South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

January 2015 Issue No. 7



Merrill Nelson with one of his Nelson & Sloan Autocar dump trucks in the 1920s.

Nelson & Sloan

by Jane Sloan Dale and Pauline Sloan Johnstone and Priscilla Sloan Webb

The partnership of Nelson and Sloan, rock, sand and transit mix concrete, was founded in 1920 by Merrill and Elma Nelson and Paul and Isabel Sloan. "Nelson & Sloan" became one of the foremost names in Chula Vista history, a company that remained a partnership and never incorporated. They made their first deliveries of sand and gravel in 1920 with two teams of mules and two wagons; one was driven by Merrill and one by Paul. In the beginning it was a rock and sand operation with one plant in the Otay Valley and

the other one in the Sweetwater Valley. Now the Sweetwater Plant, which was closed in 1945, is located under 805 Freeway, approximately one-half mile north of Bonita Road. This plant produced a fine grained sand used in making plaster which was dug out of the Sweetwater river bed creating a large pond. This pond was a constant worry for Paul as he feared someone might drown there. Thank the Lord no one ever did. In the mid to late 1920's, they purchased 5 Autocar Cabover dump trucks with wood-spoke, hard rubber wheels. This enabled them to deliver sand and gravel used to manufacture concrete to pave runways for planes to take off and land at Naval Air Station, North Island. I know this is true because I rode with my father, Paul Sloan, on one of these trucks across

the Coronado strand when he made some of these deliveries. Nelson and Sloan's Otay plant was west of Beyer Way at 7th and Main streets. The dump cars that hauled material from the river bottom were pulled by small locomotives called dinkies, not horses, which would have been impossible due to the weight. Also, I know this is true because I spent several afternoons with Jim Nelson while he operated the dragline and drove the dinky to the hopper and unloaded the material for processing.

This was not only a business partnership but a very close friendship. When Paul Sloan was a teenager, he met Merrill Nelson and asked him for a job working in the Nelson lemon orchard which was located at the north end of Sixth Avenue, now known as Hilltop Drive. Times were hard so Merrill told Paul he couldn't pay him anything more than room and board. Paul was glad to have a job, thus this life-long friendship began.



Paul Sloan, 1918

During the First World War, Paul served in the Navy aboard the USS Illinois. He promised Merrill that when the war ended, he would come home to them. He did. By then, the Nelson sons, Horace and Jim, were old enough to work in the orchard, so Paul started a chicken ranch on some of the Nelson property. Later, when Paul wanted to start a sand and gravel business, the Nelsons said let's do it together.

On August 30, 1920, Paul married Isabel Priscilla Martini, daughter of Frank Martini and Mary Jane Symons. Belle, as Isabel was called, was one of eight children. Frank Martini came directly to San Diego from Genova, Italy. He had no formal education but successfully operated a trash business in San Diego. Mary Jane Symons was the daughter of Thomas Symons and Fannie Quiller, one of six children. The Symons came to San Diego from England. Mary Jane's father worked for the City of San Diego water department as did her brother John. Mary Jane and Frank Martini courted near the Hotel del Coronado when it was under construction and were married in 1888.



Paul Sloan and family in 1932: from left, Paul, Priscilla, Belle, baby Paul Jr., Jane (standing), and Pauline.

When Paul and Belle (both born in San Diego county) were married in 1920, Merrill and Elma gave them a 1/4 acre of land and helped to build the house that Paul brought his bride home to. In later years, both the Nelsons and Sloans built new homes on their property. Paul lived in this home until his death in 1962. Paul and Belle had four children: Jane, born October 20, 1923; Pauline and Priscilla, twins, October 27, 1926; and Paul, Jr., October 15, 1931. All of the children were born at the old Chula Vista Hospital which was located on the northwest corner of Third and I Streets.

Paul loved to reminisce about his experiences as a young man growing up in this area. He was born in South San Diego, now known as Imperial Beach, to Robert and Anna Sloan. His mother, Anna Augusta Miller, was the daughter of Albert J. Miller, Jr., who served in the Union Army during the Civil War. His

father Robert Sloan came to the United States directly from Ireland. Paul was born April 14, 1897. His father passed away when he was four and a half years old. His mother moved the family to San Diego.

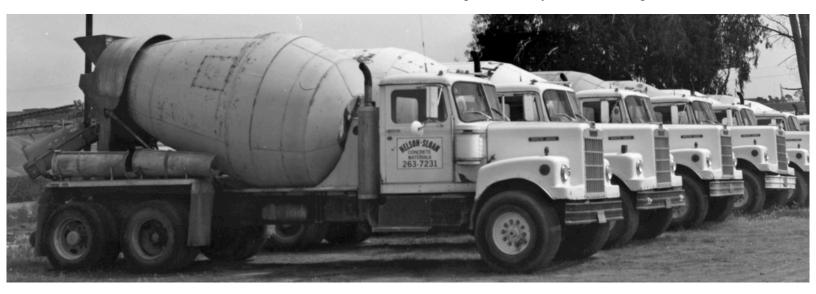


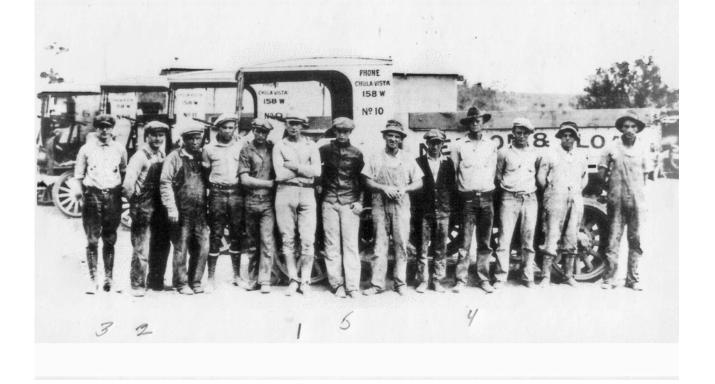
Paul Sloan, right, and Ken Rose hunted geese in Mexico. Ken was a barber at 294 F Street in Chula Vista.

Paul loved to swim, shoot, fish, and hunt and went on expeditions to the British Yukon, Africa, and India. In 1940, he placed sixth in a shooting competition and represented the state of California in national competition at Camp Perry, Ohio. He dove for abalone and lobster, personal use only, in La Jolla Cove and in the Hussong area of Mexico, by using a face mask and holding his breath. Scuba gear hadn't been invented yet.

In the 1950's, with another long time Chula Vistan, Art Beasley, and with Joe Miller, he founded Fisherman's Landing in Point Loma, which provided charter boats for groups of fishermen. This also became another very successful business. Another tidbit about Paul Sloan, in 1926 when the Sweetwater river flooded bank to bank, a family was on their home's rooftop floating down the river screaming for help. George Lee, later Chula Vista's Fire Chief, came to Paul for help in making a rescue. The two men rowed out to this family. dodging cattle, fences and many other obstacles and saved this family from drowning.

Nelson and Sloan was a very successful business because Merrill's and Paul's abilities complemented each others. During the Great Depression, they poured a lot of the concrete curbs and sidewalks in downtown Chula Vista. Then in 1937, they bought (at Paul's insistence) the first transit mix truck in San Diego. It had an open top and the concrete was mixed with a revolving paddle, not like the trucks today that mix as the barrel turns. The first concrete poured with this truck was the foundation for the building at 311 Third Avenue in downtown Chula Vista. I remember this was a very notable occasion because many of Chula Vista's civic leaders were there. The "City Market" is located there now. The bridge that spans the Sweetwater River at Willow Street in Bonita was another landmark pour in 1940 because it was a continuous pour. Once started the concrete was constantly poured until the job was completed. Nelson & Sloan remained in operation 78 years, until it was purchased by Hanson Enterprises.





Above, the men at Nelson & Sloan line up for a group photo. Those who have been identified with numbers are: 1. Paul Sloan, with arms folded; 2. Merrill Nelson, who usually ran the business from the office; 3. Bill Keene, plant superintendent; 4. Lynn Love later worked for the city; 5. Horace Nelson, son of Merrill Nelson. Below, Paul Sloan stands in the center with arms folded, with Autocar trucks from the 1920s.





Above, the Nelson & Sloan plant in the Otay Valley in the 1920s crushed rock brought to the plant by railroad dinkies and transported from the plant in dump trucks. Below, the great conveyor belts built in the 1960s finally stopped in 2003 when stone from Rock Mountain was no longer processed at the 60-acre Nelson & Sloan plant.



Mining in the Otay Valley

by Steve Schoenherr

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 west to connect with the Coronado Belt Line railroad he built around the bay in 1888. This spur also connected Babcock with the National City and Otay Railroad that was constructed by the Land and Town Company in 1887 to develop the lands Frank Kimball had given to the Santa Fe Railroad for a transcontinental railroad terminal. Babcock also wanted to develop the lands of the South Bay and the Otay Valley. He invested in the subdivisions of Coronado Heights and South San Diego along the route of his belt line, bought the Salt Works, built the Lower Otay Dam, and provided hunting lodges for his hotel guests. Babcock helped William Carlson construct the San Diego and Phoenix Railway in the Otay valley in 1893. The line began at Phoenix Park in Otay where Babcock's spur



Elisha Babcock in 1886

line crossed Hollister Road. Carlson went bankrupt by 1896, his line only reaching as far as the Daneri winery in the valley. Babcock built a large pavilion and picnic grounds at Phoenix Park which proved popular for another decade. However, the cost of these developments strained Babcock's resources, and he was forced to sell most of his property in Coronado and Otay to John D. Spreckels.



Henry Fenton in 1939

Henry Fenton took over the sand and gravel processing plant where Babcock's gravel pit had been located. The NC&O line followed 27th Street to the gravel pit and Hollister Street, and Fenton 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.

The flood of 1916 destroyed the Fenton plant, but it was rebuilt at the same location along 27th Street east of Hollister. The Nelson & Sloan Company was founded in 1920 on 60 acres at 7th Street south of Main. Merrill Leonard Nelson had started a sand and gravel pit in 1915 in the Sweetwater Valley where today the 805 freeway crosses E Street. With the help of teamsters Ermon and Oscar Meador, he won several contracts with the city of Chula Vista to haul crushed gravel from this pit for local road work. When Nelson formed a partnership with Paul Rubert

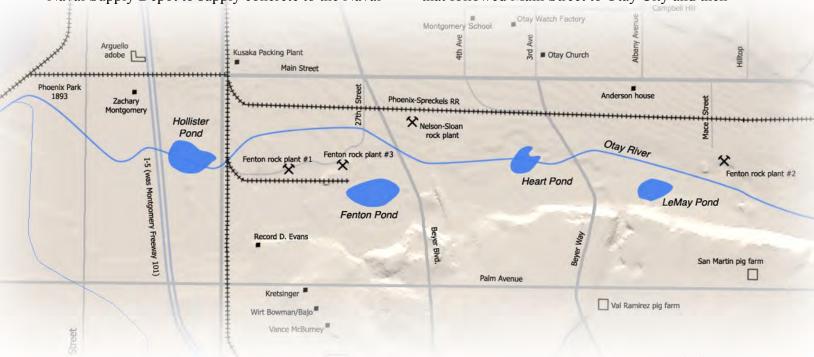
Sloan, a new gravel pit was opened in the Otay Valley, although the Sweetwater pit remained in operation until 1945.

Gravel operations in the valley made use of the San Diego and Eastern Railroad built by John D. Spreckels along Hollister Street. Fenton built a spur line east from Hollister to his second processing plant 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. 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 in the early days by mules or horses. The mules soon gave way to "dinky" locomotives that pulled the cars up and down the valley. 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.

Fenton bought the Western Salt Company from Elisha Babcock in 1922. He also established the Pre-Mixed Concrete Company in 1924 to market the concrete made from the raw materials of his sand and gravel pits. In 1926 the Pre-Mixed Concrete Company entered into a major contract with the Naval Supply Depot to supply concrete to the Naval

Fuel Depot. Henry had worked for the U.S. Navy since his earliest days as a contractor and the federal government had remained a significant client. In 1926 the Standard Oil Company purchased 265 acres east of Otay from John Mosto, a resident of Otay for 35 years. The site became a bentonite mine, a source of the clay-like substance used to refine oil. In 1961 the mine was closed and taken over by San Diego County as the Otay Landfill and solid waste dump at 1700 Maxwell Road.

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 the 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, 1931.²

During the 1930s, gravel and sand from the Otay Valley was used on major road-paving projects in the South Bay. Highway 101 was built from Chula Vista to the border by 1933 with money from the new state gasoline tax enacted in 1923. FDR's New Deal paid for the paving of major city streets from National City to San Ysidro. Lorenzo Anderson was a young African American road worker for the county who moved from Logan Heights to the Otay Valley in 1938, paying \$250 down on an old house built in 1888. "When I came to Otay there were no paved roads and no sidewalks. There were all dirt roads. Otay was mostly lemon orchards and celery fields." Anderson raised his family of three children in this house, became a deacon of the Otay Baptist Church and was active in the Woodlawn Park Community Church. The house at 3487 Main Street today is Chula Vista Historic Site No. 68.3

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." This growth in Fenton's business was characteristic of the whole county. Harold Clifford has written, ""While the least glamorous, the sand, gravel, and broken stone industries have been the county's most economically productive geologic exploitations. These industries experienced phenomenal growth fostered by the post-World War II construction boom. Between 1947 and 1959, the tonnage of stone quarried in the county was multiplied sevenfold. The monetary value was increased tenfold to \$13,600,000, and the stone and gravel quarried made up 94 percent of the mineral production in the county. To put this in perspective, in 1959 the county's stone production was worth approximately twice as much as the value of all the gold ever mined in San Diego County."5

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 #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 federal highway acts of the 1950s funded another surge in road construction. The Montgomery Freeway had been built in 1951 and was widened and renamed

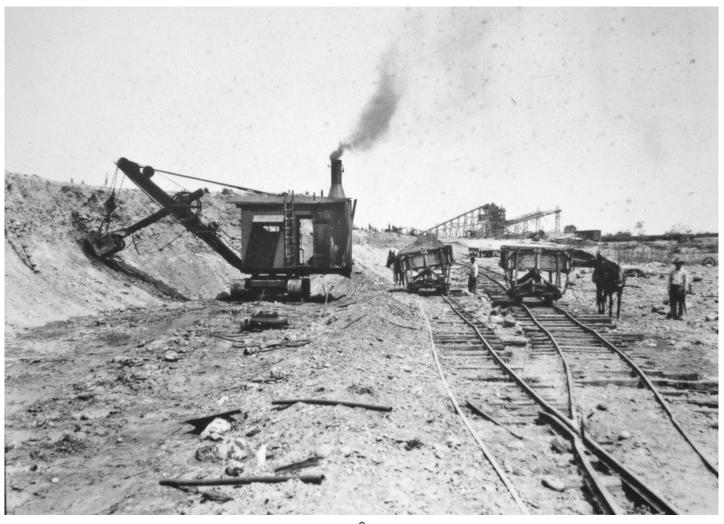


Interstate 5 in the 1960s. The new road took up more land crossing the Otay Valley and the Fenton Company had to sell 1.24 acres to the state for the road expansion.

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 emblem "USA" of "USMC". One of the several hog farms in the valley was the 48-acre San Martin farm on the south side of the valley near the pond now called LeMay Pond, but Rudy remembers it as a popular swimming hole that the kids called Blue Pond. It was deep and several kids drowned in accidents at the pond. When Rudy was 12 he drove trucks for his dad picking up garbage at the Coronado Naval Base to feed the 5000 hogs on his farm. In

1954 he began driving concrete trucks for Nelson & Sloan at age 19. Other hog farms in the area were owned by Val Ramirez, Al Schulenburg, Alfred Combs, Bill O'Donnell and the Hansen brothers. After the city of San Diego annexed the area south of the valley in 1957, the hog farms were forced to close.

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 we built a new ready-mixed concrete batch plant. 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 a better 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 concrete trucks that operated out of the Otay plant under the name of Pre-Mixed Concrete Company. "From the late 1960s 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 1980s. At that time the aggregate processing plant was closed." 6

Although excavations stopped in the valley floor, the Nelson & Sloan developed a quarry at Rock Mountain several miles up the valley in the mid-1960s. Bob Walter started his trucking company in San Marcos in 1963 and remembers the quarry growing dramatically from a small patch on Main Street to the present 80-acre pit. Walter's trucks have carried over 1 million tons of large-stone riprap from Otay to the Dana Point breakwater, North Island Navy base, Shelter Island, Seaport Village, the boat basins in Chula Vista and National City, and the Sweetwater River Channel. The two batch plants of Nelson & Sloan provided concrete for many of the high-rise buildings in San Diego. The Symphony Towers in 1989 was the largest single-pour concrete job in the history of San Diego, with 60 trucks providing 6000-7000 yards of concrete. The Fenton Company provided the concrete for the construction of the Salk Institute designed by Louis Kahn, the UCSD campus in La Jolla dedicated in 1956, the Home Federal skyscraper in downtown San Diego, and the modern Community Concourse in 1964. Fenton concrete was used in the building of the Coronado Bridge 1967-1969, and the widening of I-5 freeway in 1973.

The Fenton Company was the owner of over 400 acres of land within the Otay Valley when it closed its plant in the 1980s. It joined with The Trust for Public Land in 1997 to sell this land at below appraised cost to the cities of San Diego and Chula Vista for the purpose of creating a public park.



Advertisement in the San Diego Union, June 8, 1913

According to Henry Hunte, "As State grant funds became available and were provided to the two cities, the Trust acquired additional increments of Fenton's ownership and transferred them to the cities. Most of what today forms the Otay Valley Regional Park, between I-5 and I-805, is former Fenton property." ⁷

The Hanson company of England bought the Fenton and Nelson & Sloan companies in 1998, and Heidleberg bought Hanson in 2008. The concrete batch plants were closed in 1998, and the concrete trucks moved to other locations, but the old Nelson & Sloan plants continued to process sand and gravel and produce asphalt. John Moller and Jim Baldwin bought the Rock Mountain quarry from Hanson in 2007, and after Baldwin left in May, 2009, Moller organized the Otay Valley Rock, LLC, and continued to mine high-quality stone from the quarry.

NOTES:

- ¹ Engstrand, "Henry G. Fenton," 2008, Chapter 2.
- ² Roalfe, G. A. "The Otay Rock and Sand Plant at San Diego, CA," 1928, pp. 235-238.
- ³ Agenda Packet May 25, 2005, Attachment 5, City Council Minutes, Office of the Clerk, Chula Vista, CA. Anderson is quoted in the "The Young Historians Student Booklet Otay and Otay Mesa," Montgomery School, n. d. [1983]
- ⁴ Engstrand, "Henry G. Fenton," 2008, Chapter 4.

- ⁵ Clifford, Geology of San Diego County, 1997, p. 45.
- ⁶ Hunte, "Otay Plant," Aug. 6, 2009.
- ⁷ Hunte interview Aug. 21, 2009.

SOURCES:

Clifford, Harold J., *Geology of San Diego County: Legacy of the Land.* San Diego, CA: Sunbelt Publications, 1997.

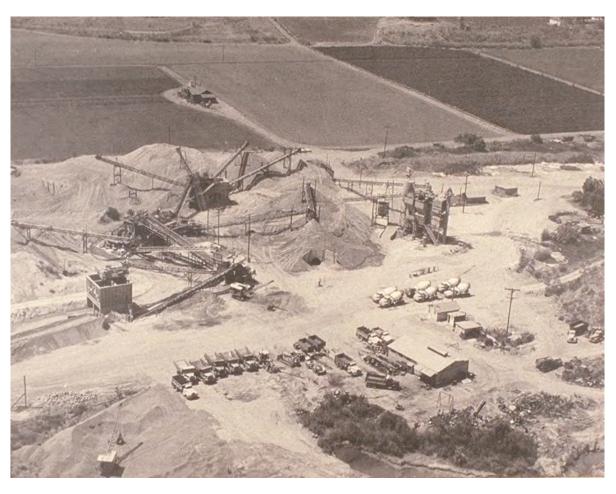
Engstrand, Iris. "Henry G. Fenton: The Man, the Land, and the Legacy," unpublished manuscript, 2008, copy in the H. G. Fenton Archives. Hunte, Henry, interviews Sept. 10, 2008, and July 30,

2009, and Aug. 21, 2009, San Diego, CA.

Hunte, Henry. "Otay Plant," unpublished typescript, Aug. 6, 2009, San Diego, CA.

Roalfe, G. A. "The Otay Rock and Sand Plant at San Diego, CA," *Contractors and Engineers Monthly* 17, no. 4, Oct. 1928, pp. 235-238.

Richeson, Jerry, interview Sept. 9, 2009, Chula Vista,



Fenton's Otay Plant No. 3 looking south in 1958

WE NEED YOUR HELP!

The South Bay Historical Society would like to help the Chula Vista Fire Department restore its 1923 "Old Goose" fire truck. It is still in pretty good shape, and just needs a final restoration to get it running. The truck was a popular part of the Starlight Parade in the 1960s, and could be again. If you know anyone who might want to work on the restoration, perhaps someone at the Motor Transport Museum in Campo or at the San Diego Firehouse Museum on Columbia Street, please contact Steve Schoenherr at ses@sandiego.edu.



NEWS

The Japanese American Historical Society Of San Diego has opened the "Garden of Unity" exhibit in Balboa Park's Japanese Friendship Garden. This exhibit commemorates the Garden's origin in the 1915 Exposition and its history over the last 100 years. The Asakawa family was important in this history. In the photo below

taken in 1918, Moto Asakawa is the young boy in the lower left, father of Bruce Asakawa who opened Presidio Nursery in Bonita in 1976. The Asakawa family has loaned several artifacts to the exhibition that will be on display this Centennial year in the park. Moto was also a founder of Kiku Gardens in Chula Vista, and the dining room is named in his honor.



Japanese Tea Garden photo courtesy of Japanese American Historical Society

EVENTS

Meeting Thursday, January 22, at 6pm in the Chula Vista Public Library auditorium at 365 F Street. Our speaker will be the indomitable Laura R. Charles, longtime teacher at Sweetwater High School and the unofficial historian of the school. For more information, see the history of the Sweetwater High School and view the short video by NBC News that is on the web page at

http://sunnycv.com/southbay/exhibits/suhi.html

South Bay Historical Society Bulletin No. 7, Jan. 2015 Editorial Board Steve Schoenherr, Harry Orgovan

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