

The South St. Louis Clay Mine Adventures by Den Polley

The evening of May 17, 1849 was about to forcibly change the face of St. Louis for years to come. A fire broke out on the steamboat “White Cloud,” moored at the Mississippi levy on Warf Street. After breaking its moorings, the boat drifted down the river, setting 22 other wooden steamer boats ablaze. This raging conflagration jumped the levy and burnt its way into the Downtown business district, turning much of the area into smoldering ashes. Its destructive assault was only stopped after buildings in the flames’ path were dynamited, forming a firebreak.

In the wake of the “Great St. Louis Fire,” a building code was written enforcing the use of masonry rather than wood in construction. The masonry of choice was brick, which would result in St. Louis being called a “City of Brick.” St. Louis would become home to world-class brickwork, and in the early 1900s the city would be deemed the “Paris of the West.”

During the booming years between the late 1860s and 1920s, St. Louis experienced widespread construction of residential and commercial buildings, made mostly of brick. A basic raw material was needed to make all those bricks, and fortunately the city had an abundance of it—clay. (It’s the same yellowish, heavy substance that sticks so well to a shovel every time you try to dig a hole for a fence post or a plant.)

The need for clay motivated intrepid business people to mine the material throughout the St. Louis area. But South St. Louis had the most of it. From the 1850s through the 1940s, over 60 clay mines operated in South St. Louis. They were primarily worked by Italians, Irish and Germans.

A heavy concentration of the clay mines was found in the South Hampton Neighborhood. Names mentioned included Henry & Hiram Roberts Mine, Kemp College Mine and the mines belonging to William Christy (of Christy Park fame). In 1857, Mr. Christy started a series of about 11 area mines under the name Laclede-Christy. He also ran the Christy mine. The street locations of these mines included Sulphur, January, Pernod, Kingshighway, Hampton, Bancroft, Macklind, Ridgewood and other familiar names. The shaft depths of the mines averaged about 50 feet. Most of them played out by the mid-1940s. The term “sturdy, pre-war construction,” meaning homes built prior to World War II, is a testament to the quality of the bricks used in St. Louis construction from that era.

Each passing year, millions of quality bricks of all shapes, sizes and purposes were made from the clay mined in South St. Louis. There are still miles of dormant clay mines under South Hampton and all of Southside. There is also a question regarding the deterioration of those mines and how it may affect the area’s homes. That’s unanswered.

For folks growing up in South Hampton during the 1950s and 60, the Christy Clay Mine, bordered by Ridgewood, Chippewa, Kingshighway and Delor, holds special memories.

(The Burlington Coat Factory, Office Depot and State Offices now occupy the site. I liked the Clay Mines better.)

For kids back then, Christy Clay Mine, by then mostly dormant, was simply known as “Clay Hill.” And what a place of unique adventure it was. It was this large piece of land, right in the middle of the neighborhood, with huge mounds of clay, chalk, rock, gravel and mine shafts.

The main attraction was the actual “clay hill,” a two or three story mountain of hard-packed clay, probably 200 feet long and 30 feet wide. It was a climbers’ paradise and a natural fort for playing cowboys and Indians, World War II soldiers (we were all John Wayne), or Roman gladiators.

The clay hill featured different formations, one of which was called the “Dinosaur Back.” It resembled the neck, back and tail of a Brontosaurus. You could ride your 3-speed racer down it and really pick up some speed. There were ravines for hiding out and ambushing enemies. Cliffs provided “I-double-dog-dare-you” climbing and jumping contests.

As mentioned earlier, other hills of various materials and heights gave variety to the adventure. Falling down the hills over very rough, sharp surfaces yielded some pretty mean skinned arms and legs. But they would heal up sufficiently to go back the next day. And you could always just tell Mom and Dad that you fell off your bike.

Also on the property was a sizeable swampy area with 10 foot high weed trees, cat tails and some very big, thorny bushes. An actual path was cut through the middle of it by kids playing Tarzan or Jungle Jim. Talk about a great place for hide-and-seek! There was a rumor of quick sand (quick mud?) in the area, but no guys were ever lost.

And remember, this was in the days when guys would charge down the alley on their bikes on summer morning, disappear until lunch, and then disappear again until supper. Mom and Dad didn’t have to worry back then. “Clay Hill” was often our destination. It’s funny how the source for all those St. Louis brick bungalows we grew up in was also one of the many reasons South St. Louis was the perfect place to grow up in during the 1950s and 60s.

Sources: Webpage by Scott K. Williams - [Geology of St. Louis, Mo.](#)
[History's Time Portal to Old St. Louis](#)