Prominent brick collector and International Brick Collectors Association librarian Jim Graves also will be attending the event.

According to Ralph Boll, coordinator of the Brick Festival, bricks can help the public learn about local and ancestral history.

"This whole region had a ton of brick plants (Nowadays people say), 'my family either worked in the coal mine or made brick,'" he said.

The brick industry existed in many local communities including Haydenville, northwest of Nelsonville, which was known for its clay-like bricks, as well as Glouster and Nelsonville. According to the Nelsonville Brick Plant's website, bricks began to lose popularity to asphalt around World War I, though a former brick company in Logan still manufactures clay tiles.

Bricks played an integral role in the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, Boll said, as they were used to create the roads needed to transport steel and other materials.

Bricks made locally have been found everywhere from Cincinnati to London, England, and come in a variety of designs, most famous of which is the signature "star brick" of Nelsonville. Three star brick designs exist the "snowflake," the "flower" or the "eight-point star," and the "circle cube."

The durability of the bricks evolved over time. According to Boll, the bricks were originally made to be very porous and therefore extremely weak. Later on, brick makers began to apply a salt glaze over the bricks to stabilize their structures. Finally, bricks were made by being compressed in a mold twice before receiving the salt-glaze application. This method increased a brick's density, making it more stable.

In the 1904 World's Fair, the "Nelsonville Block" was named the world's most durable brick.

"Preserving the brick is a service to the community, to the region," Boll said. "I think eventually people will appreciate what we're doing."

Boll acquires his bricks by taking them off the hands of cities and individuals who wish to replace their streets and sidewalks with asphalt or concrete. Boll expressed his admiration for the strength and many uses of the brick, and believes that secondary roads should be paved with brick today.

"(A brick street) is more cost-effective in the long (run)," he said.

According to Boll, while it costs more to lay brick in a street, a brick street requires less maintenance than an asphalt road or concrete sidewalk.

Additionally, brick roads tend to slow down fast-moving vehicles, increasing the safety of the streets.

"The sound (bricks) make, it slows the traffic," he said.

For Boll, Athens County's local bricks document the progress of the area.

"(Bricks) are a good kind of history to pass on, because they last forever," his daughter Toni, who is helping her father prepare for the festival, said. "People of different walks of life come together with the rich history of the bricks."

Those interested in attending the Nelsonville Brick Festival should visit its website, www.nelsonvillebrickfest.com. A complete schedule can be found there, though the main events are the train rides at 2 and 6 p.m. Friday on the Hocking Valley Railway, and on Saturday the IBCA Brick Swap at 9 a.m., the IBCA auction at noon, the Brick Scavenger Hunt at 1 p.m., a Brick Rider Car Show at 2 p.m., and music by Double Shot at 6 p.m. Most of the events take place at Hocking College.

According to IBCA rules, bricks may not be purchased, only traded for. Those interested in obtaining a brick without trading should participate in the scavenger hunt, where participants are allowed to keep one of each type of brick they find.

"Brick and brick and brick and more brick. I got a lot," Boll said