

“WELCOME TO THE PIT”

Trona is white as snow, desolate as the Sahara, rich as King Solomon's mines. It is a company town, if one can imagine a company town on the moon.

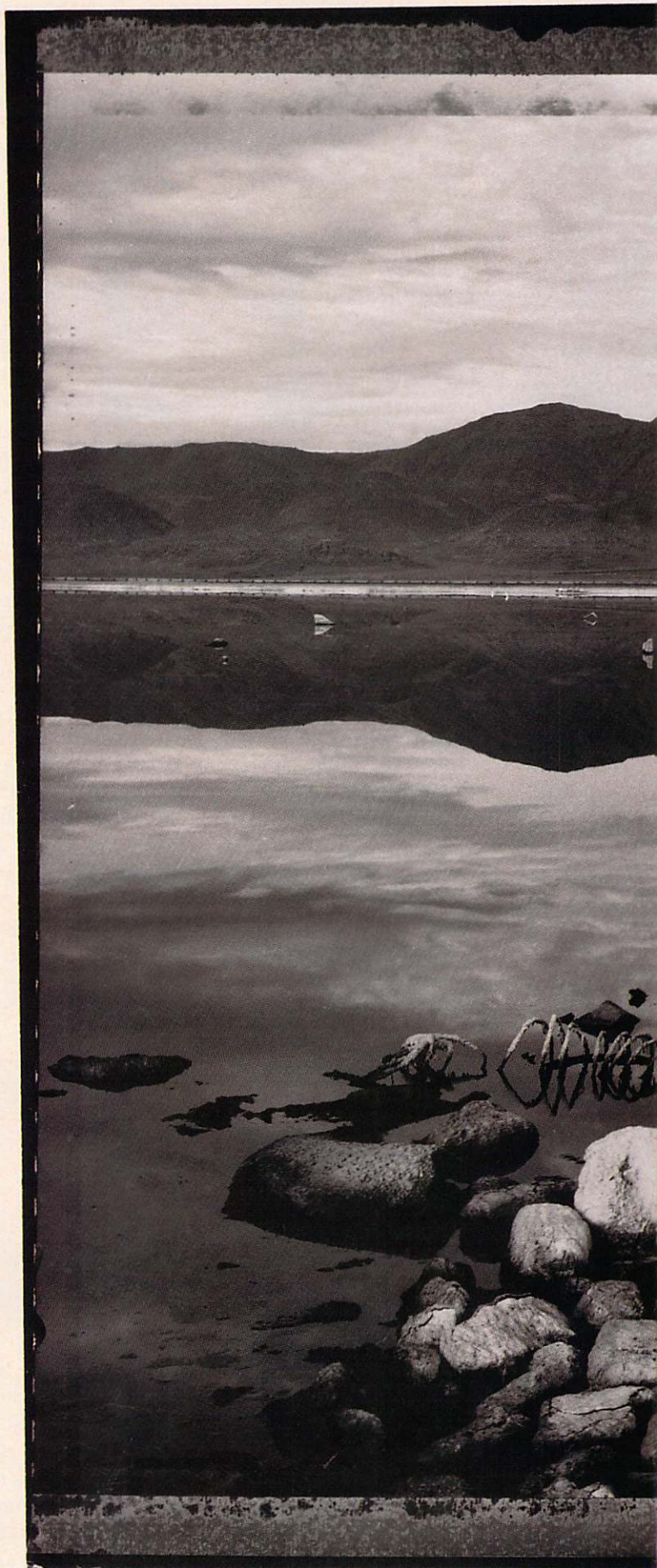
BY TED CONOVER

Coach Paul Branum takes a certain pleasure in imagining the impression his dusty town makes on high school football players arriving for the first time to play his team, the Trona Sandmen. “First, of course, they go down Poison Canyon,” says Branum in a soft drawl, his face shaded by the bill of his team cap. The canyon is the gateway to Trona: a narrow, serpentine passage that drops from what you thought was the desert floor to a hotter region of even lower elevation, so named because the saline creek that snakes along the bottom contains arsenic. A message on the canyon wall, painted in the blue-and-white colors of Trona High School, reads WELCOME TO THE PIT.

“Then there’s the smell.” Though longtime Trona residents claim to hardly notice it, others are assaulted by the stench of rotting eggs, a by-product of the three huge Kerr-McGee chemical plants that dominate the town.

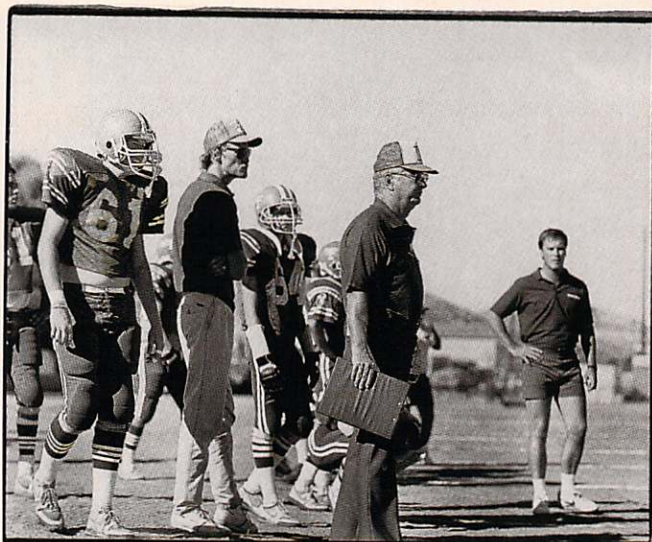
Branum, 52, crosses the Trona High School parking lot, tracing the opposing team’s steps, and enters the school stadium. “They’ve heard about it, but they don’t fully grasp it till they’re about here.” He gestures toward the Pit, the

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD BROWN





Paul Branum and the Trona Sandmen, above, on the only playing field in California made of sand. Right, the Kerr-McGee plant fronted by the dwellings of Trona.

only California school football field made of sand.

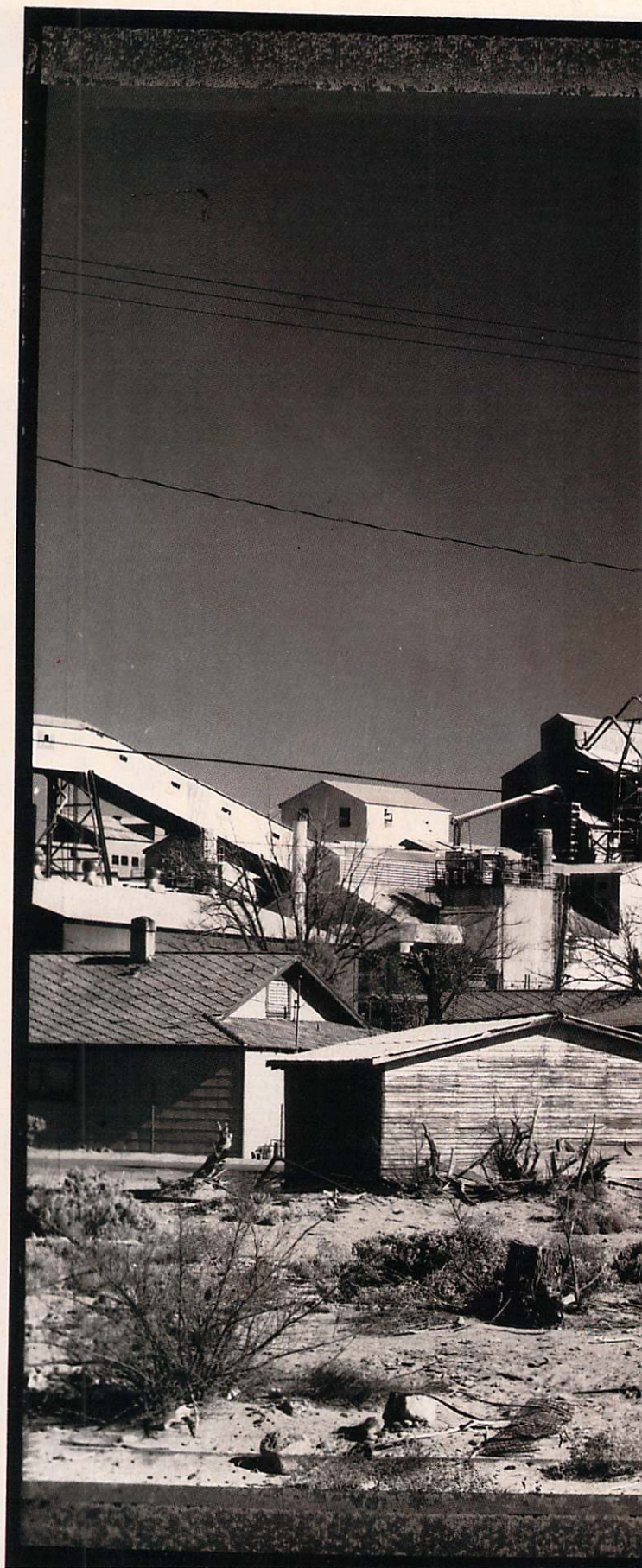
"Usually, now, they see the flag standing straight out, from the 40-mile-an-hour wind, and a Jeep with a roller smoothing out the surface," Branum says, a demonic smile breaking out on his cherubic face.

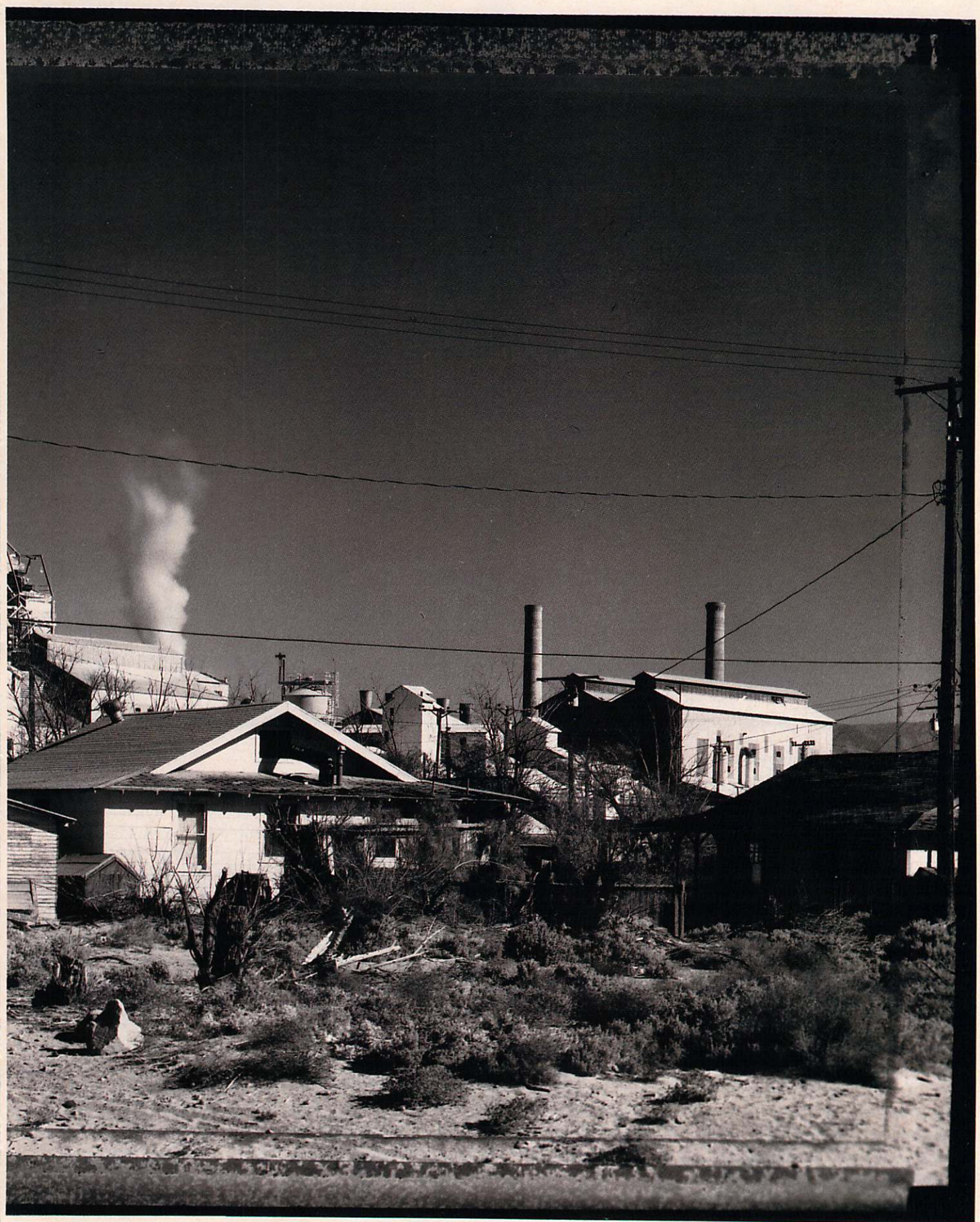
"If they come in and say, 'What?! We can't play on this shit, no way!' then," he says, positively grinning, "we've got 'em." Branum insists that the home-field advantage in Trona, said to be worth approximately one touchdown, has little to do with the actual physics of playing on sand and much to do with attitude—that of his players and that of the opposing team. It's one reason the mystique of the Sandmen and the Pit—together, perhaps the town's greatest civic asset—is carefully nourished in Trona. As the coach says, "It's the only game in town."

Trona, perched on the banks of vast, parched Searles Lake, is a land of powders. Beginning with the tawny sand of the desert floor outside the town, one notices the gray of the crumbling walls of Poison Canyon, the small piles of ivory powder dropped by departing semis at stop signs on Trona's outskirts, the frosting of dust that covers the dashboard and car seat after the 175-mile drive northeast from Los Angeles. But the blockbuster is the first view of Searles Lake, its surface covered with a millennium's accumulation of white salt crystals, blinding on a clear day.

"Now we turn a rocky point and see a large dry lake, as white as snow, in front of us," wrote the son of John Searles, the first borax entrepreneur, in 1890. "It is about eight miles wide and sixteen miles long. On all sides high mountains rise, completely walling it in, the few large cañons forming its gates.

"They are nothing, only bare rock; nothing whatever grows on them. The lake itself is dry, however there are







portions where a person dares [not] walk for fear of going up to his waist in mud." The mud is white, and dense as quicksand from the sediment. Except for the huge modern factories that have replaced Searles's modest shacks, little has changed since his arrival. Beyond the mountains, reinforcing Trona's isolation, are three immense tracts of federal land—Death Valley, the China Lake Naval Weapons Center and the Randsburg Wash test range.

Trona, the word, derives from chemistry—it's a "double salt," essentially borax, found on the lake's dry surface. It's an apt name, for it describes the town's reason for being: chemicals. Underneath Searles Lake lies a cavity filled with millions of gallons of brine containing dissolved chemicals worth an estimated \$150 billion. A succession of companies have maintained settlements at Trona, and paid residents to exploit this soup; the largest and most successful of them is the town's current landlord/steward, the Kerr-McGee Chemical Corporation.

By uncomfortable coincidence I arrived in Trona on the anniversary of the 1974 death of Karen Silkwood. I discovered this on my flight to LAX, in an article I was carrying

about Kerr-McGee. Silkwood, an employee in the corporation's atomics division, was on her way to an interview with a *New York Times* reporter with information alleging Kerr-McGee's careless manufacture of nuclear fuel rods when her car was struck from behind and forced off the road. Silkwood died, and the suggestion of dirty dealing made her death a cause célèbre among antinuclear activists nationwide. A movie about the incident, released in 1983, starred Meryl Streep, Cher and Kurt Russell.

"That was then," said Gerry Baker, the company's manager of community relations. The Silkwood affair has significance for Kerr-McGee mainly as a public relations disaster. "We've come a long way from there," Baker says. In terms of PR, that is certainly true: my call to company headquarters in Oklahoma City expressing interest in Trona resulted in Baker's immediate appearance on the scene, an offer of tours through Kerr-McGee's \$400 million worth of plants at Trona, an invitation to dine with the plant director and his wife and an offer to introduce me and escort me around the town.

I took Baker up on the first two, not to get the goods on



Above left, the Kerr-McGee plant from inside one of its buildings. Searles Lake, above, its blinding white surface covered with salt crystals, its bowels filled with dissolved chemicals worth \$150 billion.

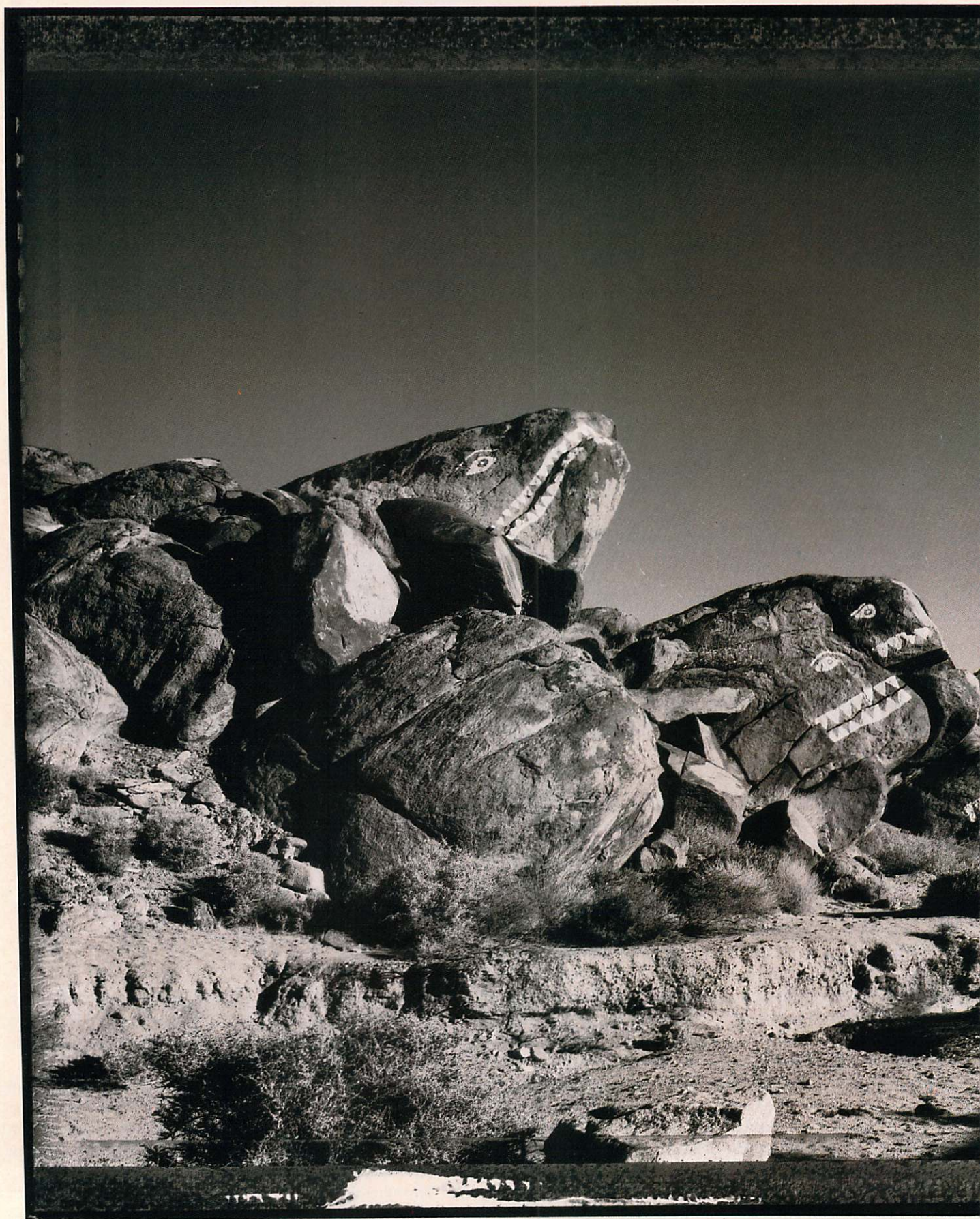
Kerr-McGee, which, by route of the Silkwood affair, has made itself one of the worst reputations in corporate America, but to learn something about a very strange place. Few lands besides California share the geological marvel of huge, dried lakes, and few not only sit on such lakebeds but exploit them: to extract chemicals from the brine underground, Kerr-McGee developed a form of mining that remains unique in the world. The company and its enterprise make Trona a manufacturing town, a place in which mothers and daughters and fathers and sons all work for Kerr-McGee, where local government is practically nonexistent, where real estate is almost entirely in the hands of the same concern. Trona is also a company town, unusual in our time, a peculiar place whose smokestacks and railroad tracks are reminiscent of nothing so much as the Industrial Revolution in England—plopped into the twentieth-century Mojave Desert.

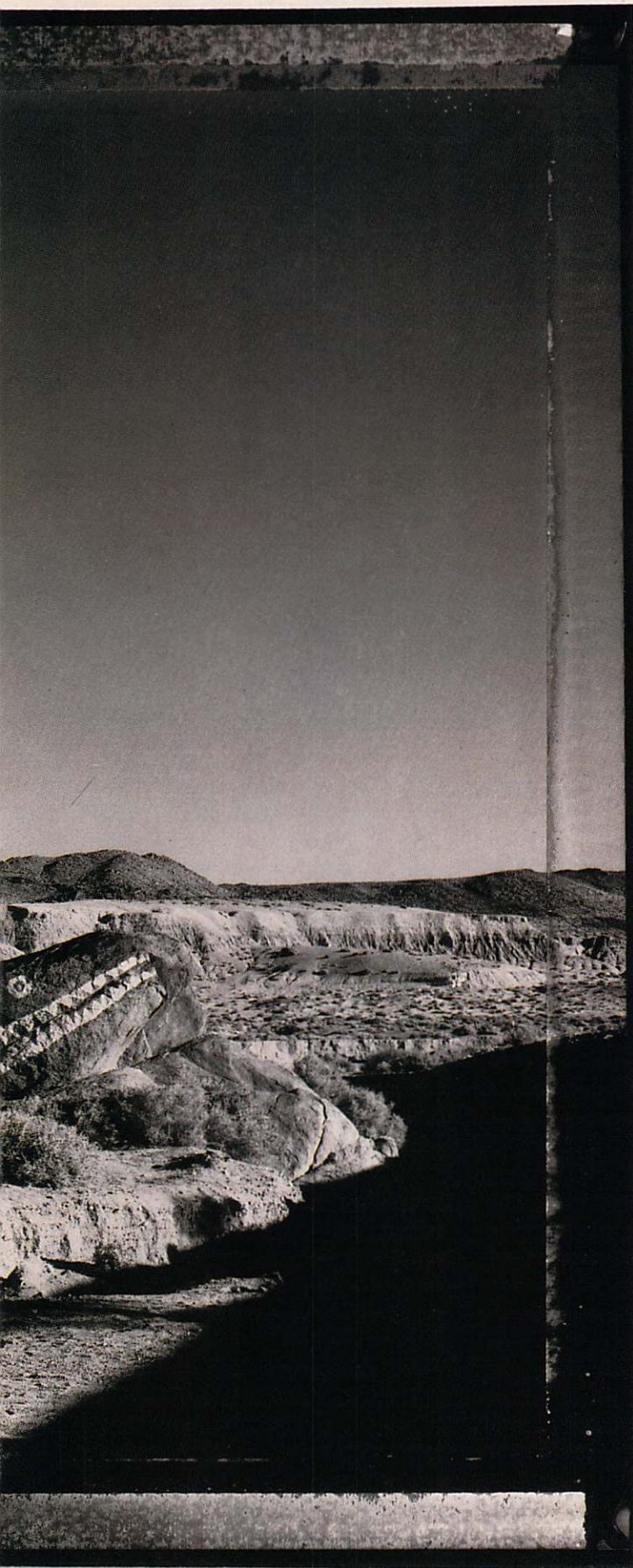
To the chagrin of its residents, Trona is also an easy place to make fun of. Even when the shots are cheap, they sting. Most everyone you ask remembers the front-page story in the *Los Angeles Times* a few years back. The article

opened by calling Poison Canyon, the gateway to the city, an “ugly scar” and asserted that “from time to time, a wild animal wanders to the edge of town, takes a drink of the alkali-fouled water and drops dead.”

Then columnist Bill Mandel of the *San Francisco Examiner* dealt another blow. Compared with the beauty of the surrounding desert, he said, Trona “is like a pimple on Kathleen Turner’s face,” a place so bad it even lost a recent contest to become a low-level nuclear-waste dump.

If you’re going by appearances, there is a lot to support this impression. On the Death Valley side of town, for instance, the Lions Club has erected a memorial with a brass





On the walls outside Poison Canyon, at the entrance to Trona, anonymous artists have depicted primeval-looking lizards, perhaps as symbolic guardians of the town.

plaque that reads IN THIS AREA, SEVERAL GROUPS OF MID-WESTERN EMIGRANTS WHO HAD ESCAPED FROM HAZARDS AND PRIVATIONS IN DEATH VALLEY, IN 1849, SOUGHT TO SECURE WATER FROM SEARLES LAKE. WHEN THEY DISCOVERED ITS SALTY NATURE, THEY TURNED NORTHWARD AND WESTWARD IN DESPAIR, AND WITH TRAVAIL CROSSED ARGUS AND OTHER MOUNTAINS TO REACH SETTLEMENTS OF CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. It explains, in other words, why the first potential settlers left.

Less than twenty miles farther on is the spot in the Panamint Valley where Charles Manson, fresh from the Tate-LaBianca murders, holed up on a ranch with 24 members of his "family." On the day he was arrested there, rumors were flying that he blamed his arrest on someone in Trona who had noticed him shopping for groceries, and that he vowed to return and level the town.

Writing in *Searles Valley Story* about her arrival in town in 1936, one old-time Tronan observed that "with the exception of some engineers or chemists, no one, *but no one*, came to Trona if he could get a job anywhere else." Like most things in Trona, this situation seems not to have changed a great deal. What's surprising is that Tronans are not by and large resentful, xenophobic or homesick for other places. Amid the stench and the smokestacks and the bleak, powdery landscape are friendly people who will invite you into their conversations at the drop of a hat. The knocks from the big media hurt. "The adults can handle it," science teacher Joanna Rummer told me, "but think about these kids."

IT'S 3 P.M., AND THE SANDMEN, IN FULL BATTLE REGALIA, are piling into an ancient school bus. The driver is the mother of one of the players. Coach Branum and I sit across the aisle from each other, and as the players try to listen in on what we're saying, the bus groans up Poison Canyon. They are nice kids, clean cut. It's a short trip today, says Branum, only an hour and a half to Boron, home of the Bobcats. "If that's short, what's a long trip?" I ask.

"Seven hours—Mesquite, Nevada," he replies. "We gotta do it to find enough opponents."

"If you've got an advantage at home, in the Pit, do you feel at a disadvantage elsewhere, on grass?" I ask.

"It's my firm belief that kids here are just a little tougher, so that maybe we even have an advantage on grass," says Branum, whose team has been the Desert Inyo League champion for two of the past four years.

By the time the junior varsity game is over it's nighttime in Boron. In the locker room the coach reviews a couple of plays. Scrambling around at knee and ankle level is trainer

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A SENSE OF PLACE

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Mel Wilson who, besides being the father of one of the players, is also pastor of Trona's Foursquare Gospel Church. ("That way," Brnum confides, "we get a little extra.") At a nod from the coach, the preacher drops his adhesive tape and leads the team in the Lord's Prayer. Energy suddenly builds as the players gather in a tight bunch. One cries out, "We are. . ." and the rest respond, "Sandmen!"

Outside, it is cold and windy. Kick-off is delayed twice as wind blows the football off the tee. The Trona cheer-leading squad bounces out of a warm van to spur the players on. . .

We are the Sandmen

Yes, we are the best

Blue and white

We're T.H.S!

And then, wisely, they run back into the van. As the Bobcats run up an early 14-0 lead, a Sandman returning from the restroom reports that their players are making fun of Trona. An assistant coach jumps on this bandwagon, hoping to fan the flames. "Yeah, like those guys were laughin' at us in Redlands, remember that? Laughin' at us! Are we gonna let them get away with that?"

This is the psychology of inferiority, and in Trona it strikes a chord. But if Trona is a pig's ear, the Sandmen are a silk purse: the team moniker (officially, the team is still named the Tornados) and the mystique surrounding the Pit show how, in the words of Trona High principal Gordon Teaby, "we've turned a hostile environment to our advantage."

Trona players didn't choose to play on sand. Kerr-McGee owns the water company, and to discourage excessive water use, rates go up with usage. To water the Pit would cost \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year.

The Sandmen stage a minor rally, scoring six points. Still thinking back on Boron's insults, a Trona player on the sidelines comments defiantly, "I don't think it's any worse in Trona than here. Boron's nothin' special." Boron, in fact, is pretty similar—an-

other company town, run by the U.S. Borax & Chemical Corporation.

By halftime the score is 37-6, Bobcats leading, and things look grim. The assistant coach and I watch as one Trona running back is lifted up off his feet and carried for a loss. He sighs. "The only way we'll win this one," he says, "is if everyone dies."

TO KERR-MCGEE, TRONA IS Searles Lake," announces the narrator of a promotional slide show Gerry Baker has arranged for me to see at the beginning of a day of plant tours. It's not a phrase he would have chosen—his job is to convince me that to Kerr-McGee, Trona is also the people who live there.

I have asked Baker and local community relations manager Jim Smith to show me the lakebed itself. A six-foot Kerr-McGee fence, topped by barbed wire and running next to the road, lines the lake all the way through town, separating what is man-made from what is natural and making it impossible for the outsider to take a closer look. In Baker's car, however, we are suddenly through security and traveling across a vast checkerboard of wide, shallow, man-made pools of brine in varying stages of evaporation. Baker informs me that 150 pumps send the brine to these evaporation ponds, where sunlight concentrates it. Then it is pumped to the plants, where useful chemicals are removed and more pumps inject the brine back into the lake. More than 15,000 gallons pass through this system every minute, through 80 miles of pipeline.

It is a sunny day, and as bright as a ski area. The workers tending to the pumps and ponds are mostly wearing glacier glasses, superdark shades with leather at the temples. The ponds reflect myriad variations of pale tan and gray. Between them run the narrow roads, and alongside these, wooden utility poles to carry electricity to the pumps. Salt has chewed away at the base of many of the poles; Baker tells me they must be continually replaced. As we turn back toward shore, Smith points out two big can-

nons. I ask if they're for civil defense.

"No, for ducks," he says.

"What? You shoot ducks?"

"No, no, to keep them from landing. Sometimes they migrate past here, and if they land in the salty pools they get sick. We shoot those things off to scare them away." During migration season, they're set to go off every few minutes; the effect must be similar to the sonic booms from Navy jets that fly over the valley.

Before Baker's shiny rented car can pull back onto the main road, we must wait for a parade of whiskered, leather-clad bikers to pass. The only thing I've seen in town as dark as their black jackets are crows. I had pulled into a bleak roadside rest area upon my arrival in town, struck as I was by the sight of the dark crows jumping around on what appeared to be dirty snowdrifts at the base of Kerr-McGee's big fence. I parked and examined the snowdrifts: they were actually piles of white dust. The crows flew away when an old-timer in overalls and cap, walking down the side of the road, stopped and explained to me that the powder was waste product from Kerr-McGee's Westend plant on the windward side of the lake. They store it out in the open in gargantuan piles, he explained; when it's gusty out, it "snows" on the town. "Ughhh," I said.

"Won't hurtcha," he assured me.

Now Baker reassures me. "We have a saying around Kerr-McGee," he says, grinning. "What doesn't kill you makes you strong."

The rest of the day is spent in the Argus, Westend and Trona plants. Plant managers explain that the history of the Searles Valley is mainly the history of technological improvements for getting things out of the lake. Photos show the brush-stoked cauldrons in which borax was first produced, and the famous twenty-mule teams that conveyed sacks of it to the railhead at Mojave.

In their place today is a flabbergasting complex of pipes, boilers, tanks and gauges that send pressurized steam, fourteen grades of water and electricity (they generate

their own) from one plant to the other, the end result being large piles of white "product." In these plants everyone, including us, wears a hard-hat, protective glasses and earplugs and walks carefully on narrow walkways and platforms made of gratings. One of the most remarkable sights is in the Argus plant, where a series of mammoth elevated drums, each 75 feet long and wide enough to drive a car through, slowly turns above your head, removing moisture from powder slurries. Everywhere—on the shoulders of workers, on the cement under stairways, on railings—is the fine white powder.

The plants operate around the clock, with a daily output of about half a million dollars' worth of product of one sort or another, which is shipped out in 90 truckloads daily and another 60 rail cars—on the Trona Railway, Kerr-McGee's private line, which connects the plants to the Southern Pacific 27 miles southwest.

The uses of the product are mainly industrial, but that is not to say they are remote from our lives. Fly ash is used in cement. Soda ash is necessary for making glass. Sodium sulphate is a "filler" in laundry detergent. Borax is most famous for its detergent powers but is also used in charcoal briquets, leather tanning and the enamel finish on kitchen appliances. Boric acid is part of the insulation in your walls and attic, and potash is in your lawn fertilizer.

In tiny specimen bottles on display at one plant are samples of all the different sorts of product, visually indistinguishable from one another. I remark to a foreman that it reminds me of a certain other substance—cocaine. "Funny you should say that," he answers. "The first time we knew we had a drug problem here was when an old-timer came and told us he couldn't understand what all those young guys were doing over at the lunch table, cutting up the product with knives and sniffing it up their noses."

Trona has a drug problem, and Kerr-McGee does not deny it. Bill DeBord, a San Bernardino sheriff's detective stationed in Trona, calls it

the number one problem in the valley.

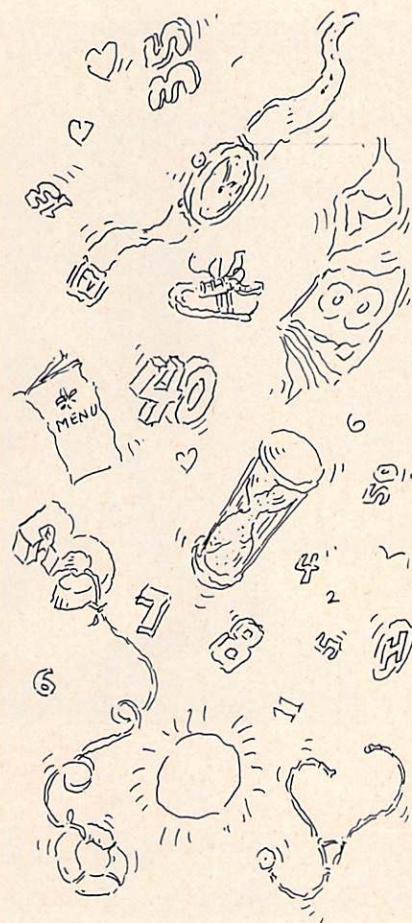
The most common drug is not crack or coke but crank, a form of methamphetamine, or speed, that disappeared from most of the country several years ago. Speed may be popular in Trona, speculates Dr. M. Marlin Clark, the town's only doctor, in part because the plants run 24 hours a day and many people have to get up at night to work.

Until recently, one of the easiest places to buy crank was apparently within the walls and fences of Kerr-McGee itself. On the job was when it was most desired, after all, and the plants have many dark and lonely corners in which to transact business.

The crackdown began in 1986: the eyes of arriving employees were examined by flashlight, new hires were given drug tests (34 percent failed) and Kerr-McGee initiated a program of random in-plant testing. At the same time, the company offered free rehabilitation. "If you want help, we'll give it to you, but if you get caught, it's too late," said Jim Smith. To date, 34 employees have lost their jobs.

THINGS ARE QUIET ON THE BUS as the Sandmen head back from Boron. It's 11 P.M. The final score was Boron 46, Trona 6. As the sandman visits the Sandmen and they go horizontal in their seats, Branum quietly explains to me why the team is now four and six. "Over the summer two of our best starters were in a car wreck near L.A. Brian was killed—Brian Reeves, a big running back. Preston Lewis... was hurt. He can't play. Preston was the quarterback. Sure it hurt the team, but the main thing is that spiritually, we were annihilated." The coach is very emotional about this; you can see they were like sons. In a high school of less than 200, the ties are strong. "The roads take about one from us every year."

Two sets of twinkling lights break up the desert blackness as we approach Trona. The first lights, just outside Poison Canyon, are the scattered fires of the Hell's Angels and other bikers who cycle up from L.A. on weekends and camp in the desert.



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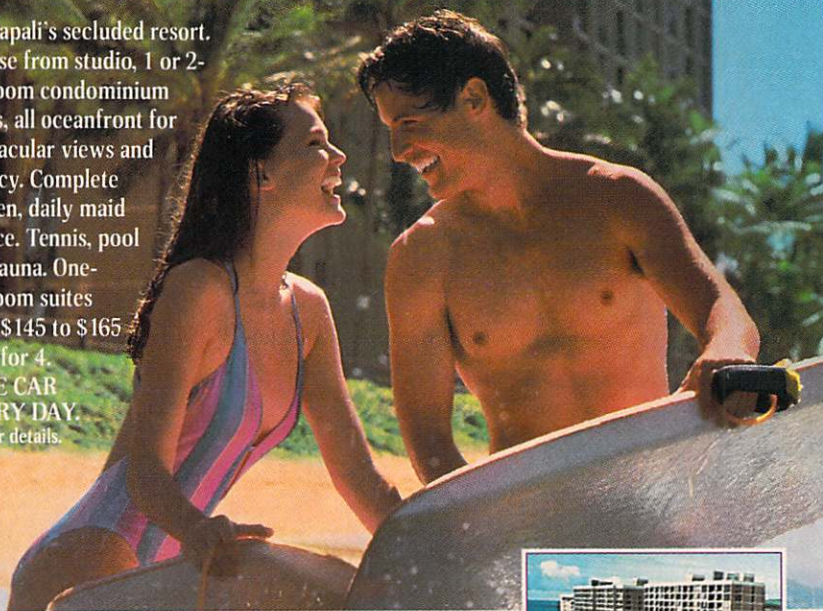


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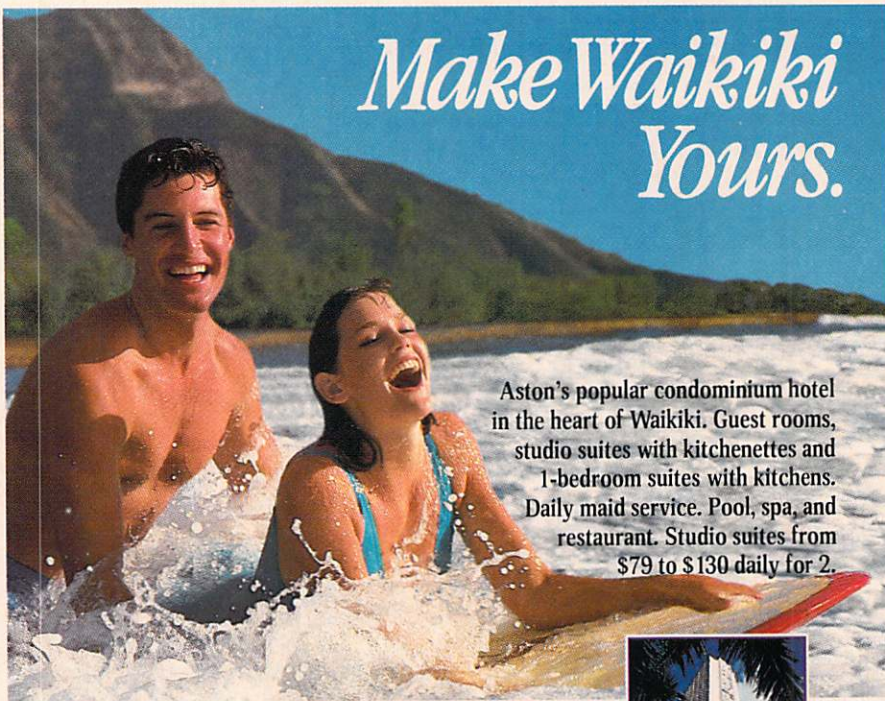
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A bit farther on, toward the end of the canyon, we see the lights of Trona. They remind Branum of the night he and his wife arrived in town.

"I saw all those lights, and said, 'Hey, honey, this is a pretty big place after all!' Then we got a little closer, and could see that it wasn't buildings or anything—just all the lights of the factories."

Trona can attract teachers of Branum's caliber partly because the school district is uniquely financed. Most of Searles Lake is owned not by Kerr-McGee but by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which receives a royalty from the corporation for its use of the land. A percentage of this money goes to the Trona school district. The district is thereby able to pay good teachers what they should be paid—Branum's salary, he told me, is in the \$60,000 range, a figure topped only by districts in one or two very wealthy parts of California. Life in Trona brings occasional compensations.

My tour of the Kerr-McGee plants is over, but before I leave, a front-office worker named Arzell has something he wants to show me. "It's the seagulls," he tells Baker, with a smile.

Baker starts visibly. "Oh no, Arzell, I don't think so, not now. That's really not appropriate. Arzell. Arzell!"

Arzell has rounded the corner with a framed picture in his hands of seagulls in flight. "You know who the seagulls are, don't you?"

"I don't think I do," I admit.

"Well, they're all the Kerr-McGee folks from Oklahoma City. We call 'em that because they fly out here, squawk at us, eat our food, shit on us and then fly back home."

"Arzell," gasps Baker, hand over his face. It is a public relations nightmare. It is going into the article. I leave the office smiling.

Right before Poison Canyon, I pull over and take one look back at Trona. In the sky I notice another dark thing against the white valley: it's a big black bird, not a seagull but a hawk, wings outstretched, spiraling round and round over one of the plants. Gaining altitude. Flying, I realize, on the thermals above one tall smokestack. ■

CALIFORNIA MAGAZINE, APRIL 1989

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

JUST DESERT

I WAS A 1931 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE who had never had a steady job until I heard of Trona in 1934 ("A Sense of Place: Trona," February). Four of us went there in a 1925 four-cylinder Chevrolet that would run if we didn't go more than 22 miles per hour. One of us went to work in the plant, and three of us worked for the railroad for 50 cents an hour. Wages included living quarters consisting of a square tent and four cots.

For food we had a choice—a nice café or a company mess hall that served good food for \$1.18 per day. For me, those were the good days.

O.K. DOUGLAS
Oceanside