

# MORETOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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THIS ISSUE- MORETOWN TALC

## Employees Wanted!

**Paying \$1.75 a day, six days a week.  
Eastern Magnesia Talc Co. (1923)**

Talc was known to exist on the hill around the D.P. Deavitt farm in the Rock Bridge area of Moretown for many years. There was a controversial man by the name of John Wilkins who first tried to get an operation started; his attempt to start a mill was referred to as "Wilkins Folly". Soon thereafter three Burlington men, J.S. Patrick, Elias Lyman and Col. George Holden got together and formed the Eastern Magnesia Talc Company, and in 1913 EMTC purchased the 125 acres in North Moretown and built a five story building to process talc.

In the meantime, Mr. Wilkins had become so objectionable that the company entered into an agreement with him to pay him the considerable sum of \$30.00 a month to stay away.

The first secretary for the company was Mrs. Mildred Eldredge who began work in 1916. She remembered riding with the other office people from Waterbury in a surrey with a fringe on top to the office located in the farm house at the mill. According to a granddaughter of two talc workers, in those early years the company's horse drawn wagon would go in to Montpelier from Moretown every Monday, to pick up miners who had been thrown in jail over the weekend.

In 1920 EMTC advertised in The Waterbury Record for 90 men to work on road improvements (RT 2) from Waterbury to the mine/mill. After the road repairs vintage Mack trucks carried the workers to and fro, as there was a shortage of cars during the war. Earl Akey was in charge of that transportation and every day he would pick up the work men at the post office in Waterbury then deliver them at the end of the day. The mine employed about 35 to 50 people from Waterbury and Moretown. The company owned a boarding house and eventually eleven talc mine homes, where employees and their families lived and worked. Route 2 was a thriving neighborhood and the Rock Bridge School had so many students many of them were tuitioned out to Duxbury and Waterbury.

The first mining work was in an adit (tunnel) part way up the mountain in back of the mill. Ore was blasted, shoveled by hand and let down the hill in a car by gravity. This adit was short lived and abandoned in favor of an adit driven at the elevation of the top floor of the mill. In 1958 the tunnel went back into the hill about one and one half miles. The Moretown mill was designed to operate in a step like fashion, the ore being processed as it moved down through the mill from the mine high on the hillside. The ore was crushed, dried, screened and pulverized until it took the form of fine powder. At the lowest level, the powder was either bagged or put into a box trailer, or loaded in bulk to a tank trailer, which was purchased in the 1950's and moved to the siding in Waterbury for shipment by rail. Someone had the idea to paint the tank trailer red and tie a piece of rope on the end to make it resemble an enormous piece of dynamite. Thereby entering it in the annual Waterbury July 4<sup>th</sup> parade.

Earl Clifton who was a mine foreman and his crew would ride the ore train into the mile long horizontal shaft in the morning and they would walk out at night. Near the end of the operation, that shaft became so unstable and long that a couple of men had to spend nearly all of their time just timbering the shaft in order to support it. In spite of that sort of thing, not one man died in a mining or milling accident. There was, however, a fatal construction accident at the Gassetts mill when Mr. Kennedy was killed in a fall while making roof repairs.

The most profitable operation in the Rock Bridge location was the sawing of the talc crayons. The demand was great and the price good until after the Second World War, when competition from Japan, North Carolina and Georgia sent this business down hill and the men employed in this phase declined from 30 to 3. Other talc products were used in the manufacture of paint, rubber, powdered insecticides and roofing material. When insecticides went to spray the market was lost, leading to the plant's closing. The losses were extensive at the Moretown/Waterbury location and it was voted by the board of directors to be shut down.

Bill Magnus and Howard Naylor tried to start a subsidiary company known as "Led Ballast." The idea was to use talc as filler for tractor tires in order to provide extra weight and traction. Other materials were already in use and it was hoped that talc could compete in that market. The idea failed and the Led Ballast division didn't last too long. The Moretown plant had other problems. The ore body was too deep into the mountain by that time and the outdated mill machinery was inefficient with its old multiple pulley drive systems. The place was a maze of pulleys and conveyor belts. Besides the water pollution issue was beginning to close in on the mining business and Moretown had no practical solution for that problem. The shaft was sealed in such a way that only two people knew how to gain access. It was thought the shaft was so weak that collapse probably would occur very soon after abandonment. About 1963 the mill was razed and now is covered over with woods.

Moretown's former Town Clerk Bernadette Ferris reported that according to the grand list in 1960 the Talc Co. was the fourth largest taxpayer in Moretown with the real estate assessed at \$80,000.00 and personal property at \$3,000.00 with taxes of \$5810.00

There was another small mine and mill operation in Fayston, which had gone out of business sometime in the late 1940's. EMTC bought it in the early 1950's without intending to operate it but rather to keep it out of competitors' hands. When they purchased it, the mill and office were still standing. The office was an old farm house which the Moretown crew later turned into a hunting camp for a couple of seasons. In the late 1930's Dr. Harwood nearly died in the Fayston mine. He had been called there when a couple of miners had been asphyxiated in the shaft. It seems the men were using a gasoline pump in the mine, and died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Dr. Harwood nearly succumbed during the rescue attempt due to the same problem. The mill became a hazard and was torn down.

#### Sources

*Waitsfield Telecom "A History of Commerce in the Mad River Valley, Compiled by Jan Pogue and Eleanor Haskins*

*Times Argus- "Backles Recalls Mining Operations" by Jan Morse, October, 1968*

*Letter to Mrs. Edward Bessette from John Backles, property of Moretown Historical archives dated 1984*

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We have gifts for sale!

Did you know there was such a thing as a MORETOWN coffee mug? (\$20.00)

Or a MORETOWN T- shirt? (\$20.00 each or 2 for \$35.00)

How about "Drawing Logs from Dowsville" a book by Mary Gow and Kitty Werner which includes the history of the Ward Lumber Co. and lots of great pictures and other local history? (\$30.00 or \$15.00)

There is also a pamphlet of POETRY written by Moretown folks and compiled by Earline Marsh. (\$8.00)

A work by Earline Marsh on the history of the Taplin School and more. (\$18.00)

OR we also have two little booklets one written by Lydia Billings (1963) and one by Mary Reagan, (1982) which outline the history of MORETOWN (\$3.00 for one or both for \$5.00)

Please contact Mary at the Moretown Historical Society for ordering or more information. 496-2901 or [MMurphy917@aol.com](mailto:MMurphy917@aol.com)

Are you doing some local research? Give us a call or drop a line, perhaps we can help!

**WATCH FOR OUR RETURNING BINGO NIGHT  
COMING SOON!**