

State's oldest bentonite plant shuts down

By PAT BOCK

OSAGE — The last chapter in the history of Wyoming's oldest bentonite processing plant was written this month when the Baroid Plant at Clay Spur shut down.

On July 11 the last of the stockpile was loaded and hauled into the plant for processing by Charles Wieck of Upton. On July 21 and 22 Baroid's Louisiana Construction Crew removed the packer operation and dust collector at Clay Spur and moved it to colony where Baroid is building an extension to its quick gel plant there.

Reason for the shutdown of the pioneer Wyoming plant is the unavailability of high grade bentonite coupled with the fact

that the machinery is obsolete. The machinery would require a considerable investment to bring it up to Environmental Protection Agency standards, company officials said.

A spokesman for the facility said it would take about one-half million dollars to bring the Clay Spur plant up to EPA standards and the plant could not run long enough to justify that kind of an investment, he noted that Baroid, known for high quality bentonite, is out of high grade ore in this area.

Baroid was built near Osage in 1926 and started to operate early in 1927, according to Osage oldtimers. A mining engineer, commenting on the closing of the Clay Spur Plant,

noted that "50 years is a whale of a lifetime for a mining operation."

Asked about Baroid's properties in the Big Horn Basin, a spokesman said there are no definite plans for building in that area at this time.

He also noted that all of the permanent employees at the Clay Spur plant were given the opportunity to apply for work at Baroid facilities elsewhere. A security officer will remain at Clay Spur for some time, he said.

Although it was once rumored that the plant would be sold for scrap iron, the spokesman noted that there are no definite plans now for the disposition of the remainder of the plant.

Originally owned by Silica Products Company, the 1,300 acres of bentonite property in the tract at Clay Spur at one time contained well over one million tons of high grade bentonite, records show.

A bulletin printed in 1930 by Silica Products Company of Kansas City, Missouri noted that bentonite was first discovered in Wyoming in about 1885 through the occurrence of what are known as "soap holes." Records report that due to the more or less natural adaptability of the material as a detergent and cleaning agent it is commonly spoke of as "mineral soap" or "soap clay."

According to the bulletin, bentonite was apparently first

shipped from Wyoming in about 1888 by William Taylor at Rock Creek and the material was then known as "Taylorite." No true bentonite has been found in the nation east of the Rocky Mountain area, the publication claimed.

Although used in this area primarily in oil well drilling and petroleum production and refining, a list of its other uses is very impressive. The list includes foundry molds, hydraulic cements and their products, ceramic products, soaps, detergents, insecticides, fungicides, germicides, roofing paper, wall board, metal polish, binder for crayons; sealing agent for reservoir walls, irrigation ditches and dikes; and in paints, water colors, and oil paints. It is also used in fertilizers, face creams, tooth paste and laxatives and a host of other products.

In another bulletin published for Silica Products Company, the facility at Clay Spur was described as "of all-steel construction, being absolutely fireproof and modern in every detail, thus eliminating any possibility of shut-downs by reason of fires."

The description referred to the second plant built at Clay Spur in 1931 following the destruction of the original plant by fire in 1930. Oldtimers note that there were no dust collectors in the original plant and "dust was so thick you couldn't see more than 10 feet

ahead of you."

However, when the plant was rebuilt a dust collector was installed.

Although mining and processing days have come to an end for the Clay spur plant, Baroid has left a bit of its history to the people in Weston County. The gasoline

locomotive used in the plant's early days to haul cars of crude material up to two or three miles to the processing plant has been donated by Baroid to the Anna Miller Museum at Newcastle and will soon be on permanent display, according to Mrs. Jack Capps, museum director.



Hand mining

BENTONITE WAS excavated by hand in 1930 at Clay Spur. Here (from left) Joe Rosetti, Oren Frazer and Earl Japp are shown extracting the mineral with picks.



By horse

HORSES did the heavy work at Clay Spur in 1927. Plant employes used the beasts to strip the bentonite. Here Joe Rosetti (arm on horse) takes a breather with John Canary. Rosetti was plant superintendent at Clay Spur for several years.

Historic Clay Spur Plant Closes

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