

It's limestone, not gravel Crushing stone business

By Carol Alexander
Of The Southern Illinoisan

Back in 1949, during its early days, Southern Illinois Stone Co. crushed some 1,000 tons of limestone in an eight-hour shift.

Today's production hovers around 3,000 tons. Beginning this month, when a new automated plant opens, the goal will be 12,000 tons.

The surge toward greater production is needed to keep pace with the growing demand for crushed limestone, according to Tom Myers of Marion, superintendent.

Products are used in residential, building, road and bridge construction and for fertilizer.

The company mines, crushes, sorts and sells about 15 grades of limestone, ranging from three-inch chunks for secondary road construction to the fine agricultural lime sold to farmers.

Now sprawling along Rt. 37 about a mile north of Buncombe in Johnson County, Southern Illinois Stone Co. will move in May to a new automated plant nearing completion off Rt. 37, a mile to the north.

President Tom Regenhart said the estimated cost of the new complex is not available. The present outdated facility will be closed.

Regenhart believes automation—with its attendant increased production—is necessary if the company is to remain competitive.

In the early 1950s, the average price for crushed limestone processed by the firm was \$1.50 a ton. Today's price is only slightly higher—\$1.55.

The new equipment is expected to trim about 10 percent a ton off the processing cost.

A 500-foot-long, 62-feet high secondary crusher and screening plant will be operated by one man, stationed at a console in a nearby tower.

The same operation—considerably less streamlined—at the present site requires the attention of several men, working at intervals alongside equipment.

Firm Employes 30

Employment is expected to remain at about 30, although some workers may be assigned

ed to new duties because of mechanization, Myers said.

The firm is believed to be the largest employer in Johnson County, Regenhart said.

He said the product is never referred to as "gravel," a common misappellation.

"The proper term is crushed limestone," he explained.

"The stone business is basically a simple operation," Regenhart said.

Each day's work really begins the afternoon before, when workers "shoot" or dynamite the surrounding limestone hills. An average blast requires about two tons of dynamite, which dislodges 3,000 tons of rock. Before blasting, drillers bore eight to 10 holes, each about 40 feet deep. These holes are filled with dynamite and blasting caps. The explosion is touched off, usually about 5 p.m., by a worker operating a push button blasting machine.

Describing how new equipment will work, Regenhart said dynamited limestone chunks 4 by 5 feet in size will be loaded onto 20-ton trucks and dumped into a primary crusher, where stones will be hammered down to six inches or less in size.

Next, a conveyor belt will feed the limestone into the primary screening plant where all stones 1½ inches or less in size will be sorted according to grade (size), channeled into bins and then stockpiled in the yard to await buyers.

All stones more than 1½ inches will be reprocessed in the secondary crusher and a secondary screening plant, with stones emerging in desired grades.

Road Material

The quarry's main product is material for road construction. About 90 percent of business is with governmental agencies involved in road maintenance and construction. For example, Southern Illinois Stone Co. products went into the construction of Interstates 57, 54 and 24.

Other business consists of sales to farmers and "little old ladies" who want to spread rock on their driveways, Regenhart said.

The company was founded

in 1949. One of the original owners was the late William McKinley Regenhart, father of Tom Regenhart and his brother, Bill, secretary of the company. Vice president is D. L. Harrison.

The new location once was the site of Ramona Stone Co., which was bought out by Southern Illinois Stone Co.

Primary and secondary crushers at the new plant will be equipped with a wetting agent, designed to reduce the amount of dust escaping into the air.

In use for about a year at the present site, the agent has been successful in preventing air pollution, Regenhart said.

Paul Schmierbach, environmental protection engineer with the state Environmental Protection Agency, said the equipment has "done an excellent job of reducing emissions from rock crushing."

Schmierbach declined to comment on whether the equipment keeps dust within allowable limits, but said the EPA has no action pending against the firm.

Blasting

In recent years, workers have been taking seismographic readings of all blasting done near buildings.

"We know how much powder to shoot and can thus avoid damage to other people's property," Regenhart said.

The company leases about 1,200 acres of land along both sides of Rt. 37 for present and potential blasting.

At least one resident along Rt. 37 is eagerly awaiting the company's moving day.

"It's one of the damnedest places I ever saw," said Mrs. Faye Burgess, whose home is across the highway from the stone company.

She claims blasting over the years has ruined walls, cracked her basement, hurled million-sized stone chunks into her yard and polluted her well water.

Mrs. Burgess, who keeps captured stones in a bushel basket in her shed as evidence said she can't wait until the firm moves down the highway.

Mrs. Nellie Simpson, whose home is across the highway from the quarry entrance, said, "I'm used to the noise from blasting, but the road dust stirred up by trucks going in and out sure bothers me."

Although the company is annoying, "it is good in a lot of ways," Mrs. Simpson said. "It has provided work for the boys around Buncombe."

Both Mrs. Simpson and Mrs. Burgess received monetary awards from the company in out-of-court settlements a few years ago.

Mrs. Simpson said she received a lump sum because of the dust churned up by trucks and now leases some of her property to the company.

"I hope they start blasting on my land because then I'd get more money," she said. "I'm 79 though and probably won't live to see it. It will be years before they get to my property."

Mrs. Burgess, who got \$1,500, said she gave \$500 to her lawyer and had \$1,000 left. "That wasn't enough to fix things," said Mrs. Burgess who would like to try for another settlement.

She probably won't, though, because she feels there would not be enough money left after lawyers' fees to make the effort worthwhile.

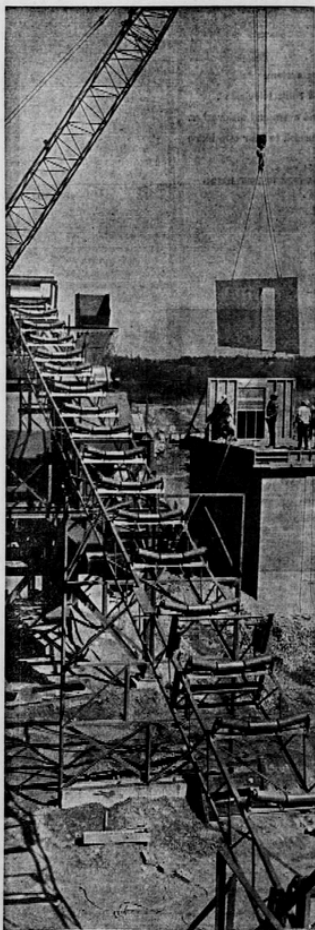


Bill and Tom Regenhart of Southern Illinois Stone Co. survey new plant under construction near Buncombe in Johnson County

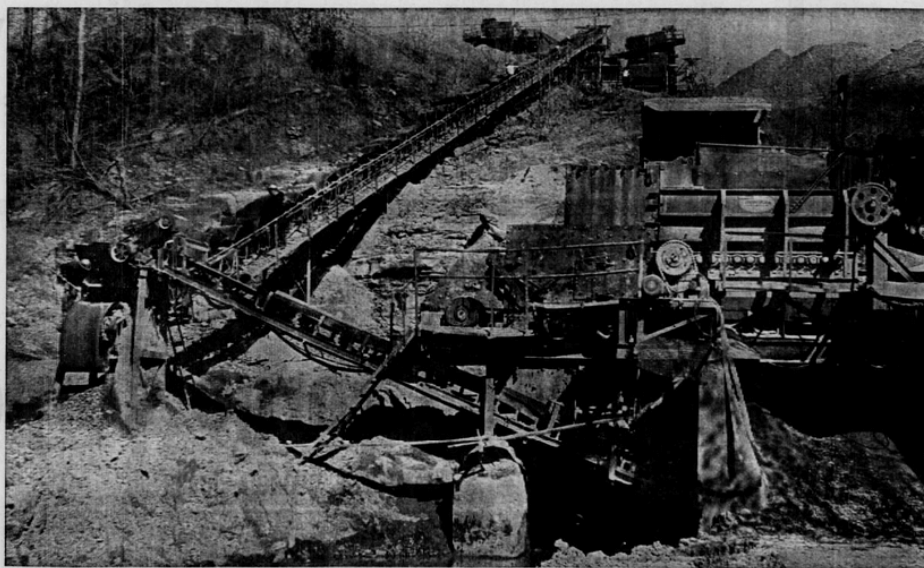
Photos by
Ed Greer



When assembled, these rollers will form a conveyor belt for hauling limestone



Secondary crusher and screening unit



The old equipment sometimes breaks down; here the belt has buckled on conveyor machinery