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First Light

A history set in cement

Tuesday, September 14, 2004

They were used for only about 12 years before they were taken out of service. And that was a hundred years ago.

Yet they still stand tall in Saylor Park in Coplay, where they remind residents and curious visitors of the Lehigh Valley's lost legacy.

They are the nine 60-foot-high kilns that David Saylor erected in 1892 to become the first American producer of Portland cement, a high-quality brand that would be a key ingredient in the concrete and mortar that built much of this nation. (It got its name from Portland, England, where the material was first quarried.)



Denise Sanchez/Morning Call via AP
Old cement kilns are located in Saylor Park in Coplay, Pa. The century-old kilns owned by the first American producer of Portland cement might be torn down because the county that owns them says it can no longer afford their upkeep.

Saylor's cement revolutionized the construction industry and helped him create a company that would go on to provide cement used in a number of important structures, including the Lincoln Memorial, Shea Stadium and our own Pennsylvania Railroad Station, Downtown.

It also established the Lehigh Valley and Eastern Pennsylvania as the Cement Belt, producing nearly 75 percent of the cement used in America each year.

But it was a dynamic, young industry and changes came hard and fast. Within a few years, the rotary kiln -- patented by Thomas Edison -- rendered the towering kilns obsolete. Saylor's company stopped using them in 1904.

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Eight-track tapes had a longer lifespan.

No one ever bothered to tear the kilns down, however, so they're still there, century-old monuments to the region's proud past.

Unfortunately, it is a region that is struggling to make ends meet. And according to Kirk Beldon Jackson, a reporter with The Morning Call in Allentown, officials in Lehigh County want to demolish five of the deteriorating brick kilns in order to save the \$300,000 cost of refurbishing them.

"We do not have the money to restore what's there now," said Richard Klotz, the county's director of administration, who presented the proposal to Coplay council last night.

Four years ago, the county collected \$329,400 to stop the kilns' decay, including \$100,000 from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. But the commission offered only \$72,500 in the latest round of funding, and the county declined to accept the grant, saying it couldn't afford to pay the rest of the cost, Klotz told Jackson.

Borough Council President Beverly Miller said the council members could vote on the proposal as early as Thursday.

"If we agree to what they want, we're basically saying to them, 'Take it down,' and I don't think we as a council are ready to make that decision," she said.

Changing times create a cement mix of emotions.

There must be some way to cancel this

It won't be long before your paper checks are obsolete. Electronic bank transfers seem to be all the rage. "Rage" being the operative word. Some readers don't like this change and have contacted consumer columnist Yvonne Zanos with their complaints.

Hard time is usually done behind hard walls

Brian Frisbie, 24, of Carrick, and Dustin Garger, 25, of Brentwood, face some serious time looking at concrete walls. The two men are on trial in Allegheny County Common Pleas Court, charged with the December 2002 beating death of a 49-year-old Castle Shannon man in the men's room at Tom's Diner in Dormont.

You love it when a judge says, 'I intend to follow the law'

District Justice Kevin O'Donnell knows the rules regarding first-time offenders charged with drunken driving. And how.

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