

The Midland Gypsum Deposit, Little Maria Mountains, Riverside County, California

Larry M. Vredenburg

U. S. Bureau of Land Management, 3801 Pegasus Dr., Bakersfield, CA 93308, lvredenb@blm.gov

The discovery of gypsum at Midland has become clouded with local folklore, and even early accounts disagree. However, all of the accounts have one person in common--Floyd Brown.

According to a March 12, 1911 Los Angeles *Times* article:

“It is said that Brown discovered his gypsum deposits in the most peculiar fashion. On one of his stage journeys two years ago, he was forced to camp out, owing to the swollen condition of a mountain stream. In the night one of his horses strayed away and, shortly after daybreak after following it several miles, he found the animal in a gulch.”

The horse had injured its leg and was unable to rise. Brown sat down on a stone some distance away wondering what he would do, when of a sudden, looking toward the top of the opposite gulch wall, he saw the gypsum. He marked the place and later, when time was more auspicious, located the claims which are bringing him a fortune.”

Camiel Dekens, a close friend and former employee of Brown, in another version of the discovery story, remembers that a prospector named Henry Hartman, “discovered the gypsum deposit at the place now called Midway [Midland] on Brown's grubstake.” The fact that Hartman's signature appears on the January, 1907, claim notice with those of Floyd Brown tends to confirm Dekens' story.

After the initial discovery of gypsum in the Maria Mountains by Hartman and Brown, several additional claims were located by others. Jack Gray located a claim he named “Gray Gypsum” a few miles east of Brown's discovery. L. L. Schellenger, a mining man who had located gypsum in the Ironwood Mountains in 1906, located the Gypsum Mammoth claim just south of Brown's in January, 1908. These claims, as well as some located by P. A. English of the United States Gypsum Company in March, 1910, were the object of an extensive prospecting effort by the company, in 1910 to determine the extent of the deposit.

After proving the deposit, United States Gypsum Company purchased claims from Brown, Gray, and Schellenger. In March, 1911, Brown came to Los Angeles for final negotiations with the company and for payment. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the selling price “was said to be \$100,000.” However, Dekens stated that Hartman and Brown split the \$7,000 that U.S. Gypsum paid, because Hartman found the deposit on Brown's grubstake. Over the next few years until June, 1913, the company continued to drill holes and prospect the property.

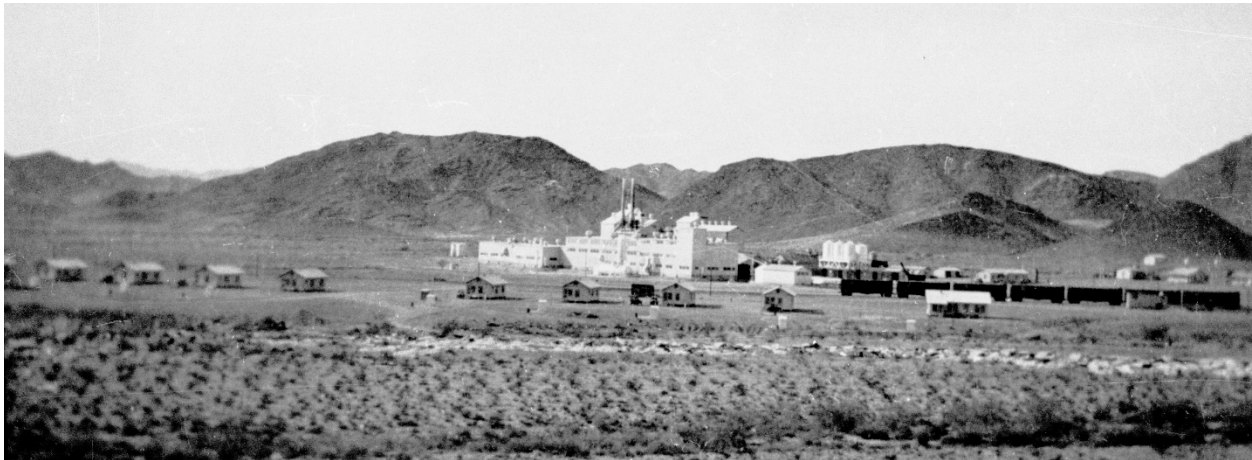
Although missing from newspaper accounts, in 1915, a company headed by Frank A. Garbutt, an inventor, industrialist and movie pioneer, Willam Warren Orcutt, a pioneer in the California oil industry, as well as 6 other prominent individuals, patented two mining claims adjacent to claims patented a year later by U. S. Gypsum. This deposit became known as the Garbutt and Orcutt property.

On April 1, 1915 work began on a railroad to the Palo Verde Valley from Blythe Junction (now known as Rice). In June, 1916, the railroad passed within 5 miles of the gypsum deposit. As soon as the railroad arrived, large scale plans were announced for the property. A narrow-gauge railroad line 2 miles long was to be constructed to access the mines with the yet-to-be constructed plant. The plant was to employ 200 people. At the same time as this announcement, 2 carloads of pipe arrived which were to be laid from the United States Gypsum Company's well to the mines. The company's well, drilled in the summer of 1914, was located 3 miles north of the deposit. Prior to this, water was hauled by mule team from a well near the town of Blythe at enormous cost.

From late 1916 until the spring of 1917, about 25 men were employed at the mine. On May 26, 1917, the *Palo Verde Valley Review* announced, "Bids are now being submitted for a three-mile railroad grade from Santa Maria station of the California Southern to the mine, work to be completed by September 1." However, in the spring of 1917, with the United States' entry into World War I, these plans were shelved.

In 1925 the concrete base for a 2,000 horsepower engine and the foundation for the crusher were both constructed. Also, a narrow-gauge railroad line to the Brown Mine, was built.

The first shipment of crushed gypsum left Midland October 2, 1925. During that year, 4,742 tons were produced. The capacity of the plant at Midland continued to grow as did the population with each new addition. In 1928 a calcining plant was added, expanding the product list to include plaster. In 1933 the first wallboard plant was added and many new employees were hired. There was a critical housing shortage at the plant, and many people lived in tents until new housing could be built. In 1935 Midland finally got a permanent Santa Fe Railroad station, replacing the boxcar which had been serving that purpose. About this same time tennis courts were built. The town also had a softball team, with the Blythe team being its arch-rivals. A fourth board plant (the last of the significant additions to the property) was added in 1937. During the construction of the plant, the company built a huge building for housing the construction workers, which later was converted to a community center.



The Midland wallboard plant, Sept. 1934. From the collection of Clota Bowen.

In 1936, the Victor Mine opened on the site of the claims purchased from Schellenger. This mine was wholly underground. For many years, the rock was hauled out of the mine by 2 mules. Later, 2 battery-operated locomotives did this job. Rock from this mine was hauled to the plant in trucks.

During the Second World War, the need for quick construction of armed forces installations boosted the employment to an all-time peak of over 400. However, the attrition rate was huge; during one year more than 5,000 men passed through the plant.

World War II had a direct impact on the people of Midland. On more than one occasion, the army of General Patton invaded the town. Tanks rumbled through the town as snipers hid under the buildings. One morning the workers woke up to find the main haulage road to the Victor Mine blocked by a raised mound of dirt, which tanks were using for crossing. The army refused to remove it, so the workers sat on the roof of the plant and watched the war games in the valley for a few days.

In 1946 underground work at the Brown Mine shut down and an open pit mine was developed. Also, the Victor mine shut down (to be converted into a civil defense shelter in 1962). A serious slump in building during the early 1950s forced the layoff of many employees, but things began looking better by the late 1950s.

During the period of 1956 to about 1960, many improvements were made in the living conditions at Midland. Television was cabled down from a neighboring hill, natural gas, and electricity was brought in from lines running through Blythe, and telephones were installed in each house. However, these improvements were enjoyed for only a short time, as the Midland plant was closed in December, 1966.

There were several factors influencing the closure of the Midland plant: the decreasing quality of the gypsum, the high cost of transportation to this remote location, the high cost of water (which was hauled in from Blythe), and a downturn in construction; but the primary reason was that U.S. Gypsum had built a new plant at Plaster City which didn't suffer from most of these problems. 76

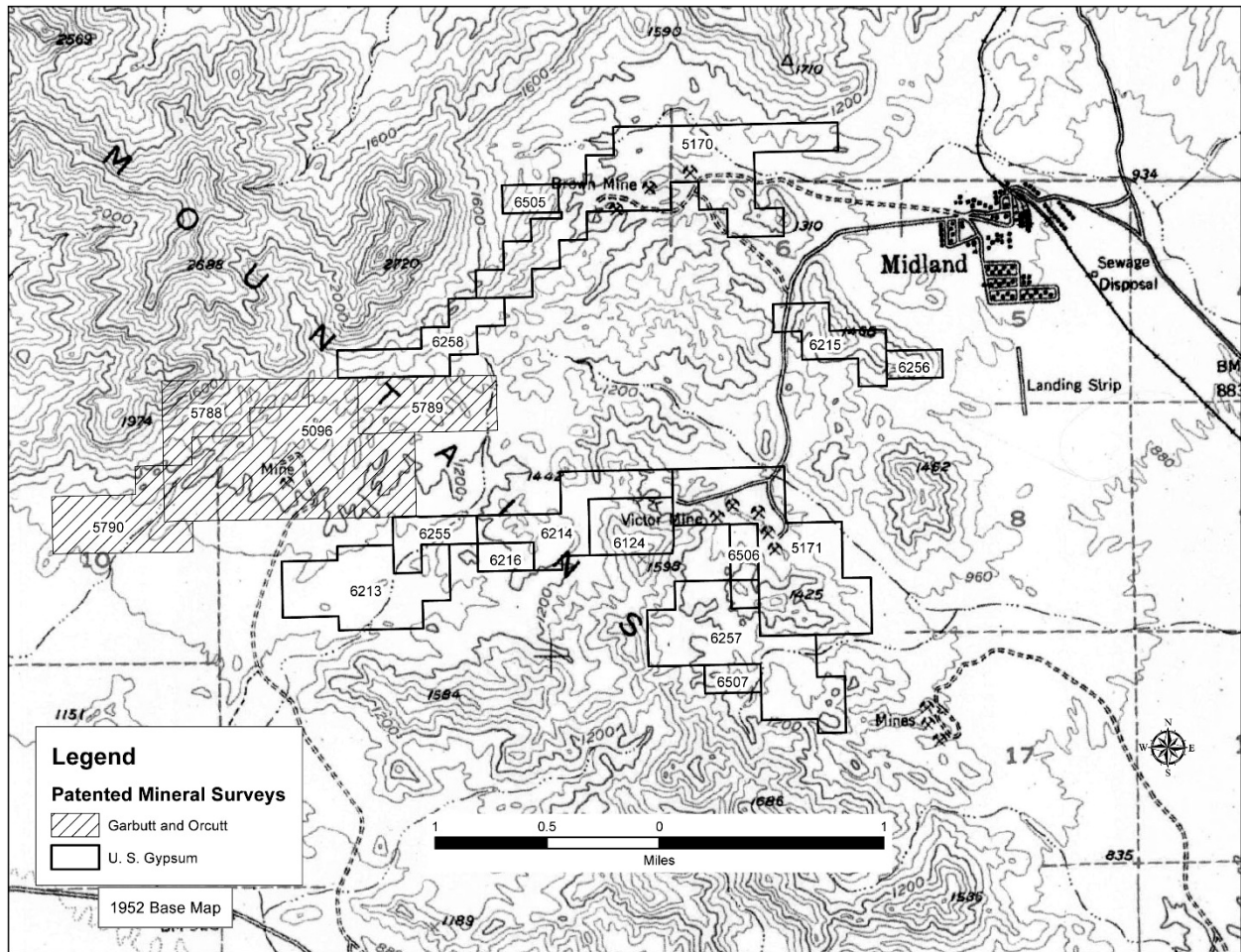
A Dallas company was awarded the contract for demolition of the plant and Paul Alewine, a resident of Parker, planned to move the houses to Blythe and sell them. However, the city of Blythe, perhaps fearful of a sudden influx of substandard housing, put severe restrictions on moving any houses there. Many houses were moved to Parker where they sat for years. In 1973 the remaining 22 houses at Midland were burned down in a training exercise for Arizona and California firefighters. Today about all that is left is the chimney of the school, the pad for the tennis court and some of the foundations of the mill.

The railroad to Blythe was pulled up in 2011.

The Bureau of Land Management has established a Long Term Visitor Area on the site of Midland. But unlike a similar site in Imperial County dubbed "Slab City" permanent occupancy here is not allowed.

Township	Range	Section	Surv. No.	Claim	Location Date	Pat. Date	Acres	Name1
4S	20E	10	5790	Standard Gypsum No. 3	1/3/1920	10/25/1926	100	Frank A. Garbutt et. al.
4S	20E	2, 10, 11	5096	Standard Gypsum, Standard Gypsum No. 2	11/15/1912	8/19/1915	320	Frank A. Garbutt et. al.
4S	20E	2, 3, 10	5788	Standard Gypsum No. 4	1/5/1920	10/25/1926	90	Frank A. Garbutt et. al.
4S	20E	1, 2, 12	5789	Standard Gypsum No. 5	1/6/1920	10/25/1926	100	Frank A. Garbutt et. al.
3S	20E	36	5170	Annie, Beryl, Clarence, Dora, etc.	11/15/1912	2/10/1916	280	U. S. Gypsum Co.
3S	21E	31	5170	Annie, Beryl, Clarence, Dora, etc.	11/15/1912	2/10/1916	280	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	1	5170	Annie, Beryl, Clarence, Dora, etc.	11/15/1912	2/10/1916	280	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	6	5170	Annie, Beryl, Clarence, Dora, etc.	11/15/1912	2/10/1916	280	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	7	5171	United, California, Lamb, Henry, etc.,	11/22/1914	2/10/1916	220	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	12	6124	Allen, Victor, and Ridge		6/27/1934	60	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	7	6124	Allen, Victor, and Ridge		6/27/1934	60	U. S. Gypsum Co.
3S	21E	35, 36	6212	US Gypsum #1 through 8		5/22/1939	160	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	2	6212	US Gypsum #1 through 9		5/22/1939	160	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	11, 12	6213	Snow Cloud No.'s 1 through 6 and 8		9/13/1939	140	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	12	6214	Steam Shovel No.'s 1 and 2, Snow Cloud No.' s 11-13		9/13/1939	100	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	7	6214	Steam Shovel No.'s 1 and 2, Snow Cloud No.' s 11-13		9/13/1939	100	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	6	6215	Joint King No. 1, 2, and 3		3/14/1939	60	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	12	6216	Snow Cloud No. 10		3/14/1939	20	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	11, 12	6255	Snow Cloud No. 7 and 9		4/20/1942	39.977	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	5, 6	6256	Joint King No. 4		10/27/1942	20	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	12, 13	6257	US Gypsum #101 through 109		4/20/1942	180	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	21E	7, 18	6257	US Gypsum #101 through 110		4/20/1942	180	U. S. Gypsum Co.
4S	20E	1, 2	6258	X, Y, Z-1 and Z-2		10/27/1942	77.161	U. S. Gypsum Co.

Midland. Patented Mining Claims



1952 Map of Midland
Showing Patented Mining Claims

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