

History of the Commercial Mining Activities in the OVRP  
By Steven Schoenherr 11-1-2009

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Commercial mining in the Otay Valley began in 1912 with the incorporation of the Fenton Sumption Barnes Company. Henry G. Fenton was a young muleskinner who hauled sand and rock for Elisha Babcock and the Coronado Beach Company. Babcock's company built the Hotel del Coronado 1886-1888 and formed the Otay Water Company in 1886 to supply Coronado with water from wells in the Otay Valley. Near these wells Babcock found sand and gravel from the river bottom for his building projects in Coronado. He built a railroad spur from the wells along Hollister between Main and Palm to transport water and gravel to Coronado. In 1887 the National City and Otay Railroad line followed 27th Street to the gravel pit and Hollister Street. Henry Fenton built his sand and gravel processing plant where Babcock's gravel pit had been located. He took advantage of the railroad connections at this site to ship materials to a central supply yard at 10th and L streets in San Diego. The Otay Valley was rich in high quality sand and small stone that needed only a minimum of crushing to the one-inch and smaller sizes needed for paving roads, laying foundations, mixing asphalt and concrete. By 1915 Fenton was shipping 350 railroad cars per month, each holding 25 tons of material, two thirds of the cars with crushed stone and one third with sand. In 1915 Merrill N. Nelson bought property near Fenton to start another sand and gravel company known as Nelson & Sloan after partner Paul R. Sloan joined in 1921. Nelson & Sloan developed a quarry at Rock Mountain several miles up the valley.

The flood of 1916 destroyed the processing plants of Fenton and Nelson & Sloan, but both companies rebuilt at the same locations, Fenton at the old Babcock site along 27th Street east of Hollister, and Nelson & Sloan east of Beyer Boulevard. The flood had destroyed the NC&O railroad, but John D. Spreckels rebuilt the San Diego and Eastern Railroad along Hollister Street. Fenton built a spur line from Hollister east to section 23 east of Beyer Way. Most of the excavation in the valley for sand and gravel in the 1920s and 1930s was along this railroad spur in the valley floor of sections 22 and 23. The railroad track was moved as excavation sites moved. A steam shovel on caterpillar tracks loaded sand and gravel into 5-cubic yard dump cars that were pulled on the tracks by mules or horses to the processing plant. The digging operation removed 10 to 20 feet of the valley floor richest in fine sand and gravel. The dump cars emptied their contents into loading hoppers at the processing plant, then moved by conveyor belts to the top of tall crushers where the material was screened and washed and crushed and sorted into storage piles, some as tall as a five-story building.

A third gravel company operated in the eastern half of the valley from 1927 to 1931. When John D. Spreckels died in 1926, his son Claus Spreckels took over the Spreckels Commercial Company and leased seven miles of the Otay Valley west of the dam to manufacture sand and gravel for the county's expanding road system. The Spreckels plant was designed by Long Beach engineer George Adams Roalfe who selected Otay Valley location because, "the character of both rock and sand is extremely good, the rock being a hard porphyry and the sand being almost entirely free from mica." The plant was built at the western end of the Spreckels lease, near Maxwell Road and Main Street, at a cost of \$150,000 and began operation August 15, 1927, producing 1800 tons of sand and rock per day. The material was transported by a railroad spur line down the valley to the San Diego and Arizona railroad. It was also transported in a fleet of 30 six-wheel 10-ton trucks that followed Main Street to Otay City and then turned north on Third Avenue through Chula Vista and National City. Cranes and shovels dug the raw material from

the valley floor, transported it to the plant where it was screened and washed and separated into different grades. Large rock was sent to a crusher and screened again into smaller sizes. The plant closed when the Spreckels Commercial Company declared bankruptcy Mar. 10, 1931.

The military growth of the war years helped expand the sand and gravel business in the valley. Henry Fenton reported October 2, 1942, the "biggest rock month yet." The following April he said business was "pretty good and we have all we can do. In fact one day we sold 13,000 tons. It averages better than 5,000 tons per day." In March 1943 Fenton shut down his original Otay plant (Otay #1) at 27th Street and built a new sand and gravel plant (Otay #2) that was located 1.25 miles east at the end of Mace Street. He was now excavating more of the valley floor than at any time previously, from Del Monte Avenue east for two miles to the site of the old Spreckels plant. After the war, Fenton completely rebuilt the plant at the original Otay #1 site on 27th Street and reopened it as Otay #3. The plant on Mace Street that had served the needs of wartime was shut down.

The company had gone up and down the valley floor twice by the mid-1960s, and began excavating the valley hillsides for material. Jerry Richeson, plant manager at Otay 1965-70, remembers his crew digging up a dead hog near one of the old hog farms, and finding old building and railroad materials near the I-805 freeway from the 1916 flood era that were buried 20 feet deep. They dug up a motorcycle from the WWI era, and military-style dinnerware with the "USA" emblem. The sand and gravel dug from the valley was brought back to Otay #3 at 27th Street and washed to remove clay, using water pumped from the Fenton Pond. The clay residue piled up in rows called tailings on the north side of the pond. The stone was screened and crushed to the required size, and piled by conveyor belt to await transportation to a construction site by truck. Henry Hunte was at the plant when it was rebuilt and enlarged in 1966. A large drive-over hopper was constructed and "the crushing, screening and washing sections of the plant were expanded and a new ready-mixed concrete batch plant we built. Support facilities were also constructed such as maintenance shops and offices. The result was an increase in production capacity to around 450 tons per hour and better a washing mechanism to remove the clay from the final product." The expanded plant had two concrete batch plants side by side, and provided the concrete for the blue and white Fenton cement trucks that operated out of the Otay plant under the name of Pre-Mixed Concrete Company. Otay concrete was used in the building of the Coronado Bridge 1967-1969, and the widening of I-5 freeway in 1973. "From the late 60's the material increasingly came from the southern slopes of the Otay river: the area north of Palm and west of East Beyer Blvd. and the area west of Beyer Way, where Heart Pond is located. Subsequently, property was purchased at Goat Canyon on Monument Road. Material was mined at this site and trucks delivered the material to the Otay Plant. The material at the Monument Road pit was exhausted by the early 1980's. At that time the aggregate processing plant was closed." Although there was no more excavation in the valley, the two processing plants remained in operation. In 1998 the Hanson company of England bought the Fenton and Nelson and Sloan sand and gravel plants. The Hanson company was bought by the Heidelberg company in 2008, and the plants continue to process sand and gravel and produce asphalt.