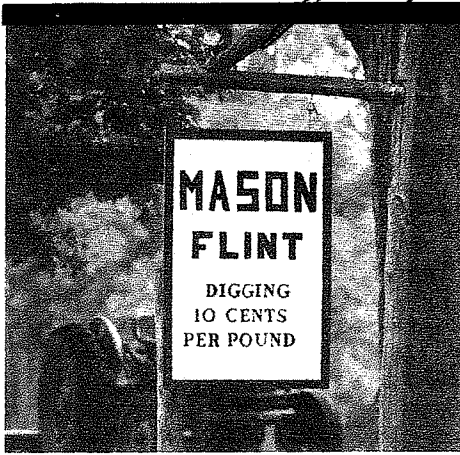


Clayton Mason

Evelyn Mason

(People you should get to know)... Around Town



The Masons... Providing Flint to Area Gem Lovers

By Jill Weldon



Evelyn and Clayton Mason in front of their shop on their farm, which is adjacent to Flint Ridge State Memorial.

"It is thought that American Indians from throughout the Midwest made periodic pilgrimages to Flint Ridge in order to obtain a supply of flint for tool making. The purity of this deposit permitted these skilled workers to fashion a wide variety of tools, weapons, and ceremonial pieces. Artifacts made from Flint Ridge flint have been found as far east as the Atlantic coast, as far west as Kansas City, and as far south as Louisiana." —Flint Ohio's Official Gemstone, Educational Leaflet No.6

You can read similar accounts of the history surrounding Ohio's Flint Ridge area in many educational and festival brochures. Flint Ridge State

Memorial also provides many opportunities for learning about Ohio's flint and its long-time special value and great uses for Native Americans. Digging, however, is not permitted at the Memorial. So where do modern-day flint aficionados go for their own supplies of the gem?

Thankfully, for many flint lovers, Clayton and Evelyn Mason have welcomed diggers onto their flint-rich property. In fact, their farm has become a camping and digging site practically devoted to providing flint to gem lovers. Their farm is adjacent to the Flint Ridge park and shares the abundant treasure of the area.

Almost two decades ago, inter-

ested diggers first came to the Masons and requested the opportunity to dig for their flint. The answer was yes. Eventually, people wanted to be able to camp on the farm as well. In 1969, the Masons started letting campers stay while searching for the extraordinary flint. "We had just a few campers at first, and the few told a few...." Mrs. Mason says.

"We kept clearing off and moving the camping area back more, and clearing off and moving back, and clearing off and moving back. They ask when I'm going to make it a little bigger, and I say, 'I'm not,'" Mr. Mason says laughingly.

One should not misconstrue that statement to mean that the Masons are unwilling to host more flint hunters. What was originally land that was detrimental in nature for farming—hard to plant, hard on tires, unforgiving to mowers (they've got a broken window now from mower-thrown flint)—has become an opportunity to provide others with a special service and has provided them a wonderfully busy way to spend their retirement. But it was far from planned this way.

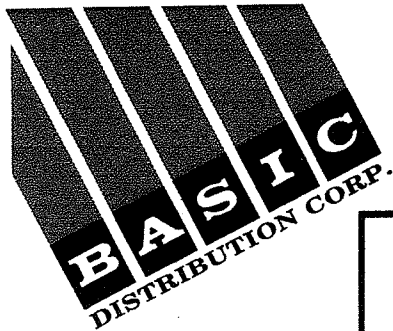
"Just today, we had visitors from Maine, Texas, California, Oregon and Pennsylvania—all coming for flint."

The land that now hosts countless flint hunters has been in Mr. Mason's family since before the Civil War. Clayton and Evelyn lived in a

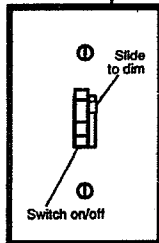
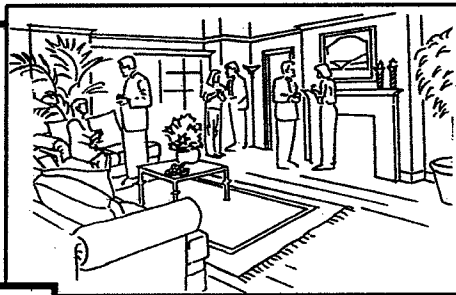
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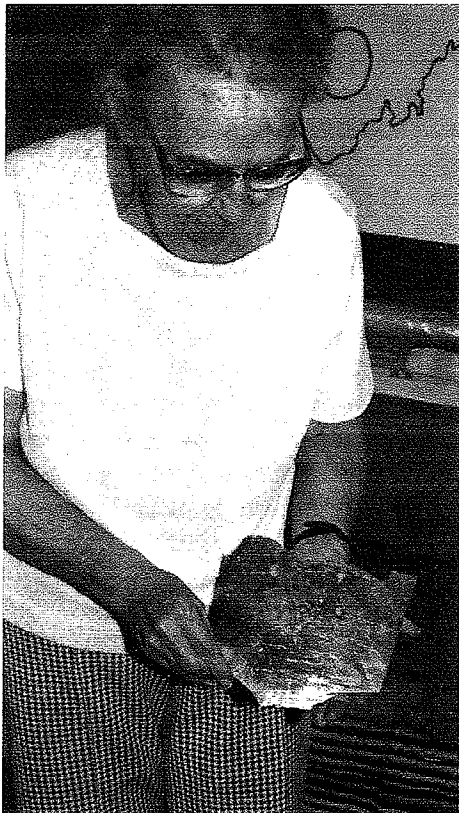
Near the intersection of W. Main and Thornwood Dr. on the far west end of W. Main.

large farmhouse on another large piece of their land, and he had a long career with Kaiser Aluminum. During those years flint was beginning to be recognized for its rich history in the area. The Flint Ridge State Memorial was established in 1933, and in 1968 a modern museum was constructed (3 years after flint was named Ohio's official gemstone).

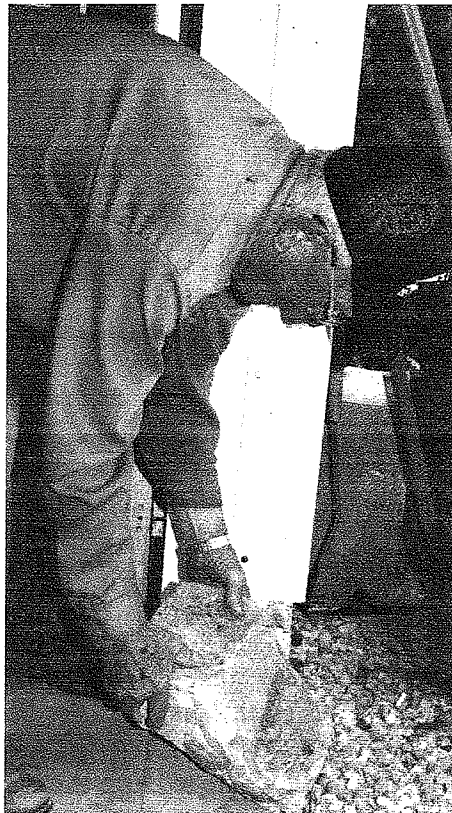
About this time the Masons started getting the requests to allow digging on this other lot of land that shared a large outcropping of flint with the park land. They agreed and have since put up a fence to clearly mark the line of their property limits. Once people started camping on the land, the Masons became more involved.

"I came down and filled the water wells and built the restrooms. We had those things before we had anything else," Mr. Mason explains. "Well, actually, we had this building (the shop) already here." He originally built the one-room building to use as a base while at the newly created campground. "He'd sleep there on the weekends on a couch," Mrs. Mason says. Things have grown quite a bit since those early days. Now they have nearly 30 permanent campers, as well as many short-term visitors from all over the country and world. "Just today, we had visitors from Maine, Texas, California, Oregon and Pennsylvania—all coming for flint," Mrs. Mason exclaims. "Besides people coming from closer by, and they were getting flint to 'knap' it, they call it, to make arrowheads." Over the years, they've had visitors from as far away as Scotland, Germany and Japan.

Mary Francis Rausch is a long-time friend of the Masons. She has spent her life interested in flint and other gemstones. As a member of the Licking County Rock and Mineral Society (as well as several other gem-focused organizations), Rausch has held many offices over the years, so she is well aware of the high demand for and interest in Ohio's flint. "Many people feel that they're not doing anything wrong to pick up pieces of



The Masons keep a variety of flint and other gemstones in their shop. Many have been brought to them by friends and customers.



Although the Masons say they don't have any particular favorites, this gem seems to be a special piece.

flint along the trails at the Memorial," Rausch says. "But it is quite illegal to take flint there. The Masons are a legal and helpful source of collecting for the general public. It's wonderful that they've done that."

While going to so much effort to accommodate diggers, the Masons picked up some interest in the gemstone themselves. Mrs. Mason sells some finished pieces of flint and jewelry in the shop. They offer flint in many stages of refinement there, too—rough pieces, that to the untrained eye look like plain, rusty rocks; some that are more refined; and some tumbled, smooth colorful stones in beautiful tones of rose, white, gray, brown and other colors.

This is not really a money-making endeavor for these great-grandparents, though. They don't have an extensive amount to sell in their shop, nor do they sell pieces elsewhere. In fact, they don't even have much time to attend the festivals for enjoyment alone. The 5th Annual Buckeye Flint Festival will be held in downtown Newark the 24th and 25th of September, but you won't find the Masons there. With the festival come so many visitors, that the Masons need to man the campground to handle those interested in camping and digging during their stay.

As for the digging and camping—they only charge \$5 a night to camp and 10 cents per pound of flint purchased through digging. The Masons don't keep "regular hours"—they never leave. To them spending a couple of hours at the grocery store is "getting away." "We're liable to go to bed tonight and get up in the morning and two or three campers will have pulled in and be waiting for us," Mrs. Mason says. Their patience in service to their customers is quite abundant. And don't worry, they don't have any plans of selling this popular land. In fact, they've had an offer on some of their surrounding land for housing developments. They turned the offer down.

On top of all of the daily ways the Masons accommodate flint lovers,

they also play host to an annual Memorial Day Festival, The Flint Ridge Runners Annual Reunion. For more than 20 years now, locals and travelers from several states have converged on Mason's farm each Memorial Day.

"Oh, that's a big deal," Mr. Mason says, laughing. People come with trailers and tents and campers—so many that the campground literally overflows. The self-contained campers are parked across the street in one of the Masons' other fields. "Last year we had 91 units, and that didn't count tents," Mrs. Mason says. "There's just barely room enough to walk around back there."

Mary Francis Rausch, who has organized the event three times, estimates about 300 people get together for the reunion. "People come from Michigan, Illinois, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Maryland," she says. The Flint Ridge Runner Annual Reunion has been going on at the Masons since 1973, according to Rausch. "I've never gone to another festival like this. I've been to lots of shows, and this is the only thing of its nature," Rausch explains. "We usually go on early morning nature walks for several miles and look at flint outcroppings and flora and fauna. We also have learning centers where we share information we've learned over the year." Rausch says the festival began with out-of-state visitors coming up for the Memorial Day holiday to dig over the extended weekend. They ended up meeting with the locals there, and before long it became a real reunion and grew very rapidly.

"The Masons are super-caring people, and they're generous."

She also tells of a funny tale of some uninvited guests at the Masons one Memorial Day. During the weekend of this particular festival, there was also a heavy metal music festival going on nearby, and the concertgoers noticed signs around

town for a "Rock Festival." "So we had a bunch of heavy metal people show up on motorcycles wanting to know when the music started," Rausch says, laughing.

One of the aspects of working with flint that is most important to Rausch is the opportunity to teach young people, and she believes it's a major part of the attraction for the Masons, too. "The Masons love young people, and we believe that that's where the future of everything is," she says. "There is no more joy than when you see some little kid come in from digging with a partner, and they've found something beautiful. They truly don't forget it."



Clayton Mason shows off a flint "peeper" creature created by his wife Evelyn.

"The Masons are super-caring people, and they're generous," Rausch says. "It may sound trite, but it's true—they're just what this country needs more of—not the least bit greedy. They just want people to come and enjoy the digging and the pleasure of swapping stories."

In the Masons' shop, a large, glass jar filled with pieces of flint and water is on display. The colors of the flint show through in the water, where they wouldn't normally in their rough state, and kids and adults alike thrill at the natural beauty. And that's what it seems to be all about for this couple. The Masons just plain enjoy sharing the bounty of their land with others who appreciate what nature has to offer.

THE END