

## Homemade Concrete Blocks

## A VANTAGE POINTS FLASHBACK

It wasn't even all that deep, but for kids, it was as thrilling as a skateboard park today. It was a depression, like a crater, on top of the hill behind one of our granaries.

Down the hill a ways was our farm house. It was massive. Basement, main floor, full upstairs and a very cool and very creepy attic – with its own stairway. What distinguished it from other large, early-settler homes around here was the outside face of it. Imagine concrete blocks, but so large it took two men to lift one. The dimensions? About 60 cm long, 30 cm wide and 15 cm high. They were called Palmer blocks after an inventor in the states. And, the corner blocks all had fancy swirls, made from the fancy block form!



Ours was the third family to live in this impressive house. The couple who built it, back in 1904 (with the help of professional builders and strong neighbours no doubt) was William and Mary Anne McKinney. They had a family large enough to make use of the six bedrooms. Large families, though, slipped out of fashion when reliable health care and labour saving farm machinery arrived. So by the time we took over in 1954, the upstairs and attic hardly ever heard an intimate human voice.

Remember. In 1904, homes had no electricity and no plumbing. So no flush toilet or shower. Most farmhouses had a well outside for water and a rainwater cistern in the basement, to keep water through winter. Inside walls were lathe and plaster. Floors were finely finished hard wood. Doors and window frames were embellished with long grooves and corners detailed with circular grooves.

Electricity came on the scene in the early 50s. This changed everything. Before electricity, we had a hand pump in the kitchen to pull water up from the cistern. On Saturday nights, we'd pump up enough water for a bath in a metal tub that was set in the kitchen. We'd heat up water in a big kettle on the stove to make the water warmish, and then bathe the smallest kid first, then the older ones and finally Mom. Dad, of course, was the dirtiest and so had to go last. All with the same water – with maybe a top up of hot water between baths. Folks did what they could with what they had.

What made this grand home affordable back in 1904, was that the Palmer block maker allowed the owner-builder to make blocks on-site with local gravel! Guess where the gravel came from to build the McKinney home. Yep, our crater. They carted it down a gentle slope 100 meters to make the bulk of the house. Little did they know that 60 plus years later children would beg to come over after church to peddle bikes down one thrilling side and up the other.

Home Blocks is based on a story in Vantage Points 5.

See you later!



**This block maker, used for many buildings in our region, and still in working order, rests on a farm near Melita.**