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## Quittin' time at Asarco



Staff photo by RUSS CARMACK

For Ted Carrel, right, and others at Asarco, Friday was the end of a career.

# Tacoma smelter, age 96, succumbs

By JOHN GILLIE  
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They'll put out the fires for the last time tonight at Tacoma's Asarco copper smelter as the 96-year-old plant finally succumbs to old age, foreign competition and air pollution regulations.

Once the last of millions of pounds of copper flows from the furnaces sometime tonight, the smelter work force will begin shutting down the machinery and preparing the plant for demolition.

The company, unable to make money at the smelter in a copper market dominated by low-cost foreign products and faced with the necessity of spending more than \$130 million for new equipment to meet pollution regulations, nine months ago announced it would close its smelter.

Already, some of the plant's 550-member work force has left, some to retirement and others to new jobs.

The bulk of the workers, how-

ever, said Superintendent Tom White, will be laid off beginning tonight and continuing through next week.

By the end of May, only a half dozen employees will remain to provide security and to stand fire watches until the plant's fate can be decided.

Some workers Friday afternoon were punching the plant's time clock for the last time.

Among them was Ted Carrel, who retired after 31½ years on the job.

Carrel said he and 117 other retirees will fare reasonably well under the early retirement plan worked out between their union and the company.

In addition to severance pay, which for workers high on the seniority list can amount to as much as \$13,000, they'll receive full retirement benefits even if they are retiring early.

Mike Berta, 56, whose last day was Friday, said he was happy to be retiring at a time when his health is good and he is able to enjoy the extra free time.

But the closing is bad news for the younger workers, Berta said. They're too young to retire but too old to find another job easily, he said.

"The ones I feel sorry for are the guys with 20 or 25 years of service who are 40 to 50 years old," said Marvin Wassmann, who retired Friday with nearly 34 years of service.

The specter of shutdown had hung over the smelter for more than a decade as the plant battled air pollution regulations and economic factors that seemed to make its closing inevitable.

The plant was located far from both its customers and company mines, and its emissions of sulfur dioxide and arsenic were of serious concern to state and federal pollution control agencies.

In the end, it was a nationwide depression in the copper industry that delivered the death blow.

The company had considered converting to an entirely new smelting process at a cost in excess of \$130 million. But low-priced imported copper made

such an investment unfeasible, said company officials.

The fact that the smelter survived as long as it did when newer smelters around the country were closing was probably due to its unique capacity to smelt ores high in arsenic.

The plant received many of those ores from overseas, and it produced arsenic as a byproduct of the smelting process. It was the United States' only domestic source of arsenic.

Asarco worker Darrel Talbert said in retrospect it was evident the company intended to close the plant. "They didn't repair anything. It was all held together with bailing wire and nuts and bolts."

Talbert is among the workers scheduled to receive government-paid training in other occupations. He plans to be a truck driver.

He'd prefer it otherwise. "I don't feel good about it at all," he said. "I thought I had a job that I could retire from."