

The First Cash Crop

by Lynne Belluscio

When the early settlers arrived, they cleared the trees, hewed logs for their cabins, split rails for their fences, fed their oxen with the felled tree tops and piled up all the rest of the logs. After a year, they burned them. The fires would last for days, and if they were lucky, it didn't rain.

It was crucial to keep the ashes dry. After the ashes cooled, they were shoveled into wooden hoppers, or barrels, and water was poured through the ashes, and drained out the bottom. The liquid was caustic lye. Some of it could be used to make soft soap, mixing it with grease. But the rest of the lye was put in a heavy iron cauldron.

A fire was built under it, and the water evaporated. What was left was a crude form of potash, called black salts. There was good money paid for black salts, and the settlers found ways to sell them. Even before they could grow corn and wheat, the settlers had their first "crop." Of course, once the trees were cleared and burned, that was the end of the crop.

It took thirty full cords of wood to make a ton of ashes. Elm trees were particularly good. But a ton of ashes only yielded a sixth of a ton of potash. Never the less, a ton of potash could fetch \$100 and during the embargo with Britain prior to the War of 1812, if you could smuggle the potash to Montreal, a ton would sell for \$300. All along the southern shore of Lake Ontario, fast sloops were filled with potash and other goods that were being smuggled into Canada.

Britain had a big need for potash, to make gunpowder, fertilizer, glass, and eventually certain types of dyes. (It's ironic that American potash was being used to make British gunpowder during the war.)

The production of wood potash followed the settlers west, until they reached the plains where there were no forests. And so it was in 1831, when the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith, moved his group of followers from Palmyra to Kirtland, Ohio. There they settled and built the first Mormon Temple, high on the bluff overlooking Kirtland.



Smith had a revelation, that if they would build an ashery, the Mormon community would be able to pay for the Temple. So an ashery was built. How long it was in operation is not clear. The Mormons left Kirtland and moved to Navuoo in 1838. Recently, the Mormons have rebuilt or restored several homes in Kirtland, to tell the story of their settlement. I visited the site on a recent museum trip and was very interested in their reconstructed ashery.

There are four large iron set kettles to boil the lye and make the black salts. They have several lye hoppers outside and a couple inside, as well as good protection for storing the ashes until they can be processed. They also have a refractory, where the black salts could be heated and refined into pearl ash. Small amounts of pearl ash were used for cooking - a forerunner of baking soda. But pearl ash commanded a better price than potash.

After visiting the ashery in Kirtland, it got me to thinking about the potash that was made around here. I'm still doing research, and it's fascinating. There are all kinds of questions. Where did the settlers get the huge kettles that they needed to boil the black salts? There are accounts of men walking to the frontier with "five-pail kettles" on their heads. They used these kettles for maple sugar, washing clothes, scalding pigs, and making potash.

Over near Syracuse - then known as Salina - the kettles were used to boil brine to make

salt. I talked with Sylvia Fraser today, and she said they had a big iron cauldron in the pig barn that they used to scald pigs, but her father also used it to cook beans for feed and in the early spring, when they tapped the trees in front of the house they boiled maple syrup. The kettle's gone now. She figures it was given to the scrap drive during World War II - - the demise of a lot of kettles.

So where did the kettles come from? They must weigh several hundred pounds. Who made the kettles - where was the foundry? One account I read mentioned that the settlers

could "borrow" kettles when they needed them. I've been driving around looking around for these kettles. Some are thin walled but so far I've found two that have inch thick walls. These may be potash or pearl ash kettles. (Give me a call if you know of one. I need to photograph it and measure it).

It is also interesting to note, that the first patent registered with the United States Patent Office, (and signed by President George Washington) was issued to Samuel Hopkins on July 31, 1790. It was for a new process of making potash. (At one time, it was believed that this Samuel Hopkins was an early settler of Pittsford, NY. Recent research has proved that it wasn't the Pittsford Hopkins, but a Samuel Hopkins in Philadelphia that held the patent.) The wood potash business came to a halt when mineral potash was discovered. One of the biggest deposits was discovered in Canada.

