

History is Almost Obscured at the Site of Brickworks

By Harold Webber, Local Historian
For The Castlegar News - Photos Courtesy of Cominco.



Except for a few broken bricks lying on the riverbank a short distance west of the Castlegar ferries, and bits and pieces of rusted machinery, there is little evidence, most obscured by time, to indicate that the site now occupied by small, cabins and trailers was once the location of the Castlegar Brick Works.

The brick works actually had its beginning in Rossland around 1901, when the partnership of Erick Fors and Alexander Larson located their brick yard close to that city, near the Red Mountain Railway tracks and adjacent to the OK Mine.

They operated in Rossland for only two years as the clay there was not well suited for brick making. They moved to West Robson, where they made brick for Nelson, Trail, Rossland and other Kootenay and Boundary points.

The British Columbia Directory lists:

Fors, Eric, Brick manufacturer; Fors, Utrick, Brick maker; Larsen, Alex, Brick manufacturer.

The 1905 Directory remains the same but an increase in business is reflected in the listing of the 1910 Directory:

Castlegar Brick Works — Alex Larson and Eric Fors, props.; Ericson, Oscar, Employee; Fors, Gotric, Employee; Johnson, Peter F., Employee; Nelson, Alfred, Employee.

There is no mention whatever of this firm, or its Irish employees, in the 1918 directory.

Oscar Ericson, who had quit his job with the Canadian Pacific Railway to become head sander, was well known in this area as an amateur sharpshooter.

The raw material for making the bricks was close at hand as the clay was dug from the river banks less than one-half mile, from the yard. The clay was loaded into a two-wheeled dump cart that was horse-drawn. The horse wore a specially fitted saddle to take the displacement of weight evenly, and a spring that was close at hand supplied all necessary water. This spring still supplies domestic water to the cabins now on the site.

The clay would be shovelled into the top of a hopper on the brick machine. Beneath the hopper was a mixer that amalgamated the water and clay. The machine itself was powered by a brute of a horse, the last one believed to have been a Clydesdale, that was attached to a 30 foot pole, the other end of which was attached to a large wheel on the outside of the mixer; As the horse walked around the machine it would set in motion the wheel, which in turn was geared to the mixer. At the bottom of the machine were trays of moulds that could form six to eight bricks on each tray. After the materials were mixed, the clay was squeezed down through the machine and into the moulds.

As each tray was filled, it would be removed and 'another empty one inserted. This was a continuing process. The trays were then placed on large flat, two-wheeled barrows and were moved to a drying area. After the bricks became firm, they were placed inside a kiln for baking. The bricks were stacked until they resembled a square building. Cordwood was then placed between the rows of bricks as well as against the perimeter, and they were all set ablaze.

The firing of these kilns seems to have created a social interest, as the residents of Robson and Castlegar came out in force to view the spectacular blaze.

When the brick yard was in operation, the CPR had a rail spur going right into the yard. The finished bricks would then be loaded onto box cars for shipment to customers. At the end of the rail spur were the only structures on the site, the cookhouse and Alex Larson's quarters.

Around 1910 Eric Fors traded his interest in the business to Larson for 21 acres near Thrums. Fors cleared this land, planted fruit trees and later sold it for \$11,000. With this sum and other money he made from the brick-making business, he retired to Nelson, where he purchased a fine home and, with his sister as housekeeper, he settled into a pleasant life.

Alex Larson operated the brick works until the spring of 1912 when he sold the business to Oscar Fors, (Eric's brother). Larson and his wife then left Castlegar to make their home in Cuba.

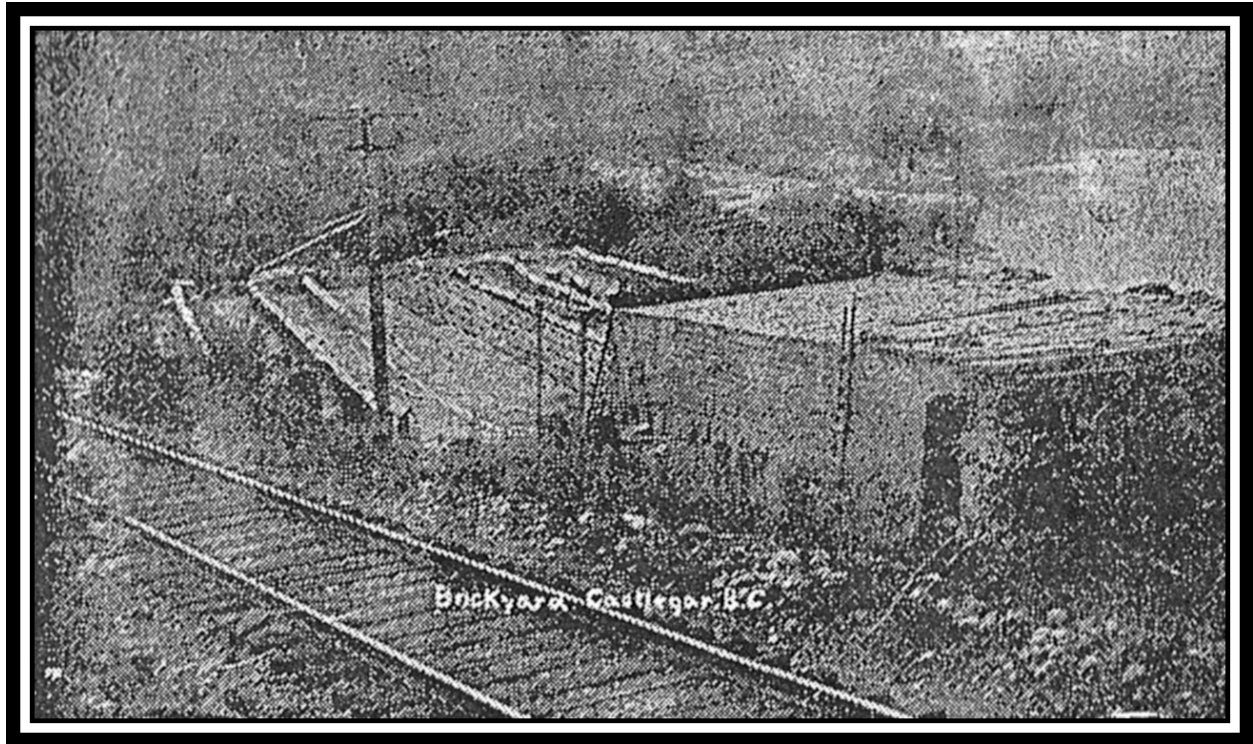
Eric offered his services to his brother while he was learning his trade. This proved to be a fatal mistake for Eric.

It was sometime during the first week in May, 1912. Eric was standing on the brick-making machine examining something inside the hopper. What happened next is unexplainable, as years of experience should never have let it happen. The machine was being operated and the wheel that that was perpetually turned by the horse, somehow caught Fors, and he was crushed beneath it.

The Rossland Miner's edition of May 25, 1912 succinctly states: "... through a moment's careless inattention, he was accidently killed, and at a time when he was in a position to enjoy life, as he had a snug fortune and the leisure to devote himself to what pleased him most."

The brick yard continued to operate until about 1916 when the property was sold to Tony Defoe. The machinery was sold for scrap and the land was used for real estate purposes.

The Castlegar Brick Works has long since disappeared, but its influence is still being felt today, as thousands of bricks produced are still in service in homes and industries throughout the Kootenays.



Castlegar Brick Works - Operated just a little west of the Castlegar ferries in the early 1900s