

Menasha - The Traveling Pottery

about 1854 to 1855

There is very limited information about this most improbable pottery making venture. The proprietor was a Mr. Crough from Menasha. He built a pottery business on a boat that could travel from town to town, stopping to demonstrate pottery making and to sell his wares. If that alone was not enough to attract people's attention, he used a windmill to grind the clay and two domesticated black bears to turn the wheel.

His planned route was from Menasha to Oshkosh across Lake Winnebago, then up the Fox River to the canal at Portage to the Wisconsin River, and then to the Mississippi and south, selling his wares along the way. This would have required a rather large vessel with an engine to get up the Fox River.

On October 31, 1854 the Wisconsin State Journal reported that Clough was in Oshkosh which is on Lake Winnebago at the mouth of the Fox River. The report says that the windmill powers the grinding of clay and the bears provide the power for the lathe (potter's wheel). The article says the bears looked contented and that they were told that the bears don't seem to dislike their occupation.

Mr. Cough spent the winter in Oshkosh and in April, 1855 the Oshkosh Courier reported that the Floating Pottery was turning out fine specimens of a variety of articles in common domestic use and that their products were selling for cash as fast as they could turn them out. "Their machinery is propelled by two docile looking black bears, and the whole concern is a curiosity well worth visiting."

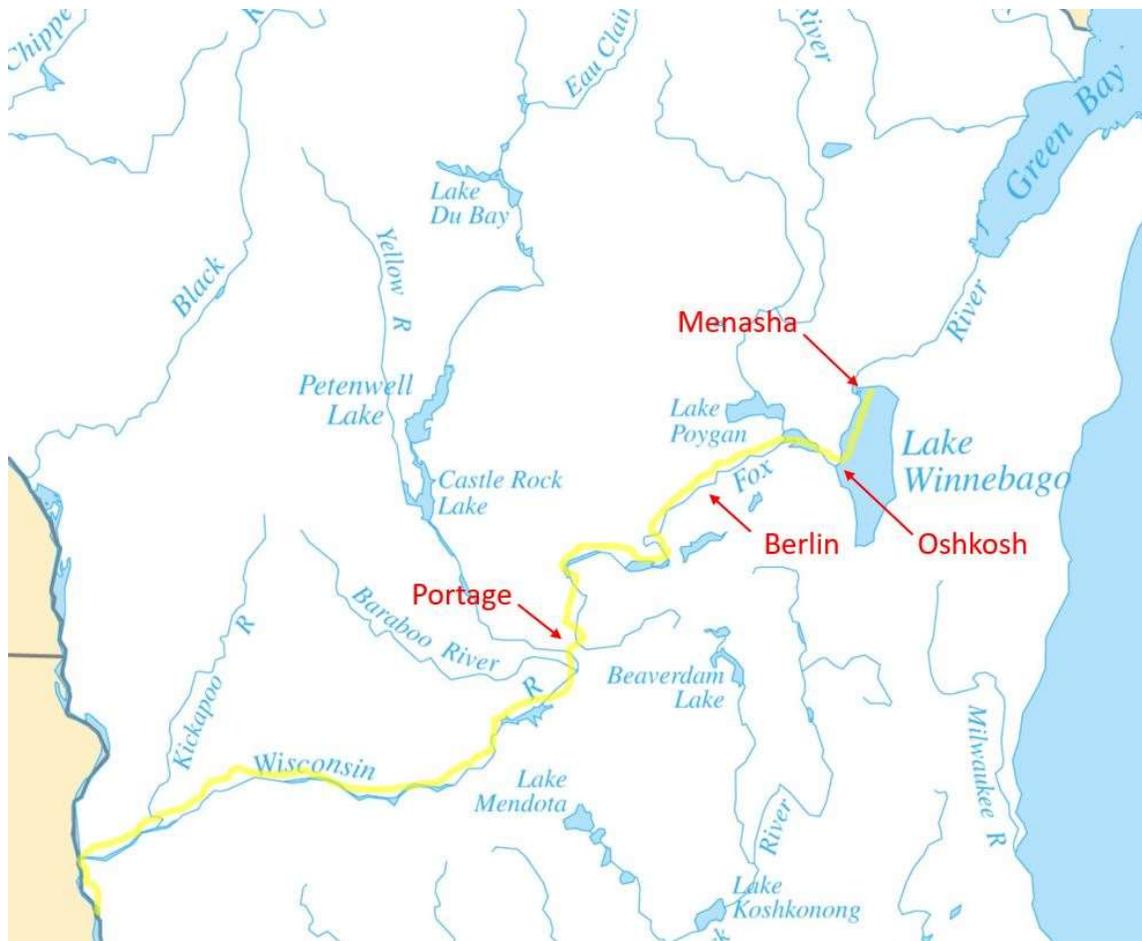
THE FLOATING POTTERY.—Some fine specimens of earthenware, manufactured at this establishment have been shown to us, consisting of quite a variety of articles in common domestic use. The proprietors find cash customers for their ware as fast as they can turn it out. Their machinery is propelled by two docile looking Black Bears, and the whole concern is a curiosity well worth visiting.—*Oshkosh Courier.*

In the 1855 Alson Vail moved with his family from Vienna, NY and was living in the third Ward in Oshkosh. The third ward is on the Fox River near the inlet from Lake Winnebago within blocks of where the traveling Pottery was moored.

Mr. Cough made it as far Berlin, about 30 miles up the Fox River from Oshkosh. In September 1855 a Alson Vail and Mr. Lewis

started a new pottery in Berlin featuring a bear for power. Apparently, Clough convinced Alson and Vail that a bear would be a good way to promote the new pottery and sold one of the bears to them. The pottery they started in Berlin operated into the 1860's.

What happened to the Traveling Pottery after that is anyone's guess. You can imagine the logistical challenges of transporting materials needed to make earthenware, a kiln, windmill, and two bears on a small river with bears. Unfortunately, Mr. Cough's plan had at least one fatal flaw. The canal between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers at Portage could handle not much more than a canoe - it was essentially a ditch in 1855 so his plan was doomed from the start. It would have required a costly and difficult portage. What became of Clough, the vessel and the second bear is lost to history.



The voyage started in Menasha, crossed Lake Winnebago to Oshkosh for the winter, then up the Fox River to Berlin. It is not known if it continued after that but the plan was to take the canal at Portage to the Wisconsin river then on to the Mississippi.

References

History of Winnebago County

Madison Wisconsin State Journal October 31, 1854

Daily Free Democrat Milwaukee - 4-16-1855