

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

Mount Clemens Pottery Company

(©2008 by Mount Clemens Public Library. All rights reserved.)



Pottery production workers sponge minor defects from the surfaces of unfired casseroles, ca.1924.

When a business depression hit Mount Clemens in 1907-8, the **Mount Clemens Business Men's Association** began an active campaign to attract new industry to the city. By 1913, a committee of **John Paganetti**, **Fred Schott**, **William Nank** and **Spencer Dalby** had travelled to Ohio and Pennsylvania to learn more about pottery production, and had recommended that the association pursue the establishment of such an enterprise in Mount Clemens.

On June 20, 1913, the *Mount Clemens Monitor* reported that an organizational meeting for the Mount Clemens Pottery Company had been held, and that subscriptions for stock were being sold in an effort to raise \$125,000 in initial capital. By December, a board of directors was in place, and on January 30, 1914, the directors hired **Charles E. Doll** as general manager.

A farm on Cass Avenue, just west of the railroad track, was selected as the site for the plant and ground-breaking ceremonies took place on May 19, 1914. Production began in January, 1915, and reached the level of 3,000 dozen dishes per week by the end of the first year. The success was short-lived, however, because the onset of World War I choked off the pottery's supply of English clay and threatened to shut down production. When the war ended, the market rebounded and the pottery was busy again.

The **S.S. Kresge Company**, a good customer of the pottery, bought the company in 1920, paying \$310 per share to the local stockholders. In 1920, new buildings and the world's first tunnel kiln

for firing dinnerware were built, and production soared. By World War II, 1,000 people had steady employment at the pottery. The war required a reduction in manpower, however, and mechanization of some processes allowed production to remain high with fewer people. After the war, the workforce stabilized at 500 people.

In 1941, the pottery became embroiled in a labor dispute that would last for 6 years and would eventually reach the United States Supreme Court. Concerned about increased mechanization of the production line, pottery workers had organized into Local 1083, United Pottery Workers-C.I.O., with **Steve Anderson** as President. On April 14, 1941, approximately half of the workers walked off the job, demanding better working conditions and more employees hired on. Then, in a federal lawsuit filed two days later with Steve Anderson as the lead plaintiff, the union charged the pottery with violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Specifically, it was claimed that time clocks did not register the correct time, that employees began work before their shift starting times, and that they were sometimes compelled to purchase their own tools. In compensation, they wanted time and a half for overtime and damages. The walkout was ended through negotiation on May 8, and an uneasy peace lasted until November 24, 1941, when another walkout resulted in fights and the jailing of four people.

The lawsuit languished in the legal system for two years, during which time a Special Master was appointed to gather facts from both sides. The Special Master's report was filed in March, 1943, and the case was referred to **District Judge Frank Picard**, who ruled that workers be given seven minutes before starting time and five minutes after meal break to walk to their workstations and do preliminary set-up. The judgment was dismissed upon appeal by the pottery, and the union sent the matter to the United States Supreme Court in August, 1945. The pottery's case was argued by Mount Clemens attorney **Bert Nunneley**; the union's case was argued by **Edward Lamb**.

The decision in the case of *Anderson v. Mount Clemens Pottery*, 328 U.S. 680 (1946), popularly referred to as the "Portal to Portal Pay" case, was handed down on June 10, 1946. The court held that portal-to-portal pay was warranted, except in cases where the amount was "trifling." The justices then returned the case to Judge Picard in District Court to settle the details. This decision caught the attention of labor leaders throughout the country and spawned many other portal-to-portal pay lawsuits until 1947, when Congress passed the Portal-to-Portal Pay Act. The new law clarified what "time spent" meant, and relieved employers from compensating workers for nonproductive activities, except where covered specifically under labor agreements.

In December, 1962, Charles Doll, who had been general manager since the beginning, retired at the age of 80. He was succeeded by his son, **Charles E. Doll, Jr.**, who served as general manager until his own retirement on January 19, 1966.

In 1965, the Kresge company sold the Mount Clemens Pottery. The new owners operated it under the name **Jamestown China Company**. Ownership passed to **Action Industries** of Cheswick, Pennsylvania in 1983.

Mount Clemens Pottery ceased production permanently in December, 1987, due to losses of \$10 million. A work force of 200 lost employment. An attempt by employees to organize a buyout of the pottery in early 1988 did not come to fruition, and the plant was demolished in December, 1993.

For more information about Mount Clemens Pottery Company, we recommend:

- Doll, Charles Edward, Jr. *The Mount Clemens Pottery Company: History and Memories*. Mount Clemens, Mich. : The Author, 1993.
- Doll, Charles Edward, Jr. *History of the Mount Clemens Pottery Company, 1913-1965*. St. Clair Shores, Mich. : The Author, [ca.1966].
- Lamb, Edward. *No Lamb For Slaughter: An Autobiography*. New York : Harcourt, Brace, 1963.

- Hotts, Mitch. "Pottery Plant's Walls Tumble Down," *Macomb Daily*, December 14, 1993, p.3A.
- Larue, Timothy R. "Pottery Buyout 'Dead in Water'," *Macomb Daily*, March 3, 1988, p.1A.
- Driskell, Bill. "Management Team Seeks to Reopen Pottery Plant," *Macomb Daily*, December 15, 1987, p.3A.
- Larue, Timothy R. "Pottery Plant Closing Leaves Workers Hanging," *Macomb Daily*, December 12, 1987, p.1A.
- Larue, Timothy R. "Pottery Plant to Close; Worker Buyout Planned," *Macomb Daily*, December 11, 1987, p.1A.
- "Heart Attack Fatal to Charles E. Doll," *Macomb Daily*, June 27, 1966, p.1.
- "Kresge Sells Pottery," *Macomb Daily*, July 27, 1965 p.1.
- "Text of Judge Picard's Decision in Mt. Clemens Pottery Case," *Detroit News*, February 9, 1947, p.14.
- "Wages and Salaries: Closing the Portal," *Time*, April 14, 1947, p.86.
- Click here to read the Supreme Court decision in the case of [*Anderson v. Mount Clemens Pottery Co.*](#), 328 US 680 (1946).
- To read more about labor lawyer Edward Lamb, follow this link to a finding aid for the [Edward Lamb Papers](#) at Bowling Green State University