



Dr. H.W. Ritchey, Thiokol tactical director, inspects one of the company's first large rocket motors, which was made in the 1950s and had 3,000 pounds of propellant.

# Thiokol: They made rockets fly

## Plant to shut down, leave 47-year legacy

By **MARIAN ACCARDI**  
Times Business Writer

Bob Brooks was with one of the first Thiokol Corp. contingents passing through Redstone Arsenal's Gate 3 on a Sunday afternoon in June 1949. Brooks, a foreman with the company at the time, and Jack Buchanan, a mechanical engineer, arrived in Buchanan's Model-A Ford, bringing their own tools and rocket motor components with them.

"We built our own work

benches to get started," recalled Brooks, whose own '35 Pontiac coupe served as a pickup truck until the group could get Jeeps and other vehicles.

After setting up shop, the group of 30 or so employees started making the first 5-inch rockets, mixing the ingredients in a Kitchen Aid mixer and casting them in waxed cardboard tubes. "We had headlights on some of our operations," Brooks said, before the buildings had power. "We did what we could."

Please see THIOKOL on A22



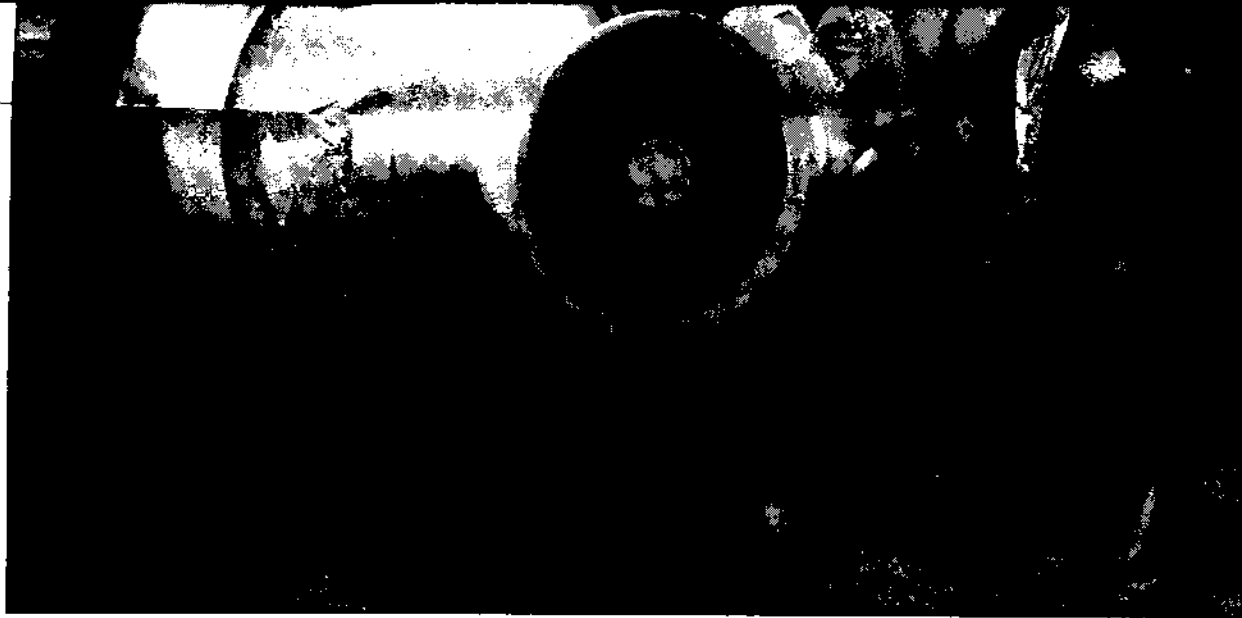
Tony Guzzo, bottom, carefully casts a 1950s vintage Thiokol solid rocket motor.



Eric Schultz/Huntsville Times

## Fire damages apartment

Huntsville firefighters saved this woman's cat and other pets from a fire that had damaged four apartments on Autumnwood Drive Saturday afternoon. A man and his dog were also among those who fled the 4:30 p.m.



Bobby Brooks, left, and Tony Guzzo look over Pershing missile parts that were a portion of an old static display at the Thiokol area of Redstone Arsenal.

Michael Mercier/Huntsville Times

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Continued from page A21

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But Thiokol's Huntsville Division will shut down July 15, ending nearly 47 years of propellant and rocket manufacturing at the plant north of Redstone Road. By the official closing date, only 15 to 20 people, mostly maintenance workers, will be left to complete the disassembly of equipment, said Thiokol spokeswoman Paulette Sellers.

"We've completed all our contracts," said Sellers, who has been with Thiokol since 1962. And the last shipment of Hellfire rocket motors will be Tuesday.

"I hate to see it because we'll need that capability some day," said Brooks, who would later be a test engineer and quality engineer with Thiokol before retiring in 1986. "We're losing a lot of potential for our country."

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Michael Mercier/Huntsville Times

ment last December after 31 years with Thiokol.

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Some say the plant was a home away from home, a place where many, like Guzzo and Brooks, got their first jobs right out of college.

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versity. She had been working for a publishing company in Memphis and came to Huntsville to stay with her parents for a year. "I'm still here," she said.

Also part of the appeal in those days was the management style.

Stokes remembers being invited with a date to dinner at the home of then-General Manager John Goodloe. "That was pretty heady stuff for me," said Stokes. Goodloe could often be found playing checkers with second- and third-shift workers at the plant, he said.

And, of course, these young engineers and other workers were also taking part in some exciting pioneering work.

"I was elated to be involved with the rocket business," said Dick Wall, who got an offer from Thiokol in November 1949, several months after graduating from the University of Alabama. "But I didn't know about rockets from my education. Most of us learned it on the job."

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BIRMINGHAM — Alabama is the best state in the nation for a new restaurant, according to a survey for a restaurant publication.

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Of the top 20 cities on the list, half have fewer than 60,000 people and most are in the Southeast.

That comes as no surprise to restaurateurs and economists because the region's economy has been booming.

So has business.

John Seymour, president of the Decatur Chamber of Commerce, said his city's restaurant industry improved dramatically this year because of quick economic growth. Bringing an open table at some restaurant is good to eat — especially on weekends — still can be a challenge, he said.

"You still have trouble finding a restaurant on weekends. There's room for growth," he said.

Alice Salter, manager of a restaurant in Birmingham, said Alabama's strong economy is a reason for the upswing in restaurant development. Another big market has become saturated with restaurants, especially in the upscale category Azalea.

*Restaurant & Institutions* is published annually.

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"It's a shame to see it folding up now," said Guzzo, a former process engineer who retired about 10 years ago after more than 36 years at Thiokol. "It was my only job I had out of school. I felt that I was really part of something from the beginning."

The shutdown, announced in March 1995, cost some employees their jobs and sent others into unexpected early retirement.

Mark Kraus, who worked in accounting the last 12 years, lost his job last December and has been looking for another one since.

"I haven't had too much luck yet," said Kraus, 54, who had expected to stay with the company until retirement. "I think there's an age problem."

He has sent out about 40 resumes, several to companies posting help-wanted ads for jobs "right down my alley. But I haven't heard anything from them."

The division shutdown is "kind of sad," he said. "Thiokol's been here such a long time."

John DeHaye, a former engineer in production design and development, had expected to retire in another few years and to see the plant continue to operate long after that. After the announcement, he decided to take an early retire-



Michael Mercier/Huntsville Times

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Some say the plant was a home away from home, a place where many, like Guzzo and Brooks, got their first jobs right out of college.

"There was a special spirit in the division," agreed Cecil Stokes, who came to Thiokol in his early 20s after graduating from Auburn University with an engineering degree. "I meant to stay a year and wound up staying 36 years."

"It's the sort of thing you could write a dissertation on. It was like a college atmosphere."

To maintain that camaraderie among Thiokol retirees and other former Huntsville Division workers, Stokes organized and incorporated the Huntsville Division Alumni Association, which has 220 members.

"If someone was sick or if their home burned, we all chipped in," said Brooks. "I can say I worked with some of the finest people."

"It was just like a big family," said Joyce Newton Royston, who started with Thiokol in 1956 as a stenographer in the research and development department. She later served as the administrative assistant for four general managers until she retired in 1991. "I think for the most part everyone helped the newcomer. I know I was as a newcomer."

Royston, like Stokes, planned to stay with the company only tempo-

rarily. She had been working for a publishing company in Memphis and came to Huntsville to stay with her parents for a year. "I'm still here," she said.

Also part of the appeal in those days was the management style.

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"Work was my first priority," said Royston, whose husband, Don, came to work for Thiokol in 1955 and stayed there for 36 years. "Everybody was eager. When you finished what you were doing, you didn't just sit back" but pitched in and offered to help someone else get caught up.

"We would work 12- to 14-hour days, six and seven days a week if it was necessary," said Brooks. "But we didn't get anything extra for it. We were just interested."

Wall, who worked with Thiokol for more than 38 years before retiring in 1988, believes that the media and the public missed the real story behind the development of the solid rocket motors.

"The repeatability and dependability of solid rocket motors is a significant accomplishment," Wall said. "The technology that has gone into the design of the rocket motors is missed by the media . . . It's a very taxing engineering problem. Thiokol was instrumental in developing that technology, and the Huntsville division was the lead division in doing that in the early years."

Decatur Chamber of Commerce said his city's restaurant scene improved dramatically through quick economic growth. But having an open table at some good to eat — especially on weekends — still can be a challenge, he said.

"You still have trouble getting into (Decatur restaurants) on weekends. There's room for more," he said.

Alice Salter, manager of a restaurant in Birmingham, said Alabama's strong economy is a reason for the upswing in restaurant development. Another big market has become saturated with restaurants, especially in the upscale category Azalea Inn.

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Earlier, Jasper McCurdy, 20, Lafayette was killed when the driver of the vehicle lost control and ran off U.S. 431 five miles north of Opelika about 4:15 a.m., troopers said. McCurdy was not using a seat belt.

Peleti Pau, 20, of Fort Huachuca, Texas, was killed when the car was riding in flipped over while running off U.S. 80 five miles north of Lowndesboro, about 6:15 p.m. Thursday, state troopers said. Pau was not using a seat belt.

Myles Mosely, 23, of Tallapoosa died when he lost control of his car in Elmore County Thursday morning, troopers said. Moseley's vehicle ran off County Road 44, into a ravine and struck several trees.

## The Huntsville Times

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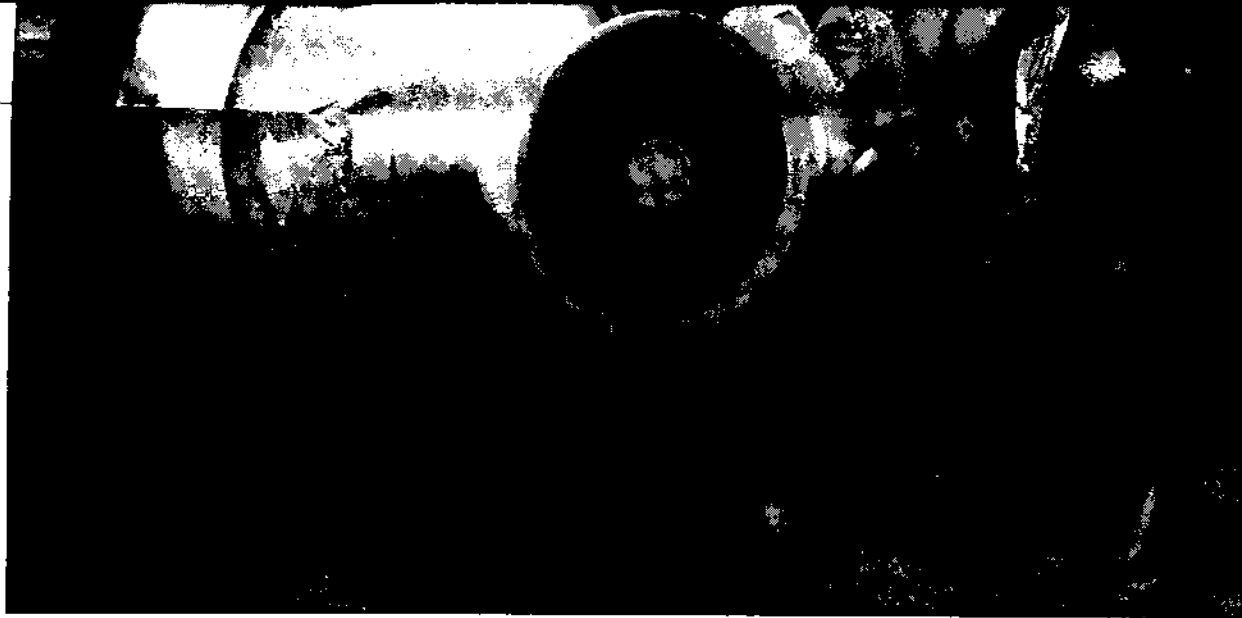
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811 Leavitt St. N.E.

## Fire damages apartments; no one injured

By AMY FRENCH  
Times Staff Writer

two from fire damage and eight from smoke and water damage. No one lived in two of the apartments, he said.

apartments. Firefighters gave oxygen to the animals as needed, then handed them to their relieved owners.



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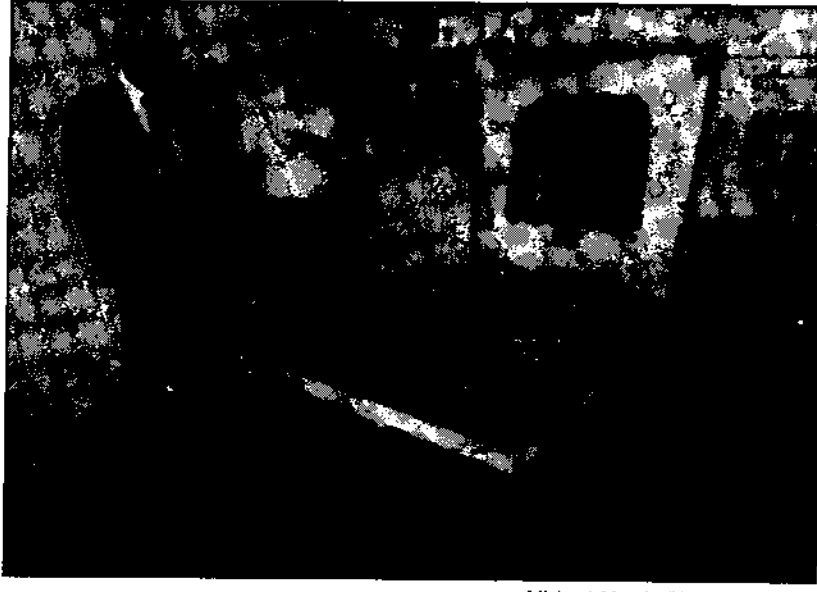
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