

FORT ERIE  
QUARRY  
RAILWAYS.

32

# MANY VOICES

## A COLLECTIVE HISTORY OF GREATER FORT ERIE

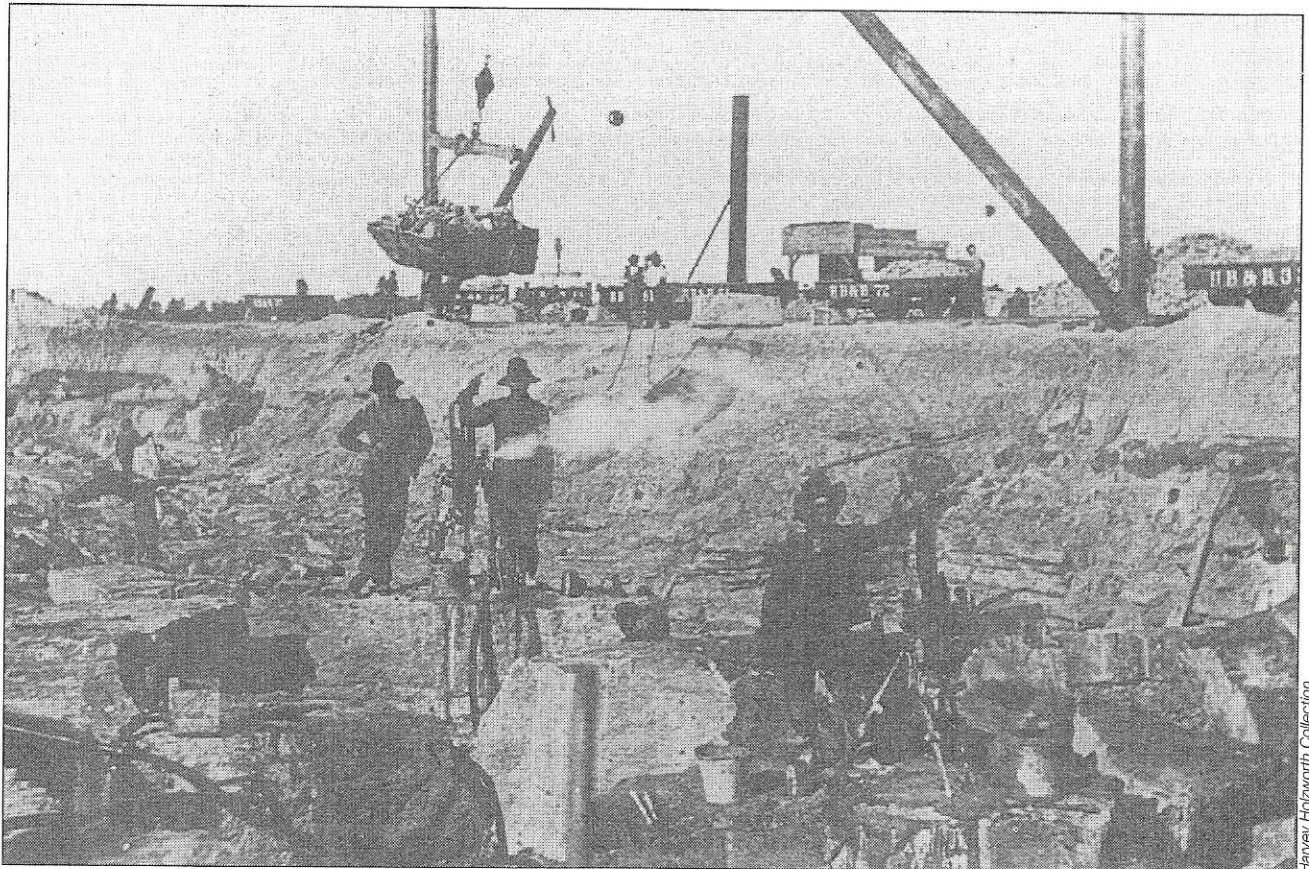


Fort Erie Museum Board 1996



# Harvesting Limestone

Rich deposits of limestone provided the opportunity for a large quarry industry to flourish. Five quarries were in operation in the 19th century. Only one remains active, the others having been abandoned and flooded for recreational use.



*Working. Men working at the Hughes Brothers and Bangs Windmill Point Quarry, circa 1900.*

*By Charles W. Davies*

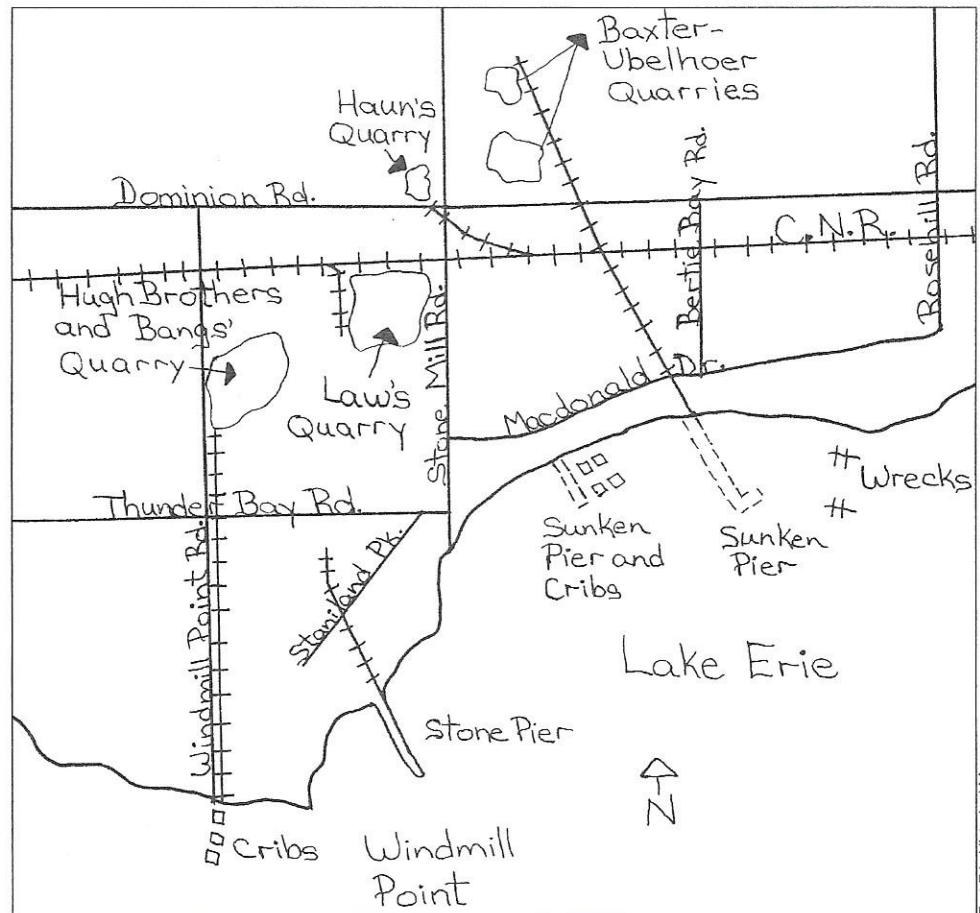
Once the arena of aggressive industry, second only to farming, the pits are quiet now and filled with water, relegated only to recreational and residential use. The rhythmic sounds of sledges on steel, of the percussion and echo of black powder explosions, of steam engines puffing and straining and the sound of grating drills boring into hard rock have been silenced. No more are giant blocks of limestone and rubble wrenched from

the outcropping of rock as they were for more than five decades to provide the material for foundations, buildings and roadbeds within the township and beyond.

During the last half of the nineteenth century there were five active quarry sites located in the vicinity of Stonemill Road: two on the east side, owned by Baxter, then Uebelhoer; one on the west side owned by Haun, near the corner of



**Locations.** This map shows the locations of the quarries in the Windmill Point area in relation to present-day roads.



Dominion Road; and two owned by Hughes Bros. & Bangs and R.E. Law close to the lakeshore not far from the site of Silas Carter's mill at Windmill Point.<sup>1</sup>

### Baxter-Uebelhoer Quarries

The earliest indication of stone quarrying is at Lot 12, Con. 2 between Nigh and Dominion Roads east of Stonemill Road—the Baxter Quarries. John Chambers purchased the Crown Land in 1804 and sold it to John Baxter in 1806. The Baxter family held the land until 1868 when Burch Baxter sold it to Washington Sloan; the following year it was acquired by Charles C. Grove and Nicholas Uebelhoer.<sup>2</sup>

About the same time, 1862, the Haun Quarry, a smaller operation, was located at the corner of Stonemill and Dominion Roads. It was connected by a spur to the Buffalo and Lake Huron Railroad.

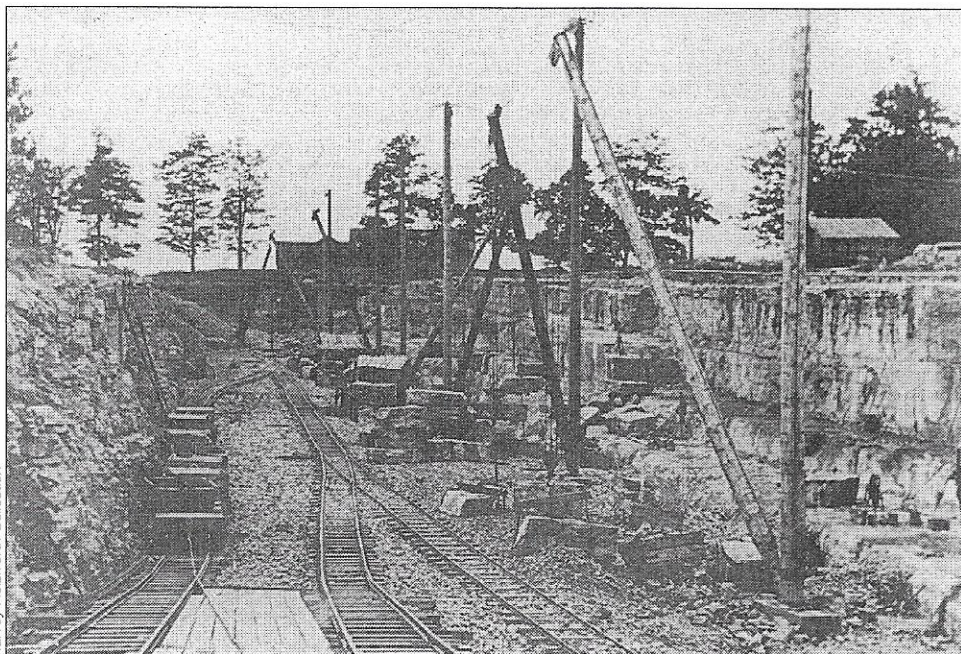
Tom Baxter of Dominion Road recalled his father's comments about the family business.<sup>3</sup> "Stone from the Baxter Quarries was used to build many of the local buildings—Stonemill Church, S.S.

No. 4 school, S.S. No. 5, the foundation of All Saints Church in Ridgeway," and also the Bertie Township Hall (now the Fort Erie Historical Museum). The similarity in the stone attests to the source and shows the craftsmanship of local masons such as the Edsell brothers.

"The stone was hauled from the quarries in heavy wagons, each drawn by four teams of horses. The metal tires on those wagons were extra wide to prevent the wheels from sinking into the earth under the weight of heavy loads. I remember riding in sleighs with wide runners used for the same purpose."

He recalled the "plug and feather" method of cutting blocks of stone from the bedrock. "They had a way of driving special steel rods into the rock to break it free and then lever it out to be hauled away." Three rods were used to break the rock along smooth lines. One was flat on both sides and the other two were flat on one side and round on the other. These were placed in a drilled hole with the flat one (the plug or wedge) between the other two (the feathers) and then they were driven in with a sledge ham-





**Quarry.** Looking down into the Windmill Point quarry when it was operated by Hughes Brothers and Bangs, circa 1900.

mer. This was done by teams of men all along the line where the rock was to be split. The result was a clean break. Rock could be dressed to size in the same manner.

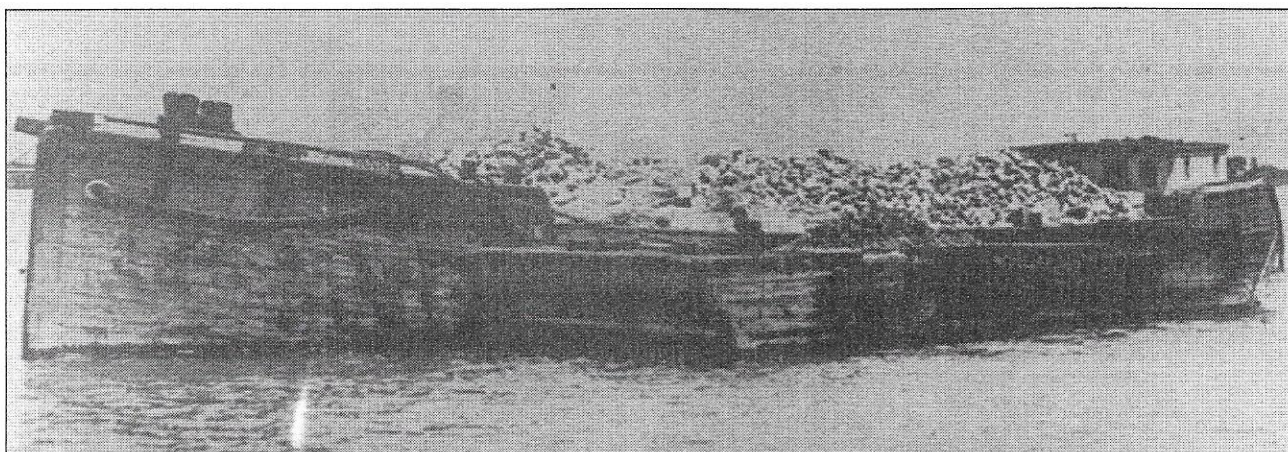
The Baxter quarries supplied gravel for the bed of the Snake Hill Railway that ran from the ferry landing at Fort Erie to Erie Beach. In 1853 they also supplied stone for the bed of the Great Western Line which ran from Fort Erie to Brantford.<sup>4</sup> A rail line also ran from the Baxter quarry to a pier at the lakeshore, indicating that stone was shipped out by boat. The remains of the pier are still visible below the surface of the water.

By the time Nicholas Uebelhoer took over the Baxter holdings in 1868, a small community had been established near the quarries. At the corner of Nigh and Stonemill Roads was an inn and tavern

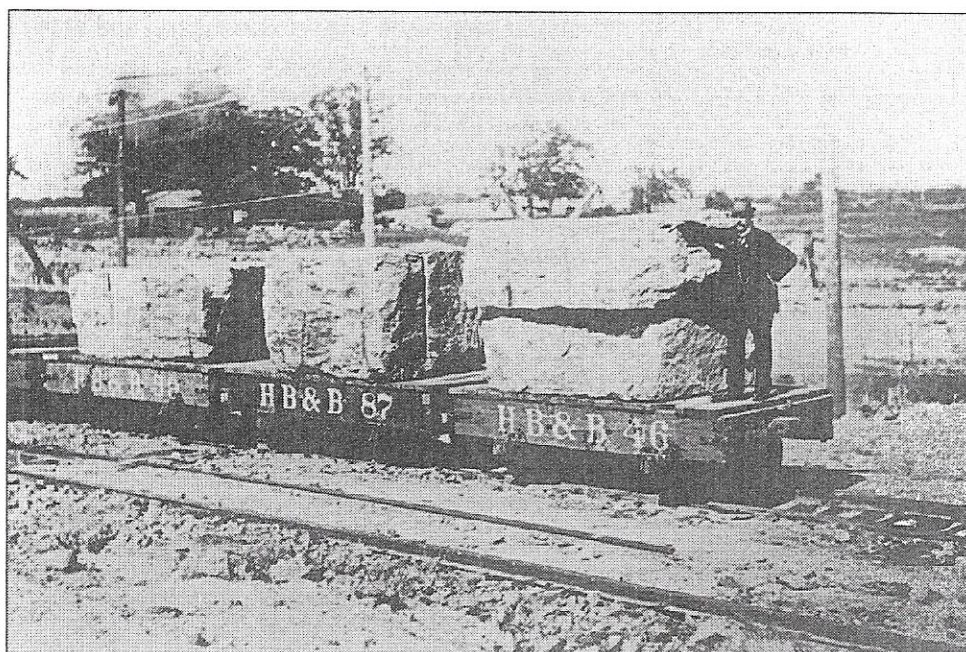
called "Halfway House" operated in 1875 by Lawrence Martin.<sup>5</sup> In 1880 the owner was listed as Michael Krieger. This establishment was replaced later by a two-storey cement block building operated by Gordon Haun. It burned down and was never rebuilt. A private home is now located on that property.

In 1886 a post office was established at "Halfway House" with the designation "Stonemill Quarry." Workers' houses were located near the pits, and a frame Wesleyan Methodist church and a Catholic church faced Stonemill Road on the western limit of the property. The land for the Catholic church, 27/100ths of an acre, was given by Nicholas Uebelhoer in 1874, and a year later, for the sum of one dollar, he sold an additional 2 1/2 acres of land on the west side of Stonemill Road to be used as a cemetery.

**Barge.** The Yankee schooner was cut down into a barge and used to transport stone from the Hughes Brothers and Bangs' Windmill Point Quarry to Buffalo, around 1900.







Harvey Holzworth Collection

In 1876 the Wesleyan Methodist church was rebuilt using stone from the Baxter Quarry at the bequest of Burch Baxter. The church still stands. The workmanship is identical to that of the other local edifices previously mentioned.

A lime kiln constructed by miller Silas Carter and an ice house were located at the southern limit of the Uebelhoer property facing Dominion Road. The kiln was demolished in the 1930s for the stone, and the ice house was moved to the lakeshore and converted to a residence.

Quarrymen listed in the Bertie Township Assessment Book of 1875 as employees of Nicholas Uebelhoer were: Berling, Brown, Cunningham, Hughes, Hefner, Leshey, Horner, McGill and Poorall.

### Windmill Point Quarries

The quarries located at Windmill Point were operated from 1895 to 1903 by Hughes Brothers & Bangs of Syracuse. It was a major operation that provided rubble and massive blocks of limestone for the Buffalo breakwater in 1898 and for similar projects at Cleveland and Sandusky, Ohio.

A *Buffalo Courier* reporter wrote in 1898: "The immensity of the work is not realized until a visit is made to the quarries at Windmill Point. These quarries, equipped with every device of steam for the saving of human labor and the speed-

ing of the task, were opened solely for the purpose of supplying stone needed at the breakwater."<sup>6</sup>

It was a major task. The base was to be 140 feet wide with wooden cribbing designed to hold rubble and gravel. The wall sloped in toward the top with large limestone blocks, some as tall as a man and weighing up to ten tons, used as revetments and capping. Extending for five miles, it was the longest breakwater in the world at the time of construction. Looking down on the structure from the Peace Bridge one can make out the size of the blocks.

Removal of the massive stones was engineered with a series of steam-powered derricks around the perimeter of the quarry. These devices raised the limestone blocks and placed them in the cars of a narrow-gauge railway that circled the pit and ran out to the lakeshore where a trestle and stone pier had been constructed. The special cars, designed to tilt in either direction, were tipped by hand, allowing the blocks to slide down chutes into the pockets of the lighters (scows). The loads were hauled by tugs to the breakwater and brought into position by delicate maneuvering. Once they were in position, the word was given to strike the dogs with crowbars to release the gates at the bottom of the pockets. In this way the heavy loads were deposited precisely where needed.<sup>7</sup>

"In the year 1902 some 5,000 pounds

*Loaded. Limestone loaded onto Hughes Brothers and Bangs' rail cars at the Windmill Point Quarry, circa 1900.*



of dynamite were used and the operation ratio was one pound of dynamite per 42 tons of stone. In the building of the breakwater alone the quarry put out 1,023,065.2 tons of rubblestone. Again it is hard to imagine that sort of dust and debris on a site which looks so clean and natural today."<sup>8</sup>

A natural spring at the bottom of the quarry provided drinking water for the 200 men who worked ten hours a day to move the stone. Labourers received \$1.25 a day and drillers made \$2.50.<sup>9</sup> A number of workers were Italian, transported from Buffalo each day by barge. A few lived on site in crude, grass-cov-

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ered huts.<sup>10</sup>

After the completion of the breakwater, the quarry lay idle and filled with water. It was drained three times, first for the Cleveland project, a second time to recover boilers and other equipment, and a third time during the Second World War to recover scrap metal and railway tracks.

In 1910 R.E. Law operated the quarry at Windmill Point Park. He provided the stone for county roads, Highway 3 and private driveways. He also ran a quarry located off Garrison Road near Ridge Road. When he applied to build a dock at Windmill Point to transport gravel by boat, local cottagers objected. He sold the land and moved his business to Port Colborne.<sup>11</sup>

Windmill Point was also a source of sand. "The shoreline at the lake had big sand hills. These hills were removed and the sand carried to the Bertie Bay dock

and sent to Buffalo to be sold to make concrete for the city."<sup>12</sup> A sandhopper was constructed near the water's edge and the dunes removed by the Fox and Holloway Company and the Carroll Brothers.<sup>13</sup>

### **Ridgemount Quarries**

The only operating quarry in the area today is Walker's Quarry on Ridgemount Road near Bowen Road. It has a long history, having been started in 1927 by John Pirson. Over the years this operation provided building material for such projects as the CNR bridge over the QEW at Sandplant Hill near Niagara Falls, the basement of the Fort Erie Post Office, the original A & P store on Jarvis Street and many roads in the area.<sup>14</sup>

In the early days it functioned as did the Stonemill Quarry using hand labour and later steam power. A great elevated heavy wooden jaw crusher was used to produce gravel which was dumped into wagons as they were positioned below the machine.<sup>15</sup> When Mr. Pirson died in 1943, his son-in-law Milton Plyley took over the management, and later John Plyley assumed that position while Milton headed the construction division.

The nearby Campbell Quarry, purchased from Bertie Township and operated by the Campbell brothers for a quarter of a century, supplied materials and built a number of the major roads in the province including the second half of the QEW from Niagara Falls to Fort Erie in 1952.<sup>16</sup>

Ridgemount Quarry was purchased by Walker Brothers Quarry of Niagara Falls in 1973, and in the 1980s they also acquired the Campbell Quarries. They continue to supply crushed stone for local projects.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Henry H. Baxter, P.E., letter dated March 12, 1994. Notes and map showing quarry locations and data taken from Page (1876) and Tremaine (1862); FEHM Quarries file.

<sup>2</sup>FEHM Quarries file. [Editors' note: Spelling varies as Ublehoer, Ubelhowr. Another account states that Burch Baxter sold the property directly to Grove and Uebelhoeer May 4, 1869.]

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Baxter, interview, December 17,

1993.

<sup>4</sup>FEHM Quarries file.

<sup>5</sup>Bertie Township Assessment Book, 1875.

<sup>6</sup>*Buffalo Courier-Express*, June 12, 1898, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>"Quarries are tranquil now," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, May 1, 1974, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup>Peter C. Andrews, *Buffalo Courier-Express*, July 10, 1952.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>FEHM Quarries file.

<sup>12</sup>Marjorie Burger, notes on the history of Windmill Point Quarry in FEHM Quarries file.

<sup>13</sup>"Quarries are tranquil now."

<sup>14</sup>"Two of oldest peninsula quarries merge with sale of Ridgemount Quarries to Niagara firm," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, May 16, 1973, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>D. Campbell, telephone conversation, January 10, 1993.