



TONY BARNARD / Los Angeles Times

The closed Bethlehem Steel plant: Where once the ground trembled, "now you could hear the wind moan."

Steelworkers' Lament

Odes for a Lost Love: In Memory of 'Lady Beth'

By EDWARD J. BOYER,
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"She looks so cold and brooding now," wrote Hermes Paiz. "Like a haunted house." Broken window panes created an illusion that bats were "ready to fly out at dusk."

For 16 of his 63 years, Paiz worked in the industrial fastener department of that now desolate building—Bethlehem Steel's plant in Vernon. He had spent an additional 17 years in a Bethlehem Steel plant in San Francisco.

His days at "Lady Beth," as employees called the Vernon plant, ended in December, 1982, when the corporation shut down the electric furnaces and closed the building after operating it for 52 years—a casualty of foreign competition.

Plant Auction

In February he returned to capture images for an epitaph in verse he wrote as part of a theater project sponsored by the United Steelworkers of America's Oldtimers Foundation.

"There was an auction at the plant, and I wanted the men to go there to see the equipment they used to work on for all those years being auctioned off," said actress Susan Tanner, the project's director. "I thought that would be a very good impetus to get some feelings and poems out."

Tanner launched the theater project last October after securing a \$9,900 Artist in Residency grant from the California Arts



LARRY BESSEL / Los Angeles Times

From the left, Susan Tanner, Lloyd Andres, Hermes Paiz, Tony Rodriguez, Al Conley, Art Poma and Cruz Montemayor rehearsing their theater project.

Council and \$3,300 from the Steelworkers Oldtimers Foundation.

The nine ex-steelworkers in the project had never tried their hand at writing, and only three had so much as appeared in an elementary school or church play as children. But the feelings and poems did come out—so well, in fact, that the men have presented three "Evenings of Readings" to overflow audiences.

On Paiz's return visit to the padlocked plant, he was startled by "the low moaning sound" the wind made as it blew against the building. "How is it that in all the years

I had worked there I had never heard the wind make that sound?" he asked in his "Epitaph."

When he worked there, heavy machinery made the ground tremble. "Now you could hear the wind moan," he wrote. "The place was dead."

That specter also hangs over Steelworkers Local 1845 on Maywood Avenue in Huntington Park. The building is now essentially a food bank where volunteers stuff groceries into brown bags lined up in neat ranks on the floor.

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POEMS: Expressions of Pain Over a Lost Love

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"When this food program dies, I think we'll be out of our local," said Ben Apodaca, a retired steelworker.

The Oldtimers Foundation distributes 10,000 bags of groceries each month to the local's members, senior citizens and community residents. Rock star Bruce Springsteen donated \$10,000 to the food bank, and fans at his Los Angeles concerts last November kicked in another \$17,000.

A Springsteen concert poster hangs above a large conference table in the local where the men read from their work recently. A sign outside the room reads: "If you think the system is working, ask someone who isn't."

More than 300 of Lady Beth's employees missed qualifying for pensions by weeks or months—"the biggest blow," said Cruz Montemayor, 64, who retired after 37 years at the plant. He and the other men talked of "displaced workers," a euphemism carrying little hint of the havoc besetting so many of the laid-off workers.

Personal Tragedies

"Most of the younger men who aren't retired have lost their homes, their cars," said Lloyd R. Andres, 43. Unemployment brought divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse... suicide.

Yet Art Poma was moved to write "a love letter to my secret love" after seeing the auction. "We went together for 23 years," Poma, 61, wrote in "Heart of Steel."

"Sometimes I would see you on weekends. Once in a while even on holidays. We never had an argument until Dec. 9, 1982. That's when you told me to leave. I don't know what happened, but if it's something I said or did wrong, I am sorry."

For Poma, the plant is "still Beautiful Bethlehem Steel. I would like to hug you. But why are you so cold?"

To Montemayor, "the steady rattle of the auctioneer's voice sounded like a hammer driving the last nail" into the plant's coffin. He recalled cursing Lady Beth, pampering her... but "all that remains of her now is a huge, rusty shell—what once used to be the bread and butter for 2,000 men and women.

"No longer will you hear the mighty roar of the electric furnaces as they were clearing their throats



LARRY BESSEL / Los Angeles Times

Unemployed steelworkers fill gift grocery bags at the union local in Huntington Park.

prior to spitting out the hot steel that makes this country great."

The closure soured Tony Rodriguez, 67, on the company. He spent 35 years at the plant, and his youngest son, 32, had worked there 12 years when it closed. Hanging out at the union hall is his only escape from the pain he shares with his son.

Escaping the Pain

"I just look at him, at his face, and I feel so bad," Rodriguez wrote. "He's just trying to make it. He's got five boys and one little girl. She is very sick. With cancer. And he drives from East L.A. to Pomona every day for \$3 an hour. Just trying to make it. I feel bitter and angry. I try not to think about him and his hard time, and I come up here to the union hall, and laugh and joke with the guys."

Andres, descended from Cheyennes, Shoshone and Paiutes, was known as "Chief" to the guys. What he now earns in the federal

displaced workers job-training program is less than the deductions were from his check at Lady Beth.

His "Burial of Old Beth" describes how men who spent half their lifetime at the plant still can't believe that it is dead and buried. When men asked him when the plant would reopen, he answered, "Never."

"... And their faces would drop as if they wanted to tell me, 'What would become of their lives?'"

Returning for the auction was traumatic for Big Al Conley, 53, a veteran of 27 years at the plant. "It's hard to explain the emotions that came up," he wrote. "There were so many spots (where) I had spent time, blood and sweat—working all shifts."

Conley had worked his way through computer courses, qualifying to operate sophisticated computer-controlled machinery before the plant closed. "Now I've been wondering what benefit my diplo-

ma in computer machines will mean to me," he wrote.

The men said the theater project has enabled them to come to grips with their pain, "but the rage goes on," Paiz said. Writing about their experiences, however, has helped rechannel that rage, he added.

Writing "fills an empty spot" for Poma, and Montemayor discovered that "this (writing) business is not as easy as it looks."

With the success of their readings (overflow audiences at the union hall), the men are now rehearsing "Lady Beth," a play they hope to open this summer.

"I don't know about a 64-year-old man memorizing those lines," Montemayor said laughing. "My mind is nowhere near what it used to be. But we're going to give it a try. Maybe it will serve as a morale booster."