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THE HISTORY OF SALTDALE

By Alan Hensher

Koehn Lake is a geological anomaly: a "moist" playa, in which shallow ground water rises to the surface by capillary action and saturates salt deposits in the center.

The Diamond Salt Company liked the prospects there and developed the deposits in 1911 and 1912. The historical record isn't clear, but Consolidated Salt Company, based in Los Angeles, apparently bought out Diamond. Consolidated put in a crusher and screening device and laid a baby-gauge railroad track onto the floor of the playa, from where a gasoline-powered locomotive hauled the salt to the crusher. Consolidated began shipping in 1914: 240 tons or more a week by October. The output that year totaled 20,000 tons.

Business boomed. Employing 30 men, Consolidated was turning out about 720 tons a week by June, 1915. The crew was soon increased, to 65 in April, 1916, while a 4-story mill was under construction. A long-awaited post office was finally established that September. But a chronic problem-- the inability of the Southern Pacific to supply enough cars-- was delaying shipments by five months.

Consolidated ran an extensive operation. Except during rainy winters, the company pumped well water onto the lake floor. The brine thus produced was then pumped through a 1½-mile ditch into several pond-like "vats"--the largest covering 43 acres--where the brine was allowed to evaporate. After two or three months, a 6-inch layer of very pure salt would form. At "harvest" time, a circular saw mounted on a portable platform cut the layer into cakes. The cakes were then cleaned by hand, loaded into small cars running on a temporary track, and hauled by a gasoline-fueled locomotive to the mill. There, the cakes were ground, sized in screens, sacked, and shipped to Los Angeles.

A second producer, the Fremont Salt Company, built a plant on the east side of the playa in 1917. In 1919, when the Southern Sierras Power Company brought in electricity, the companies produced altogether 17,000 tons.

By then, the operations were becoming somewhat erratic. Enough families were living at the plants to induce the Kern County supervisors to organize the Saltdale School District in February, 1920. But Consolidated was employing only six men, and few pupils showed up at school; in fact, no schoolhouse was built. Even so, the companies managed to produce 22,000 tons. The camps probably remained small, for the school district was absorbed by Garlock's in August, 1921. The output of salt declined somewhat, to about 18,900 tons in 1923.

Although Consolidated's operation was being kept in good condition--"as neat as a lady's kitchen"--only six men were working in the mill in July, 1924, besides a handful running the pumping plant and train. A shortage of water and power was holding down production, to about 6 to 10 tons a day. Apparently, the school was moved from Garlock to the plant about then. Alas, the building was little more than a shack, and the institution was one of the poorest in the county, suffering from a high rate of absences. Although H.C. Topp, "the rustling superintendent" for Consolidated, called 1925 the best season so far, the companies finished the year with 6,900 tons, their lowest total output.

Slowly, the operations began to recover. The total output reached nearly 15,000 tons during the 1927 season. Even so, the companies were facing another dry year.

Coming onto the scene was Henry Fenton, the owner of the Western Salt Company, based in San Diego. Western Salt had acquired at least a part ownership of the Long Beach Salt Company, which in turn bought out Fremont in December, 1927, and Consolidated in April, 1928. Fremont's plant was dismantled and all operations concentrated at Consolidated's plant. By then, the camp's "business district" probably included no more than a company store, the post office, the school, and a service station along the Cantil-Randsburg road.

The school, too, began to enjoy better days. Under the guidance of its teacher, Mrs. Ruby Rogers, and H.C. Topp, who also served as the district's clerk, the school began to set records for its high attendance rate. The building was repaired, repainted, and enlarged in late 1927, enough to make it "very attractive and well lighted."

Like many camps then, Saltdale was composed of two groups: managers, skilled workers, and their families, who tended to be Anglo Protestants, and common laborers and their families, who were usually Latino Catholics. The Protestants had their own group, the Ladies' Aid Society, which held weekly meetings, often at Cantil. For the Catholics, many of whom worked at other camps, the center of religious life was St. Mary's Church, in Randsburg.

It was the job of many schools, including Saltdale's, to bring the groups together. To carry out the work of "Americanization," Latino children were encouraged to participate in play activities that demanded "the use of the English language and the finer points of good sportsmanship and cooperation." At a Christmas party held in 1929, the pupils put on a well-received play, after which cake and sandwiches "and some delicious enchiladas made by our Spanish American ladies" were served. Another teacher, Mrs. Caroline Larson, began teaching a night course in English ("Americanization") for Latinos and a Spanish course for Anglos during the fall of 1930. She "deserves a great deal of credit," one correspondent commented.

Although the work at the mill was hot and hard, the residents could enjoy an abundance of humble pastimes during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Ladies' Aid Society often held parties, bazaars, and fund-raising events. The mill workers put on dances that attracted people from all over Fremont Valley. The schools at Cantil and Saltdale together went on picnics, held Christmas parties, and put on field days. During August, 1928, Mrs. A. Soto invited several friends to "a splendid enchildada dinner" in honor of her husband's birthday; a week later, two Latino youths spent Labor Day "swimming in the 20 per cent brine-solution ditch, and claimed that they liked it. Felipe Hernandez made an eager second for the impromptu swimming party."

Despite these simple pleasures, Saltdale could suffer from its isolation. Since Randsburg, 16 miles away, had the closest justice of the peace, constable, and jail, crime was easy to commit. The company store was robbed of several games one night in March, 1928. Topp "feels sure it was strangers and we feel sure no one around here would commit a felony," one correspondent explained. And rather than go to the nearest hospital, at Red Mountain, some mothers gave birth at home. But this practice could lead to complications: during the same week that a boy was born to one family, in December, 1931, the infant daughter of another family died.

It must have been difficult for Saltdale to weather the Depression. A proposal was made in September, 1931, to consolidate the school districts at Saltdale and Cantil. The construction of a modern campus, the paper in Randsburg predicted, was probably "the best improvement that could be suggested." (The merger had to wait 20 years.)

Even though depressed, Saltdale and other camps still had to be serviced. To handle the shipments of salt, gypsite, and pumice, the Southern Pacific built a modern loading platform at Saltdale in late 1931, and the county graded 10 miles of the Cantil-Randsburg road, which was now oiled. And to increase the flow of brine, Long Beach Salt blasted a 1.7-mile ditch in the mud of the lake. The company, in fact, enjoyed enough good years of production to keep its parent, Western Salt, prosperous through the Depression.

The 1940s, however, were another matter. An increased amount of gypsum in the salt limited its sale to farms and factories. The rainfall, meanwhile, dwindled, finally drying up for a few years after January, 1947. Attempts to run the plant on salt shipped from San Diego turned out to be impractical. Only three workers remained in 1949. The post office closed in June, 1950. The school district was dissolved in July, 1951, the same year that Fenton died. The Saltdale operation, a family member recalled, was "one of the few salt ventures that did not support his good judgment."

The mill, however, was kept intact and modernized during the 1950s. It remained a highly mechanized, round-the-clock operation that required only a handful of workers. By the late 1970s, only four workers remained--and none of them lived at Saltdale. The plant probably shut down soon afterward. Amid the rubble of buildings, the corrugated-iron shell of the mill still stood in May, 1980. The wind banged the doors eerily in the glow of the setting sun. A year and a half later, even this remnant of mining was gone.

SOURCES:

William Ver Planck describes the history and individual operations in Salt In California, California Division of Mines, Bulletin 175 (March, 1958). Descriptions of Fremont Valley, including Koehn Lake, appear in David Thompson's The Mohave Desert Region, California, U.S. Geological Survey, Water-Supply Paper 578 (1928).

The day-to-day operations were pieced together from several sources: California Mining Bureau, Report 17 (1921) and Report 25 (1929), and the files of the Randsburg Miner (1912-1915), the Mojave Press (1914-1919), and the Randsburg Times, Mojave Record, and Mojave-Randsburg Record-Times (1924-1931).

Henry Fenton's life, including his operations at Saltdale, are described by Laura Fenton in Henry Fenton, typical American, San Diego(?): 1953(?).

Larry Vredenburg, of the Bureau of Land Management, Bakersfield, deserves my thanks for helping me copy the articles from the Mojave Press.#