

Smelter town determined to live

By Darrell Glover
P-I Reporter

RUSTON — Reports of this small town's impending death are greatly exaggerated, residents say.

The tall stack of the ASARCO smelter, which dominates this community of 662, will soon stop belching smoke.

The smelter will begin to shut down and the first workers will be laid off the week of March 18, plant supervisor Tom White said yesterday. Over a two-week period, the work force will be cut from 400 to about 120.

When the smelter goes, it will take a sizable chunk of the town's income with it.

But residents are determined to save the tiny town, which sits on a bluff and hillside, with Puget Sound on one side and Tacoma on the other three.

Houses replaced

Named after W.R. Rust, one of the founders and president of the Tacoma Smelting Co., Ruston was incorporated in 1906. The smelter had been there for years by then.

Most of the original homes built for its workers in the shadow of the smelter are gone now, replaced by modest houses constructed in the 1920s and '30s.

"Ruston will survive," said John Pate, who has worked at the smelter 21 years. Pate, who also owns the Idle Hour Tavern, opposes annexation of the small town by Tacoma.

"It's a little town all to itself," Pate said. "There aren't many areas left like it."

John Torbet, butcher and grocery operator, called Ruston "a little oasis" and doubted that residents ever would vote to become part of Tacoma. But Torbet thinks the town will have a hard time surviving unless some other enterprise moves to the smelter site.

Tax loss

"There should be somebody who would want to move in there because it is a deepwater port," Torbet said.

Town Clerk Loretta Prettyman agreed that another industry should establish itself on the smelter site.

She said Ruston could survive its financial problems after the smelter shutdown, even though it will lose about \$40,000 a year in business and occupation taxes.

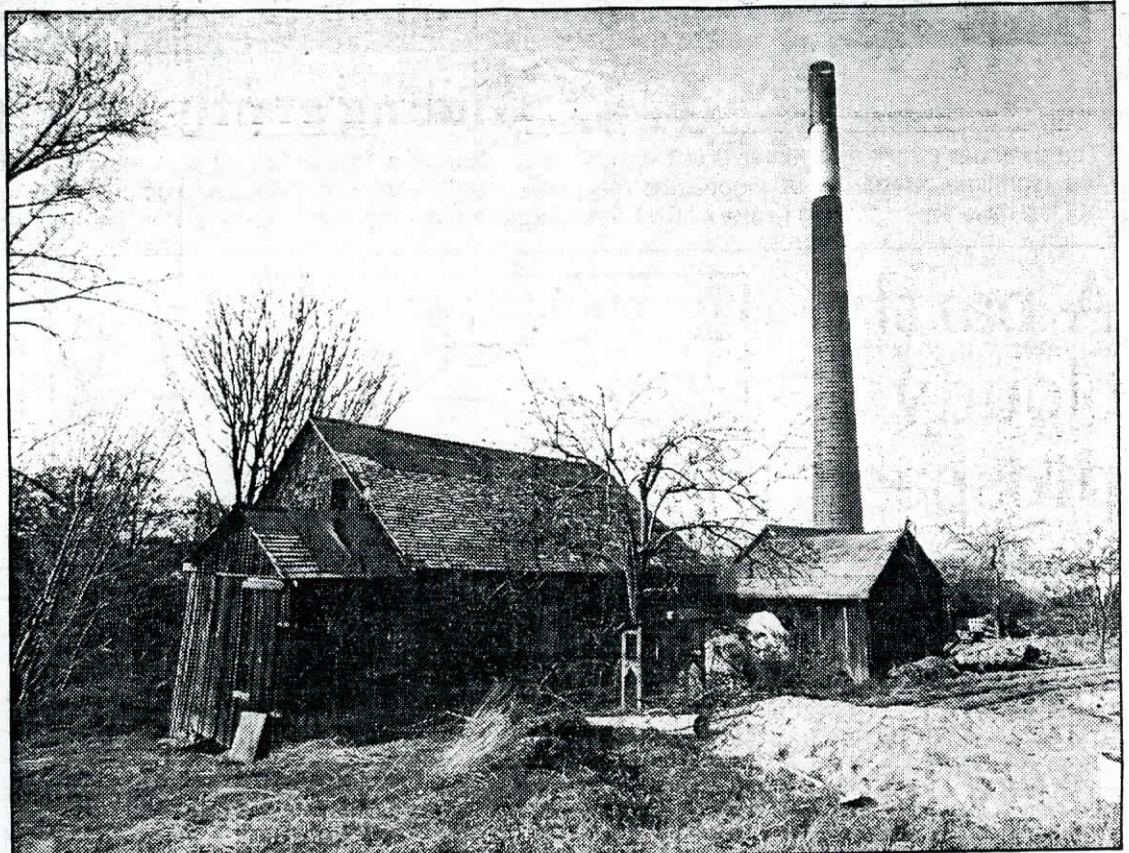
But the town will still have a property tax base of nearly \$98,000, she said. About 42 percent of the property taxes come from ASARCO.

"We don't expect to be losing that for a few years because they (smelter) still have to pay property tax," Prettyman said.

She also said the majority of the town's residents don't get their paychecks from ASARCO.

"It used to be that practically everyone in town worked there," she said. "But now only a small percentage of the people (17 out of 290 households) work there."

But the loss of ASARCO's business and occupation tax pay-



The smelter's smokestack dominates the town, but the smelter no longer dominates Ruston's economy to the degree it once did. Residents insist the town will survive closing of the smelter.

ments, which supported police and garbage services, already has forced belt-tightening.

Prettyman and Deputy Clerk Norma Doucette, for example, are taking pay cuts.

And two police officers, one full-time and the other a reserve officer, have been dismissed. That leaves Police Chief Rick Shaver, who works full time, and two part-time officers.

Shaver said the town has adequate police protection because he and his men are on 24-hour call and Ruston has a mutual aid agreement with Tacoma.

The half-mile-square town also has, since the first of the year, started charging residents \$5.50 a month for weekly two-can garbage pickup.

"Our people have had free garbage collection from day one," said Prettyman.

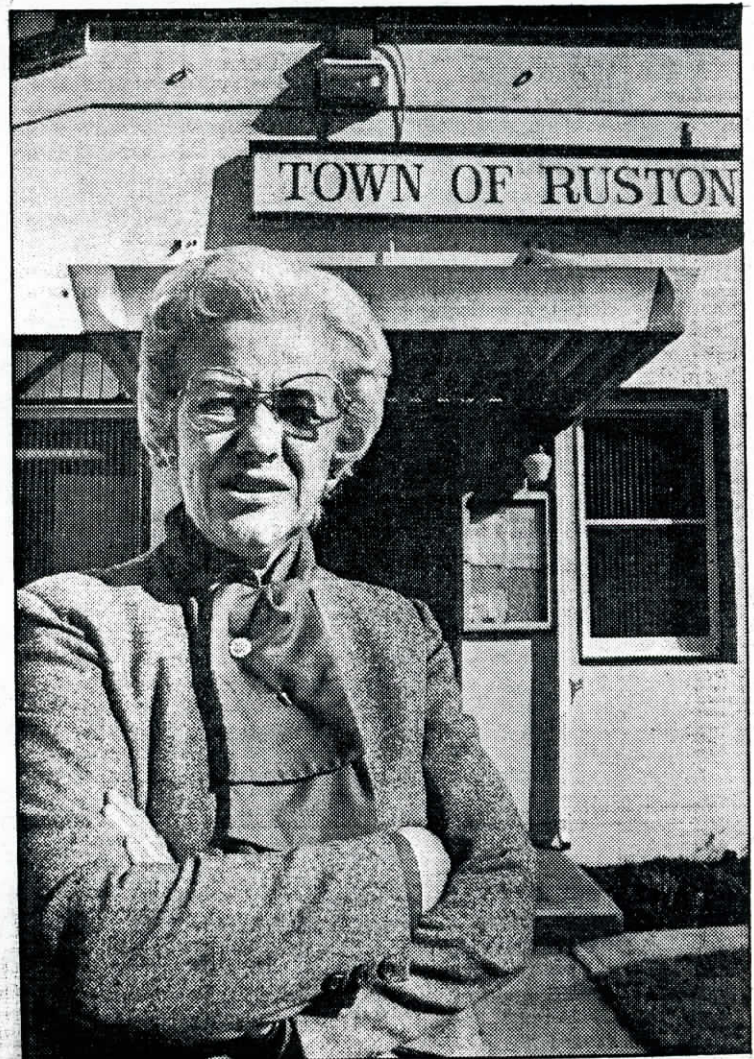
Rose Murphy, who has lived in Ruston with her husband, Floyd, for 17 years, is one resident who doesn't mind the new charge.

"The town has done so much for the people, now it's time for the people to help the town out," Murphy said.

As for police protection, Murphy said: "I think we had too darn many (officers) for such a little place."

Tacoma Mayor Doug Sutherland said his city doesn't have its eye on Ruston for annexation. "The town of Ruston is (made up of) a strong-minded, independent group of people," he said.

City Councilman Phil Parker said there is no doubt Ruston will survive: "You have to have the right attitude."



JENNIFER WERNER/P-I PHOTOS
Loretta Prettyman, the town clerk, says Ruston should survive the loss of the smelter, as few residents now work for ASARCO.