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Los Angeles: Dream Factory (1988)

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6. DREAM FACTORY

Summer 1988, Fairfax, Va: (Journal, copy to Norton)—I had a break from HQ chores during some traveling I took recently to orient Dan Tanner, the new Dallas PR guy. It's my job to have him show me his turf in the Central U.S., and then the two of us linked up with Jack Bonner, of the L.A. office, for a trip to the West Coast facilities. It was a routine field supervisory team building trip, but it gave me plenty to think about.

The trip came as I was beginning to study up on our cultural love affair with American popular films, the Los Angeles dream factory, and how it ties into our reality of our popular culture: the sleazy embezzlement stories at the studios, mob ties to the studios, the political role Hollywood has had in popular culture, with the House Un-American investigation, the blacklist, and of course the scandals of the Los Angeles police department and Hollywood Babylon, the L.A. of Raymond Chandler, and hey, even the actor elected president of the United States. I've been wondering how ideas get fixed in our heads. What is the relation to the dream factory in L.A. and what's really going on? Given what President Reagan's guys were up to lately with Iran, it seems we are getting a bit confused, or our myth-making system is taking over our reality. You get the idea. I'm getting fired up on a subject again: there is something to this movie thing. Call it a Post-Reagan analysis.

I mean, let's get real. To hear some in D.C. tell it, Reagan has been asleep for years. How else can you explain this Iran thing? The truth of the events are plain to see, and I am afraid not nearly as comforting as they were in the

Nixon years, which was a psychopathology of some kind, a kind of reaction by paranoids to real and imagined threats by subversives. I mean there was a real live kill-them-dead war going on during the Nixon years. Today, it looks like our guy's major vocation has been napping. Reagan can tell a story and look good on video. Still, he talks to visitors in the White House from palm cards. He's been in and out of the hospital for cancer, gunshot wounds, polyps, tumors and what-all. But he doesn't read his mail, he likes movies, and he signs, unread, whatever his chief of staff puts in front of him. This Iran-contra thing is from the movies, to mix my metaphors. You can't make it up. Like on the rewrite desk and the guys are calling in bits and pieces for a piece on deadline, and you keep thinking as you are stringing the story together. No one makes up fiction as bizarre as reality.



A small example from one evening at *The News*. Did I tell you the time that Vince Cosgrove's \$15 Timex rang in 1978 in Times Square? True. I was on the night city desk and had assigned Vince to cover the ringing in of the New Year. He was on top of the Chemical Bank building in the Square, which at that point was jammed with thousands of merrymakers. It turned out the guy who was going to lower the Big Apple (the first time it was used instead of the ball) had lost his watch. Vince called me at *The News* from the top of the Chem building.

"They don't have a watch, so I'm giving them mine," he said to me.

When his Timex got to the right spot, Vince told the guy when to lower the ball. I watched it on TV. The Western world thought it was all done according to some clock in Greenwich, England, or a nuclear clock aboard some sub somewhere. Nope. That evening, the guy lowering the ball at Times Square was using Vince's wrist watch.



Take my first trip to the company's refinery in Torrance, in 1980, as another example. The first time I heard about the refinery was when there was an explosion there on December 3, 1979, a few months after I began work at the company. I was editing copy for the company newspaper in the office on East 42nd Street when a guy from down the hall in the Corporate PR Department handed me a written statement from Allen E. Riley, then the head of the division supervising the refinery, and which we used for the next issue.

Riley's statement detailed what the company knew about the explosion, which resulted in three deaths, including a teenager driving by the refinery at the time. Riley said: "Our deepest sympathies go out to the families (of the victims). It is always difficult to accept the loss of lives and it is doubly so knowing how hard we strive to prevent accidents. Mobil will, of course, inves-

tigate thoroughly to determine the cause of the fire. I know that all Mobil employees join me in condolences for the families of our two co-workers and our neighbor.”

I was struck by the sensitivity of Riley’s words, and thought to myself that he was showing a genuine sense of the tragic nature of the incident, and to the families and loved ones of the dead. I was comforted that the company I was working for had a heart, and would do everything it could to make matters right. My reaction wasn’t any deeper than that.

I went on with my editing duties and forgot about the refinery fire until five months later. After I got the job in Chicago with Riley’s division, I went to L.A. on an orientation tour. There at the refinery site, an environmental guy gave me a tour. We walked around the site where the three had died and inspected the 80,000-barrel product tank, which had erupted, and which now looked like a huge rusted beer can that had been stomped on.

“A meltdown,” the environmental guy said, as we surveyed the rumbled hulk. It was an eerie place. We walked in the dike where one of the dead guys ran and collapsed after he was overcome by flames. Over yonder was where the 19-year-old girl was incinerated.

She was a citizen driving on the public road through the refinery. A dense gas vapor from a leaking tank had migrated across the road and robbed the air of its oxygen, which caused her car to stall. Inspectors later determined the explosion and fire occurred when the teenager tried to restart her car and the engine’s spark plugs ignited the vapor. “The girl didn’t have a chance and the other two guys just ran in the wrong direction and the fire engulfed them. A fourth guy was saved when he ran into the wind to the north. He was lucky, the vapors were past him.”

Later Jim LaPorte, the West Coast PR guy, gave me a rundown on how he handled the refinery’s response to the fire and its aftermath. These were the kinds of duties I would have to perform in my new post in Chicago, and I paid meticulous attention to the details, personalities and procedures of navigating the company’s hierarchy.

I recalled the statement that Riley had made after the fire in December and said to LaPorte: “I was really impressed with Riley’s statement. I thought he really said the right thing.”

“Thanks,” LaPorte said. I didn’t quite understand and rumbled up my forehead. LaPorte explained, “What, you thought he wrote that? Hell no. I wrote it. Riley approved it okay, but he’s too busy to worry about statements like that. That’s our job.”



My relationship with Torrance got personal in 1984. With the new job in Fairfax, the new guy in L.A. who handled public relations for the refinery,

Jack Bonner, reported to me and I became responsible myself for making sure Riley and the other U.S. managers used the right words to explain what was happening there.

The trouble at Torrance would continue. In 1983, the temperatures in the main process block of the refinery (for some reason) got too hot and the flue gas that went through the Fluid Catalytic Cracking Unit's electrostatic precipitator (ESP) reached nearly 1800 degrees F, more than three times normal. Plates the size of a garage door buckled like discarded aluminum foil. Wires the size of clothesline cracked like cold taffy candy thrown on the ground. Suddenly, the efficiency of the ESP was in trouble.

The refiners at Torrance knew the ESP wouldn't work so well anymore, but the ESP's purpose was to reduce the dust emitted from the FCC. The operators knew they had to keep the dust from going into the air of Los Angeles Basin, air pollution laws being what they are, but they knew the ESP was a duplicate or even a triplicate device and redundant enough so that L.A.'s emissions standards (30 pounds of dust an hour) would be met. (The U.S. EPA standard is 50 pounds an hour.)

In December 1983, the refinery's environmental guys and the regulators from the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) conducted a "source test" on the FCC's flue gas. Mobil's test showed 60 pounds per hour, twice L.A.'s allowable level. Not trusting the results, they went into the ESP four more times through 1984, testing each time, each time showing the ESP out of compliance.

Here is where it gets a bit murky. The refinery guys knew the tests showed the ESP was out of compliance, but they also knew that the test was unreliable to begin with, that the actual pollution was within the U.S.'s safe standards and not actually a threat to anybody's health, and that the AQMD had the same test results and didn't seem too concerned. They never called or anything.

In mid-July 1984, the refinery began internal planning and budgeting procedures to get another ESP. They begin the preparation for getting Ex Com to approve a \$5 million capital improvement for a new ESP from General Electric, which occurred in December 1984. Meanwhile, the AQMD in August 1984 had told the refinery that the AQMD tests were faulty, so they must do another round. Those tests, whose results were delivered to the refinery in October, indicated that 75 pounds per hour of dust were in the flue gas, so in November the refinery was given a "notice of violation" by the AQMD and told to apply for a variance so it could operate in compliance with rules for a year, until December 1985, by which time the new ESP would be installed and ready.

There was a simple good faith relationship between the refinery and the regulators and no one at the refinery, in the Office of General Counsel

(OGC) or the PR guy feared that anything could go wrong at the AQMD Hearing Board (like a Zoning Board of Appeals), where several environmental supervisors from the refinery were placed under oath in late fall and asked to tell the board what they wanted and why. From my standpoint in Fairfax, these events were occurring as though it was all normal white bread, sun in the morning, stars at night. Routine stuff. Mobil operates five refineries in the U.S., along with 4,500 service stations, thousands of miles of pipelines, millions of credit cards and you name it. What the heck, this was a routine variance for some dust.

And that fall day, in front of the AQMD Hearing Board, were two Group 15s and a lawyer in a regional OGC about to jeopardize Mobil's future in the U.S. Because they simply told the truth—the tests had indicated problems months before and Mobil has been operating the ESP throughout. The lack of faith in testing procedures and the fact that no one at the refinery or the AQMD actually believed the results and that Mobil was now seeking to replace the unit anyway was not at issue.

“Tell me, Mr. Smalls, how long has Mobil been in violation of the AQMD regulations?” asks the hearing board officer of the Mobil witness.

“Oh,” says Frank Smalls, the Mobil witness, “maybe a year, year and a half.”

The AQMD hearing board can't decide what to do. They deadlocked, 2-2 with one abstention. A second hearing later in December produced a similar result.

So in mid-January 1985, Bonner, the West Coast PR guy, and I were in Dallas for the West Coast marketing region's annual kickoff meeting. We got a call on a Thursday night from Bonner's assistant who said she had fielded questions from a dozen reporters (TV, *L.A. Times*, *Herald Examiner*, radio) who all asked questions that focused on this theme:

The AQMD says that Mobil has knowingly put 1 million pounds of cancer causing pollutants into the air in Los Angeles for a year, vetoed a subordinate's request to repair the machinery in question, and covered the whole thing up. The AQMD wants to shut down the refinery immediately, seek \$1,000 a day in penalties, have the DA consider criminal penalties against Mobil managers (a la jail), and what is your response?



This alarm began a series of intense actions and hurried public statements that were all designed to deny the thrust of the allegations, while giving headquarters lawyers, managers and us time to find out what in hell was going on at the Torrance Refinery. Few in Fairfax had focused on the details

about the variance application, or believed that the relationship between the refinery and its regulators could have deteriorated as quickly and as dramatically as it did. We later learned that the statement by the refinery environmental guy unwittingly “admitting” to operating in violation of L.A. air rules for more than a year was a statement that the AQMD could not ignore. Had the Mobil attorney objected to the question and answer at the time, and if he had had the record adjusted, much of the political fallout could have been avoided. Once the decision was made to go after Mobil, the allegations by the AQMD broadcast over the metropolitan area for weeks was the resulting handiwork of the agency’s PR guy who stretched the facts and language for its maximum political and news effect. What an effect! In L.A., statements from the AQMD about daily air quality are watched as closely as weather reports—signaling whether kids should play outside, teams should practice or play games, and whether or not it is a good time to jog. Having Mobil called a willful, cancer-causing polluter in the movie capital of the world was devastating.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. In the months preceding this crisis, the U.S. management team was organizing the technical and engineering facts and business arguments to justify the expenditure of \$400 million to pay for a new FCC feed hydrotreater to upgrade the refinery so it could produce more high-quality gasoline from less crude oil. The division management needed to persuade the Executive Committee of the corporation that this upgrade was necessary to keep up with the other 10 refineries in the L.A. Basin that competed with Mobil and had less expensive operations or newer equipment.

At a staff meeting with U.S. brass in early February 1985, the U.S. executive, Woods, was briefed by the head of the U.S. legal department about the issues. The AQMD had demanded that Mobil shut down its FCC production until this issue about the past violations was settled. During this session, we learned just how much trouble this was going to be. Woods was as despondent as anyone has ever seen him. He was worried. “How can I justify to Ex Com spending \$400 million on a new hydrocracker at Torrance if we can be shut down by something like this? I’m not feeling too good right now, and I’m going to be feeling worse if I have to shut down the FCC.”

What Woods was saying, of course, was that Mobil might have to withdraw from California if this problem wasn’t solved. And if Mobil withdrew its downstream operations from California, nothing in the U.S. downstream system was safe. At the time, Torrance was the most profitable of Mobil’s five refineries in the U.S. L.A. was where Mobil sold nearly 10 percent of its gasoline. Southern California was one of three spots in the U.S. (the others being Texas and Florida) where Mobil’s marketers figured Mobil had a chance to grow and thrive into the 21st century. If Woods could consider closing

Torrance (which was getting the only major capital improvement program in all of M&R this year), the entire U.S. downstream system (and thus M&R worldwide) was in jeopardy. Forget Montgomery Ward/Container selloffs. Mobil marketing on the street could get like the newly carved-out marketers Gulf and Getty real quick. The consequences of this business reversal on the West Coast because of these legal and PR problems was a potential company-killing event.

When the implications of what USM&R faced sank in back at HQ, there was, in the words of a long time OGC guy I know and respect, “the most significant management reaction I have seen in my years at Mobil.” Somebody screwed up! The managers in the manufacturing department lined up to support each other, but staff was always easy to target. “PR and OGC got us into this, and Manufacturing is going to get us out,” went one comment out of Woods office.

Woods called me one afternoon and wondered out loud, “When the dust settles on this, I want to talk about our PR on the coast and see if we got the right guy in the job there.”

As far as I was concerned, we did. I later made the case that Bonner had been vigilant throughout and had been doing his job all along. But he couldn’t get anybody at Torrance to answer his questions. As he explained: “Hey, I ask the guy, ‘When did the AQMD send you guys that letter?’ The answer was: ‘What letter?’ It got to be Twenty Questions trying to get these guys to give information needed to save their damn necks.”



In early February, acting on internal legal advice, management shut down the FCC unit voluntarily in order to avoid being ordered to shut it down—a technicality that prevented a legal order that regulatory delays might prevent Mobil from ever getting reversed. The priority for the rest of the month was to get the refinery up and going, and prevent the Mobil Ex Com from believing that U.S. management had permanently crippled the downstream business in the U.S. PR was a lost cause. We had already been accused of being the heinous polluter in the smog and media capital of the Western world. Salvage of good name would take a decade or two, forget a couple of stories in tomorrow’s newspaper. Think big and long term. Bonner and I would spend the next weeks and months devising a community relations and outreach strategy that altered management’s interactions with a variety of groups—government, political and community—and would create a new and very open pattern of external affairs behavior at all the refineries in the U.S.

I spent February commuting between Northern Virginia and L.A. The personal dislocation reminded me of the August I spent in New Orleans. I took the redeye twice, cross continental six times. I stayed in three different

hotels for a total of 14 nights. I sat through six days of hearings spread over three weeks. I got to know the environmental reporter for the *L.A. Times* pretty well, and at the conclusion was trading jokes with the on-air talent from *NBC* and *CBS*. I was on the all news radio, feeding Reuters, local bugles, and the Torrance *Breeze* (single most important paper). I wrote a letter to President Reagan. I set up a meet between the congressman from Torrance and the refinery brass. I worked the press daily, and for the most part we got a fair deal on the air and in print. At the end the PR guy for the AQMD and Bonner were buddies, and trading promises to get together for lunch.

“Too bad this had to get out of hand,” said the AQMD guy, who was seemingly so won over by Bonner that he asked if he could work for Mobil when this was all over. This guy put this in writing in a letter to Bonner, who did nothing with the letter and did not act on the request. We figured it could be set up to catch Mobil in a bribe attempt.

On a Friday in late February 1985, lawyers signed an agreement ending the dispute and the AQMD counter-signed. We could restart the FCC, make gasoline and stay in business. If we hadn’t gotten the thing started that week, jobbers in the L.A. Basin serving Mobil’s 500 service stations would have been dry by the end of first week in March. The price of a gallon of regular unleaded wholesale had already gone up 8 cents because of the loss of Mobil’s FCC capacity. The fears caused by the loss of Mobil’s gasoline supply in the market had worked to spike prices on the spot market; everybody—Chevron and Arco—got rich on the windfall from this snafu, but not Mobil. The thrust of the arguments that won the day by the end of February went along the following lines:

1) Mobil’s witness at the variance hearing spoke out of his area and didn’t realize what he was saying.

2) The test used by the AQMD to figure out our emissions was bogus, which they knew, and we have scientists who will swear to that under oath.

3) Mobil had a problem with the ESP, but the second stage and third stage separators worked fine and Mobil can prove it by the photos of the expander turbines’ rotor fins, which don’t have a mark on them and which they would if we were pushing out the dust you guys said.

4) This FCC dust was dust but there is no evidence it causes cancer. But we’ve had this scientist from Bologna feeding FCC dust to rats for two years and they only died when they were dissected to inspect the damage from the dust. No fibrosis and no cancer. In contrast, the control bunch of rats fed asbestos got fibrosis and cancer.

5) Mobil had warned that if the Torrance Refinery were shut down, the price of gasoline would rise at least a nickel a gallon on the spot market, and Californians would spend \$400 million extra for gasoline in just six months. We were shut down for two weeks and prices jumped nearly a dime a gal-

lon, which L.A. drivers have been paying ever since. We're big, remember, and we make gasoline, which the people of L.A. want no matter what.

6) We hire good lawyers (the best in town), and our PR guys are having lunch with the *L.A. Times*.

7) We intend to fight you in court for 20 years. And if we take you to court you won't be able to enforce air pollution rules for a generation. You already have agreed to use a new test from now on to measure ESP dust because they knew all along their key tool of enforcement wasn't scientifically valid. If this got out, enforcement of air quality rules in L.A. would be thrown into jeopardy for years. We agreed not to call attention to that fact to the *L.A. Times* (a piece of the bargain I kept).

Much of this, of course, was rhetorical overkill for effect. And it was of the routine variety in the give and take of negotiations and went unnoticed in Mobil's wider corporate world. What with the remnants of Container Corporation and Montgomery Ward to contend with, plus other assets throughout the Mobil system that aren't up to standard, business activity continued in the company as if nothing was happening on the West Coast. As the settlement was reached, in the end, quietly, the board received endorsement from the shareholders who sent Mobil's stock price up \$1.50 when Chairman Brothers disclosed he'd hired Goldman Sachs to advise Mobil which units should be sold.



The dispute with the AQMD was settled by the end of February, but the allegation that Mobil had willfully polluted L.A. air stuck. For months our lawyers heard rumors that other agencies would come after the refinery managers. Politicians used Mobil as a punch line in speeches about corporate behavior.

Fresh in everyone's mind are the images of catastrophe in Bhopal, India, where 3,000 were killed and thousands more injured from a leak of methyl isocyanate at the Union Carbide plant in December 1984. Closer to home were the series of fires and incidents that plagued the Torrance facility. There was the fatal fire at the refinery in December 1979, a ruptured chemical line causing another minor fire in February 1984, and the disruption in the neighborhood when superheated oil burst into the air, covering homes, cars clothing and property when a pipe burst in May. Then in January 1985, there was a butane leak from a tanker on the rail line that crossed the refinery property, causing a vapor cloud to force the fire and emergency teams to close down a portion of Prairie Avenue. In March, weeks after the settlement with the AQMD, scalding water from a ruptured tank killed one worker on the site.

These incidents, all unacceptable, would all be explained after thorough

investigations as accidents, each unavoidable, tragic and unforeseen. Still the impression, even within Mobil, persisted: What is going on at the Torrance refinery?

The question of management competence became of some urgency as a result of a refining industry study of the material called HF—hydrofluoric acid. HF is a very useful chemical for upgrading oil to higher-value fractions and is used in half of the 100 refineries in the U.S., and all but one of Mobil's five refineries. In addition to the Mobil refinery in Torrance, three other L.A. refineries used HF—Ultramar in Wilmington, and Golden West and Powerine in Santa Fe Springs. The refineries that don't use HF rely on sulphuric acid in the upgrading processes.

The pros and cons of each process have been debated over the years by chemical engineers and the refining industry. HF is more lethal, but less of it is needed. Sulphuric acid, though also deadly, does not behave quite as dangerously when released and is therefore more manageable, but the volume in which it is used requires that more of it be moved on nearby streets, exposing the public to greater hazards.

It turned out all of these concerns were being addressed in downtown L.A. at the district attorney's office under the politically savvy Ira Reiner, who, while Mobil was working out settlement details with AQMD lawyers, had begun a criminal investigation. A joint U.S./L.A. County grand jury was probing to determine whether individuals at the refinery committed felonies by deciding to ignore the air laws, as well as whether Mobil itself could be guilty of conspiring to violate the air pollution laws.



I had a call on Thursday afternoon, July 18, 1985, from Bonner, who said that when he went to visit the managers at 10 a.m. he was walking down the sidewalk in front of the administration building at the Torrance Refinery. There in front of him, he saw 20 or more men get out of vans and cars. They all wore warm-up jackets with the letters "L.A. DA" stenciled on the back. Bonner watched them followed the man in charge, holding a search warrant and a subpoena, into the administration building on Crenshaw.

Bonner followed the troops, asked what was up and was given what he thought was rude treatment, which in a very no-nonsense way implied if he didn't cooperate he would be charged with obstruction. No joking here. Bonner was utterly correct and cooperative throughout. He followed a team of four or five officers to the manager's office, where they opened the desk drawers, looking for the desk calendar and otherwise making themselves at home.

Over the next few hours, these guys went about their duty with deliberate and mind-crushing thoroughness. They knew which drawers to look for in what office, they acted confidently about which papers they wanted,

and they knew who was in charge, who was up and who was down. Somebody who knew the refinery and its offices and operations obviously had given them instructions. At 6 p.m. the officers left with seven cartons of papers taken from files, desk drawers and storage cabinets, which the battery of attorneys, called to the scene, were unable to copy or otherwise log. A letter would have to be sent later to the DA asking for photocopies of what was taken.

It would be the following April, 1986, before the L.A. district attorney's office announced it had decided not to prosecute. Meantime, of course, Mobil hired the best lawyers it could get in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., to work with the criminal investigators and respond to the questions. What a year! Calls to the refinery were suspected of being listened to. We wondered who was talking to the DA. Would the truth be told? If so, whose version? How's that for a PR situation? It would be only after the investigation ended that I would learn that, among other things, my notes and papers won't be scrutinized by a grand jury and assistant DA interested in sending Mobil managers to jail. The possibility of such an event chilled me pretty good.

This is some new world for gasoline makers. When the refinery began operations there in 1929, Torrance was a virtually uninhabited city founded in 1912 as a location for the steel and petroleum industries, and home to forests of oil rigs. The refinery was built by General Petroleum Company of California, which Standard Oil Company of New York (Mobil's predecessor) had purchased in 1926. California's General Pet, along with Magnolia Petroleum of Texas and the Wadhams, White Star, White Eagle and Lubrite subsidiaries in the Midwest, operated as separate business units for decades. These units were all merged into the operating company that called itself Mobil in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, as Los Angeles grew, particularly after WW2, Torrance had been turned into a suburb for tract houses. In 1970, Torrance became home to what was then the largest shopping mall in the world, and homeowners began to worry about traffic, noise and smog. All the while, the refinery continued operations in the midst of this community, which included 500,000 people within five miles. By the mid-1980s Torrance was home to high-tech industries, the national headquarters for Toyota and Honda, and several industrial parks seeking to attract Pacific Rim investors.

Regardless of its origins and its economic contributions, the refinery could be a troublesome neighbor. It would burp off gunk now and then, and folks don't want to have it around anymore. And this is the L.A. Basin, probably the most sensitive spot in the U.S. to air contaminants, and notorious since the Indians for its foul air conditions.

For more than a month in early 1985 Mobil's refinery was publicly accused of dumping 1.3 million pounds of health-harming dust into the air for

13 months in knowing violation of the law, because air pollution penalties (\$1,000 a day) were less expensive than fixing the pollution problem. This allegation was uttered at length by the AQMD mouthpiece and was written in the *L.A. Times*, broadcast on local affiliates of *ABC*, *NBC* and *CBS* and the indy's television channel, and on the radio, over and over for more than a month. A city councilman wrote to President Reagan, and the U.S. EPA and the L.A. DA called for an investigation, which lasted nearly a year.

This will be a problem for years. Few political figures can let all that free publicity about what a bad actor Mobil is go to waste without seeing if something else can be made of it. After all, L.A. is a community where the largest and best-equipped room in the district attorney's office complex is the room where news conferences are held. His assistant DA for environmental enforcement lives with a woman who is on *ABC-TV News* in L.A.

This combination of news, ambition and the politics of theatrical and rhetorical prosecutions before cameras are colliding with the community's reliance on the goods produced by industry and how industry operates to make those goods.

California has become a problem in this regard. In Sacramento were two bills of interest last year. One was called *Be a Manager, Go to Jail*, and though not directly related to Mobil, provided that on environmental matters, the managers of polluting plants would be held personally responsible for the acts of their units. This had become a vogue idea, though not many pols have considered whether up and coming MBAs will covet industrial operations management as a career goal if they have to do jail time for what folks five levels below may have done, say five years before the manager came on the scene. Japan and Germany haven't jailed any production managers recently, nor have the Chinese or Russians. Has anybody done a news story on that angle yet? Not yet. The story at the moment here is that the managers of American companies might be convicted as criminals and thrown in jail as felons if their plants violate pollution laws. The second bill was called *The Mobil Bill*, was directly related to Mobil, and would increase the fines for pollution violations from \$1,000 a day to \$50,000. What is that spread out over 13 months? Last week, somebody from the L.A. DA's office testified in favor of the bill. So did a councilman from L.A. The DA's assistant was called "the person prosecuting Mobil."



But this was all background for the battle that is about to be undertaken over the refinery's use of HF. Now in 1988, we have a matter more a serious than political cheap shots—an issue that cuts to the heart of whether a community can tolerate having an industrial operation in its midst, whether the private sector can be trusted with hazardous operations, and whether a com-

munity can evaluate these sensitive issues in a modern political campaign and media environment. For the past year and likely for the foreseeable future, Mobil's duties in the refining world will be consumed with this issue.

The danger signs arose around HF in 1986, when an industry-sponsored study led by Amoco tested the behavior of HF at a desert site near Frenchmen's Flat, Nevada. Some 1,000 gallons of HF were released in two minutes; the behavior of the cloud—hovering in a dense vapor and migrating like a huge white snake for as far as you could see—proved to the surprised testers that HF was deadly five miles downwind of its release site. This has provoked a serious debate in the industry's research and manufacturing sectors. Half of the refineries in the U.S. use this stuff, and many are situated, like Torrance, amid hundreds of thousands of citizens. The question was whether the methods used by the industry were adequate to “mitigate” or deal with an unexpected release of this gas. These new tests demonstrated to most in industry that the answer was no. Ever since, a rush has been on to develop the technology and equipment—mostly high-pressure nozzles capable of jetting massive amounts of water to inundate and transform the vapor and which can protect the refinery workers and surrounding communities.

As this important matter got underway in the refining community, 1987 was another nightmare at the Torrance unit. The successful conclusion of the company's dispute with the AQMD and the DA's decision not to prosecute didn't provide much of a respite for the managers. The Ex-Com had approved the new \$400 million hydrotreater at Torrance and the resulting construction project on site caused one mishap after another, though the public reactions were far more muted owing to the success of the renewed community outreach program. By the end of the year, however, the Torrance Fire Department issued a report which had been ordered months before by the concerned City Council. The report indicated that it had responded to 127 incidents at the refinery since January 1, 1979, of which some 25 percent were in 1987 alone, owing to a series of incidents related to the construction project. This rash of accidents came in an environment when the City Council began to grow concerned about the industry reports about the dangers of HF and Mobil's capacity to maintain safe operations. And then on October 30, 1987, the unthinkable happened. For the first time in memory, there was a serious accident in which HF escaped from a refinery site. A crane used in an unrelated construction project crashed into a processing vessel at the Marathon Oil refinery in Texas City, Texas, causing the release of some 6,000 gallons of HF, the evacuation of more than 4,000 nearby residents and the hospitalization and treatment of dozens of others. In January, in reaction to this accident and the use of HF at four refineries in the L.A. Basin, the AQMD formed a task force to study whether the region was prepared to deal with an

HF emergency. The Torrance City Council considered a resolution by one of its members that the citizens vote on an initiative to ban the use of HF at the Mobil Refinery in town.



All of these concerns dominated my thinking this month when I took Tanner on the trip to the Midwest and West and spent my downtime wrestling with conflicted and intertwined musings about American industry, American politics and American movies. It's now the early summer of 1988, and the course of our trip was to go to L.A. first and then swing up to the Midwest.

The thing about California is that—until very recently—it seemed so far away. Not in time anymore, being only five hours airtime away. But as a state of mind, as in beyond the Rocky Mountains, or time zones (three hours difference) so that the people there exist, literarily, in a different time. And in our mythology, California is the site of the Gold Rush of 1849, Hollywood, Raymond Chandler, John Wayne and John Ford, warm weather, palm trees, Rockford, PIs, Oscars, beautiful coastal highways, beaches and bikinis, surf boards. You don't have any of that stuff in New York or New England, or in the Middle West. To me, California was more like a movie set in my mind rather than a place.

After I spent all that time in L.A. in 1985, I got a chance to know the place a bit better: the L.A. basin, the Santa Monica Mountains, the San Gabriel Mountains, the Valley, the Hills, the Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu, Santa Monica, downtown, and LAX. In fact, I got to know the terrain pretty well. I learned what it meant to drive on the freeways (which are spectacular, it is true, particularly after inching along Northern Virginia roads), what stereo rock 'n' roll on the radio will do for you as you glide at 60 mph through the Hollywood Hills, Glendale and Pasadena near La Canada-Flintridge. I flew with a full joyous laugh with the wind knocking me around from the open window, and learned what it means when you take a wrong turn off I-10 on the way to Santa Ana at 10 p.m. and found myself in a dark, ominous no-man's land of a neighborhood when just five minutes before I was on top of the Hills, the glittering world at my feet.

The Torrance wrangle required that I stay around. I got back home twice (taking the redeye), and felt the impact of having my body clock knocked off balance for four days each time. The hearings were in a smog corridor east of L.A. along the San Bernardino Freeway in an area called El Monte, in a setting fit for any routine municipal government activity. I got to know the *L.A. Times* guy pretty well and some of the local TV characters; all in all, decent professionals.

I thought I had a pretty good idea of where L.A. fit in my inner land-

scape until a weekend ago when I took some time away from Tanner and Bonner, while they did some local chores. I had a Hertz car and a few hours free. I turned on the radio, got some rock 'n' roll, and made it up from Santa Monica along the Pacific Coast Highway. I went as far as Zuma Beach, taking in the whole way, like the East Coast sponge I was. The TV/movieland images that I'd had in my head were gone now, replaced by reality, which wasn't so bad all in all. The ocean was beautiful, the homes built against all sanity along the edges of pending avalanches, and beach houses worth a fortune that looked like garages in Madison, Connecticut (Long Island Sound). Pepperdine University may have the most beautiful campus in the world. The Santa Monica Pier has been rebuilt, recalling the news clip I saw a year or two ago of its being turned into matchsticks by a surly ocean. Malibu Pier was quite nice, but its habitués are often found behind stands at traveling circuses or county fairs. Lots of tattoos, and folks fishing for lunch. I tried to figure out where Rockford ate all those tacos, and it's not like it looks on TV, nor does his trailer site, where there's a public john and bathhouse. Across the street is the Malibu Omelet House, which for \$2.75 gave me a 2-2-2, two eggs, two pancakes, two strips of bacon. Another 65 cents gave me a blueberry bran muffin and some coffee, and I was just fine all afternoon.

The next day I went to Universal Studios, a TV/movieland version of Disneyland/Sea World/Busch Gardens, et al. Only here the fantasy sold was TV/movie lore. Everything was quite neat to a starstruck TV/movie fan. There was Conan's Castle, the A Team's rigs, Knight Rider's car, and Edith Head's bungalow, Alfred Hitchcock's hideaway, the set from *Spartacus*, which rained and flooded on cue, the shark from *Jaws*, which came within a foot of my arm (no lie) at 30 mph, the miniature carnival site from the film bomb *1941*, which when on film appeared as if a Ferris wheel was rolling into the sea, *ET* and his pal's bike, the house from *Psycho*, which really is on a hill and does look as spooky as you'd imagined, and lots of other neat stuff.

What did it to me finally, though, was in the area of the back lot at Universal where all the old films and TV westerns were shot, the false front western towns, and the sites of the New York/Chicago/San Francisco/Boston neighborhood (take your pick). The movie *The Sting* was made along those streets.

Among these façade streets was what looked for all the world to be a suburban street, much like the ones I have lived on nearly all my life. You'd think you were in Oakwood, Mt. Prospect, Upper Nyack or West Hartford. I was on the right side of the tourist tram, when coming up ahead of me on my side was this strange house. Smaller, a bit tawdry, as though it had seen better days. The shrubbery was routine, and the home-front façade quite small. Behind I turned to see the sidewalk and lamppost just as I had remembered them.

This was the street of *Leave It to Beaver!* No kidding.

The guy on the speaker confirmed that it was not only the setting for *Leave it to Beaver*, but also *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, which didn't mean too much since I never watched that show. But the home of Wally and the Beav, right here?! I mean this was something!

At that moment, my inner gyroscope failed me. I had been such a fan of this TV show at such a young age that it was like my own extended family—cousins I saw every week or pals down the block. The cast of characters made such a winning tableau—June and Ward the parents, Lumpy, the decent but ineffectual friend, and Eddie Haskell, who was such a con artist, the perfect pal for fun. The half-hour show ran from 1957 to 1963 and piled up more than 230 episodes for CBS and ABC. At the time, I was, in real life, between Wally and Beaver in age. I lost interest after I went to Western Reserve, but that show was a constant feature of my TV/movie life from when I turned 10 in West Hartford through my early teens in Dayton. It was like a fantasy family to me in those years, somewhat comforting as I had left my pals in Connecticut and had begun with a new group in Ohio. As I inspected the front of the home of that “family” and time I was struck into a kind of silent disbelief.

Then, as I was full of this reverie, the tram I was riding in turned around the corner as it would have if we were to drive right behind the Cleavers' house. But it wasn't a house. It wasn't even close. It was the back of what looked like a billboard, propped up by leaning 2x4's, which in fact was the back of the façade that looked like the front of a house on the other side.

On this side, however, where I had somehow expected to see the back of a modest ranch home, or perhaps even a living room and kitchen area, we instead were driving by a piece of dirt covered with debris, a pay phone, a discarded plastic tarpaulin and other detritus hidden from view. This image was awful. It bothered me for the longest time. Some counterweight that had balanced my inner sense of reality had been tossed a bit out of kilter. How could that world of Wally and the Beaver that had such a large impact on me as a kid be so transparently unreal? Those fantasy images had had a genuine impact on my growing up and had helped shape, in a very benign way, what I thought about families and how they can interact with each other and their communities.

Of course, what I learned about the refinery in L.A. had bothered me as well, not only a year ago or so, but also this recent trip put me in a bit of a funk, being away from home and not at all sure of what future the company had, owing in large measure to the potential problems stemming from Torrance. Beaver's house did it, though. Illusion. Fantasy. Reputations and images that are manufactured.

But another reality exists in California, as it does everywhere else. The world in fact runs on oil and requires its refining to keep the engines of soci-

ety running. That reality is as real as any we have. A bit like the requirement of having a military that can destroy the enemy. It may not be nice, but it exists. To ignore that reality is to risk survival.

In L.A., of course, another economic reality is the TV/movie industry, which is make believe as deep and permanent as a videotape, ripe for erasure or editing. But nothing like the pictures and notions I brought with me to L.A. TV land is a business, its product illusions sold as reality to folks like me back East.

The problem I had was wondering how much manufactured fantasy people possess about Mobil. There is the fantasy of the lefties and greens and such. But the trade I practice lately is to create an image, too. What image was I putting on what reality? Had I done my best to keep it honest? Good questions, no easy answers.

I was face to face with the knowledge now that Beaver Cleaver's house doesn't contain Ward and June in a living room, near a kitchen, but debris and a pay phone.

It made me reconsider what a guy at Torrance had said, "What do people think we make here, anyway, jelly donuts? This is a gasoline factory, for Christ's sake. The people here live in the biggest-automobile-drivingest town in the world. They demand all the gasoline they want all the time, and cheap. We aren't perfect. But we bust our butts to make that happen as best we can."



Traveling with Tanner, a new guy, I realized how we had a whole new crew of bosses in Fairfax, too. Names and numbers change frequently in this outfit. I get to be pals with a guy, figure that will make my job secure for a while, and, wham, he's gone. You get to start the process all over again. There's another reason I get antsy with these shifts, too; something to do with loyalty. I have developed a nice loyal feel for some of these characters. Nothing too deep, but loyalty, as in there is a reciprocal nature to this advising. I've come to believe in a lot of the people I work with. I have developed professional relationships that produce results, and have faith in many as trusted colleagues. In order to function I have learned you have to believe in this process of interaction with others, and believe in their professional and technical abilities. You have to believe in the people after all, or you can't do it. I don't find the workaday guys here hard to get on with at all. What they do makes sense, and I like my work. When they go off, I don't like that.

Tanner and I went to Texas from L.A. Sunday afternoon, flying to Dallas. We visited with Tanner's clients, the accounting center guy, pipeline brass, marketing folks in Dallas Monday. In the late afternoon we flew to Beaumont, where on Tuesday we saw the brass, which runs the big engine

that refines 400,000 barrels of oil into products every day. That afternoon we took a hop to Houston and then on to O'Hare.

When we landed it was raining and 50 degrees. It turned out to be flooding in Mt. Prospect. The governor was on TV that evening in a rowboat in my old town, declaring it a disaster area. The air was great, northern plains clean stuff. We went to the Hamilton in Itasca to have dinner with the marketing brass hat in Chicago, a pal of mine who I knew when he was still hoping to get out of Omaha and selling tires/batteries/accessories (TBA). He's made the cut since then, and now handles gasoline and motor oil marketing in six states.

What got me though was driving around Northwest Cook County. We grabbed the rental car later in the evening and just drove around alone, cruising in my memories, looking and feeling. Central Road past St. Emily's, take a left on Wolf, north to Kensington, west to Newberry and voilà there's the old neighborhood. The exact same, haunting in a way, not a sad feeling, but of a time gone. I could imagine my kids in school at Euclid, and at Feehanville. We drove to Randhurst, the shopping center, past the hotels, along Route 53 (aka I-290), to Woodfield. Mobil's old regional office is now minus 200 folks and the Central Region dismantled, its folks dispersed, the whole thing gone. I recalled all the argle barge about who was up, down, in and out. No one cares anymore, it doesn't matter, it's history. My guess is that half the folks I worked with when I went out to Illinois six years ago are gone from the company. A few progressed along, like my buddy the new Chicago district manager (group 21), or even me, I guess. But most are gone. There was a sweet melancholy to all this.

The next morning, Tanner drove the rental car down I-290, I-294, and south toward St. Louis on Rt. 55 and over the Des Plaines River and there in all its glory was Mobil's newest refinery at Joliet; wondrous was all, beautiful. I mean it.

We had traversed some of the most complex industrial and agricultural territory in the world, knitted together by air, water, road and rail links, by trillions in capital investment and centuries of industrial and technological developments. Intermittently along these thoroughfares were capitalist dominions where thousands would work at jobs which resulted in some of the most important human interactions of their lives and which sustained their families and hopes.

As Tanner drove on a highway interchange over acres of railroad interchanges south of Chicago, I thought of my great-grandfather James Collins and his father, Sinon, the immigrant father and son, aged 50 and 22, who got off the boat *American Union* in New York City from Ireland in May 1863, weeks before the eruption of the Civil War draft riots. The Collinses crossed the Hudson River months later, to find work as blacksmiths in the Erie Railroad's yards in Jersey City. A few years later, my great-grandfather, James,

and his wife, Mary Kearney, moved to Meadville, Pennsylvania, where James found work as a mechanic and blacksmith in the yards of the Atlantic & Great Western Railroad, which was booming after John D. Rockefeller began his domination of the nation's emerging oil industry by using the railroads of the upper Midwest. Their descendants, my grandfather, father and now me, would continue to find opportunity in this world of manufacturing, transportation and petroleum. Blacksmith to wordsmith.

Now we were driving up to a refinery that was part of Rockefeller's industrial legacy. One gallon of gasoline out of every 100 consumed in the U.S. was made there. I was so tongue-tied by memories and emotion I stayed silent. I could not find the words to tell Tanner of all that I knew of that place and what it meant to me.

When we pulled up he was taking me to see the people he knew there, not the ones I knew. I had become a senior guy from headquarters visiting with the new guy. Most of the people I had known there were gone, reassigned or retired. All that remained was the process of the corporation; the people in it interchangeable.