

Blame it on rain? No, blame it on plaster!

Posted on [April 20, 2013](#) by [David Britten](#)

Happy Hollow returned with a bit of vengeance this week. Record rainfalls for the month of April led to Plaster Creek once again spilling its banks and filling the old Alabastine plaster mining area with a foot or two of water. Godfrey-Lee's athletic complex is temporarily more suitable for aquatics than football, soccer, baseball or softball.



Not the first time, nor will it be the last.

Plaster Creek enters the Godfrey-Lee district at the corner of Clyde Park and Burton Street. It meanders alongside the Kalamazoo interurban electric train route just west of the old Leonard-Kelvinator plant. The creek exits the district only after crossing Chicago Drive and Godfrey Streets destined for the Grand River.

The creek once had a very different route through what kids referred to as Happy Hollow. It actually curved up to the east edge of the football field before heading back towards Chicago Drive. Back when Chicago Drive was known as the Grandville Road, the creek was more-or-less straightened so the interurban train could avoid the necessity of two trestles (bridges) to cross it. This of course left the rest of the area on the west bank of the creek swampy leading to the moniker of Happy Hollow.

But before there were trains, there was plaster, and plenty of it.

In the year 1841, the first mill was erected for working the gypsum deposits, by Warren Granger and Daniel Ball near the place where Plaster Creek crosses the old Grandville road (now Chicago Drive). The land was owned by Mr. Degarmo Jones of Detroit, who had secured 80 acres of this land before 1838, and these men paid Jones rent in plaster delivered by water at Detroit. The mill was equipped with crude grinding apparatus and one run of stone operated by water power from the creek, and with a two barrel cauldron kettle with thick bottom. Under Mr. Rumsey's management, the next year, three cauldron kettles were set in an arch and fired with dry wood.

The plaster was stirred by means of a stick with a spud at one end and was removed by shoveling out to one side after the first settling. The manufacture of calcined plaster was a very small part of the work, as most of the rock was ground for land plaster. For this purpose the stone was broken with a hammer and passed through an Indian mill or crusher and ground between mill stones. The land plaster was shipped down the river and around the lakes to Detroit, and from there sold to the neighboring territory.



1876 plat map of the Godfrey-Lee area showing route of Plaster Creek and Plaster Mill

In order to call attention of the farmers of the vicinity to their work, Granger and Ball had posted, in conspicuous places, the following advertisement:

PLASTER! PLASTER!

The subscribers have now completed their Plaster Mill on Plaster Creek, two miles south of this place which is now in operation. They respectfully inform the public that they have on hand at the mill or at either of their stores at Ionia or this place a constant supply. As the quality of the Grand Rapids Plaster is not

equaled by any in the United States, they hope to receive a share of patronage as the price is less than it can be obtained for at any place in Michigan. Wheat, Pork, and most kinds of produce received in payment.

*Granger & Ball
Grand Rapids, December 21, 1841.*



Quarrying gypsum at the “Happy Hollow” Alabastine operation.

Plaster (also known as gypsum, alabastine, and anti-kalsomite depending on its use) would be dug out of the Plaster Creek watershed up until the early 1900’s. After that, mining moved underground over where Marquette Park sits today and along Butterworth Drive on the west side of the Grand River.



Alabastine Company Factory No. 1 on old Grandville Road (Chicago Drive, today)



The Alabastine building today. It's been home to Dossin Foods that bottled Pepsi Cola, a paper company, and now a building supply company. The building sits on Chicago Drive across from the start of Lee Street and our East Lee Campus.

By the 1870's, the company quit using this area as its quarry, instead moving north along Plaster Creek towards Hall Street and then west to the area where today sits Marquette Park. By 1911, Alabastine decided to tunnel underground in the site of its second mill, Alabastine No. 2, at the north end of Nagel and Judd Streets, next to the Wyoming Yard train depot. Today that site is home to Michigan Natural Storage.

The end result from all of this plaster quarrying is a very low creek basin that, particularly when the Grand River is high, sheds its excess water across our athletic complex and area streets. In effect, historic Lee Field constructed on what was once the Happy Hollow swamp and a portion of Plaster Creek itself, serves three missions: as a sports facility for Godfrey-Lee athletes, a playground for ECC students, and a flood plain for Plaster Creek.



Men dug out Lee Field by hand in 1936-38 as part of the Depression-era Works Progress Administration, filling in a part of Happy Hollow on the old Alabastine plaster quarry area. For many years in the early 1900's, the site was used as a neighborhood dumping ground.

So once again, we patiently await nature to return our ball fields. Soon, we hope.

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