

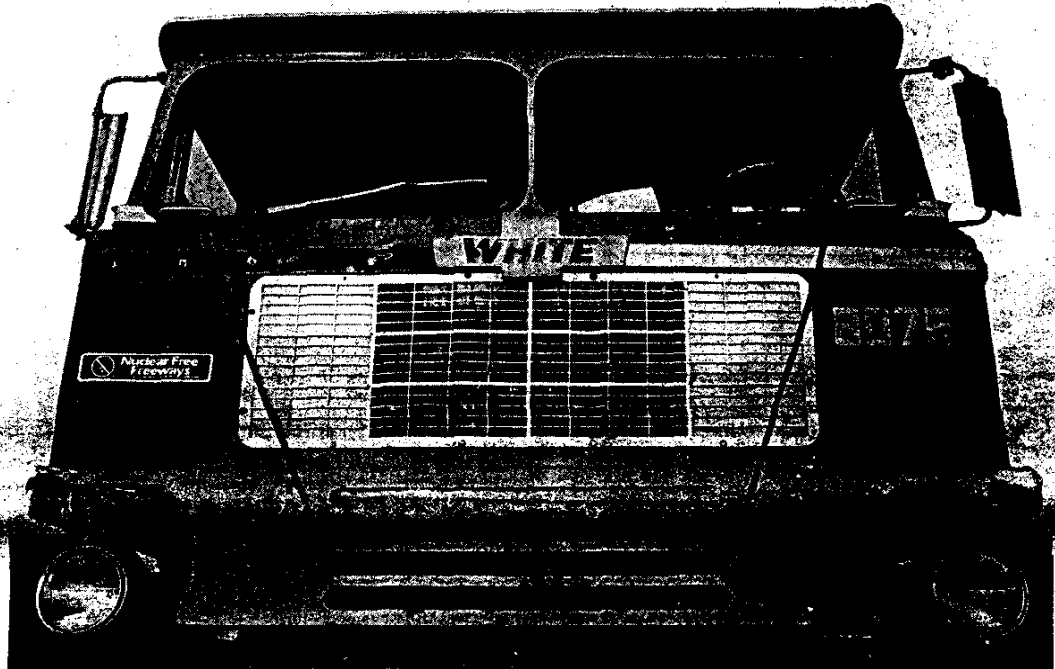
INSIDE: Remaining Glove Street (p. 5), Impersonating Dylan (p. 5), Rating "Under Fire" (p. 12), plus David Armstrong on the Montclair Affair (p. 8).

EXPRESS

THE EAST BAY'S FREE WEEKLY

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TOXIC TRUCKIN'



Photographs by Mark Sarfati

Confessions of a Hazardous Waste Hauler

By Richard Katz

I was always curious about toxic waste. It's a toilet training thing, I suppose. Where does it go, Mommy? It goes down the toilet, child. This answer satisfies people most of their lives. It goes down the toilet, and you needn't be concerned about it any longer. Don't ask foolish questions. Don't be a pain in the ass. Don't embarrass me. There are people to take care of that. The Authorities.

I had heard of the Environmental Protection Agency and its endless rules about hazardous chemical waste, mostly from newspaper articles. Businessmen were always lamenting the tragic effect all the government regulations were having on their balance sheets. So the Authorities were no doubt in firm control.

But really, where does the toxic waste go? I decided to become a toxic waste hauler and find out.

I already had my costume. After several years in the trucking business, hauling everything from tomatoes to sculptures, I had a fair idea how to handle the transport of 50,000 pounds of freight on one place to another. I had my own semi-truck (tractor), a set of trailers, a tele-

phone, a desk, and a backhaul. All I needed to be a toxic waste hauler was a shipper of toxic waste to haul for.

I found one.

This outfit was a classic. They had a whole advertising campaign to promote their image as recyclers, as opposed to mere dumpers. They were saving the world. Recycling was their corporate shtick. When I called them up to see if they had any southbound freight, I talked to the president and founding father of the company. He said no, they didn't have any freight exactly, but they had been using their van to haul some of their unusable material to Casmaña, and they needed to get a bigger vehicle. I had never heard of Casmaña. I had no idea how big their van was. I had no idea what their unusable material consisted of. I said I would stop by and have a look.

From the outside, the place appeared quite ordinary. There was a respectable den of offices, a library with scientific volumes on shelves, a modest laboratory, a coffee pot, a clean bathroom. But behind the office, and behind massive gates, was something else again—the Valley of the Drums. There they were, just like on the Evening News. Fifty-

five gallon drums. Dented. Bent. Dripping. Stinking. Stacked up four high. Stacked on racks, thirty feet in the air.

And yes, they wanted me to haul those drums. Not all of them—just the unusable material. I said I would think it over. There were two, maybe three loads there, the vice-president of operations told me.

I brought the truck and set of double trailers to their yard on Monday. I parked by the curb, outside. Two men in white lab coats, who were apparently in charge of loading the truck, were instructing the forklift driver on which drums to bring to the front of the yard for labelling. The drums were brought out on pallets, four at a time. They were then labelled with bright yellow stickers: "Hazardous Waste."

The first four barrels were set out on the sidewalk. Neighbors watched from their doorsteps; children played ball against the fence. One of the two honchos in lab coats riffled through the pages of a little book filled with numbers and tables, picked out a number from one of the lists, and entered that number on the yellow sticker. I glanced at the table over his shoulder. It was a list of chemical compounds, each

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matched specifically with a four digit number, apparently a code. If there were a mishap down the road with the drum, the Authorities would know exactly what was in the drum and exactly what to do about it.

The drums were picked up two at a time from the pallets by a forklift equipped with a special drum-pick-er. The forklift dodged all the cars going by on the street, and set the barrels on the deck of the trailers. A little pushing and shoving here and there, and they fit nicely up and down the set. There were 96 drums in all.

The two men in lab coats said that they would have the manifest ready in a short while. I set about tying down the load. I placed a set of vee-boards (1" x 6" boards with some strapping material between them) around the outside edge of the drums, to square the edges. I threw ropes over the boards and the drums, one rope every four feet or so, and criss-crossed the extra ropes at the front and back of both trailers. I had seen loads of barrels going down the highway, and I did as good a job as I could of emulating the tying-down job other drivers did. The other trucks hauling barrels usually had placards on them, just as tank trucks do. I thought about placards, and decided to ask the company if they had any I could use.

Neither the president, nor the vice-president, nor the two fellows in lab coats knew where they kept their placards. The young man who had been operating the forklift found a box of adhesive-backed placards in a closet. There was an assortment of them—OXIDIZER, FLAMMABLE, FLAMMABLE LIQUID, CORROSIVE, and several others. Two secretaries were typing the Hazardous Waste Manifest. The company men looked over the manifest, and decided that the best description of the load already on the truck was "FLAMMABLE." I took eight "FLAMMABLE" placards out to the truck, and stuck one on the front of the cab, one on the rear bumper of the second trailer, and plastered the rest of them on the barrels sitting on the deck.

One of the secretaries handed me a copy of the Hazardous Waste Manifest. I was supposed to sign it, in the space marked "Transporter," and fill in the spaces marked "EPA No." I hesitated. "I'm just the driv-

er," I said. The president of the company overheard that and came out of his office. He said that they should type the company name in on the line marked "Transporter," and I could sign as the driver. The president said goodbye to me; I waved to the others as I walked out of the yard. It was late afternoon.

Casmalia is just south of Santa Maria, a bit over two hundred miles from the East Bay. It was familiar territory to me; I had hauled lots of loads down the highways of California, and I looked forward to another trip down Highway 101. Rush hour on the Nimitz, however, is no fun, so I put off the trip until the next morning. I took the load of drums back to my yard and set my alarm clock for 4 am.

Four o'clock in the morning is a good time to set off with a truck. It is one of the good feelings about trucking: in the still of night, walk-

blackened all the other drums. It blackened the trailers as well, down to the landing legs, the axles, and the rear bumpers. A pool of black liquid was collecting even now on the deck. A green-painted drum near the front of the first trailer was leaking—leaking Hazardous Waste by the side of the road on Highway 101.

I plugged the hole with a nail. It slowed the seepage to a dribble. I wondered what the nail in the hole in the metal drum would do, bouncing along at sixty. I drove onward to the top of the Cuesta Grade, just outside of San Luis.

There is a normal level of paranoia one develops as a truckdriver after just a few months on the road. It is paranoia engendered mostly by the California Highway Patrol. Local cops hardly ever stop trucks. I have always presumed that this was because they know so little about them. What kind of license

that might very well have been criminal, not just illegal.

I called the shippers collect from the pay phone at the top of the hill. I talked to the president. The first thing he said was, "Don't get hysterical. You've been reading too many newspaper articles." He advised parking on dirt, not highway, and plugging the hole with a sheet-metal screw wrapped in tape. "Do you have a sheetmetal screw wrapped in tape?" he asked.

I realized that this guy was only seeking to avoid trouble, and did not want to do anything drastic. I realized, in fact, that I was on my own. I found a sheetmetal screw and some Teflon tape in the toolbox. When the nail was removed, black oily liquid coursed down my fingers and all the way down my left arm, and then dribbled across my armpit and nearly halfway to my underpants. I couldn't stop to wipe it off. I had to stop the leak. I got the screw into the hole and praised God that it tightened and the leak stopped.

Iwiped the oily liquid from my fingers, my palm, my arm, my underarm, and my chest; everywhere it had been, my skin was black as coal. Somewhere under the passenger seat I found some mechanic's hand cleaner. It was probably made from chemical waste. With a rag, I smeared it on the stains. The stains turned gray and left a horrible-looking mess all over my upper body. I wondered, then, what was in that leaking drum. When I looked at the yellow Hazardous Waste label, it said only "PRINTERS WASTE."

I drove on, gully as hell, the last twenty or so miles to the intersection of Highway 101 with Betteravia Road. There is a truckstop at the corner, and I put in there to take a shower. I didn't get clean, but I didn't smell quite as bad after washing with soap. I asked for directions to the dump. Most of the people who worked at the truckstop had never heard of the waste dump. No one knew for sure what I was referring to. At least one of them knew there was a place that sounded kind of like that over the hill, and he gave me directions.

The road to the dump was quite scenic. It crossed Highway 1 and then went up a hill toward the Pacific Ocean. Just on the other side of the hill, a sign said NTU Road. Go right. The two-lane road was unremarkable. Cows grazed on the hill-sides. Up one more little rise, and

there it was. There was the usual platform scale, seventy feet long, capable of weighing vehicles up to 100,000 pounds; an office trailer; and nothing else. I drove onto the scale, set the parking brake, and went to the window labelled "Drivers."

There were two women working in the trailer. One of them wanted to see the hazardous waste manifest. I produced it. The other woman went out to the truck with a Geiger counter, and walked around it. The woman who had the paperwork disappeared into the back room of the trailer. When she reappeared, she asked me to move the rig off the scale, park it to the side, and wait. The temperature was easily in the nineties.

Ten minutes went by. Two other trucks arrived. They weighed in and had their papers inspected. They were the cleanest company trucks I had ever seen. One was a forty-foot van, smooth-sided and nondescript; only its placards indicated anything out of the ordinary. The other was a flatbed like mine, but it had stakes and sides, and all of the drums were oversize "recovery" drums, brand new, and painted yellow with black stripes. They moved off down the road. Regulars.

After another ten minutes or so, I was called back to the window. They could not accept the whole load. It seemed that several of my drums were not "hazardous waste." They were "very hazardous waste." One was nickel cyanide. They called the shipper. The shipper called Sacramento. Sacramento called the EPA and the EPA issued a permit. Everything was in order. When the women were done with the papers and the Geiger counter, they gave me a map and explained its various hieroglyphs, such as "turn right at the light pole" and "turn left at the pesticide pond." I did as I was instructed. There was no mistaking the pesticide pond. It stank. It was an open pool of poison, and two tankers were dumping into it as I went past. The drivers just stood there, waiting for the pumps to empty their trailers out.

I got to my appointed area. The dump workers had a forklift fitted with a large platform on its forks, unloading another truck. After I got the rig stopped where they wanted it, and the ropes and rigging untied, they came over with the forklift and waited. I was supposed to man-handle the casks off the truck and

I noticed not one, but several automobiles passing my truck with their windshield wipers going. The weather was fine. Beautiful, in fact. After the third or fourth car, I stopped the truck and inspected the load. A spray of dense black material had seeped from near the front of the load and been blown backward at sixty miles per hour. I was leaking Hazardous Waste on Highway 101.

ing out to the waiting rig. Fire up the diesel, and the obedient beast of big wheels and chrome stacks pours smoke all over the place; the wind blows it all into my eyes, and every mile ever spent on the highway.

I drove a hundred miles south, watching the sunrise as I went. I stopped, got some breakfast, bought some fuel, and tightened the ropes. Fifty or so miles more, and I was near San Luis Obispo.

It was along this stretch of road that I noticed not one, but several automobiles passing my truck with their windshield wipers going. The weather was fine. Beautiful, in fact. After the third or fourth car, I stopped the truck and inspected the load. A spray of dense black material had seeped from near the front of the load and been blown backward at sixty miles per hour. It

does the driver need? What kind of registration, when the truck has eight license plates? How is the load supposed to be secured? Is that blowing air a normal thing, or a citable offense? They don't know. So they don't ask. Officers of the highway patrol, on the other hand, go out of their way to keep an eye on trucks. They will pull a truck over, just to check the driver's logbook. It is nerve-wracking. It always costs money. To this strain is added the very real physical possibilities: that the load is falling off the deck, that the tires are shredding sixty-five feet back, or that somewhere in that forty tons of metal and freight, a pound or two of steel is giving way to time and fatigue, and something is going to bust. There are the normal fears of the road, but this was different. For the first time, I was driving some-

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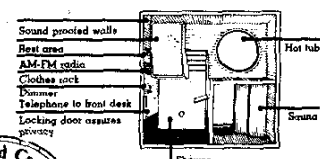
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The driver went the short distance to the pile, put on rubber gloves, and set to work sucking each drum into his tank. I watched the driver as he shoved the stinky three-foot nozzle of his vacuum hose into each drum in turn. He sucked up a small amount of material, removed the nozzle briefly and let the material drip from the hose, sampling it with his hand. I walked over and asked him what he was looking for. "Water," was the reply. "Don't want no water." I asked him what they did with the stuff. He said he didn't know exactly, but he thought most of it was sold for heating oil.

One of the white coats asked me to move my truck, so it would be closer to the pile of drums. The forklift operator started to load my trailers. I ambled off.

I like to look around on trucking jobs, when they'll let me. Trucks, sea containers, ships, trains—it's all one system now, and a driver who keeps his eyes open can see a little piece of all the world's commerce through the windshield of a semi. (That same system, though, is pretty good at keeping the drivers and everybody else from seeing very much. A driver is more likely to spend his whole life hauling boxes of canned peaches twenty blocks from the cannery to the warehouse, or hauling slag from the foundry to the dump, under strict supervision, in an endless loop, punching a clock, than to spend twenty minutes on the job sightseeing. Supervision was none too strict on this job. I wanted to see what this was all about. Where does the toxic waste come from?)

There was only one person working around the factory, besides the hazardous waste boys. He was the

parking lot. There were no records in the building. There were no old hands who might know or have some idea what was in those drums. There was, in fact, no one on earth who knew what was in those drums. Of this, finally, I had convinced myself.

But the white-coated fellows had no difficulty complying with the labelling rules. They spread out a pile of yellow hazardous waste stickers on the hood of a car in four rows. They labelled one fourth of them "Water Treatment Waste," and entered the appropriate four digit code; one fourth were marked

As usual, it was now too late to head south for the dump. I drove instead toward my yard, but stopped a few blocks short at my house. I left the engine idling, doubleparked on the street. I got out of the cab and walked to the gate. No trucker walks away from his rig, no matter how shabby it is, without turning to give it an admiring glance. This time when I glanced back, I saw that the last row of drums on the last trailer was smoking. Acid brown fumes were puffing from the rim of one of the barrels.

That load had solvents of all types on it. It had, among other things,

**Trucks, sea containers, ships, trains—
it's all one system now, and a driver who
keeps his eyes open can see a little piece
of all the world's commerce through
the windshield of a semi.**

"Paint Sludge," with its code; and so on. They opened up the drums, copped a feel of the contents with their fingers, pronounced it watery, or oily, or whatever, and then slammed a sticker on the drum and loaded the drum on the truck. One problem persisted, however. Every time they got a load together, a pool of liquid would collect somewhere under a trailer. I finally told them that when they got it right, they could call me. The barrels would have to wait overnight. I unbitched my tractor from the trailers, and drove home—"bobtailed it," as we say in the trade.

When I returned to Newark the next day, I asked a worker if the load was ready. "Yeah, she's ready," he said. "Looks pretty good." I looked at him curiously. "Good" is certainly inappropriate for this collection of rusted poison. "Well," he continued, "ain't none of them leakin', anyways."

I hauled those drums to the dump.

I even hauled a few more loads for that outfit, and each time the circumstances became more bizarre. Finally, I went out with them to haul a collection of un-touchables from a place right here in town. Never mind where they came from, or how they got there. By this time, I didn't really want to know.

When I finally hauled a load out of that place, duly manifested and placarded, it was four o'clock in the afternoon of a beautiful sunny day.

six drums of diethyl ether—the ether used to flash-start a motor on a cold morning. Six drums of blown ether would wipe out West Berkeley.

I ran inside the house. I found my wife, and told her to grab the rig and get the hell away from there. We argued a lot in those days, but that time she did as I asked.

I called the fire department, and then I called the company. The fire department arrived in a minute. They parked a hundred and fifty feet away from the truck. They would go no closer. A pickup truck arrived from the shipper. Two of the men in lab coats wrestled the smoking drum from the trailer and into the pickup. They tried to put out the fire inside, but a minute afterward it would have been up again. I told them to get their drum, their pickup, and the rest of it the hell out of there. They left. They rode off into the sunset, fumes trailing behind them. I have never seen them since.

I parked that load in my yard. The shipper found a truckdriver to pull my trailers to the dump with a rented tractor. I told the driver of the dangers he faced, but he said, "That stuff? Shit, it ain't nothin'. That stuff don't scare me a bit." Two days later he brought my trailers back. Even brought in the backhaul. Good driver. His forearms were burnt. I asked him how it all went, and he said there was no problem, a little lye never hurt nobody now.

onto the platform by myself.

In the heavy hauling trade, this is highly unusual. Forklifts do all the work nowadays. I did it, and it was brutal. The operator of the forklift helped with the heaviest ones. He was extremely casual about it, slamming the barrels recklessly and hard to the back of his platform. No one said a word about the black spray or the sheet metal screw. Giant earthmovers rumbled nearby. Soon a bulldozer had shoveled tons of earth over the drums I had brought, and the moonscape was smooth.

I drove out of this strange land and stopped at the gates to reweigh the truck. I had delivered 46,000 pounds of toxic waste. I went back to the truckstop. The truckwash attendant charged \$50 to clean the trailers (though to this day the paint is still bespotted with black). I drove north to Monterey and back-hauled a load of sand to Berkeley. They mine it on the beach, and it's used for sandblasting.

That is where toxic waste goes. But where does it come from? The company I had hauled it for had another job

for me, and believe it or not, I took it.

I drove my rig to a factory near Newark, California. I saw a large collection of fifty-five gallon drums in the parking lot. Several workers, some in white laboratory coats, were standing about. There was a forklift and a medium-sized van truck. I estimated that there were a hundred and fifty or more drums in that parking lot.

**There was no mistaking
the pesticide pond. It stank. It was an open
pool of poison, and two tankers were
dumping into it as I went past.**

into groups. I drove in a wide arc around the lot and parked at a respectful distance from the drums. As I walked toward the group of workers and barrels, a small tank truck entered the parking lot. The little tanker approached the drums; the driver got out and asked for Jack. One of the white-coated men spoke up and directed the driver to a set of approximately fifty drums that had been set off to one side.

worked on closing up the plant. He told me he had been been out here from Cleveland for six months, getting all the machinery and equipment cleared out of the immense building. He was almost done with the job; all that was left to be disposed of was the "chemicals" in the parking lot.

That was intriguing. I had noticed that there were no labels on the drums in the



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