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GYPSITE: A Humble Product from a Humble Camp

By Alan Hensher

Several products of the desert were too humble to attract much attention. Gypsite, a mixture of gypsum and clay, was one of those products. The purest grades could be turned into plaster, and lower grades were valued by farmers as a fertilizer.

Charles Koehn, who had figured prominently in the mining boom in the El Paso Mountains during the 1890s, found an unusually large and pure deposit of gypsite on the dry bed of Koehn Lake in late 1909. The discovery was made while the Southern Pacific Railroad was building a branch from Mojave to the Owens Valley.

Even though gypsite was selling for only \$10 a ton, the California Crown Plaster & Gypsite Company, of Los Angeles, began leasing Koehn's claim and put up buildings and a calcining (roasting) plant near Kane (Cane) Springs in early 1911. Twenty men worked at the mill. (A post office served the milling camp from June, 1911, to March, 1912.)

The demand nearly overwhelmed the plant. Running the mill day and night during the summer of 1912, a mere 12 men produced 30 tons of plaster a day.

In any case, Koehn soon lost control of his claim. He was accused of trying to kill a Bakersfield judge with a bomb and found guilty in September, 1928. George Abel, meanwhile, bought his gypsite property. Making frequent sales trips to orchard owners--one order totaled 1,500 tons--Abel successfully ran a small operation for several years. After Abel died during the early 1930s, other operators continued small-scale mining well into the 1950s. #

SOURCES:

F.L. Hess described the property soon after its discovery: Gypsum Deposits Near Cane Springs, Kern County, California, U.S. Geological Survey, Bulletin 430 (1910). Occasional articles can be found in the Randsburg Miner from 1910 through 1915 and the Randsburg Times (title varies) from 1924 through 1932. Two state publications also describe the later years: William Ver Planck, Gypsum In California, California Division of Mines, Bulletin 163 (September, 1952), and Bennie Troxel and Paul Morton, Mines and Mineral Resources Of Kern County, California, California Division of Mines and Geology, County Report 1 (1962).