

## **WILLIAMS / What was happening back in those deep woods?**



**If you'd followed the trail of cars into the piney thickets and seen what's happening, you'd have been surprised**

**By Robert M. Williams, Jr.**

Published:

Tuesday, May 20, 2014 9:34 PM EDT

I was way south on a road I'd seldom traveled last week when I pulled off at a country store to ask directions.

Two men in a pickup cheerily waved their hand further toward the south and told me: "Just keep going about another 10 miles or so and you'll see some guys in red t-shirts. They'll get you there."

With those vague directions, I pulled back on the road toward a lunch date with part of Southeast Georgia's future. It was the Grand Opening of the Southern Ionics Mission South Mine. The massive dig is just a pine cone toss across the Brantley County line into Charlton. The sandy site was covered with tents and as many parked cars as it was mining equipment last week, though.

Governor Nathan Deal was there to celebrate the creation of 125 new jobs in Charlton, Brantley, and Pierce Counties — and he wasn't the only one.

A large contingent from several counties around, plus north Florida, attended the ceremony. The mine, owned by the Mississippi-based chemical manufacturer, will create 125 jobs and invest

more than \$100 million in the three counties over the next two years. Thirty-five of those jobs will be right here in Pierce County when a massive sand-filtering operation is completed early next year near Offerman.

The company has just completed construction of the Mission South Mine and will open the Mission North Mine, just across the road, in Brantley County next year. Minerals and sand from both mines will be processed here.

“Everyone at Southern Ionics appreciates and understands the privilege we’ve been granted to mine and produce mineral products from deposits in Charlton and Brantley Counties,” said Milton Sundbeck, president of Southern Ionics as the ceremonies got underway. “We’ll be mining here for several decades and will be a good corporate citizen that our employees can count on for long-term, meaningful employment. We will engage in sustainable mining practices and reclaim land to pre-mined, forested conditions.”

That attention to “sustainable mining practices” and a pledge to reclaim the land to “forested conditions” is part of what convinced local leaders, including well-known former Congressman Lindsay Thomas, to support the company’s efforts. Thomas praised Sundbeck and the company for their commitment to our area’s environment during remarks at the event.

Southern Ionics will extract zirconium and titanium from the south Georgia sand along a ridge that extends from Winokur to near Nahunta. The minerals will be sold by the mining company for manufacturing products from airplane parts, to paint pigment, to dialysis components.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony last week marks completion of the “wet mill” construction, acting as a giant mining pan to separate the heavy minerals from the sand. The mill sits on pontoons allowing it to float from area to area as mining progresses.

Southern Ionics Director of Mining Ron Rose said while the deposits of titanium and zirconium here are not large, they are some of the highest quality minerals to be found.

As many of the area leaders scuffed toward the big tent where the ceremony was held and lunch awaited, one noted how good it was to see a new use found for our gritty sand.

“Who would have ever thought you’d see this kind of machinery and technology extracting dollars from back in these woods?,” he said with a wave.

An answer came with a laugh.

“It’s a miracle,” said his friend, with a laugh. “I’m just thankful someone was smart enough to know how.”

Aren’t we all?

• Robert M. Williams, Jr. is Editor & Publisher of The Times. Email: [rwilliams@theblack-sheartimes.com](mailto:rwilliams@theblack-sheartimes.com).

**Read more top stories available in the May 21, 2014 edition of *The Blackshear Times* (Subscribers [click here](/edition) to log in and read the entire paper online.)**