INTERVIEW WITH CURTIS DUNGEY BY ANGELA COOKSON 2-6-1992

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Interview with Curtis Dungey
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I guess the first thing you want to know is a little bit about my background and how I came to work at the Tacoma plant. I graduated from the University of Washington in 1973 in Seattle. I have a Bachelors of Science degree in environmental health. In 1974 I was hired by ASARCO to go to work in Salt Lake City, Utah at the department of environmental sciences. My chief role there was to be an industrial hygienist, invested to do investigations in the occupational health environment as well as some environmental work that was on going in the company. At that time most of the focus was on air quality and, maybe, a little bit with water discharge problems. About a year later, I was asked to transfer to Tacoma, oddly enough. I never thought that I'd be moving up to Tacoma when I went to work for ASARCO. At that time there were numerous problems going on at the Tacoma plant, mostly with respect to occupational exposure to arsenic in the facility. Also there were issues related to sulfur dioxide in the ambient (outside the environment around the plant). I was asked to be on site as the resident environmental specialist/scientist. I was at the plant from about 1975 to 1981 at which time I transferred to the New York office. I worked at the New York corporate office for about two years, and then I came back here in 1983 and I've been here ever since. The plant closed in 1985 and I've been here since that time overseeing some of the clean up issues; issues related to the closure of the plant.

Originally your main concern was with the health of the people, not actually the environment, and it just kind of grew into that?

That's right. It just kind of evolved and started getting involved in hazardous waste issues as some of the laws started coming on board in the early 1980's. In the seventies, really, most of the laws related to air quality were ones that impacted this plant.

Right. I thought it was interesting going back in my research where most of the articles I read prior to 1950, no one even thought of health concerns. They were all concerned about their gardens and what it did to their lawns. So I thought it was interesting how it's evolved, the different concerns.

The sulfur dioxide issue was really the thing that was always the focal point back in the seventies. This plant made at least a couple major requests to the Puget Sound Air Pollution Control Agency for variances to continue to operate. The agency has very stringent sulfur dioxide limitations that go far beyond the federal or state regulations, and that's for 90% control of all sulfur input. This plant was only able to achieve about 50% with the installation of the liquid sulfur dioxide plant, down on the south end of the facility, in 1974. We were continuing to operate under a variance in the early eighties, and about 1984-85 we were going to have to tell the agency how we were going to meet the remaining 40% of the 90% control requirement. The feeling was that we were going to have to completely rebuild the whole smelter, essentially. We were going to have to install a new smelting system

with a new acid plant to collect the sulfur dioxide, at an estimated cost of 170 million dollars.

Why did the plant close down in 1985?

There is really three main reasons. In the early eighties, you might recall, there was an extreme recession. I don't know if you remember the double digit inflation, but a lot of the industries were closing down, having a hard time. It was probably a much bigger recession than we're having right now. The nonferrous metals industry was extremely effected by this with low metal prices because there wasn't much production and not much demand for the metal. Also there was a lot of foreign competition because all of these metals compete on a world market. These metals are listed on the London metals exchange and bought on the open market, so we have to compete with other foreign countries. Anyway, the metals prices were low and even as we came out of the recession in 1983 they continued to be low for the next couple of years, and there wasn't any end in sight. Copper was selling at around sixty cents a pound, as I recall, and the thought always was that we had to at least be selling it at around a dollar a pound just to break even. So, we were losing money in that regard. So the company started going through this restructuring program about 1984-85. Part of that was looking at closing down unproductive facilities, or facilities that just weren't going to make it. So this plant, as well as several others, was designated for closure in about that time period. Another reason this plant closed down was because this plant always was a special plant in that it treated materials that other people didn't want. The feed

materials that came into this facility had a lot of impurities in it, and we sought out those materials because materials with high arsenic or high lead, that other plants just couldn't handle, we had the capability here to treat material with high impurities in it. Most of those came from foreign countries, and, as it turned out, a lot of those foreign countries, particularly the Philippines, where a lot of our stuff came from, were starting to develop their own smelters, and they were going to treat their own material. So it looked like a lot of these feed materials just weren't going to be there in the next few years, and we were having trouble getting some of it. So, that was another reason, and the third reason was the environmental issues that I was just mentioning with the sulfur dioxide. All three of those, coupled together, just didn't look like the plant had a very good future, so they decided to close down. Obviously there aren't mines close by to this plant where you can bring material in and treat it here.

Isn't this one of the only plants that also did the whole process from beginning to end? Or did those start to develop later on, other plants that did the whole process? Because that's what I've been reading, that this is one of the few?

I don't know what you mean by the whole process, but this plant started with [pause] they treat concentrates here. Concentrates are materials that come from the ore. The ore is usually treated at the mine and the mill to essentially concentrate the copper in it. The copper comes here about one or two percent, maybe a bit more than that, whereas, at the mine it's only like two to three tenths of a percent. And so the idea

is they run it through this concentrator to concentrate the copper in a material, and then there's the overburden and the mine tailings that are extracted from that and left at the mine site. When the stuff comes in here it looks kind of like a dirt. In it's hay day, this plant treated the copper concentrate and the end product here was refined copper which was like 99.99 percent copper, a very pure copper, because we had an electrolytic refinery here. You're right, to a certain extent, in that we had the smelter and the refinery right here on site. Most plants have just the smelter, and the refinery is usually at another location. After 1979 we shut the refinery down here, and we just made what was called anocopper. That copper was shipped down to our Amarillo plant.

Why demolish the plant instead of leaving it as is?

Well, there is not going to be any more copper smelting here, obviously, and the plant buildings are deteriorating over time. The main stack is deteriorating. We had an engineer look at the stack in 1986, and his basic recommendation was that the top 60 feet in particular, were somewhat deteriorated, and his recommendation was, that if we were going to leave that stack up for some period of time, that we should take off that top 60 feet. Just the nature of brick work, if you don't have heat going through it for an extended period of time, then it starts deteriorating due to the cold and the wet weather getting into it. And obviously, these buildings are rusting away and deteriorating and they are just a hazard. They're really a public nuisance. It is unsightly, in our opinion, and we want to get this plant down and the structures out of the way. Also, we're under an order with the U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency to do some clean up here on the site, and it's kind of difficult to do the clean up if you still have the buildings here.

What effect is it having on the environment just sitting here besides deteriorating?

Well, the buildings I don't think are having any effect, they're just sitting here. They are not all really that contaminated. The real concern is more with what is in the ground and how that needs to be handled.

But it's not getting any worse it's just that they want it gone?

Well, we're the one's that were pushing for this demolition actually. In fact, we've been working for three years to get this demolition going. After we did the first phase, which included the arsenic plant and the brick flues, which had all this dust remaining in it, the EPA was in total agreement that those structures posed a hazard and that some of them were in danger of falling down, and just due to the contamination they agreed that that should come down initially. But when we approached them on the second portion they were a little bit reluctant to have us do it through the Super Fund process. They kind of wanted us to actually apply for a demolition permit like any normal person would do in which you have to go through this environmental impact statement process where you fill out a poll check list and then they determine whether it's a significant event or not. Then you get all of these agencies involved and commenting on it. We just thought

that that in its self was going to be very burdensome. We had already gone through this process with EPA and we've worked out a fairly good system. We thought it would be much better to work with EPA and go through it that way. Finally EPA agreed and we're at the stage we're at now trying to get the final consent decree finalized and get going with the remaining demolition on the plant site.

So that's the only thing holding it back right now?

Well, pretty much. We have a few deliverables to give to EPA once this thing is entered, probably in March here sometime, in the court. They're just finishing up their comment period right now. The public has an opportunity to comment on the consent decree and statement of work.

Have you got a lot of feed back from the community in regards to the demolition, are they involved?

Well, not to any great extent. I think the biggest question always is "when's the stack coming down?" They are interested when the stack is going to come down because they want to see it. I don't detect a lot of undue concern on the part of the people in the community in regards to our plant. We've presented this plan several times here in the last couple of years at several different public meetings and I think people are becoming quite familiar with it. We've provided a lot of information on the demolition and how the stack is going to come down in our news letter. We have that demolition packet which you have a copy

of. Occasionally people call about it, but, for the most part, I don't see a lot of concern about the stack coming down. I think a lot of people would as soon see all those buildings taken down, because I think everybody agrees that it's kind of an eye sore.

How about from any of the former workers, have they showed any concern or nostalgic ideas?

No, not really. I don't detect a lot of nostalgia from the stand point of workers on preserving anything down here. I mean, some employees come down here and I think when they see this place they kind of get depressed looking at it. If anything else they see how deteriorated looking it is and they say "gees, you know, it's sure not like it was when I was here." I don't think they even want to be around it, really. They remember it was a good place to work for them and provided a good income over the years, but it's closed now and that's gone. I think they would rather remember the place as it looked a number of years ago rather than come down and look at it now.

Everything I've ever heard so far from people that worked here has always been positive. They liked working here, and they felt important in their job and treated fairly.

One of the things that as far as the workers go, I should point out, when the plant closed down I think we had an excellent program that we put together with Tacoma Pierce County Economic Development Board in helping find new employment for workers and providing counseling for

those workers who felt they needed it. The union hall...on Baltimore street, it's now that senior center...was the steel workers union hall Local 25. When we announced the plant closure, we contracted with the union. We helped turn that building into a resource center for employees: not only union employees but salary employees that were becoming displaced as a result of the closure. They had a staff up there that provided counseling and information on opportunities for other employment or additional training that people felt they needed. That was put into effect in mid-1984, as I recall. We had the announcement of the closure in July of 1984. We said within a year we would be closing, and we did close in March of 1985, but we gave adequate notice to everybody, and I think people had at least an opportunity to start preparing for that event.

How many people were employed in 1985?

When we closed in 1985 I think there were about 550 employees here, which included salaried people.

Do you know how many of those found other work?

Well, a lot of them retired. A lot of them were eligible for retirement. We had quite an older work force. We really hadn't done a lot of hiring in the years before that. We did have some newer people on board, but I think most of them went back to school or found other jobs pretty easily. Some of the people had a hard time though, particularly the ones that were kind of middle age, that had worked here

for twenty five years or more, and were in their fifties, and didn't know anything else. It's kind of difficult to find employment for people who get to be that age and they're displaced and they don't really have any skills for anything else other than tapping a furnace or something like that.

Right , and they're too young to retire.

And they're too young to retire, and they may not be eligible for a retirement program. A lot of the people were eligible for early retirement under our plant closure early retirement program that we had here. So, a lot of people were eligible and were able to retire early under that. They got some extra benefits as a result of that.

So it seem like the plant's concern for its workers followed all the way through to the very end, and even now, like you said, pension plans and such.

Oh yeah, that continues and, under the various pension plans and others, some people are even provided medical coverage up until they're eligible for medicare or something like that.

There seems to be some what of an air of secrecy in regard to the Super Fund project. Is this a misconception?

I feel that ASARCO, particularly in the last couple of years, has tried to make known what's going on out there . We've put together this

newsletter, and we have the information center up here where anybody in the community can drop by and find out what's going on at any given time. We not only have information that we've generated as part of our studies, but we also have all of the EPA's information up there. We've tried to make a good effort to be out in the community providing information about what's going on with the clean up.....The EPA's very concerned about involving people in the community in this process. There is a form of public participation in Super fund clean ups. Generally, through each step of the process there's a public comment period. Soon, coming up, in mid February, EPA's releasing their study on the residential community. They've been doing a study on what might need to be done as far as cleaning up the soil in the residential community. That's going to be coming out in mid-February, and I know there's going to be a sixty day comment period on that report, it's a big thick document probably. But they're going to take comments from the public for sixty days on that, and I'm sure they'll have a couple public meeting during that period. Usually there's an opportunity for the public to participate.

When the demolition actually starts, are you going to be hiring people from around here to help in that, or where are you going to get labor from?

Well, the labor will be handled by what ever contractor we choose to do this work, and they would work for the contractor. Now, back in 1987 when we had the demolition taking place on site, what they did is they brought in some of their key people to do the demolition and then they

filled that in with a labor force. In fact, some of the people that worked for them were former smelter workers that got a job working here. Since that time, some of the regulations have changed such that it's not as easy as it once was to qualify to work on this site. for example, now, since this is a Super Fund site, anybody that works here has to have a certain training that's required by EPA and OSHA for working on a hazardous work site. You have to have forty hours of training. Usually that training goes through all these things, it's oriented towards like somebody's worker going out into a land fill where you get a sea of drums of all these unknown chemicals, you don't know what they are, and they teach you about how to detect what chemicals you might encounter, what types of personal protective equipment you might need, and that sort of thing. And, really, it's not very applicable to this site where we know what the hazards really are and their pretty readily recognizable. But, nontheless, anybody that works here is going to have to have that kind of training. So they might have to have a little bit more of a specialized work force working here.

But, most of that training is geared towards safety, just protection of the workers basically?

That's right.

What's going to happen to the site once the plant's gone?

Well, that's a good question. We really don't know at this point. And, I think early on, we've always thought that well, once the smelter

is demolished, we'll probably, well ASARCO would like to retain ownership of the property just because of the liability concerns. Even after it's cleaned up, you're not going to be able to clean up every molecule of contamination. There's going to be some sort of capping over the remaining portion of the site, and we'll have to maintain that and so we're responsible for that forever. And, so we'd like to retain ownership. But, what goes on this site is kind of up in the air, and it sort of depends somewhat on what the clean up scenario is. More and more, we're starting to think about what possible uses this site can be made into, and trying maybe to think in advance what that might be, so if there is a clean up scenario that's developed by EPA we can work with them to help develop, or structure that clean up so that it doesn't severely impact our development plans we have. For example, if, suddenly during the clean up scenario, they decide "well, instead of trying to do any extensive clean up, we're just going to put in a real extensive ground water pumping and treatment system," you might end up with a great big manifold across your whole property. This essentially would prevent you from doing anything here.

That would be a shame because it's a nice area.

That would be shame and I don't think that's ever going to happen, but that's an extreme example. But, you know, you've got to be careful in what you're planning for the site, because you want to make sure that whatever clean up scenario develops, it doesn't severely impact your plans for development, hopefully.

So you kind of have to work both ideas together then.

Right. Unfortunately there isn't a lot of precedence for this, as a matter of fact most Super Fund sites are never used for anything. Usually what they do is they clean up the site and they put a fence around it, and nobody's ever allowed to go on the site again. This is an interesting situation because it's a real nice location and I don't think that's acceptable really to anybody. I don't think the city or the town of Ruston wants that, and we've been trying to work with them. We know that one of the things they're very interested in is eliminating that tunnel and having a road go through that site. Unfortunately, they're ready to do that right now, and they want to put the road in immediately. Well, we keep telling them we just can't do that right now because we still have some steps to go through on the clean up.

Well right. If they put the road in now and after it's cleaned up and you have future plans it might have to come back up again.

Yeah, and you might have to go in and rip the road out again. So, that doesn't make any sense. They're going to have to wait a few years yet, but we're willing to work with them on it. It's just a matter of where that road is going to go. The city, I know, would like the road right along the water front, right along where the water is. We told them we're not too interested in that because that would prevent some possibilities for development along that area. So, I don't know what the eventual development scenario is going to be. I think it would

probably be some commercial type developments with public access in mind, but I don't know what form that's going to take at this time.

What do you want to see happen to it?

Well, basically what I'd like to see is something along that line. I don't think ASARCO has the idea that we want to make a big park out of it, necessarily, but the city is very interested in that I know. Ruston, on the other hand, would like to see some sort of commercial development down here.

What, like restaurants and stores?

Yeah, something like that maybe.

How extensive would the clean up have to be for that? I mean, pretty much if it's just sitting on top of the soil it's not going to be a hazard, I wouldn't think.

Well, it would be capped. There would be some protective barrier over it that would be required regardless of whether you turn it into another industrial plant or a commercial development, or even a residential area. So, it's just a matter of whether you have a residential development where you're going to have people owning pieces of that property and they're going to be maybe living on it full time and digging into the soil or something along that line, whereas if you have

a commercial development people aren't living there and it can be more easily controlled.

What's going to happen to the information center? Is that going to remain there?

Well, it's a house basically. We bought the house here last year and did some remodeling and converted it to this information center. But, we left all the utilities intact in the house so at some point if someone wanted to turn that back into a residence it can be done very easily. And, our intent is to, the upper portion has three bedrooms up there and they're going to be offices basically for who's even left here after these buildings are torn down, for a period of time. So, that will be the ASARCO main office for some time.

Once it's torn down is there anything being done about preserving the history of the plant?

Well, we really don't have a lot of history, and I know and I guess you know, that there is some information down at the Washington State Historical Society. I think most of the real pertinent items, such as any pictures and written materials was given to them. There really isn't much historical information left here, just old files of junk that nobody would be too interested in. As far as items that people would be interested in, you know it was an industrial plant, there's a lot of heavy industrial equipment that you would find at a lot of other plants, so a lot of that has been taken out, and anything useful has been taken

out and shipped off to other facilities. Is that what you're interested in?

Well yeah, and people who maybe want to know about the plant. So I guess that's up to people like me and the Washington State Historical Society.

I don't think there's any active attempt on the part of ASARCO to create any new written information on the history of the plant. We're not actively creating any written history of this plant. What's there and available I guess is about what there is.

So, that would be more important to the people of Tacoma (the history of the Smelter), instead of to someone as big as ASARCO. It wouldn't really matter to them how it affected Tacoma.

Well, it matters to us...

But, I mean the nostalgia. That's probably up to the people here.

Yeah, that part of it, I don't think the company is too nostalgic about all of this. So, I guess it would be up the people, if somebody is interested in that, to make a record.

[Our interview ended here, and then Mr. Dungey went through some of his files to try to find some further information for me. We talked a

little more and then I had to leave. I left with a good interview and a few more articles on the plant.]