

Curran, C
The Bakersfield Sandstone
Brick Company

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ORAL HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY PROJECT
CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

INTERVIEW FORM

1. Name of Interviewee: Charles S. Curran
2. Date of Interview: May 1, 1976
3. Place of Interview: 215 Jefferson Street, Bakersfield
4. Address of Interviewee: 215 Jefferson Street
Bakersfield, California
5. Date and Place of Birth: January 29, 1890, Bakersfield
6. Place of Longest Residence: Bakersfield
7. Length of Tape: Approximately 45 minutes
8. Transcription: Yes No
9. Has the Interviewee signed a release? Yes No
10. Name of Interviewer: Alice Pinkerton

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11. Historical Importance: The tape supplies information about the history of the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Co., reveals information regarding the business practices of the company and supplies information regarding the success of the company

12. Subjects: The Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Co. -- 1886-1976

13. Names mentioned in tape: James Curran, W. S. Tevis, C. J. Lindgren, Bob Curran, Henry Eissler, Mr. Jewett, James Curran, II, Walter F. Heisey, Gordon Foster, Bill Steele, C. S. Curran

14. Period: --1900; 1900-1920; 1920-1930;
1930-1940; 1940-1950; 1950--.
1886-1976.

ORAL HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY PROJECT
CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD
PIONEER PROJECT

THE BAKERSFIELD SANDSTONE BRICK CO.

Charles S. Curran

Interviewed

by

Alice Pinkerton

on

May 1, 1976

Transcriber: Alice Pinkerton

ORAL HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY PROJECT
CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD
PIONEER PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: Charles S. Curran

INTERVIEWER: Alice Pinkerton

SUBJECT: The Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Co.

DATE: May 1, 1976

TRANSCRIBER: Alice Pinkerton

This is an interview by Alice Pinkerton of Charles S. Curran, Director of Bakersfield Sandstone Brick and son of the founder of the company, for a History 373 class, Bakersfield, Cal State, May 1, 1976.

P: Mr. Curran, the first question I have for you this morning is what attracted your father, James Curran, to California from Illinois and why did he settle in Bakersfield?

C: As a boy he had asthma back there and after he graduated from college he thought coming west might help him get rid of the asthma, which it did. He had an uncle living in San Francisco and he stayed there with him a short time. He took a steamer down to Southern California, looked the country over around there, finally came up to Bakersfield and got a job with the Kern County Land Company,

which at that time was Haggin and Carr, as a zanjero on one of the canals.

P: What encouraged your dad to establish a brick business in Bakersfield?

C: His father was a brickmaker and he was familiar with the business and the town needed a brick establishment.

P: Most of the buildings then that a, before the brick business was established, most of the buildings were just out of lumber or was there a brick business in Bakersfield at all?

C: Well, mostly out of lumber; however, there had been two or three handmade brick deals where they burned to kiln a brick and for and two or three buildings. Most of the brick buildings; however, were made from his brick.

P: Great. When the company was formed in 1886, what was the name of the company?

C: Well, it was just James Curran. It wasn't a company. It was just his individual business.

P: Do you know what the initial investment in the company was in 1886?

C: No, just whatever money he happened to have he bought the land where the, about forty acres, and where he started his brickyard.

P: Is this at the current site that the company is now?

C: Yes, it's at the same site where the Sandstone Brick

Company is now.

P: Is all the forty acres still there?

C: No, everything west of Sonora Street has been sold off.

East of Sonora the original land is still there plus additions that have been acquired throughout the years.

P: Now currently Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company then encompasses how much land?

C: Well, several city blocks. I don't know just how many off hand.

P: When James Curran started his business of brickmaking, how much help did he hire back then? Do you have any idea?

C: Well, it was a primitive sort of making brick but most of it was hand labor and only in the summer months when the brick would dry, and so I would say his help outside of maybe one or two men for six months of the year was nil.

P: Let's see, the company originally started by manufacturing the common red brick and when, what and why was the sandstone brick added to the manufacturing line?

C: Well, Mr. Tevis, W. S. Tevis, who was the head of the Kern County Land Company had been traveling in Germany and saw these bricks which were made out of sand and lime being made and knowing that both sand and lime was plentiful here in California, he decided to start

up two or three plants and he happened to be telling Mr. C. J. Lindgren on the train coming to Bakersfield what he intended to do. Mr. Lindgren, being a partner at that time with my father, they decided to join in with Mr. Tevis and the company was formed mostly of employees of the Kern County Land Company and Mr. Lindgren and my father.

P: Very good. Then this was not, Mr. Tevis also bought other machines for other companies throughout California?

C: Yes, he started one in Antioch and one in Fresno, neither of which succeeded.

P: Now, how was the red brick manufactured?

C: They were manufactured out of clay mud which was put in molds which were dumped out in the sun to dry. After they were dried, they were set in a kiln where they originally were burned by wood, and it took five or six days to burn them to get them up to the proper heat temperature and that's all there was to it.

P: Now, the mud that was used for the red brick though, was it just regular mixed mud?

C: Yes, regular mixed mud. We didn't put any straw in it like the Egyptians did. (laughter)

P: Okay, now the difference between the red brick, how was the sandstone brick manufactured?

C: Well, it had a special machine that compressed the sand and lime in the proper proportions and they were

stacked on a steel car and afterwards they were put in the steam kettles, a long cylinder kettle, and under steam pressure where they were cooked for twelve hours and then they were put out in the air to harden and the older they got the harder they became.

P: In 1903, the company was incorporated and stock was issued. Do you know how much stock was issued in other words, what the capital investment of the company was?

C: \$52,500.

P: And who were the major stockholders?

C: Mr. Tevis and his friends and Mr. Lindgren and my father.

P: What type of problems were encountered by the company during its first twenty years in operation?

C: Oh, well, the manufacture of sandstone brick only lasted until the war broke out in Europe, War World I, and then parts for the machinery were no longer available and the plant, brickmaking machinery, was sold to a group of Chinese who shipped it over to China and so no, no sandstone brick were manufactured after 1913.

P: Okay, on the red brick, when did the company stop manufacturing that?

C: Well, let's see, I think, my father died in 1952, so I would say that we stopped making them in the late 1950's. I don't remember the date but we stopped just in time before this environmental stuff started. (laughter)

P: Now during, back to the original twenty years or so of .

the company, did they have difficulty obtaining raw materials or transportation problems or any type of manufacturing problems other then not being able to get the parts for the sandstone brickmaking machine?

Was everything right here in Bakersfield?

C: Yes, everything was right here at hand and no particular problems that I recall that we couldn't overcome.

P: When were you first employed by Bakersfield Sandstone Brick?

C: In 1909.

P: So you've seen a lot of changes, haven't you?

C: Yes, all of them practically. (laughter)

P: Okay, during its ninety-years existence, has the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company experienced any disasters? In other words, was there fire? Have they had financial trouble? How did the earthquake of 1952 affect them?

C: Well, we had a fire in our mill, planing mill, that was along around in the 1920's which burned the building down and we had some losses all covered by insurance. There has been no difficulties. The credit of the company has always been good. The company was able to expand all the years on retained earnings. The company, there never was any more capital added except from the earnings of the company and we're still expanding and growing and still have

quite a number of members of the family that are becoming of age and want to work in the company, so I imagine it will keep on growing.

P: Would you consider Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company a family-oriented company?

C: Yes, because the majority of the shareholders are members of the family and most of them are employees of the company.

P: Back to the fire in the 1920's, did it completely burn down the building. Were you . . .

C: Only just the mill part which is a separate building.

P: Did it stop production of anything?

C: No, no, only our planing mill operation because what wasn't damaged by fire was damaged by water. Until a new building was constructed and new machinery acquired, why that part of our operation was at a standstill.

P: Now the planting mill, is that the lumber area or what?

C: That was a separate building on Sonora Street between Eureka and Truxtun.

P: What did it do though? I guess I don't know what a planting mill is?

C: Planing mill.

P: Oh, a planing mill for the lumber.

C: Yes, p-l-a-n-i-n-g.

P: Very good, thank you. Does the company have a credit policy towards its customers and when did it come

into existence?

C: Yes, we have budget accounts. It's always been we had credit accounts. Some of them are just thirty-day accounts but now we have where they can pay as little as ten dollars a month on their budget account. I don't remember what year but it has been a long time.

P: Was it to keep the business? Was it something that you had to add to the company so you could attract customers?

C: Well, it was an accommodation, you know. People would say buy, will want to put up on an addition to their house, do-it-yourselves, and probably have three or four, five hundred dollars that they wanted to pay off by the month. Same as stores do. Layaway plans you know. Montgomery Wards, Sears Roebuck and those.

P: Do you think this policy might have started before 1920, before the war?

C: No, let's say afterwards. After, after, well let's see the war was over in, War World I was over in 1918, War World II. Let's say it started in the 1930's, after the depression. Of course, it may have started during the depression.

P: The Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company has used what type of advertising media in its ninety-years of . . .

C: All of them.

P: You mean t.v. and radio and . . .

C: Newspapers.

P: Did you start advertising way back at the turn of the century or . . .

C: Oh, yes. We've always had maybe small ads in the newspaper. Goodwill ads in women's endeavors, you know, (laughter) women's club cookbook and assorted.

P: How was the company affected by War World I?

C: Well, it was like any other business. (laughter) If you're affected by the fact that we could only do business with what materials we could get and acquire. Same in War World II. Everything was slanted towards help winning the war. The government business came first and so with what materials we could get that's what we did business with.

P: Did you lose a lot of employees going off to wars?

C: Yes, there's always that turnover.

P: Did they have a job when they came back?

C: Yes, everyone that wanted a job when they came back.

P: How about the Great Depression? How was it affected then?

C: Well, there was two years that the company really lost money, but we came out of that all right. Most of our customers eventually paid their bills and let's say there was only two years that the company lost money.

P: Do you remember what those years were?

C: Probably 1931 and 1932 or 1932 and 1933.

P: Did you have to layoff employees during the Great Depression?

C: Some and some came to be and said, "Charlie, we don't care what you pay us just so we keep our job", because their jobs, especially those carpenters and so forth that worked in our mill, they wanted to keep their pension rights alive and just like keeping their job and the job was worth more than the money because as long as they had a job they had credit and which eventually works out.

P: What was your position when you started with the company?

C: Just a laborer.

P: And then where did you go from there?

C: Well, I had previously worked three years in the bank and, of course that's where I acquired a business education more or less, and I became office manager and eventually I was made secretary of the company. Finally, with my brother and father, we gradually acquired all of the outstanding shares that were owned originally by different people. Some of them, they died, and their estate was settled and we were able to buy their shares until it was all just family owned and later my brother and I, Brother Bob and I, owned ninety percent of the stock ourselves. When father died, there were a few shares that we never bought.

P: Are those shares still outstanding?

C: Yes, they're still outstanding?

P: When were you put into a management position with the company?

C: I just grew into it. I don't know. (laughter)

P: Here's one on local history. Since the original Beale Memorial Clock Tower was constructed with sandstone brick, did the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company take part in its restoration?

C: My father along with a contractor, Henry Eissler, had decided to repair it. Mr. Eissler had investigated what it would take to do it and they were just about ready to start when the city torn it down.

P: I thought it was torn down because of the earthquake?

C: Well, it was damaged by the earthquake. That's what we were going to repair was just the upper part where the clock was. So that's all that was damaged that we figured at the time that two or three thousand dollars would repair it back to its original condition but the property owners on the four corners of 17th and Chester apparently wanted it removed out of there and the city manager at that time and so in the dark of night, they knocked it down.

P: A lot of upset Bakersfield citizens.

C: And then a group to restore it was formed and got permission to build it out, you know where it is now, out at the museum and funds were raised and it was

built out there out of cement blocks which simulate the sandstone brick that was originally built out of and whatever parts could be salvaged like the granite knees that were on the four corners and those were salvaged and replaced in the new so it looked practically the same as it originally did.

P: Were you asked to provide any of the hardware or anything for the clock itself?

C: I think Mr. Jewett who was a repairman and had a repair shop out near Greenfield restored all that stuff. The clock parts, I think, he made that couldn't be salvaged but it operates now. The Sandstone furnished what it could.

P: Why were the additional lines like lumber, hardware and plumbing added?

C: Well, it was expansion of the company.

P: What is KernCo?

C: Well, that's a separate deal. That's the Kern Corporation which we organized a separate company. It has nothing to do with Sandstone except that it rents the property there. It has a different set of stockholders to some extent. With few exceptions, the directors are the same as the Sandstone but it's an entirely separate company.

P: It's two different companies?

C: It's two different . . .

P: It's not a subsidiary or anything . . .

C: No, it rents, it rents its space and building. It was organized by the Sandstone . . . (telephone rings) Barbara will get that I guess. Well, I guess I'll . . .

P: What is the controversy regarding Sacramento Street?

C: We own, the street was closed on half of the block. See we own property on both sides and when the, when the city wanted to close one of the streets in there on account of making Truxtun Avenue more or less a freeway there, they closed Sacramento Street which they closed it back to the alley which then, so we petitioned then to close the other half just so we'd have a continuous deal and it was Walter Heisey who is a councilman and then he was running and so they just brought it up as some more politics is all. (laughter) That end of the street was closed and nothing more was said about it.

P: So did you get your way then?

C: Yes, just like we, well we used it anyway you know, it might just well close it. It wasn't a through street.

P: Well, did the company originally own that property . . .

C: Yes, and when, when it was subdivided, see the company owned that by meets and bounds and when the, when the railroad company laid out the town of Sumner, we made the blocks and lots conform to their thing and then probably, I don't know whether we deeded to the city or

whether it just was there on the map. But anyway, it didn't affect the Sandstone one way or the other.

(laughter)

P: How many people are currently employed by the company?

C: Well, I don't know exactly, but I would say between sixty and seventy.

P: How has the merchandising and manufacturing business changed since 1903?

C: Well, in 1903 and for several years afterwards, the only way of shipping in materials was by railroad and of course, now things can be brought in by truck. You can, you can get materials practically overnight that use to take weeks to get. Everything has speeded up and where in the early days contractors would give us a week's notice to get materials on the job, now they give us a half an hour and we have to go along with the times.

P: Well, that leads into my next question. How has Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company changed with the changing times?

C: Well, we've changed from the horse and buggy age where our deliveries were made with teams and wagons. Now we have a fleet of trucks and we are able to go along with the times.

P: By changing or adding all the different lines to your company, that has been a change. How also have you

made it easier for the consumer? Do you have like home decorating areas?

C: Certainly, we are a progressive company and we're out to please our customers and to attract new customers.

P: Is that part of the reason Bakersfield Sandstone Brick has been so successful over the years?

C: That's right. We confine our business to Kern County mostly; however, we do make deliveries over to the coast but at the present time we have no intentions of expanding beyond Kern County.

P: How do you feel that the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company aided in the development of Bakersfield in its early days?

C: By, in the early days, of course, we supplied building materials, we manufactured brick and we dealt in cement and lime and plaster and kindred commodities that were used and our principal customers were contractors and builders. There was very little do-it-yourself except amongst the farming trade and I think we have always been probably a step ahead of the needs of the community. The fact that the company has progressed and expanded and developed shows that we have filled a need.

P: Are there any buildings currently standing that still have the old sandstone brick?

C: Yes, I think. I don't know whether that's the original Hall of Records building on the corner of Truxtun and

Chester. Of course, those buildings have been torn down . . . (doorbell rings). Oh, that's some little kid. They want to sell candy or . . . I would have to pass on that question. Without going and looking to see, I don't know whether it's still there or whether they have been replaced.

P: Most of the buildings were destroyed by the earthquake, weren't they in 1952?

C: Yes, a number of them were severely damaged and, of course, the earthquake laws that were passed after that they required so much reinforcing steel that it practically eliminated brick construction. About the only uses of brick now are, in this area, are for fireplaces and brick veneer work. But there are practically no building being wholly constructed out of brick because they can do it so much cheaper with reinforced concrete.

P: How do you foresee the future of Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company?

C: Well, with the training that the employees are getting, I think we'll always have progressive management and it all depends how they take care of the business.

P: Have any departments been added since 1966?

C: No.

P: Who are the current directors of the company and officers?

C: The officers and the officers are all directors, James

Curran, II is president, Walter F. Heisey is vice president, Gordon Foster is secretary, Bill Steele is treasurer and C. S. Curran is a director.

P: Let's see you were president of the board. When did you go back into directorship?

C: At the time my brother, Robert E. Curran, died. Then the new board was elected and the new officers were elected.

P: Do you remeber what year that was?

C: No.

P: Okay, thank you Mr. Curran. I have appreciated all your help.

C: You're welcome.

THE BAKERSFIELD SANDSTONE BRICK COMPANY

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What attracted James Curran to California From Illinois and why did he settle in Bakersfield?
2. What encouraged James Curran to establish a brick business in Bakersfield?
3. When the company was formed in 1886, what was its name?
4. What was the initial investment in the company in 1886?
5. How much land did James Curran purchase for the business?
6. Has any of the original land been disposed of?
7. How many people did James Curran hire to begin the business in 1886?
8. Originally the company manufactured common red brick. When and why was sandstone brick added to the manufacturing line?
9. How was red brick manufactured?
10. How was sandstone brick manufactured?
11. In 1903 the company was incorporated and stock was issued. How much stock was issued and who were the major stockholders?
12. What type of problems were encountered by the company during its first twenty years in operation? For instance: Where there shortages in raw materials? Transportation problems? Merchandising problems? Manufacturing problems?

13. When did the company discontinue manufacturing both sandstone and red brick?
14. When were you first employed by the company?
15. During its ninety-year existence, has the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company experienced any disasters?
For instance: Fire?
16. How was the company affected by the earthquake of 1952?
17. Has the company had any financial trouble in its years of operation?
18. Does the company have a credit policy and when did it come into existence?
19. The Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company has used what type of advertising media during its ninety-year existence?
20. How was the company affected during World War I and World War II?
21. How was the company affected during and by the Great Depression?
22. Were any of the company's employees laid off during the Great Depression?
23. Since the original Beale Memorial Clock Tower was constructed with sandstone brick, did the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company take part in its restoration?
24. Why were additional lines like lumber, hardware and plumbing added?

25. Who are the major stockholders of the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company today?
26. What is KernCo?
27. Who is KernCo owned by?
28. Is KernCo part of the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company?
29. When was KernCo formed?
30. What is the controversy regarding Sacramento Street?
31. How many people are currently employed at the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company?.
32. How has the merchandising and manufacturing business changed since 1903?
33. How has the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company coped with the changing times?
34. Why is the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company a successful company?
35. How did the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company aid in the development of Bakersfield?
36. How do you foresee the future expansion of the Bakersfield Sandstone Brick Company?