

The Charcoal Kiln

By David N. Walsh

For nearly 100 years, the small town of Glenburn, was one of the major sources of fuel for the commerce and industrial center of Bangor. I first learned of the charcoal business from Peter Chase, the former town manager of Glenburn when I was covering the community for the Bangor Daily News a few years back. He told me that at one time Glenburn was the center of the charcoal manufacturing for the greater Bangor area. He spoke of one family in particular, the Megquier family, and how members of that family had been involved in the charcoal business for more than 100 years. He suggested I look up Merrill Megquier of Hudson to learn more of that interesting history.

Megquier, a retiree of the Air National Guard in Bangor, where he worked for more than 35 years agreed to share his memories with me on a recent late summer sunny afternoon. Seated at the kitchen table, where Maine's best stories are told, he told of how the Megquier clan ended up in the Hudson-Glenburn area.

The family name is Scottish, although some have thought it might be French because of the spelling, but Merrill is quick to point out that Mary Queen of Scots, was by nobility a Frenchman.

Megquire's great, great, great, great grandfather, settled New Gloucester, Maine. The ancestor with three greats before grandfather, was instrumental in settling Poland, Maine. The ancestors of the current Megquiers, Joseph and Edmund arrived in Glenburn in the 1840s and great uncle, Edmund, built the Brick House in Glenburn Center, now a local landmark, from 1852 until 1858 of bricks made from the blue clay of Lancaster Brook. He bought a brick making machine and made all the bricks himself," said Merrill. A nephew of Merrill's now lives in that old family homestead.

From the beginning, the family became involved in the charcoal making business, along with farming and lumbering, and numerous other activities throughout the years. His great grandfather had two kilns at one time near the Glenburn brick house and Brook Farm.

The Megquier family made charcoal for more than 100 years in the Hudson -Glenburn area at various kilns they constructed over the history of the industry.

Life was not easy in those early days. "My great great grandfather was burned to death clearing land in Glenburn," said Megquier. He was trying to clear farmland with a controlled burn and the fire got out of control and headed for his house. He tried to save the house but perished in the fire. His name was Joseph Melvin, but he went by Mel.

Merrill's grandfather was Otis Megquier, his father's name was Joseph Megquier, and he had an uncle named Edmund who made a special charcoal out of alders, for use in the manufacturing of gunpowder.

In 1935 Merrill's father and relatives rebuilt the last kiln to work in Glenburn using some of the materials from an old charcoal kiln located at Six Mile Falls. "My father, his brothers Clifton and Harlan and Sam, a cousin, tore down the old kiln and father hired a brick layer, for the new one, but he told father he could only brick up a square building. My father got rid of him and did the brick work himself. They used a mortar of slack lime and sand so the kiln could withstand the heat.," said Merrill.

In 1936, shortly after the new Glenburn kiln was in operation, a photographer from the Bangor Commercial made a film of the operation. Merrill, who was born in 1931, was just a young child at the time, but remembers that a yoke of oxen was featured in the film.

The Glenburn kiln, the remnants of which are today located off the old Lancaster Road, looked like a brick beehive, with two metal doors, a lower door in the front, and a top door on the backside of the kiln that was approximately 8 feet off the ground, and a smoke hole on the top and small brick sized vent holes all the way around the circular structure. It was 20 feet across and stood 18 feet high and held 10 cords of wood.

"It was always filled from the bottom. When the bottom of the kiln was filled and you could no longer pile wood any higher, the filling process moved to the back of the kiln where wood was packed through the top door until 10 cord of wood was packed into the kiln.," said Merrill.

Once the kiln was full the top door was sealed. They used a long birch tree with loose birch bark attached to the end was used to ignite the fire in the bottom center of the kiln. Once the fire ignited the bottom door was then sealed. Because of the construction of the kiln, the fire burned from the center out to the strategically located holes that ringed the bottom. The fire would then drive the gases from the wood out through the bottom of the kiln.

"When you could see flame near the holes, they were sealed up with bricks and a mortar made of slack lime. When all the holes were sealed, and you had determined the gases were sufficiently burned off the smoke hole located on the top was completely sealed off. If there were still gases, you couldn't get the cap on because of the pressure. It was important not to put it on too early, because you could blow out the doors or walls if you allowed the pressure to build up.

When the kiln was operating you could smell the strong acrid scent of creosote, which streamed out from the top of the kiln. Creosote coated the entire inside of the kiln and the odor lingered in the area.

When all the holes were sealed oxygen was slowly cut off from the fire. The burn which lasted approximately 4 days, would eventually extinguish. After allowing sufficient time for it to cool, the metal doors were cracked open, and the charcoal was removed and sifted through a set of three screens, and it was sold as three grades of charcoal. Megquier was not sure of what grades went to particular markets, but there was a difference.

The most popular woods were birch, maple, beech, and oak, but the best charcoal, said Merrill, came from gray birch.

Merrill said one of his earliest memories was visiting the kiln, which was located about a mile off the road after traveling along a horseback road, with his father who carried a kerosene hurricane lamp that had glass on three sides. "He would make me wait outside the kiln, I was probably around five years old, and he would leave me outside and go into the darkness," he said as the fragments of memories came back.

Most men who cut wood for the kiln did so with a buck saw, but Merrill remembers hearing tales of an Uncle Edmund who went into the woods with nothing more than a double bit ax and spent the day chopping down trees, then reducing the logs to four-foot lengths for a full cord, a pile measuring four foot by four foot by eight foot.

There was a big market for the charcoal. Among the customers were the paper mill in Millinocket, the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad, the major hotels and restaurants in the Greater Bangor area, the city's blacksmith shops, other businesses and many homes throughout the city.

On another note, Merrill said the first car to show up in Glenburn was owned by his grandfather Otis who paid \$1000 in 1913 for a Reo Touring Car. He bought it brand new, and Merrill still has the bill of sale. The family would later convert the car to a truck to move charcoal.

When Merrill's father Joe was in charge of the charcoal operation, most of the charcoal was delivered to market by trucks, but in the days when his grandfather ran the business, they used horse drawn wagons in the summer and large double-runner sleds with a boxed in cargo area in the winter. Usually, a pair of horses would do.

The charcoal business could prove dangerous. Twice his grandfather Otis was robbed of his day's receipts. One night he was returning by sled with a pair of horses after having delivered a load of charcoal to Bangor along Valley Avenue, an area filled with ice houses, a flour mill, and other businesses, when he was clubbed unconscious and robbed. Fortunately for him, his horses knew the way to carry the sleigh and brought the unconscious man home where his family was able to minister to him.

On another occasion thieves poured a kettle of boiling water on him to overpower him and rob him. He had a thick winter jacket on with bone buttons. It was so cold that when the hot water hit his thick winter coat, the bone buttons split to pieces. Memories passed down from one family member to another. A fragment here, a phrase there. The picture of life comes alive.

Megquier chuckled as he told about one of his grandfather's cousins, Newell, who used to deliver charcoal to homes in bushel baskets. At one stop the woman of the house complained that the basket wasn't heaped up high enough. The next time he stopped by the woman was impressed. The basket was heaped up high with charcoal. It wasn't until after he left, and she went to use the charcoal that she realized he had turned the basket over and covered the bottom with charcoal to give it the appearance of an overflowing basket.

Some of the Megquiers eventually left the Glenburn area and spread out to Bar Harbor, and even Minnesota, but that's another story..

In 1943, with World War II raging, Merrill's father Joe was drafted, and after nearly 100 years of operation, the Glenburn kilns closed. Gas and oil replaced charcoal wood and coal as the dominant fuels, and after the war, although there was some demand for charcoal for specialized uses, too much had changed. The ax and bucksaw laborers were no longer available. The industry folded.