

The Lewis and Clark

JOURNAL



SEPTEMBER 2016 • FREE

WRITING ON THE HILL | SQUASH BLOSSOMS | TOM'S CREAM PUFFS

Block Manufacturer Celebrates 70 Years in Business

A legacy that would last seven decades started with a simple statement when one brother noticed a trend and mentioned to the other, "hey, they're bringing in (building) block from Idaho. Let's start a block plant." Joe Kanta didn't have to do much arm twisting to get his brother George on board. George had graduated from Montana State College with an engineering degree and put it to use with the Hoover Company. WWII changed the firm's focus from manufacturing vacuums to things more suitable to the war effort. Kanta longed to return to Montana and pursue his dream of manufacturing a Montana-made product. With the end of the War, George was able to make his dream come true. He and Joe joined forces in founding Builder's Products in Three Forks in 1946.

The plant began within the Yellowstone Garage/Henslee Building (West Cedar Street). George and his wife Kathryn (Katie) took over the company just a few years later and Joe moved on.

The business wasn't always smooth sailing and a number of similar businesses within the industry would fail, however George's engineering background and Katie's skills in bookkeeping helped the company stay the course. For a time and to help with finances Katie also owned and operated a restaurant in town—the Dew Drop Inn—which was in the Ruby Theatre building at that time. Younger brother Tom would occasionally stop in, leaving the family farm in Bozeman on weekends to help out. After graduating in 1958, Tom spent a year in Idaho with Joe. While Tom was home visiting, George said to him, "If you're gonna work somewhere, you might as well work with us." And so in 1960 he joined the business, making it a family affair. It was at this time that the name was changed from Builder's Products to Kanta Products. Later, George's son-in-law, John Neuhaus would come on board in 1983. Tom's wife Carol and daughter Kim Kanta Fink would also work in the office as did Elaine Neuhaus (George's daughter and John's wife.) The company did grow and rather steadily after about 1970, manufacturing more varieties of block, septic tanks and landscape products. George attributed

the growth to the quality of the work force. Tom recalls a few names over the years; Darrell Raffety, Lynn Conner, Boots Myers, "Skinny" McLees, Gene Crowe and Arlene Heebner. Another name was also mentioned—John Chor. Known to be a high school teacher, Neuhaus clarified, "John worked during his teaching years then went full time after he retired (from teaching.) His joke was, 'it took me 30 years to get on full time!'"



Trucks load out block in the early days of Kanta Products at the original location in the Yellowstone Garage Building (Corner of Cedar Street and Railway Ave.)

Kanta Product outgrew the available space at the Henslee building and in 1968 purchased about 30 acres from Julius and Edith Olsen at the south edge of town and is the present home of Kanta Products.

While an old price sheet from 1952 lists service offerings other than block (kitchens etc.), the mainstay for the company has been quality building blocks. The company trademark is "Build Montana with a Montana Product." Over the years, Kanta Products has supplied block to build several hundred schools, buildings, churches and jails all across Montana, Idaho, Washington and Wyoming. Some block has even gone as far as Alaska, Canada and overseas.

Such far away destinations aren't typical, however. Neuhaus explains the market limitations, "We're fortunate to be located six miles from a cement plant and at the population center of the state—on I-90. Other plants, our competitors in Billings and Great Falls are at a disadvantage not having a pumice source close." Transportation costs dramatically impact the industry's share of market.

Certainly the company's longevity, location and the availability of raw materials has made Kanta Products what it is today. As it turns out, it also makes the company an appealing asset for other block manufacturers looking to expand their territory as was the case with Mutual Materials.

The Seattle-born corporation is also family-owned with a very long history and so when it became time for some Kanta shareholders to seek an exit strategy, the two companies negotiated a sale. Mutual Materials closed on the deal in June of this year—also the month that marked seven decades for. A press release issued by Mutual Materials reads, *"A number of existing shareholders will continue to work for the company post-acquisition. Mr. Kanta emphasized the decade-long relationship with Joe Bowen, Chairman of Mutual Materials. "When we decided to transition the business, our first choice was to try to do something with Mutual Materials as we share so many long-standing family values."*

Mutual Materials intends to continue operations under the Kanta brand, advancing the legacy into the years ahead while keeping the family-owned concept.

BUILDERS PRODUCTS INC. Three Forks, Montana	
<small>Phone 75-2111 Price 350</small>	
PUMICE BLOCKS	
<small>Inspected and Certified by the Underwriters' Laboratories, Inc.</small>	
Price List as of January, 1954	
<small>Loc. Three Forks</small>	
8x8x16 Regular	\$.30
8x8x16 Corner and Sash	.30
8x8x16 Bond Beam	.30
8x8x16 Double Corners	.32
8x8x8 1/2 Block	.17
4x8x16 Partition	.20
6x8x16 Partition	.25
8x16 3/4x16 3/4 Chimney (8x8 Flue)	1.25
Colored Split Block	
4x4x16 Green	.23
4x4x16 Other Colors	.20
4x4x16 White	.15
<small>(110 # Blocks will build 100 sq. ft. of Wall)</small>	
<small>Also Dealers for: Garage Doors, Wood Sash, Steel Sash, Steel Wall Reinforcement, American Kitchens and Kentile</small>	