

A concrete career

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(F3A)

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inaccurately — as cinder blocks. Cinder blocks are seldom used in blocks today.

The Fendts works on Gill Road, started in 1924 by Lionel "Leo" Fendt and continued by son Junior and grandson Alan, is distinguished by its towering slate grey bin or hopper, which soars to 110 feet above the ground.

The bin holds the makings — sand, gravel, cement and something called light aggregate — for the blocks.

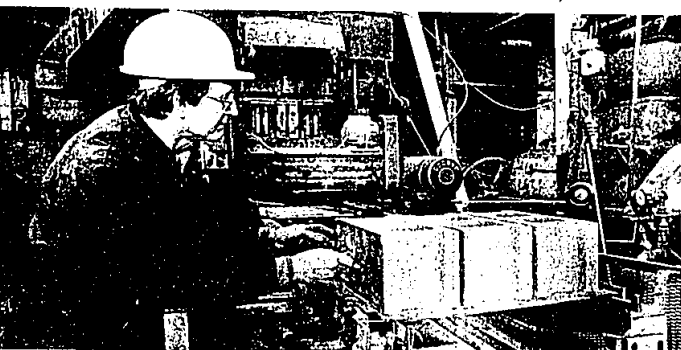
Inside the plant, or under the bin, there's a batcher and a mixer to combine the materials, a block machine to form the blocks, several kilns to "cure" them at 170 degrees for eight hours and lots of other heavy equipment as well.

Because of automation and safety regulations, a job in a block plant isn't the backbreaking, dangerous work it once was. But it's still a dirty, dusty factory job. A strong back is still a requirement as are steel-toed work shoes and old clothes.

BUT ALAN FENDT wasn't born a vice president with an easy chair in the front office. He worked every job in the plant, including truck driver, while earning a degree in industrial management from Southfield's Lawrence Institute of Technology.

"It's an interesting business," said Fendt, who lives with his wife Sharon and their two small girls in a house he built himself (with Fendt blocks, of course) near Ann Arbor.

"Personally, I like machinery," he said. "I like to tinker with machinery and make automatic machinery work. It (the plant) has been in our family. It's what we make our living at. It's been good to me."



Fendt employee Larry Voss checks the finished product.

"There've been things I wouldn't have been able to have had I been working for someone else."

Like a lot of snow-belt concerns, Fendt's company is feeling the general deceleration of the economy and the resultant downturn in the construction industry.

Some 15 people, including salesmen and office personnel, are employed at the Gill Road plant. In 1979, "close to 40" people worked there, Fendt said. A sister plant in Ann Arbor was closed in 1980 and now serves only as a stock yard and customer pickup point.

The bad economy has brought on stiff competition for the remaining blocks, according to Fendt, and that has led to what he calls "murderous price cutting."

"You get hit with a double whammy," he said. "You're not selling as much, and what you are selling you're selling at a much lower price. You end up almost giving it away."

ABOUT THAT competition: It's growing and it includes not only the other block companies.

"Our real competitors today aren't the block companies," Fendt said. "They're the lumber, steel and plastic industries. Instead of concrete blocks, they're using wood, steel, poured concrete and a lot of prefabricated materials in homes."

"Of course, I think we (the block industry) have advantages. Durability is one of them. And the insurance on masonry homes is sometimes a lot less. Blocks don't burn."

To hold down costs, Fendt tries to keep the plant as self-sufficient as possible. "We do all the maintenance our-

selves," he said. "That includes welding, fabricating. We have our own truck mechanic."

"We don't have a big staff, so everybody has to know how to do everything. But that's good. It gives the guy a little pride in what he's doing. It's not like being on an assembly line."

Producing building blocks can be a tremendously expensive proposition. For example, a new block machine can cost around \$150,000. A new truck (Fendt has 10) with a loading boom on its bed goes for \$90,000.

"I'm not in the market for any new equipment, I'll tell you that," said Fendt with a laugh.

THE FENDT plant is a heavy user of natural gas to produce the steam which cures the blocks in the kilns.

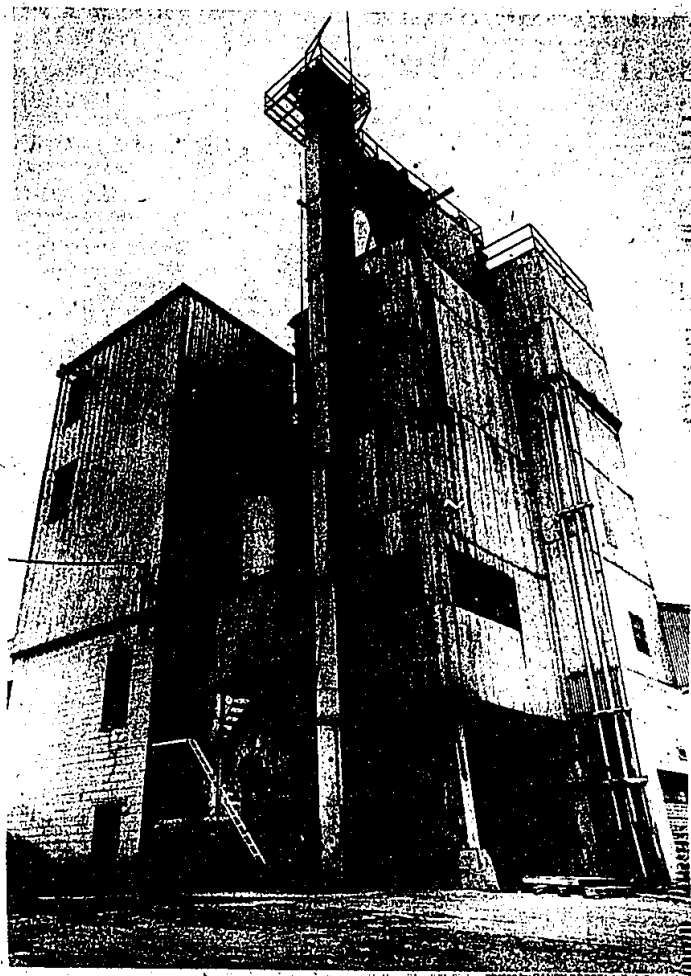
"I'd say you're looking at \$3,000 to \$4,000 a month for the gas bill," Fendt said. "We reduced our gas usage by 20 percent in 1982, but our gas bill was slightly higher than the year before. You just can't keep up with the thing."

And then there are the regulators. MIOSHA (Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Act) personnel make regular visits to the plant.

"They're constantly coming in here and putting guards on things," Fendt said. "Any possible way somebody can get hurt, they're trying to prevent it."

But Fendt likes the business despite the problems. And he'd rather be in the plant with the noise of the machinery and the smells of the concrete and paraffin oil than in the office shuffling paperwork.

"But it seems I'm getting caught up more and more in office matters," he said.



The makings of Alan Fendt's concrete blocks are stored in the 110-foot bin behind the company's

offices on Gill Road.

INSIDE ANGLES

MARILYN WALLAS, chairman for the Michigan Federation of Music Clubs Convention, is busy recruiting members of the Farmington Musical to serve as hostesses for the 400 women attending from all over Michigan. The theme for the 66th annual convention is Melodies & Maybaskets, and is being held May 11, 12 and 13 at the Sheraton-Oaks Hotel in Novi. The convention will feature talent winners from the state as well as the \$5,000 National Young Artist Award winner, Gary Lakes, tenor, accompanied by Fontaine Lange. Kerry Price Gower, jazz pianist, and harpist Kirsten Agresta will also be heard during the convention. Dr. Roger Jacob of Interlochen will be the guest speaker.

THE 100 VOLUNTEERS who signed up to act as officials for West Bloomfield's Half Marathon ate an after-race spaghetti dinner at Buddy's Pizza in Farmington Hills. The party was Buddy's thank you to those who manned the first aid stations, directed the runners at the 40 turns of the 13.1-mile route and handled the registration.

HELP, (Human Emergency Lift Program) got its latest bit of help from employees of Texas Instruments whose cash donation was matched dollar for dollar by the company to ease the frustration of the unemployed. In addition to \$111 in cash, employees garnered 122 canned goods items for the economic emergency.

KAREN CHERKASKY, a sophomore at Harrison High School, is a member of Rosemarie Floyd's Contemporary Civic Ballet Company. She performed with the company in their April 15 performance with the Oakway Symphony at Southfield-Lathrup High School.

THE BEST WAY to remember the beauty of spring wildflowers is to capture them on film. Photography enthusiasts, and flower lovers as well, will be able to venture out to the woodlands during the "Spring Photo Walk" at Independence Oaks County Park 8:10-10:30 a.m. Saturday, April 23. Those attending should supply their own equipment and film. Photographers Hartley Anglin and Bill Barnard will be on hand to share their knowledge of close-up photography.

Meeting place is the boat rental building. Cost is the park entry fee of \$2.50 per vehicle for Oakland County residents and \$4 for non-residents. Pre-register by calling 888-0963 from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday-Friday. Independence Oaks County Park is on Sashabaw Road, 3 1/2 miles north of I-76 near Clarkston.

VOLUNTEER NETWORK has been tying all the volunteers in the Detroit tri-county

area since it was formed here just a little more than a year ago. Now the network will be doing that quite literally with its ribbon wearing campaign promoted for National Volunteer Week. At last count 6,000 red, white and blue ribbons have been distributed for volunteers to wear and be identified during the week's observance. National Volunteer Week is April 17-23.

CONGRATULATIONS to Daniel Welner, a student at Harrison High School, who was one of 15 finalists in the new student computer programming contest to be featured at this year's Michigan Technology Fair.

THE SALVATION ARMY cordially invites the public to attend their Spring Campaign. Leighton Ford's six-part film series, Good News is for Sharing, will be at 7 p.m. April 20-24 at 27500 Shiawassee. In this practical new series, Leighton Ford, an associate evangelist with the Billy Graham Team, explains a natural approach to evangelism that works for ordinary people. Topics covered include what it means to manifest, facing your fears, tapping the Gospel's power, discovering your church's role, how to naturally talk about your faith and how to answer specific questions non-Christians ask. Besides working with the Billy Graham Team, Ford is chairman of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and a frequent radio speaker on "The Hour of Decision."

A NATIONWIDE STUDY to determine whether lowering cholesterol reduces the risk of a second heart attack is continuing at four regional medical centers. The program is supported by the National Institutes of Health and has more than 700 volunteers from throughout the country. The Midwest Center is at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis with Dr. Henry Buckwald as the principal investigator for the project. The Midwest Center is still accepting volunteers for a short period of time. If you are under age 65, have had your first and only heart attack within the past five years, have not had heart surgery, have not had a stroke and do not have diabetes, you might qualify. For information, call (612) 376-4494 collect.

FISHING BUFFS, and all other anglers for that matter, can get a line on just where their favorite Michigan sport fish are biting this spring by calling the Michigan Travel Bureau's toll-free 24-hour Conditions Report Line, (800) 393-5404. Those who call will hear a recorded message that gives current fishing conditions, where they're biting, what they're biting on and a word about festivals and other travel happenings in Michigan. The report is issued weekly as often as conditions demand and can be called any hour of any day.



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