

Interviews

Life Along the Kokosing

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Interview with Brad Cunningham

Sasha Lourie

Brad Cunningham

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LAK-SL-A110299.A

Researcher: Sasha Lourie

Event: Interview with Brad Cunningham, General Manager of Sant Sand and Gravel Company, Mount Vernon, Ohio

Place: Sant Sand and Gravel Company, 14220 Parrott Street Ext., Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050

Date: November 2, 1999

This interview took place while on a driving tour of the Sant Sand and Gravel plant. References to certain objects mentioned in the interview are explained to the best of my ability and noted in *italics*. My questions and comments are in **bold**, while Cunningham's responses are in regular text.

SL: This is tape LAK-SL-T110299.A side one. It is Tuesday November 2, 1999. This is Sasha Lourie, and I am speaking with Brad Cunningham who is the General Manager of the Sant Sand and Gravel company in Mount Vernon, Ohio.

There is about three minutes of dead space at the beginning of the tape. The tape begins in the middle of a discussion of the mining operation, specifically with a discussion of the stages through which the stones are dug up and then turned into gravel.

BC: ...So we push it [*the dirt*] up, and we run it through that machine right there which pulverizes it, takes all of the stones out of it, which makes really nice top soil. Then we add lime into it too which comes back from, we have, Sant Sand and Gravel [SSG] is part of United Precast, Ellis Brothers Incorporated, so you know we're in the concrete business too, so we have a lot of limestone back out with the concrete. We pull it off. Down here with the trackhoe, that sitting down there, that's what we use to strip the dirt off with. And it varies depending on how the glacier come through this valley. It's, the dirt layer will be anywhere from two feet up to ten feet deep, to get down to the gravel core. We can go back down to the bottom here and I can show you a little better.

So, it kind of starts down here and works its way up?

What's that?

So the basic procedure begins down here?

No. It starts up here [*gesturing up to the top of the hill at a large pile of soil*]. You've got to take the dirt off first to get to the gravel bar. You cannot run the raw dirt up through the plant, because it will just plug everything up tight, and then you just got a lot of people mad at you. Okay...You see the difference right there in that top and in that bottom layer? [*He gestured at a cutaway of soil which was about fifteen feet high, showing the top layer of dirt, which was about two to three feet high, and then noted the next twelve feet or so was the gravel layer.*]

Oh, it's amazing, it's just two completely different shades.

Right. That bottom layer, that's the gravel layer. That top layer, it's all dirt. Like I say, you know, it's real shallow over here, and then it just continues. When the glacier come through here, this path right here, the glacier was, is deeper, right through this one area, right there. It stays pretty deep going across that field like that. Where up here it's a little shallow with the dirt. So what we do is take the machine, and we pull the dirt off the top and clean it real good.

Just scrape all the dirt off and get down to this layer of gravel. And that's what they're loading back here.

Where does the dirt go once you've cleaned it off?

We haul it places. We've built a couple paths up front for a stock area. There's a farm right across the field over here, that back in the old days the county used to dig gravel out of the bank over there, And he's [the county] wanting to put a slope back on that and seed it so that he can mow it with a mower. So we're hauling dirt over there. We just, wherever we can haul it and get rid of it. It's a waste product. It's all waste. And then we're digging, we're digging in the lake too. *[This lake was a about thirty feet or so across and was the area which they were currently mining.]* Now there's another, about, anywhere from, ten to eighteen feet, that's all the deeper this is, about eighteen feet. There was a solid bar of clay underneath this gravel there, which when we test dug, see...We own, we own, all the way from the creek [Kokosing River] all the way to [Route] 661.

Oh really?

So there's about 600 acres here.

Which lake is this, again. Is there an official name, or is...

No, this is the lake we're digging out of.

Oh, okay.

We just continue to make it bigger as we dig. Anyway, when we test dug, when we bought this piece of property over here. When we test dug, they dug thirty feet down, when they hit the clay they dug another thirty feet and never got through the clay bar, so it's a solid bar of clay.

Really, interesting. So, there's obviously a lot of gravel out here.

Oh yeah. We're running about 500,000 ton a year through the plant. That's a sufficient amount. I'd like to see that amount up a little more but...

[A break while we picked up another passenger, and drove him up the hill so that he could pick up his bulldozer. This break in the tape lasts approximately 45 seconds.]

About how long does it take to mine out a specific area?

We can mine. At the rate we're going right now, we can usually take about five acres a year. Pretty close to it. Now, if production went up, if it doubled, you know, acreage is going to go up, so on and so forth.

Is that a pretty standard amount of production or digging a year?

If we would update our plant, it, production, I could put production up, somewhere between 800-1000 ton an hour. And then if we put a second shift going running day and night, you know, so on and so forth, there's a lot of variables there. We're just not, right now we're not equipped. We've only been in this business for six years. We bought this six years ago, and we're just kind of learning as we go here, not investing a lot of money to put our self in a bind. You know you've got to make it to invest it first, so, that's kind of where were at.

Would you say you guys are doing pretty well in the business?

What?

Would you say you're doing pretty well right now?

Yes, we're doing extremely well. Sales and production from six years ago is up over 120 percent.

Really. Do you think that has to do with the amount, the kind of, more people coming into the area?

No. A lot of it=s because the interest rate=s still real low on new homes. There=s still a lot of road work going on...election year, it will drop off again. It always does, election year, when they change terms on the president, it=ll drop off for the first year, year and a half, and then it will start picking back up again.

What kind of stuff have you been doing for recently for people around here?

We do the same thing every day. I got guys who do the same thing everyday, that=s what they do. I got one gentleman who runs the trackhoe and the dragline. Then I=ve got my rock truck drivers, and I=ve got a man down here at the plant, I have a man in the loader up front, a man in the loader in the back. And then I got my truck drivers, they=re all out on the road. I only employ about thirteen people. Thirteen, in the beginning of summer, good summer, it goes up, it=s about twenty people...All the raw material come up and gets dumped in that hopper right there. That=s a field hopper. It goes up...just a sec, let me show you... [*He showed me a large structure through which all of the mined rock gets put onto. Once on the machine, the rock gets sorted according to it's size.*]...runs up that belt, on to that screen. That=s a triple deck screen, right there, there=s three decks in it. The top deck has [1] inch openings, the next deck has 3/8th inch openings, the bottom deck has 1/8th inch openings. We=ll take all the oversize rock, which is anything an inch and above, and it goes in, there=s, that=s, there=s a jaw crusher right there, crushes all that rock down. Now it come up here and runs through this impacter, which makes berm material, it=s all done dry, none of its wet. It=s all dry material. Now we can shut this off, and put that crushed rock back on that belt and go back up and rescreen it, and wash it too. There=s many options here. All your gravel comes off of the middle deck. Sand comes through, and goes into that grey classifier [*a small grey shed*] over there, where it gets washed, as it getting screwed up in that machine it=s being washed, washing all of the silt and fines out of it. Then all of the rock, all of the rock, come over to this other screen.

When everything gets washed, the gravel, the sand and all that, what happens with all of the silt and kind of the runoff from all that?

You see that ditch right there where them pipes are going into, that=s where the fines and the silt go. [*He pointed to a drainage pipe by which the water all goes into a drainage lake.*]

Okay.

We have to dig that out about every two weeks, that=s what you see [*the silt*] piled up around the edge there.

Are there any kinds of regulations which...

No. We=re pulling water. There is. There is regulations, but we=re not pulling water off of anybody=s residence. You see, we own everything. We=re pulling water...and we=ll go back down around here, and I=ll show you...[*We drove over to look at two manmade ponds which are separated by a small roadway.*] All the water that we pull out of one gets put back into the other one. There=s two separate ponds out front here that was dug back in the, oh I don=t know, back in the [19]50s or [19]60s...[*Cunningham receives a phone call*]...When this place first opened up it was called Purdy Sand and Gravel. There=s a pond across the road, I don=t know if you noticed that when you come down [*at the intersection of Columbus Road and Parrott Street*].

Yes, I saw that when I was coming in.

They started there, digging there. That was the first pond that was dug. And then they come over and then they dug this one [*pointing to the pond on the left*], and then they dug this one

[*pointing to the pond on the left*], and then there's a little one right up here in the corner yet. But down through here, there's a roadway down through there as you can see, but there's about ten 8 inch cross-over pipes all the way down through here...steel pipes that go from lake to lake...So, in a dry season if you're pulling water out of this one and you putting water all back into this one, and this lake goes down and this lake comes up but it don't come up high enough to get over the road, you gotta keep this water level the same or you'll run out of water to wash it [*the gravel*] with. So that's why, that's why there's cross-over pipes down there.

Okay, so everything just kind of cycles back around.

Everything cycles. This is like a retention pond. As you can see, where the silt has settled and stuff. As that settles, and then it clears out, and it goes and flows back over, and it's just a continuous cycle.

Is this kind of a fairly standard kind of recycling use of the water?

Yeah. Yeah. Most operations do it this way. A lot of operations...Some operations has got their plant like a mile away from their water source. I mean they're pumping water a mile, and then they're returning it all back into the same lake but with pipes. We're very fortunate to be as close...you know we don't have a lot of expense here.

There's definitely an advantage to having this here?

Yeah. Now about once every three years we gotta, we run a trackhoe but it's on a boat, it's on a barge, and then we put in this lake [*the lake on the left*], and we get in here and we clean. We clean all this out, clear back to, back in there somewhere [*gesturing back towards the sorter*]. Cause we don't want to, we can't cut this size down on this any. Eventually, you know, if we left it go, the silt keeps continuing going out there, eventually it will be no water, it'll be done. We do sell some of that silt, it's very good to put on when its dried out. It's very good to put on baseball fields, on top of them baseball fields, but other than that, it's a waste product too. It's too fine to use in concrete. It's too fine to use for masons and mason sand. It's just, it's a waste product.

So, you mentioned before that you started six years ago here, would you, or have, did you work previously in the gravel business, or is this just kind of a...

Yeah, when I come out of high school, I worked, as a matter of fact, I worked in this plant for two years. Kind of, oh, being a mechanic, driving a truck, running equipment. Then I went to work for United Precast, and drove a crane truck for them. I done that for eleven years, and then when United Precast bought this, being that I was familiar with this organization, and then around the aggregate business I got transferred over here to run this.

So, are you originally from the area too?

Fredericktown, Ohio.

Have you ever kind of left the area, or have you always kind of worked around here?

No, I've always worked here.

Do you find that most of the people who are employed here are from directly in the area?

Yes, most of them are. As a matter of fact, all of them are...[*As we drive around, Cunningham changes gears and gestures to a large pile of rock.*] That's raw material, that's what there just hauling up to stockpile. There's not much big rock in this vein. Average rock's about six to eight inches. Every now and then you'll snag a boulder out, which'll be two to three foot in diameter, but not, not very often.

Is this kind of a more ideal size for what you guys are doing, or would it be better to pull out a boulder?

No. Well, we don't have the equipment to crush a boulder for one thing, our jaw crusher will only take up to a twelve inch rock. So, everything that's twelve inch and above that gets dumped on the hopper up there, there's a grizzly up there, which is a framework that's spaced out on twelve inch centers so nothing twelve inches and above can go down through. Because if it goes down through and goes up that feed belt, and gets into that jaw crusher and that crusher won't take it, then you've got to shut the whole operation down and get a machine and pick the rock out and it's ugly, it's a bum deal. That's pretty much the extent of it. Do you have any more questions?

Yeah, I got a couple more. Actually, you mentioned before, talking about the election year, is it that the politicians do things, or kind of suggest things that would impact your business

No. It's just, you see it, you see it more in business, like your housing people, your people that's building houses. Election year, they don't know what the economy's going to do, they don't know if the interest rates going to stay the same, or if it's going to jump up or if it's going to drop. They're real tight with their money, you know what I'm saying? Things just slow down, the building industry just kind of slows down. It don't come to a complete standstill, but it slows down to where you can see it effect your sales. I mean you can see it in the paper work.

Are most of you customers businesses?

Yes. Ninety percent of my customers are contractors, have their own business. Ten percent are probably homeowners wanting stone on their driveway. Do-it-your-selfers, don't get very many of them. Most of my work this year has been state work, been road work, bridgework, that kind of work. That's guaranteed money.

You mentioned before, when I talked to you over the phone, that things have been kind of tough around here, driving trucks yourself, are you guys kind of shorthanded?

Yeah. Help's hard to find.

Are other businesses experiencing the...

Everybody is. Turnover help this year's just astronomical.

Can you speculate on maybe why that's gone on?

I don't know. It's just, I don't know. See, I was born and raised on a farm. Worked all my life, you know, was expected to work. I don't know, it just seems like today's times, things are getting... people's getting more...sluggish, I guess is the word I want to use, you know what I mean. They're not go-getters, they just kind of show up to get a pay check, and they don't put a lot of effort into their work or pride or, and I don't tolerate people like that. You know, I mean, when I hire people, they're here to do whatever needs to be done, you know, if it's working on equipment, working on the plant, shoveling, you know. There's nothing here that I don't do myself, and I expect my other people to be like that too. It's... I don't know, it's a tough subject. I just...you know...it's just...you know, it's not like...We pay good, I mean we pay really well for this area, have great benefits, have a retirement, have a paid vacation, paid holidays. So it's not...it's just, the people I guess...the hell...just the people.

And you've been seeing that more and more. Do you think it could be connected with the kind of changing community around here, with more people coming in from out of the area?

No. Well, no. No. I wouldn't say that because like I say, pretty much all my people that I've hired that's worked here or worked for me, were born and raised in this area, not come out of a big city kind of like thing, you know.

Different kinds of aspirations maybe?

Yeah. Probably. Look at work different. Everybody looks at work different. You got anything else?

Yeah. As the General Manager, basically your responsibilities, you said before that you do what you'd expect anyone else to do.

Yeah. My responsibilities are to do whatever needs to be done to make this place work and make money.

And that includes driving trucks...

Renting equipment, working machines, work any hours, working the late hours, early mornings, fixing stuff, doing all the paperwork. There's a lot of paperwork involved. Every month you have to, gotta do tonnage, how much tonnage came up and went across the screens for the month. Quarterly reports for AMPSHA, which is the Federal mining people, those have to be done. EPA's always wanting paperwork filed for dust control. And being as this is a gravel pit, when it's dry we have to water the entire area where the trucks are running because the dust is just so bad that they [the EPA] can come in and shut you down, shut the mine down for that. Lot of responsibility. There's a lot of things that play into factor here you know, dealing with the public, customers, it's all part of the game.

What kind of stuff, with the different types of regulations that you have, you mentioned the EPA and the mining people...

Right. We have...the only people we really deal with is the EPA, the Federal mining people and the state mining people. And then we have reclamation people, which when you dig, when you get up against the property line which next year we'll be up against the back property line, you have to stay fifty feet away from the property line. You can't dig any closer than fifty feet. And then once you get all that dug out, get the water clear to the bank, then you have to come back in within the next seven years and you have to reclaim that, which a lot of that dirt we strip off goes back over and you put a slope on a three to one slope. And it's gotta be grass seeded, and grow grass, and it's gotta have so many pine trees planted on it to retain it so it don't wash back into the water. Like I say, we haven't had to do that because we haven't been at any property line yet, so to speak.

For those agencies, pollution control is a major issue which you guys have to encounter, do you think?

No, no. The only, the only restriction would be the EPA, like I say, with the dust. They're concerned about the dust more than anything. If this was a totally dry operation, and the rocks coming off them belts was creating a bunch of dust when they was hitting the pile or so on and so forth, you'd have to put some kind of water system up to the top of the conveyor to keep that pile damp, so the dust particles does not go into the air, and so on and so forth. But other than that, it's pollution. We don't take any...this is not a landfill. We take dirt from people, few tree stumps here and there, but as far as garbage, trash, wood, that kind of stuff, we don't take any of that. We don't take any of that. We do...when we drove back on that road back there, did you see that great big pile of concrete, junk concrete off to that one side?

Yeah.

We just bought a recycling plant out in Iowa which is coming in this winter and we're going to...

END OF SIDE A

...be stressed through the United States government, and so on and so forth, to everybody about... instead of using up land to bury concrete and bricks, and so on and so forth. I am just using that as an example because that's what we're going to do, is they want to start recycling stuff like that, you know they're recycling garbage, now, and so on and so forth. Land's too valuable, costs too much money just to...you know...if you dump junk concrete into a hole, and then 20 years later you want to build a building over that or you want to make this a housing development. If this ever, if we ever dug ourself out, and we wanted to say make this a housing development around a lake, or you know, so on and so forth, you can't go in and dig basements through rubble, and so on and so forth, so we try to keep everything cleaned, cleaned up and neat and tidy.

Could you foresee in the near future, or in the not so near future I guess, digging out all your reserves and raw materials?

No. Not in my lifetime. I'm thirty-six and I won't see it. Not with 600 acres. We just keep acquiring more. There's a farm behind us back here, we bought one piece of property off of it which was sixteen acres I think, and that's where we're digging now. Like I said, we'll have it dug out next year, we bought it three years ago. The rest of that farm, eventually, probably will be into this organization. It will all be dug.

It's a continually expanding organization.

Right. Right.

Do you, is the operation that you run here kind of unique because it's right outside of Mount Vernon, do you think?

Yeah, this is the only one left in Mount Vernon, this is the only quarry left in Mount Vernon. There's one in Gambier, there's one in Mt. Vernon and there's one in Fredericktown. Now there used to be another one, right down the road here from us which was Goodwin's, which, they was in the same vein of gravel we're in, but they just run out of land. So, they're done, they've been done for three years, so...

Do you think there's an advantage, kind of advantage that you'd have by running your operation in this area here as opposed to being outside of town?

This gravel business, with only three of us being in the county is very competitive. Very competitive. It's nick and tuck, you've gotta have your pencil real sharp or you lose a lot of work. So, it's competitive. I mean there's enough for everybody, with just three of us, there's enough for everybody.

Basically everybody supplies the same sort of services.

Yeah., yeah.

Could you...

It varies a bit as far as stone size, and so on and so forth, but not very much.

Basically could you just run through those service again to make sure I've got them?

See, we got concrete sand, we have 304 berm material, which is just crushed rocks with dust in it, it's dry. We've have number four gravel which is 2 inch in diameter, 57 gravel which is 3/4 to one inch, eights—which is the size of a pencil, and then nines—which is about the size of pencil lead. That's well, ones and twos, which is 3-4 inch rock, we crush that set up to make that, and that's all we make. Limestone, it hauled in from up north. There's no limestone quarries in this area, in this county so to speak, there's not even a limestone vein in this county. It comes out of Marion. Marion, Ohio. That's just a service for the people.

So what do you once you bring the limestone here?

It gets resold. Delivered. People come in and buy it. It=s pure white, it=s not brown.

Just got a couple more questions here. Do you notice any problems or are there obstacles you have to encounter with the changes in weather? Like you said you don=t actually use the Kokosing as so much of a part of your business...

It=s not even involved in our business.

Right. But, like the floods or droughts which occur from time to time, like this summer, a couple of years ago.

Flooding is not a problem. The water=s never been up high enough anywhere to actually take this underwater, that I=ve ever seen. Rain doesn=t effect us, unless it=s thunder and lightning. Lightning, that effects us. We shut down very quick. Just the cold, that=s the only thing that stops us, it the cold weather, when it turns cold. *[He had mentioned earlier that the company generally runs from March 1st until around Christmas. Once the temperature gets below freezing, the machines stop running to well, and as a result they generally shut down once it begins to get very cold.]*

You don=t experience any work related difficulties with the drought of the summer, it=s drier.

No. Nope. Never run low on water. We never run low.

A lot of that comes from your water supplies down there, those creeks...

Like I said, there=s...those are ponds, manmade ponds, the gravel was pulled out of those to make those. They=re a whole lot deeper than the one in the back. They run about 35-40 feet deep. So they=re containing a lot of water, and what water we=re pulling and putting back, you=re probably only losing about five to six percent of it soaked back into the ground, which eventually it gets over to the pond. But as far as the amount of gallons coming out and the amount of gallons going back to the other one [*pond*], you=re probably losing five to six percent.

But, you know we=re pumping 1500 gallons per minute through the plant. It takes a lot of water.

Getting back to what we were talking about before about being close to town, are there additional zoning restrictions?

We=re not in the city limits. The break off from the city limits is Parrott Street right there, the city is that way, we=re in the county. We=re in Clinton Township.

Are there any county regulations?

No.

So basically you just have to deal with the Federal, kind of EPA and mining guys?

Right.

Is there anything else which we haven=t touched upon that you think I need to know?

I don=t think so, none that I can think of. That=s pretty much all of it. That=s pretty much the about the way it works you know.

Seems like a pretty successful business, I think I=ve gotten a pretty good understanding of what goes on. Would it be possible for me to come back on a better day than this and take some pictures or something?

Yeah. On a sunny day when everybody=s working and equipment=s moving. Today=s not a very good day. Sure, no problem, just come on back.

Could you think of anyone else that maybe I could talk to about information about this or something else which might relate to what we=re studying back at the Rural Life Center?

Now, there's a place down, you go down 13 South. It's called Vanway Sand and Gravel, have you ever been down to Newark...right before you get to Newark there's a little town called St. Louisville, it's just a little stretch of houses, is basically what I think it is. I think there's a store there. I think they're right before St. Louisville, yeah, on the left. Dick Vanway's the owner's name. Now, they dig out of the creek down there. I think that's dry creek coming through there and that ties into the Kokosing, so if you could get something set up with him, he would know more about the regulations and what the rules are of digging out of the stream, he could give you more information than I can for what you're wanting.

Would I be able to use your name...when I call?

Sure. He knows me...we do business together.

Are they in Knox County?

No, they're in Licking County. Big operation, it's about twice the size of this.

Would you say this is a fairly small operation?

Medium.

How does this compare to Small's in Gambier and the one in Fredericktown?

Small's, they're a little bigger than us. They're into more than we are. They're into the asphalt, they got their own excavation business, and so on and so forth. We just strictly stay in the aggregate business here. Olin in Fredericktown, now that's a big business. You know, that's part of Kokosing Construction. Money's no object, they're probably running 12-1500 ton an hour through that plant. It's a big business.

Do you find that you're sometimes limited by the financial resources you guys have come up with being in...

No. We can...we sell everything that we make. I mean, we're not hurting for sales, you know what I'm saying. Yes, it would be nice to be bigger, to put more on the ground, to be better stocked going in to the winter. But, you just can't go out and spend two or three million dollars, and you know if it don't work then you've done lost everything you've got.

Do you think you could see the business expanding sometime soon? Pretty soon?

Oh yes. Within the next five years.

How come?

Supply and demand. The demand is up so much now. But like I said, election year it'll slow down. But then, like I say, give it a year, year and a half it'll start coming right back up again. Plus, like I said, we have nine of our own ready-mix plants, plus United Precast, they pour all their own concrete. Ninety-nine percent of the sand that we're making go to our own business, for our own concrete, ready-mix. Within the next three years, probably fifty percent of the stone will be going to them too. So, it's all like a little in-house organization. But we're here to supply the public too. It'll always be a public business too.

What kind of relationship do you have with the general public?

Good, good. We have a lot of people call on us. It's a good business. As long as you treat them right, and you know, don't cheat them and do a good job for them, they'll always come back. They'll always come back. That's...a lot of times people get, business gets so good and then they get greedy, and that's when things start falling apart. So, you gotta treat them like you want to be treated, so to speak.

Do you get customers come from the other gravel companies, or do you, have you formed your own little clientele?

Well...

Do people just kind of bound around?

Yeah. There=s times that we sell stone, like Vanway=s down in Licking County. There=s not a lot of large gravel what they=re digging down there, and they have problems with making fours and keeping fours. So here, we make quite a few, so in the winter, they may send their trucks up and buy stones off of me, and if I run low on 57 gravel, you know I=ll buy some off of Olin in Fredericktown just to get me through the winter. Yeah, everybody kind of works together.

Thank you for your valuable time and information.

When the sun=s shining come on back and you can take some pictures and get a better look at what it=s all about.