



PART III The Land



The Old Clay Pit

by Dan Wyant

Stroll along a pleasant path just inside the northeast border of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery and you'll walk past the site of one of the city's pioneer enterprises. From the intersection of University Street and East 25th, walk to your left on the cemetery path for about 300 yards, to just before the first hairpin turn up the hill. Stop and look ahead toward the gentle slope covered with shrubs and grasses.

This is where they dug the clay that made bricks for the University of Oregon's first two buildings, Deady Hall and Villard Hall, as well as some of Eugene's earliest church and business structures.

The property was originally part of the 640-acre donation land claim staked out by Fielding McMurry and his wife in 1851. They built their two-story white farmhouse where the UO's Erb Memorial Union now stands, and in 1859 sold the ten-acre hill south and west of their home to the Eugene Masonic Lodge for the city's first cemetery. Part of the purchase agreement provided for a free McMurry burial plot in the new grounds. It was used all too soon when McMurry died the following year.



Lower left: Brickyard on W. 11th, Eugene, ca. 1905.

Top right: Newly opened UO (Deady Hall) in 1876. Bricks were later covered with cement to stem deterioration.

Opposite page (clockwise from top left): Quarry work near McKenzie River, 1923; The Toledo-Siletz mail stage; Seavy Ferry on McKenzie River, 1914; Hendricks Park in earlier days; Log drive tent on Fall Creek; Looking at the UO, 1890s; Oregon Electric Railway celebration float, 1912; Girl with steer, ca. 1904.

His son, James Scott McMurry, carried on the brick-making business. He supplied the bricks for Deady Hall in 1873, receiving \$6 for each thousand bricks delivered to the site. The one-building university wasn't ready to open until 1876, but the outside brick shell was completed that first year, says Keith Richard, University Archivist Emeritus. The bricks were molded and then fired in a kiln located at the McMurry homestead.

But some of the brick making occurred at the site itself. Frank G. McMurry, a son of James, prepared a sketch for UO records in 1956 that shows the location of the farmhouse, an orchard, the cemetery, and the clay pit which he identified as a "brickyard."

From a personal observation, this writer can verify that broken pieces of bricks from the old site extended down to the 2500 block of Emerald Street, where my wife and I purchased our first home in Eugene. Digging in the yard while gardening invariably turned up quantities of broken brick, which puzzled us then. Emerald and Onyx streets are only about a half block apart at that point, and the brickyard or its storage area obviously extended to what later became Emerald Street.

When the university approved plans for Villard Hall in 1885, McMurry got the contract to supply bricks — this time at \$8.50 per thousand. The architectural design called for an exterior cement finish shaped like stones to be applied over the bricks, so the regents called for an exact count as the bricks were laid and still visible. The count was 529,000 bricks.

Assuming a similar number was used in Deady Hall, the two buildings alone accounted for more than a million bricks from the Masonic Cemetery clay pit. McMurry also supplied bricks for the university's first gymnasium (where Lawrence Hall now stands) and for the short-lived observatory atop Skinner Butte.

He kept busy outside the university also. A.G. Walling's 1884 book, the *Illustrated History of Lane County*, reported that Eugene had "no less than ten brick buildings" by 1872. Twelve years later, the book said, "The town contains twenty-five brick business



buildings with twice as many wooden ones, three hotels and a fourth of brick just commenced."

But there was at least one other local source for bricks, says Ethan Newman, former long-time Eugene postmaster. It was called the "Cook Brickyard," and was situated on a hillside northwest of where the Fred Meyer store is located today in west Eugene, Newman says. But the McMurry brickyard was the earliest, he adds.

You won't see any McMurry bricks on the UO campus today. The Deady Hall bricks exposed to the elements began to deteriorate, and in 1887 the exterior was covered with a cement veneer to prevent further damage. But there are several interior bricks in the UO archives, salvaged by Keith Richard when they were removed to make room for an elevator. More than one hundred years after they were formed from raw clay, these bricks are, well, as hard as bricks.

And more than one hundred years after they were built with bricks from the old clay pit, Deady and Villard halls share company with the Pioneer Courthouse in Portland and Mt. Hood's Timberline Lodge — as the only four buildings in Oregon named to the elite National Historic Landmark Register.