

Massive Collection of Post-Depression Tiles Preserved

by Andy Rosten

After 27 years as a general contractor repairing older homes in the Sacramento area, I decided to start selling my accumulation of vintage tiles as I'd found most of my sources had gone out of business and/or run out of supply. I soon realized my inventory was severely limited and that in order to become the premier source of these historic objects, I'd have to search for more material. I sought out used building supply firms and found Mortarless Building Supply in Los Angeles through the internet about 2 years ago. My first call shed little light on the extent of its inventory, and I concluded that I must visit the facility the next time I was in the LA area.



A small section of the yard we scavenged through at Mortarless Building Supply, Los Angeles. Photo by Andy Rosten.

A few months later I met Joe Ranieri, the gregarious owner, but due to limited time and his lack of organization, I was still unable to grasp exactly what Mortarless did or did not have other than it was the most historic tile I'd ever seen in one place. In June 2017 Joe informed me of his intent to retire and said "bring a truck and your money." After several trips with a U-haul truck, there was simply too little time to go through even 10% of the inventory before the property was sold on August 4, 2017 - with the remaining tile left behind.

Distressed by the thought of it going to a landfill, I located the new owner a few days later with the help of a title company and appealed to him to contact me before disposing of the remaining inventory. Finally in January 2018 we met and he agreed to my proposal to clean up the property in exchange for my right to procure whatever tile I could haul away. The task was daunting: loose tiles, many broken and chipped, scattered everywhere, aisles impossible

Tiles Preserved continues...

to walk through without stepping on material, boxes deteriorated and spilling, pallets disintegrating from termites and piled with loose tiles that fell like an avalanche with the slightest bump. In addition, there were numerous tires, an abandoned car, chairs & tables, automotive parts and even 55 gallon drums of grease that had to be removed. For six months I made biweekly 400-mile trips with 5 helpers, working 10-hour days and staying in local hotels. The work was not unlike an archeological site with daily surprises.

The vast majority of the tile is from Aztec, Gladding, McBean, Pomona, Huntington, B&W, Mosaic, Redondo, PT&P, AO, and Dal, but there are specimens from over 70 manufacturers, some of them obscure such as Ace, Angelino, Balka, Columbine, Coorsite, Doric, Downey, Golco, Hoffman, Marshall, Santa Anita, Stronghold and Superior. I also found a few specimens of Batchelder, Malibu, Old Bridge, Taylor, and Sant'Anna of Portugal, USET and even an original box of AET with the tiles still hand-wrapped in the August 1929 Los Angeles Herald stock market pages. In all I hauled no less than 60 tons of field & trim tiles some dating as early as the 1920s and a vast selection of standard and reeded box caps and "brick" caps.

Story continues on page 8



Helper Glen Caldwell poses while the driver examines the cargo. Photo by Andy Rosten.

Tiles Preserved continued.....

The work is not over as the tiles still need cleaning, sorting by manufacturer and inventorying. Some need mortar removal. I have learned so much about each manufacturer's tiles that I plan to write a reference book on post-Depression tile firms including brief historical information, identification of the backings, lug size/spacing and different profiles of trim pieces. I am also adding to my website sample boards/pieces showing the various colors and patterns made by each manufacturer. Eventually I hope to open a tile museum in my hometown of Sacramento that would serve as an educational tourist attraction. I would love to hear from others who can provide any historical information as well as any old catalogs, sample boards or photographs of tiles (front & back) or manufacturing plants that I am lacking.

I appeal to anyone who has suggestions on the best way to remove mortar from reclaimed tiles. We currently use an angle grinder which is laborious and somewhat destructive. We have been told tiles can be put in a kiln to loosen the mortar but do not know the specifics nor if it is different for porcelain tiles such as box caps.

It is a wonderful feeling to hear customers tell us how grateful they are to have found us after having searched for weeks at several other tile suppliers and now are able to restore their vintage tile installations.

Andy Rosten, Vintage Tile
Visit: <https://vintage tile.weebly.com>

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