

POTTERY COMPANIES--LOS ANGELES--
 FRANCISCAN POTTERY
 California Vertical File

os Feliz, Silver Lake, Echo Park and Atwater Village

Gone to pottery

Looking back at Franciscan factory in Atwater Village

By Jon Regardie

Much has been made of plans to build a massive development on the Franciscan Pottery site in Atwater Village. Yet as a private developer and a Korean church prepare to build a 300,000-square-foot commercial complex and a 1,000-seat sanctuary, it is easy to forget the manufacturing plant that occupied the 45-acre plot for almost a century.

The Worchell-Horowitz partnership, which plans to anchor their development with a Price Club, a Ralphs supermarket and a Toys 'R' Us store, and the Lasung World Evangelical church, which will move its 500-person congregation from Downtown, are ready to build on land that has been called "one of the most important pottery sites in the western United States."

According to Stephen Alexandrowicz, an archaeologist and owner of the Lytle Creek-based Archaeological Consulting Services, at the turn of the 20th century the site was considered prime land, located as it was next to principal transport routes. Investors purchased the property in the late 1800s and sold it to the Pacific Art Tile Company. Pottery production

began.

"The facility was next to the railroad line and rail transport played a big role in its acquisition of materials for production, as well as the shipment of final goods to their other sources of sale," says Alexandrowicz, who is currently studying old maps, photos, architectural documents and other records as he prepares a detailed history of the site. He has also obtained several hundred original molds used in the manufacturing process. When finished analyzing the material, he will submit his condensed findings to the U.S. Park Service; ultimately the report will be placed in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

In 1922, the Gladding McBean Company purchased the factory, ushering in the site's most important years. From the 1930s to the '50s, says Alexandrowicz, the company produced what were called Franciscan wares. This trend of manufacturing brightly-colored table settings marked a change from the plain, single-colored patterns frequently produced at the time.

Alexandrowicz's research reveals that the quality of work rivaled those items manufactured in

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Archaeologist Stephen Alexandrowicz with some of the thousands of leftover molds used for plates and other ceramic wares at the Franciscan Pottery site in Atwater Village.

Pottery

European and Asian plants. The company's reputation soared.

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The Gladding McBean Company invested heavily in their resources; consequently their most important contributions resulted from research and development. Like Henry Ford's car factories, the company worked on an assembly line process, with thousands of identical pieces being pulled from the molds.

"They were interested in getting the best paste, the best glazes, in developing new types of wares that were appealing to the common people," says Alexandrowicz. "They were heavy into the architectural tile production, and many of their tiles embellish some of the historic buildings in Los Angeles. These people were inventive. They were able to change with the times and sometimes ahead of the times. They were on the cutting edge."

In the 1960s, the Atwater Village site was sold to a company called Interpace. A 1977 plan map of the facility recorded by a valuation consultant reported that the factory was composed of five main building clusters spread across land bounded by Los Feliz Boulevard, Vermont and Perlita avenues and the Southern Pacific railroad lines. The main factory comprised more than 400,000 square feet spread over two floors as well as a number of offices, kilns and warehouses (the dinnerware storage facility alone occupied 71,770 square feet).

In the early 1970s, renowned English manufacturer

Wedgewood acquired the factory, though they sold it Dura Ceramics a few years later. Alexandrowicz says Dura continued to use the original Franciscan tile molds until the plant closed in 1983. Five years later, the empty buildings were razed, leaving the assemblage of dirt and greenery which is circled in chain link fence today. It is currently one of the largest undeveloped plots of land in the city of Los Angeles.

After the factory's demise, it was learned that much of the ground on which it stood had been contaminated. During the decades of manufacturing, lead, cadmium and zinc had seeped into the soil. Contamination stymied various developments proposed for the site, and helped to turn a school away from the land.

Of the previous attempts to build here the most promising was broached by developer Mark Schurgin. He envisioned a massive entertainment complex and sunk \$30 million into site cleanup. However, the effort left him bankrupt, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation took ownership of the land. Officials installed an underground rubber sheet to contain the poisons, and repeated testing by the state Department of Toxics has shown that the tainted area is contained.

After a battle against development from some Atwater Village residents, the City Council approved in late 1995 conditional use permits for the land filed by Worchell-Horowitz and the Korean church. The city approval allows the organizations to close escrow with the FDIC. The new owners are expected to break ground on the Franciscan Pottery site within a few months.