

STRANGER FROM A STRANGE LAND

# The Strange Brick Collection

Daniel Strange collects bricks. Yup, that's a thing. Dan built a museum at his Minden residence that resembles a shed from the outside. But the inside is filled with 3,500 bricks classified by states and countries.

His dad was a bricklayer. Dan worked the same field in younger days to help pay college tuition. In later years he returned to this vocational symbol of his heritage but unlike his father, be-

came a collector. Not many have an obsession with bricks. Most of us do harbor both positive and negative brick connotations.

Bricks are durable construction material. In the tale of the Three Little Pigs, the Big Bad Wolf quickly destroyed the dwellings of two pigs who built their homes from straw and sticks. But when the wolf encountered the third pig's house, he failed to blow it down. The still hungry wolf foolishly sought entrance through the brick chimney and landed in a pot of boiling water. Pigs are notably intelligent creatures and that bricklayer pig was particularly smart.

On the other hand, a bricklayer in basketball is not a flattering term. A brick is a shot that clangs off the backboard or rim with no chance of scoring. Jeering fans or players might then yell, "Brick!"

In the biblical account of Exodus, the hardened heart of Pharaoh forced enslaved Hebrews to collect their own straw to make bricks for his pyramids. He was tired of their complaining and instructed his foremen, "You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making. (Exodus 5:7-8)

Mud was gathered from the Nile banks, mixed with chopped straw, molded into brick shapes, and baked in the sun. As if their previous labor wasn't challeng-

ing enough. Fear not True Believers. Passover is upon us and that'll settle Pharaoh's hash.

Dan explained a time-tested process of brick construction. "Pug mills worked like a meat grinder. It was like a sausage machine that processed mixed clay and water. Long lines of wire cutters sliced the bricks coming through the extruder. Then they're fired in kilns."



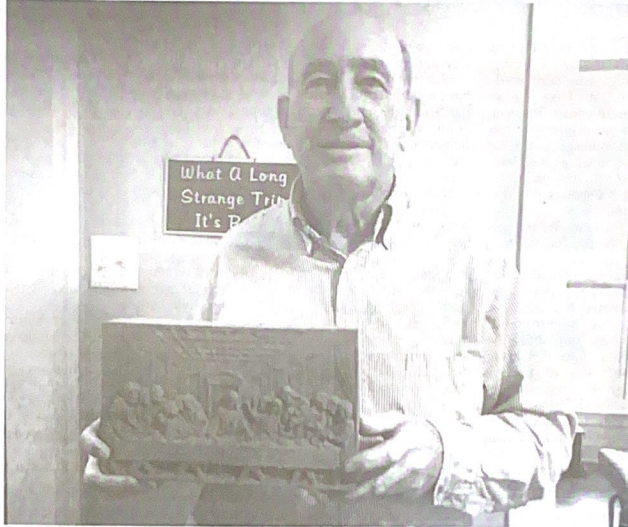
DIRK ELLINGSON

There is an International Brick Collectors Association. Dan's member number 1299. His friend John Hicks in West Monroe is also an enthusiastic brick collector. They're longtime IBCA members. John devotes many spare hours to researching and cataloging bricks. These ardent detectives work hard on both research at home and discovering brick treasures on location. Three days prior to my visit to see the Strange collection, Dan and John were on an archaeological dig in Jackson, Mississippi. People are often surprised to learn about their avocation digging for bricks.

"Sometimes they look at you like a cow staring at a new fencepost," John said. "We make discoveries through demolition contractors." Besides shovels and calloused hands, I asked what tools they take on location. "Chisels and pick axes," John said. "I'm very careful chipping away the mortar with the pick axe."

Dan has mounds of bricks from his adventures kept outside awaiting cleaning. You have to be careful with cleaning chemicals like hydrochloric acid so the bricks aren't damaged. They're first soaked in buckets of water. It looked like an assembly line, albeit one Dan works solo. Once clean they go on display in the museum.

The IBCA has meetings around the country. They trade information and bricks. The center section of Dan's museum is stacked with bricks he intends



to give away or trade. The pandemic curtailed IBCA assemblies the past year but the brick enthusiasts hope soon to resume their spirited conventions.

Bricks usually bear the imprint of their manufacturer. You don't see that looking at a wall where the maker is concealed by the brick placement. But bricks removed from buildings display clues of origin. Dan's collection is a library of bricks. You can read the manufacturers on each shelf in every aisle.

We spent an interesting hour touring his collection. Dan's a passionate archivist eager to share the stories behind his bricks. They sit upright on display to show names not originally intended to be seen. Not only the titles and cities of manufacturers but many include interesting artwork. Sunflowers from Kansas bricks. Skylines of Texas cities. Birds. Space shuttles.

St. Joe has been making bricks in Pearl River, Louisiana since 1891. Forty miles north of New Orleans, St. Joe Brick Works uses a colonial process of soft mud in wood molds. They eschew automation to manufacture what their website describes as "a good honest brick, full in dimension and character." Architects sometimes specify the St. Joe product.

Louisiana and dozens of other states are represented in Dan's collection.

Seen bricks with three holes? Why would they do that? Dan explained it cuts down on clay used. When you're making bricks by the thousands those small holes save considerable money on materials.

The Strange brick I found most fascinating was kept in his house. It depicted Jesus Last Supper as described in the Synoptic Gospels and First Corinthians. The brick was sculpted by Glen-Gery. A timely work of art for the coming week.

You drive on brick in downtown Minden. In a November 2018 Minden Press-Herald article, historian John Agan explained, "The brick paving of Minden's streets was part of a series of civic improvements carried out by the town government and local businessmen between 1916 and 1918. The first step in this campaign was to have the downtown section of Minden curbed and guttered. The dirt streets in Minden had become a severe drainage problem."

Traffic was kicking up dust. Lawbreakers exceeded the 8 MPH speed limit. "The passing of speeding cars through the dirt streets in the downtown area

was causing excessive dust to be thrown on local businesses and shoppers," Agan wrote. Minden took steps towards better roads. Bricks to the rescue by way of Missouri.

"This project moved forward much more quickly, spurred by public impetus," Agan said. "On October 2, 1917, bids were let on the project. The job was awarded to Kennedy and Olson Construction of Kansas City, Missouri. They were the lowest of three bidders for the job. The specifications requiring paving bricks set in cement on a concrete foundation."

Both Main Street and Broadway were bricked for a half-century. You still drive on bricks along Main. They removed the Broadway bricks in 1975. Many of these bricks were repurposed for Jacqueline Park. Some found their way to private collections. Do you suppose the Strange brick collection includes any Minden specimens? Ask Dan. Each of his bricks has a story waiting to be heard.

As his business card proclaims, "I collect bricks; but then again, I'm Strange. Find me a brick."

DIRK ELLINGSON IS A MINDEN, LA RESIDENT AND IS CURRENTLY A PHARMACY TECHNICIAN AT THE LOCAL WALGREENS.

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