

Whitefish Pilot

HISTORY OF BRICK MAKING IN WHITEFISH

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From native inhabitants to early settlers, the people of the Whitefish Lake area have depended on an abundance of natural resources to sustain and build their communities. All of these activities were either seeded or grown by the availability of transportation, particularly the railroad. With community growth came human developments, urbanization, and increasing demands on those natural resources. The history of development in the area includes better known activities such as ice and timber harvesting, agriculture, mining, shoreline development, and an abundance of recreational pursuits. But one less known activity in Whitefish was brick making.

Brick making in Whitefish was an idea born of fire. P.J. Hoffman was pulling coals from a campfire when he noticed baked red clay amongst the ashes. This clay is a result of the lacustrine soil left behind from a proglacial lake at the end of the Pleistocene Epoch. The idea came to Hoffman that he could make brick in Whitefish, so he and his sons built their brick company. The first brick building in Whitefish was a five-room home at 328 Central Avenue built in 1907. The second was the Pacific Power building on Second Street. These and other buildings were constructed of Whitefish brick made by P. J. Hoffman and Sons, located northeast of the railroad depot on the north side of the tracks. According to locals, Whitefish brick can also be seen today in the walls of The Toggery, a popular clothing, shoe and accessory shop; Montana Coffee Traders; and Loula's restaurant (located in the historic Masonic Temple building), all in downtown Whitefish.

Brick making proved to be difficult as bricks could not be allowed to freeze during the process. Keeping the fires stoked so as not to lose bricks was a demanding job. At the start of their business, bricks sold for \$6 per thousand, which grew to \$17 per thousand by 1935. As prices rose, the use of bricks for homes declined as the cost was prohibitive. Hoffman's son Pete had moved away for work from 1910 to 1912, and returned to find his father's business in debt. In 1923, he moved the business to Kalispell, combining it with the Kalispell brickyard. He continued using Whitefish lacustrine clay for his better brick. His business prospered throughout the 1930s, but declined in the 1940s. He sold the business in 1946, but the new owners were unable to keep the business afloat and by 1948 there was no longer a brick making business in the Flathead.

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