

THE SAND BUSINESS AT COOK SPRINGS, ALABAMA

by

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Introduction

The natural alluvial deposit of sand along Cane Creek was a valuable resource that provided employment and income for several families for nearly half a century. Shipping that sand to cast iron foundaries in Birmingham and other cities began in the late 1800s and ended when the supply was exhausted prior to World War II.

The Cook Springs Sand Company was owned and operated by the Cooke family and its representatives. Sand for that business was obtained from the Cooke and Cline properties south of Cook Springs, and was loaded into boxcars on a siding west of the Cook Springs railroad station and adjacent trestle.

The Carreker Sand Company was developed by Russell A. Carreker before the turn of the century and managed by him until his death in 1919. The four sons and three daughters then owned the business equally and changed the name to Carreker Brothers Sand Company. Management then was rotated between brothers John R., William D. and James Paul.

The sand was obtained from the Carreker property east of Cook Springs and was loaded into boxcars on a railroad sidetrack within that property. Wagons and a tram car system hauled the sand from the pits to the boxcars until about 1925 when motor trucks were utilized. The tram system is described in more detail later.

Cast Iron

Cast iron was made by pouring (casting) molten iron into molds. The mold gave shape to the desired product and conducted the heat away to let the metal cool evenly for uniform strength throughout the finished piece. The sand at Cook Springs was highly desired for its molding and heat transfer properties. Cast iron pipe and fittings, and other cast iron objects, were the products of the cast iron foundaries. A train load of cast iron pipe made with sand from Cook Springs is shown in the accompanying photograph made in 1924.

Origin and Characteristics of Cook Springs Sand

The land beside Cane Creek near Cook Springs was formed through geological processes. Successive periods of flooding deposited soil particles in the flood plain. That flood water contained sand, which was deposited over long periods of time to depths of several feet. Similar deposits exist along many streams between sandstone ridges.

Sand particles vary in size from very fine, near microscopic size, to quite coarse, being one to two millimeters in size. The gradation in size can be detected within broad limits by feeling the sand between one's fingers. The finer particles "mold" together when squeezed and hold the shape formed then. The coarser, or sharp, sand particles do not do so. Both fine and coarse sand is used in the cast iron business. Persons used to working with sand develop the ability to detect these differences in particle size when feeling the sand. There were pockets of fine and coarse sand at different places along Cane Creek. This made the Cook Springs sand highly desired by the users in the cast iron industry.

The Carreker Tram System

A tram car and track system was developed near the turn of the century for hauling the sand from the pit to the railroad siding. The upper end of the tracks was a "tipple" that became overbalanced with a loaded car and dumped the sand down a chute into a railway boxcar.

The rails at this point were curved upward to stop the wheels and hold the car in place while the sand poured out. The upturned track section and car were then pulled back to the horizontal position. **Note:** Boxcars were used to keep the sand dry and free from cinders.

The track was made of light steel rails shaped like railroad rails and fastened parallel to each other on wooden ties that were imbedded in soil. The track lay along a prepared uniform grade from the top of the hill to the creek bottom land and then outward into the working pit. The distance was 1/2+ mile.

The tram cars were 3' x 6' x 3' deep and held two cubic yards, or about 2½ tons, of sand. One end was hinged to let the sand pour down the chute after the latch was sprung. The four wheels were flanged and tapered like regular railroad car wheels to keep the car on the rails.

Th empty cars rolleed down the hill by gravity and the speed was slowed by a person applying brakes to the wheels. Two mules in tandem walked between the rails to pull the empty car to the pit and the loaded car from the pit to the tipple above the railroad car. The mules stepped out of the track before the tipple was reached and their hitch was released. The latch that held the end door was tripped and the filled car was pushed by hand onto the tipple, which became overbalanced and dumped the sand down the chute. Two men, the driver and the brakeman, operated the tram movements.

Loading Sand At The Pit

The sand deposits were covered with a layer of soil about six inches deep that had to be removed to expose the sand.

Sections of track were then placed beside this sand layer and the empty cars were pulled alongside. The cars were filled by hand shoveling the soil into each car. The filled car was pulled out and an empty one moved into place for filling. This operation required a two-man team on the filled car, a driver and a brakeman, who was the pusher at the top. Two or three men stayed at the pit to fill the empty car and to expose more sand. When a strip was worked out, the soil off the next strip was shoveled into the bottom of the first pit and the track put in beside the wall of sand. That restored the natural topography and fertility of the land after the sand was removed.

Wagons or trucks were driven alongside the exposed layer where they were used for hauling the soil.

This tram track operation was terminated in the late 1920s when motor trucks were utilized for hauling the sand from the pits to the railway cars.

Occasional deposits of gravel were avoided or discarded because a gravel would create a fault in the mold. Likewise, a decayed tree stump or roots had to be removed to maintain the quality of the sand. Hand shoveling permitted such care.


General Information

Houses were provided for full time employees of the Carreker Sand Company. The going wage was \$1.00 per day per man for a 10-hour day until the 1920s, and was gradually raised after that. A few farmers brought their team and wagon to haul sand in the summer after crops were laid by. The going rate of pay was \$1.00 per day for the driver and \$1.00 per day for the team and wagon. All drivers also shoveled the sand onto and off the wagons.

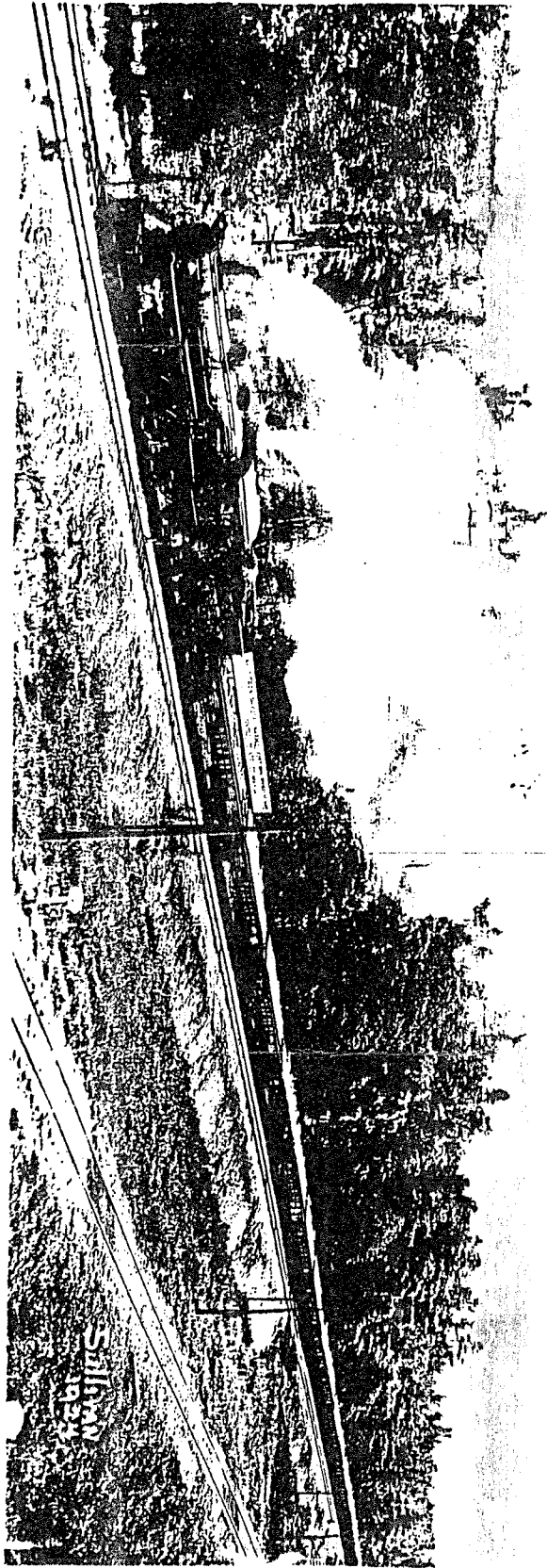
One family primarily handled the loading and hauling sand with the tram system. Monroe Stevens, the father, operated the pit area while his sons, George, the driver, and Jim, the brakeman, handled the tram cars. George's son, Winton, worked some during the 1920s in the railroad boxcar shoveling the dumped sand from the door area toward the ends of the car.

The supply of sand was exhausted on the Cooke property by the mid 1920s and that business ceased to operate. The Carreker Brothers Sand Company lasted about 10 years longer.

Deposits of residual sand were located on the ridge northwest of the springs area (now the nursing home area). John Robert Carreker shipped sand from that location in the late 1930s and early 1940s until his age-related infirmities stopped him during World War II. That land belonged then to the school and nursing home projects that succeeded the Cooke family businesses. Those entities did not continue the sand enterprise, thus ending the business of shipping sand from Cook Springs.


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