

The History of Saltdale

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Introduction

Koehn Lake is a geologic anomaly: a "moist" playa, in which shallow ground water rises to the surface by capillary action, carrying with it salt, which is deposited in the center of the desert playa lake. This readily available source of salt, close to transportation and to major markets in Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley, was also the site of one of the longest running deceptions in the Mojave Desert.

The Saline Placer Act of January 31, 1901 placed a limit of one mining claim for saline minerals per locator. To thwart the intent of this Act, the salt producers on Koehn Lake employed the services of numerous individuals or "dummy locators" to locate mining claims, thereby acquiring large blocks of mining claims. It began in the period between 1909 and 1913 when sixty saline placer claims were located and leased to Thomas Thorkildsen and Thomas H. Rosenberger for a period of forty years. By having individuals locate these claims, and subsequently lease them, Thorkildsen was able to tie up sufficient ground to begin salt production. Thorkildsen during this period began developing borate deposits near Lang in Los Angeles County, at Stauffer in Ventura County, and near Daggett, giving William "Borax" Smith a fright that his borax monopoly was less than secure.

The claim staking by Thorkildsen and Rosenberger did not go unchallenged by feisty Charles Koehn, founding father of the settlement of Kane (or Koehn) Springs. Koehn, who had previously located claims on the lake bed, challenged the claim jumpers in January, 1912, in a "lively" gun battle on the dry lake. Swift justice was meted out in Randsburg, the Randsburg *Miner* reporting on February 10, 1912, that in the case of *People vs. T. H. Rosenberger and ten others*, the defendants were found guilty of forcible entry and detainer, and Rosenberger was fined \$50. Nearly a year later, a happy ending to the dispute was reported by the *Miner*; Koehn sold his claims to Thorkildsen, who in turn sold them to the Diamond Salt Company of Los Angeles. More than likely the Diamond Salt Company actually leased the property.

While the chain of ownership for the *claims* located on Koehn Lake is detailed in government investigations in between 1945 and 1971, the corporate relationship in the early years is confused. The Consolidated Salt Company was incorporated February 11, 1913. It forfeited its charter November, 1913, but the company's interests were not transferred until 1933. In addition, the Randsburg *Miner* continued to report as late as 1915 that the Diamond Salt Company was actively working the deposit.

Early Operations

The Consolidated Salt Company constructed a crushing and screening plant and laid a baby-gauge railroad track onto 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. In January, 1915, the company was shipping about twelve cars of salt weekly.

Business boomed. Employing 30 men, Consolidated was turning out about 720 tons a week by June, 1915. The crew was 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 1± 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.

Newcomers to Koehn Lake

In activities which harkened back to the claim staking by Thorkildsen and Rosenberger's crews in 1912, T. Y. DeFoor and Philo H. Crisp located a block of one-hundred eleven mining claims on Koehn Lake between 1916 and 1918. In order to locate this large block of claims "dummy-locators" were paid 5,000 shares of stock with a par value of \$1 per share for signing their names as locators. After DeFoor located a claim on the ground, he gave Crisp, an old time prospector in the Garlock area that knew all the section corners in the vicinity, the location notice and a deed with the name of the grantee blank. At the same time, another associate, Paul Greenmore, a resident of Bakersfield, was rounding up the "dummy-locators" described as "just a bunch of widows none of whom could write a check for \$50." Greenmore received \$2.50 for each signed location notice. Each of the 111 claims was 20 acres, and each claim was "located" by a different individual. These claims were then deeded to the Fremont Salt Company.



Fig. 1. Mill at Saltdale, February 1955. William Ver Planck, Calif. Division of Mines, courtesy Larry Bredenburg.

With location of these claims, a second producer, the Fremont Salt Company, incorporated December 7, 1916 and 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.

The year 1922 also saw the transfer of claims held by Thomas Thorkildsen and Thomas H. Rosenberger to the Consolidated Salt Company.

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 part ownership of the Long Beach Salt Company, which in turn bought out Fremont on November 5, 1927. The Long Beach Salt Company had operated salt ponds and a salt works in the marshes opposite Terminal Island between Wilmington and Long Beach. The salt operations were gradually displaced after discovery of oil.

Long Beach Salt dismantled the Fremont Company's plant and

concentrated operations 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 enchilada 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.”



Fig. 2. Harvesting salt at Saltdale, April 1953. William Ver Planck, Calif. Division of Mines and Geology, courtesy Larry Vredenburgh.

Despite these simple pleasures, Saltdale could suffer from its isolation. Crime was easy to commit since the closest justice of the peace, constable, and jail was in Randsburg, 16 miles away. 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, gypsum, 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.

Two important transactions occurred in 1933. On June 3, all the leaseholds held by the Consolidated Salt were transferred to the Long Beach Salt Company. Then in July, 36 association placer claims were filed by the Long Beach Salt Company on Koehn Lake, allegedly for placer gold. The location of these claims continued the legacy of deceptively located claims on Koehn Lake, for with the passage of the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, salt was no longer a mineral which could be acquired with mining claims.

Where the 1930s were prosperous, the 1940s 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.

The claims from which the salt operations at Saltdale had germinated were known to the United States. An extensive investigation was begun in 1945 by geologists and engineers with the General Land Office (case SF-62514), but apparently died with the creation of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 1946. The case was reopened in 1956 when the president of the Long Beach Salt Company filed a protest with the agency when another company filed a Sodium Prospecting Permit Application under the provisions of the 1920 Mineral Leasing Act. By 1960 the renewed investigation died as well.

The beginning of the end started with a September 3, 1968 letter from D. Livengood, president of the West Coast Salt and Milling Company of Bakersfield. Livengood's letter to Secretary of Interior Udall, Congressman Robert Mathias, and the Bureau of Land Management shook the agency into activity. Livengood was steamed that Long Beach Salt Company was able to undercut his product, for which he paid royalties to the United States from operations on Searles Lake. Earlier investigations focused on the manner in which Consolidated Salt, and Fremont had acquired the claims. The complaint that was filed July 23, 1973, charged that there was insufficient gold on the 36 claims located in 1933 to constitute a valuable mineral discovery. Even though salt was a valuable mineral which had been produced since 1913, production had moved off of the pre-1920 (Mineral Leasing Act) claims to the claims filed in 1933. Incredibly, in a civil case decided July 9, 1972, the court determined that the terms of the Saline Placer Act of 1901 had not been violated in the location of the pre-1920 mining claims. However, the fate of the 36 claims from which Long Beach Salt Company was producing salt was decided by the United States Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) on December 2, 1975, when they declared them null and void.

At the time of the IBLA's decision, 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). Operation of Long Beach Salt Company in Long Beach, and those of Thomas Thorkildsen at Lang are described by Thomas E. Gay Jr., and Samuel R. Hoffman in "Mines and Mineral Deposits of Los Angeles County, California", *California Journal of Mines and Geology* Vol. 50, Nos. 3 and 4 (July-October 1954).

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(?).

Records of the Bureau of Land Management were principally found in case file R 4367. The Interior Board of Land Appeals decision *United States v. Long Beach Salt Company* 23 IBLA 41 (1975) provided excellent background. The civil suit *United States v. Long Beach Salt Company*, Civil No. F-686, U.S.D.C., E.D. California, was not consulted, although it was referenced in the 1975 IBLA case.