

John Wunder Founds Trap Rock Company



John Wunder, founder of the Dresser Trap Rock plant.

The basaltic rock that shapes the spectacular scenery of our valley is also the basis of the local traprock industry that blasts it out of the earth and crushes it into various usable sizes, to be trucked wherever it is needed for road building, railroad beds, banks and erosion stabilization, landscaping, and even as particulate on roofing shingles.

The plant, at the south edge of Dresser village, was built in 1914 by John Wunder. A German immigrant, he by then owned Gopher Sand and Gravel Company in Minneapolis, in conjunction with his concrete-building construction business. Wunder had that same year bought out a financially struggling local corporation attempting to establish a traprock* quarry in Taylors Falls.

Wunder became interested in traprock after discovering that the crushed rock considerably strengthened his concrete buildings.

Traprock is hardened lava that flowed over this region from fissures in the earth some 1.1 billion years ago, creating ledges and outcroppings. It is one of the hardest, most indestructible rocks in the world. Its name comes from the geologic term for "any of various fine-grained, dark-colored igneous rocks having a more or less columnar structure, especially basalt."

*traprock is one word, according to Webster.

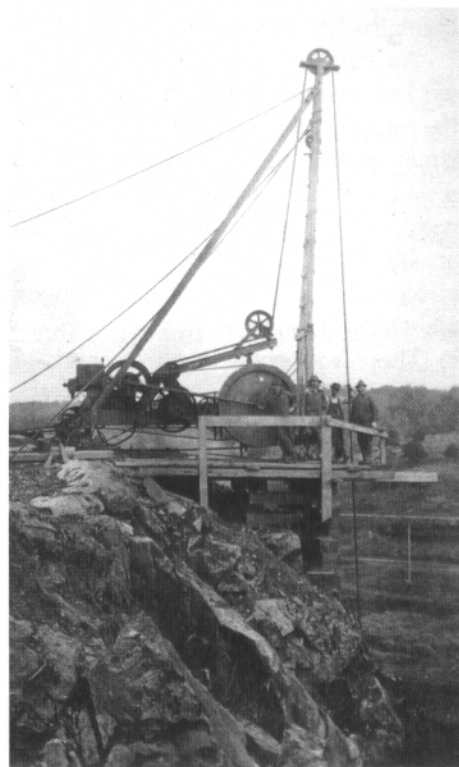
In the Dalles of the St. Croix River can be seen the columns, or steps, formed as the rock has split and broken.

Taylors Falls historian, Jack Liljenberg, said that the fledgling company there folded even before the rock crusher, purchased in New York, could be installed. "The dynamite blasts on the hillside above the town—and flying rock debris—got the people up in arms, and their protests brought an end to those operations even before the site was prepared."

Evidence of the proposed plant can be made out in what is now still referred to as "Rock Crusher Woods," southwest of the Angels Hill neighborhood, now part of the Minnesota Interstate Park. The looming exploitation of the traprock landscape spurred local citizens to support the establishment of the park.

Even as early as the 1880s, the attraction of crushed traprock as an inexpensive road surfacing material was threatening the intrinsic beauty of the craggy bluffs above Taylors Falls. (Dalles traprock was used in surfacing the old Fort Road that became West Seventh Street in St. Paul.) The Taylors Falls and Lake Superior branch of the St. Paul and Duluth (later Northern Pacific) Railroad, completed in 1880, would have offered transportation of the heavy material.

John Wunder's son, Harvey, had moved to Taylors Falls in 1920 to take charge of operations, which apparently were confined to excavation of sand and gravel from the company's other properties, mainly along Basil Street to the north and east in the village. Harvey bought and moved into what was known as the Walker House at 213 Basil Street on Angels Hill. He



Above: A drilling rig. Below: The high-line rails to the crusher.



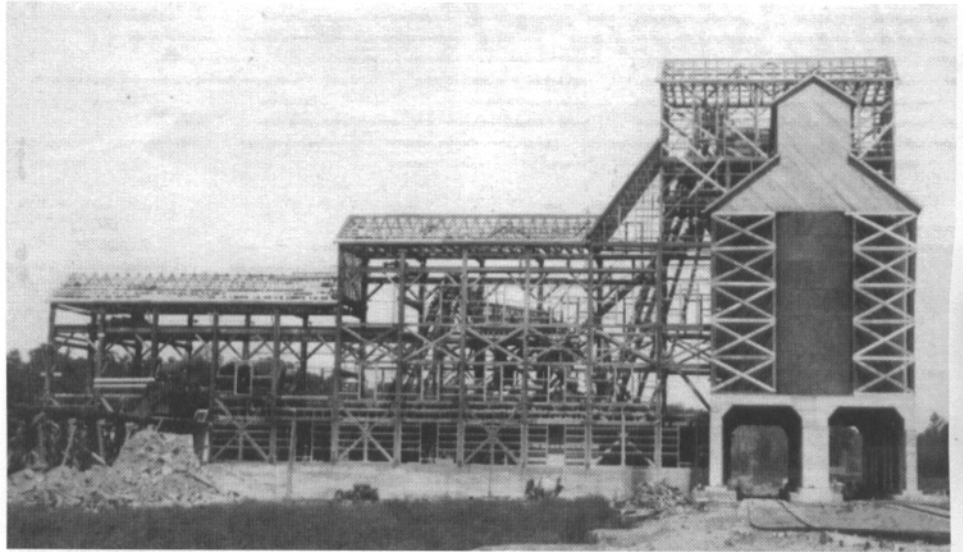
eventually took over management of the Dresser traprock plant.

Harvey Wunder had met his future wife, Martha Cecilia Ostrom, who was living with an aunt in St. Croix Falls, while doing preliminary work on the Taylors Falls project before entering the armed forces during World War I. A daughter, Marjorie Lois, and two sons, John Harvey and William Henry, were born to them. Both sons died serving as pilots in World War II. After Martha's death in 1925, Harvey married Claudia Hansen, and they had one child, Rolf Martin.

An engineer, Harvey Wunder had worked on the 1914 construction of the traprock plant at Dresser. That was a huge project, employing at least 100 men at a time (including, according to some reports, imported Italian laborers such as had worked a decade earlier on construction of the hydropower plant at St. Croix Falls).

There was rock to blast, track to lay, and fill to dig and haul for the "high line" railroad that would carry the rock to the top of the crusher plant. Some 5,300 yards of concrete were placed for the foundation. Four carloads of timber posts went into the framework of the main building.

Two long buildings, a cookhouse and a bunkhouse, were built for the workers, and a farmhouse remaining on the land was used for storage. The plant was located on land that had been the farms of Thomas Michelson and William Dresser. Wunder grasped the opportunity to purchase the rocky land cheaply through a real estate



The unique building under construction. Below: The steam shovel fills the dinky cars.



Lila Demulling tallies the weight of truckloads of traprock on the scale outside the office window.

agent who, apparently, led the owners to believe it was worthless except as "a sheep ranch."

And, finally, there were the gargantuan machines to install.

The primary crusher was believed to be the largest open jaw crusher in the world. It weighed 220 tons, with a 40-ton swinging jaw. As reported in the *Osceola Sun*, it "will crush rock that is 6 x 7 feet into pieces as small as 12 inches and from there the rock is conveyed in iron bucket conveyors to a smaller crusher which weighs 70 tons." That "smaller" crusher could break the rock up as coarse as three

inches and "as fine as dust."

Two steam shovels were brought in to load the rock chunks into quarry cars that were hauled to the crushing mill by steam locomotives called "dinkys." The steam shovels—"two-man Osgood shovels"—and the "dinkys" had been used in building the Panama Canal, which had just been completed.

Three steel tanks 44 feet in diameter and 40 feet high could each hold 1,800 yards of gravel or crushed rock; other concrete tanks had a capacity of 6,000 yards of crushed rock each. Altogether, the tanks could hold the equivalent of 1,185 carloads of rock. The broken rock was conveyed to the tanks and sorted according to size by a large screen shaker.

The company began operations with a contract to supply 65,000 yards of rock, probably for railroad track ballast.

The rock crusher building of Dresser Trap Rock Company, with its starkly towering mill, became a landmark, often photographed and sketched. The company provided employment for more than 60 men at various times, and using support services of area businesses, it was, and still is, a major factor in the local economy.

Over the years, the plant has been streamlined, from the original horse and steam-powered equipment to conveyor-belt automation. But in the early days, horses were indispensable to the operation.

In 1918, Jule Larson (1890 - 1965) had moved his family from his farm at Cushing to Dresser, where he ran a stable and engaged in "horse-trading," according to his son-in-law, John Larson. Jule was married to Anna Peterson, whom he met while both were students at the Lanesdale School. Their only child, Violette, became John's wife.

Jule started hauling for the traprock company, and in 1920, began working with his horses to remove the "overburden," in preparing to blast away the rock. The overburden, John explains, was the soil and vegetation that could vary from a few inches to six or eight feet in depth. It was done with a "fresno scraper" to which the horses were harnessed.

By about 1928, Jule had worked his way up to where John Wunder assigned him to take charge of the Minneapolis operation, and the family moved there. However, in 1930, Harvey Wunder, who was managing the Dresser plant, died at the age of 41 from peritonitis, after suffering a burst appendix. John Wunder then sold the Gopher plant in Minneapolis, and Jule was called back as manager at Dresser. Jule then bought a house at 406 North Washington in St. Croix Falls, now location of a laundromat.

After John Wunder died in 1939, the company continued as a family-owned corporation until 1949. When it appeared that the plant might be closed, a group of local businessmen

formed a corporation to buy the quarry and mill. Jule Larson was the general superintendent and also vice-president of the new company, which began operations June 1, 1949.

Carl Thye, Dresser, was elected president; Louis G. Nagler, St. Croix Falls, secretary; Harry S. Pomeroy, St. Croix Falls, treasurer. Other stockholders elected to the nine-member board of directors were Floyd Pomeroy and James C. Miller, of St. Croix Falls; Elmer Strohbeen, Osceola; Robert Soderberg, Dresser; Mel G. Astleford, Minneapolis; and Francis H. Smith, St. Paul.

In 1960, the company was purchased by W.L. and Charles Bryan, producers of quarried rock, with headquarters at Shakopee, Minnesota. They remodeled the plant, disposing of the steam-powered equipment, changing to diesel. The plant changed hands again in 1976, when purchased by John Conlon, of Milwaukee, and again in 1979, when the current owner, Dresser Trap Rock, Inc., acquired it.

The Soo Line Railroad, which arrived in Dresser in 1887, and is now part of the Canadian National, played an important part in the early traprock plant, not only as a principal user of the rock as track ballast, but also in transporting it to various users. A rail still runs to the crusher mill, where railroad cars are loaded directly from the tipple, to be transported by CN rail to wherever the rock is to be used.



Trucks now transport about half the production.

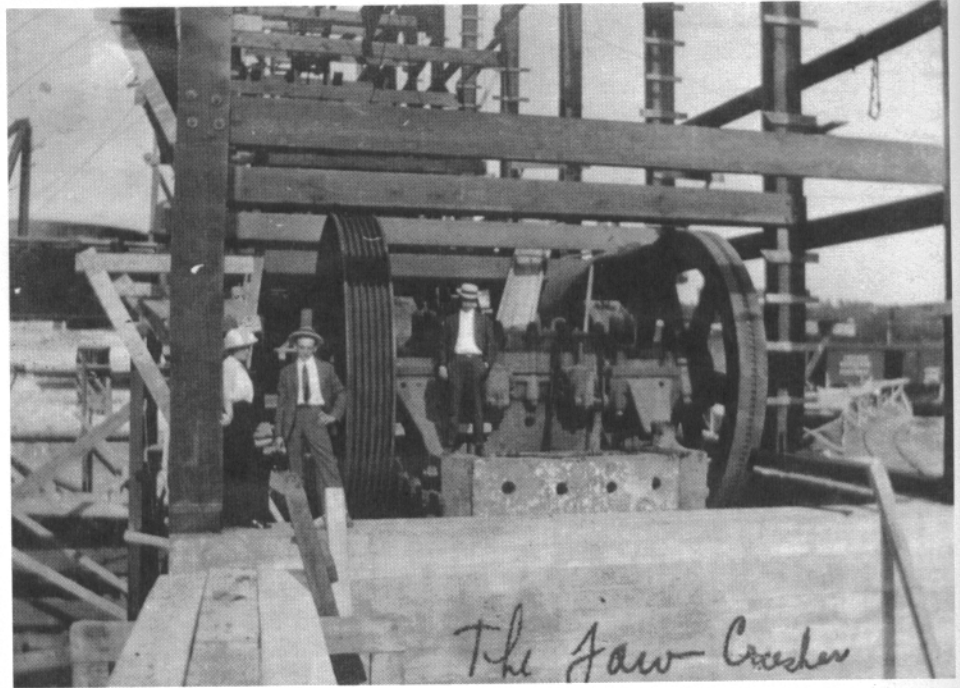
Dresser Trap Rock, Inc., currently produces about one million tons of traprock a year, according to Ivan Bowen, president of the company.

From the giant jaw, chunks of traprock pass through any or all of a series of sixteen auxiliary crushers, and 17 variegated screens, on a system of conveyors and elevators. Twenty sizes of material are produced, separated in bins of 2,000-ton capacity, for "load-out" onto trucks or railroad cars.

One of the major variances occurring since the early 1960s is the method of blasting the basalt from the 100-foot high face of the quarry. Originally, tunnels were jack-hammered and hand-dug deep into the ledge from the quarry floor and large charges of dynamite detonated to bring down massive piles of rubble. The resulting shock through the rock ledge shook the ground and could be heard for miles around... sometimes rattling windows and glassware in kitchens and bringing protests from homeowners.

"Now, we prefer to shoot many smaller, controlled blasts, that cause less vibration and noise, and are far safer," Bowen explains. "Instead of packing dynamite into tunnels, we drill 6-1/2-inch holes into the top of the ledge, and pack them with ANFO, which is a mix of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. We'll split off just one column, maybe some 600 pounds, at a time." That's quite a contrast to the last huge explosion in 1957 that detonated 43.5 tons of explosives to bring down 870,000 tons of rock.

The plant was a picturesque anachronism of old-time steam-powered machinery until the major renovation of the early 1960s. Previously, three steam locomotives hauled the rock over a five-mile network of rails intersecting 640 acres of company land. Two 140-ton steam shovels — that took three men, each, to run — and a huge crane loaded the rock into ten-yard quarry cars that were hauled to and dumped into the crusher at the mill. Before STH 35 between Dresser and St. Croix Falls was rerouted up



Installation of the jaw crusher.

and over the hill, the road ran through the company grounds, under the trestle between the quarry and the mill.

Catastrophe struck on Nov. 4, 1993: The unique old traprock mill burned to the ground. Fire started in the upper levels of the 10-story tower, and the building, constructed of two-foot square timbers and corrugated tin siding was engulfed in flames by the time it was spotted about 6 p.m. Earlier in the day, workmen had been using cutting tools to do some remodeling, and apparently sparks ignited the blaze. Efforts of five area fire departments concentrated on saving other buildings, machinery and equipment. The plant was back in operation by the next spring.

According to William Scott, of Taylors Falls, architect and preservationist, the old building was "very significant in its design, and could well have been listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings. It was an excellent example of contemporary industrial architecture, typical of a style that became popular in the 1970s for industrial buildings, referred to as 'Brutal,' featuring heavy construction, small windows, and many different roof slopes. The traprock building certainly had all that! It was a terrible loss."

Today, Ivan Bowen points out, con-

veyor belts move the rock from quarry to mill, and within the mill to the various crushers and storage loading tanks. A staff of less than 20 people is needed to run the plant, the more dangerous jobs having been eliminated by automation.

There's the house on a corner of Day Road and Maryland, built by Elisha Creech, who came here from West Virginia in 1849, to farm and engage in lumbering. He married Mary Seed in 1863, and they had four children. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Maurice McCourts lived in the house, Viola McCourt having been a granddaughter of Elisha Creech.

A Polk County Historical Society marker dates the building to 1857. Viola McCourt had recalled that the "thick frame boards run vertically, pegged together. The boards are 10 to 12 inches wide, of Norway pine, with no knots. A similarly constructed barn was so sturdy that it had to be sawn down when it was to be removed. The original deed was for 2,000 acres. A newspaper found pasted to the wall behind a chimney was dated 1859." The William Blanding family lived in the house until he built his Maple Drive mansion in 1877.