

The Lost Town – High Cliff, Wisconsin

(Impact Magazine Article of the Year Award 2002)

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High Cliff State Park

*Booom bah booom bah booom, crash, toooot,
woosh, booom! Bammm!*

What a time it must have been!

Even the sounds of the busiest days of summer at High Cliff State Park in the 21st century cannot compare to what it must have sounded like on this land in the late 1800's to mid 1900's.



A once lively little town of hundreds, Clifton Wisconsin, which was later re-named High Cliff, was the home of the Western Lime and Cement Company and a thriving limestone quarry operation.

Imagine the deafening sounds of hydraulic jackhammers pounding away on the quarry floor as men drilled plug holes for high explosives. Blasts of dynamite from High Cliff quarry caused the earth on top of "the ledge" (Niagara Escarpment) to split and crumble. Air compressors hissed as they discharged power to the drills from the little "compressor house" perched atop the ledge overlooking the quarry. Teams of men swaggered pick axes all day breaking rocks into small pieces worthy of the lime kilns which were located hundreds of feet below the ledge. Add to the mix the gyrating stone crushers which boomed out their own grinding version of un-natural music as ton after ton of crushed limestone tumbled into waiting railcars. The deep baritone chorus was also accompanied by the groans and squeals of the box cars as they creaked along the railroad tracks headed to and from the kilns. Electric motors buzzed and whirred at the remote substation near the smoke bellowing kilns. Occasional blasts of steamer and barge whistles momentarily interrupted nearby fisherman. The whistle heard at noon and day's end announced periods of relative quiet. Even the horses knew which whistles to pay attention to. It is said that they stopped their work as abruptly as the men who commanded them!

In the days of the mid to late 1800's, precious loads of Niagara Dolostone (limestone) were hauled by horses pulling carts. They zigzagged up and down the treacherous bluffs. Later, pulley systems provided more efficient methods of moving the stone. I have even had occasion to find oxen shoes, though I have never read an account of the beasts working at High Cliff.

The Niagara Escarpment is a major geologic feature in Wisconsin. The 650-mile sickle-shaped cuesta extends from southeastern Wisconsin to south of Rochester New York, and also travels north into Canada. The rock of the escarpment is primarily Dolostone or dolomitic limestone that formed 420 million years ago when shallow, salt water seas covered this part of North America.

The challenge of moving heaps of the quarried rock from the top of the ledge to the lime kilns and crusher bins on the lakeshore some 225 feet below must have been daunting.

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Early days saw men rolling boulders down to the lakeshore. There they were piled up and eventually transported across the lake by barge for use in building foundations for homes, churches and other structures. Stone headed for the kilns was all handpicked. So too was the stone bound for the crusher bins. Much of the limestone was quarried to produce several end products such as limeate, a cement additive that aided in the construction of roads and buildings and pea-sized gravel for road construction. Some of the lime powder was also used for agricultural purpose.

Once processed in the kilns, men using shovels and wheelbarrows trudged the “cooked” lime powder from the base of the kilns to the nearby cooper’s shop. It was then placed in wooden barrels or bags to be shipped across Lake Winnebago to Menasha, Oshkosh or Fond du Lac. The physical work the teams of men performed, at least by today’s standards, is unimaginable.



Over the years several profitable businesses provided work for a diverse group of immigrants to High Cliff. Settlers and drifters came from eastern and southern states and foreign countries to work for the Cook & Brown Company at the High Cliff brickyards when they began operations in 1855. The building of a general store, company office, and a post office soon followed. The emerging village was named Clifton due to its proximity to the limestone cliffs. Two years later the company opened a sawmill not far from the brickyards on the shores of Lake Winnebago. Company housing would be added prior to the turn of the century.

The brickyards operated for approximately 60 years until there was a shortage of suitable clay for brick making. After the depletion of lumber from the immediate area, Cook and Brown decided to diversify their operation by closing the sawmill and started a quarry enterprise at High Cliff. The first kilns were built directly on the lakeshore in about 1870. Plagued by fires the kilns were relocated and rebuilt several times.

By 1885 the Village of Clifton was going through an identity crisis. Apparently there was another village in Wisconsin with same name. Misdirected mail prompted the changing of the village name to High Cliff, Wisconsin. Zip codes had not yet been invented!

The quarry operation also changed names several times. The Cook and Brown Company merged and later sold out to the Western Lime and Cement Company. They still continue a successful business in Wisconsin today.

As the quarry operation grew, so too did the business exploitations on top of the ledge. Bursting with entrepreneurial flavors, the first High Cliff Dancing Pavillion, (spelled with two ll’s) was built in 1885.

The Valley Queen and many other excursion boats brought loads of people to High Cliff to enjoy summer days filled with picnics and dancing.

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Old photos show hundreds of people precariously perched and clogged on every available inch of the cliff edge and surrounding areas. This popular destination expanded again in the 1920's to include an amusement park. Rides and concessions were steadily added.

A steam powered merry-go-round was a huge favorite. Foolhardy daredevils even drove cars off the cliffs for spectacular entertainment on the Fourth of July.

Local travelers, quarry workers and recreationists found the only way to get to the top of the ledge was to trudge up the old "Indian Path" as it was called, to get to the top. The narrow and steep path was built by hand by Alex Hart in the 1850's. It was the only easy connector to the top and the bottom of the ledge. Calumet County commissioned Mr. Hart for a sum of \$200 to build the road. His tools consisted mainly of a pick axe, shovel and a wheelbarrow. It took him several years to complete.

Though the work was hard at the High Cliff quarry the pay was fair. Families lived their entire lives in the tiny village. Thousands of people came and went over a century of time. Workers' names are found in the faded journals and company documents in the old General Store, which is now a museum. Many local families are descendants of the first settlers at High Cliff. My grandfather is among them. His name was August Sternhagen. He worked for the WL&CC during the boon days! Grandma and Grandpa lived in the village of High Cliff.

Though most of those who lived at High Cliff are now gone, there still remains a few living memorials left by a few "homesick immigrants" from about 80 years ago! A huge Kentucky coffee tree and two pecan trees, which were carried in by southern immigrants who missed their native trees of home, still grow on the lawn of the old General Store.

The history of settlement on the far northeast shore of Lake Winnebago is fascinating. It has been and still remains dynamic. The limestone mining operation at High Cliff which began in the 1800's operated successfully for nearly 100 years. But as the quality of available limestone at this location waned, operations slowed. A decision to begin closing the plant was made. Workers began moving their families back to the cities so the men could find work. The village of High Cliff slowly began to disappear.

The State of Wisconsin purchased the land in 1954 to prepare the site for a state park. The last load of limestone went into the kilns in September, 1956.

The once thriving community was no more. One by one the unoccupied and dilapidated company houses were demolished. The once prosperous amusement park, tavern and dance hall had fallen into disrepair and were removed.

Today the only remains of the one time boom town of High Cliff are the General Store Museum and the lime kiln ruins. Nature has slowly healed the scars of the quarries by replacing vacant holes with living things once again. The landscape surrounding the park has also changed. Hundreds of new homes dot the once open space of the nearby farmlands. High Cliff is no longer a ghost town...it is busy and vibrant once again.

But one can't help but wonder, what will this place will look like 100 years from now?