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MAX SIMS LALE AND LONGHORN ARMY AMMUNITION PLANT

By Gail K. Beil and Max S. Lale

In 1946 Max Lale reluctantly left the U.S. Army. He would have preferred to make a career of the military, he once said, but his wife Georgiana, an only child from Denison, Texas, was dead set against it and felt the need to be closer to her parents. Max, who constantly struggled to win the approval of Georgiana's socialite mother, decided the better part of valor was to put the uniform in the closet and take up his first career, journalism.

Born in Oklahoma on August 31, 1916, Max graduated from the journalism school at the University of Oklahoma before serving in the military and joined the *Marshall News Messenger* as a reporter in 1946. While there he met his mistress, Texas history, particularly the history of Harrison County. That love affair survived Georgiana and lasted throughout his life. His last bit of research committed to publication – in this case in the April 29, 2006, edition of the *News Messenger* – was completed five days before his death. The only difference between it and all the other pieces written over the years for a number of historical journals, newspapers, and books was that its genesis was not in the clacking keys of an old Royal typewriter. Max wrote it on a legal pad, his beloved second wife, Cissy, transcribed it on her brand new computer, and I added it as a sidebar to a feature I had written on Marshall's Temple Moses Montefiore's unique tracker organ.

Max acquired his love for history as a byproduct of his journalism career. One of his first assignments from *News Messenger* publisher Millard Cope was to write a comprehensive history of Marshall and Harrison County. The piece was to be some thirty-two pages in length and include everything from agriculture to weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, after it had been set in linotype and was ready for production about half of the article was dumped or spilled or otherwise destroyed. There were apparently no other copies, so half of what reporter Lale wrote never saw print. This vexed him so much that he spent the next sixty years trying to recapture the lost stories. Along the way he contributed to numerous historical journals, wrote nineteen Texas Historical Marker applications, at least six nominations for the National Register, and too many book reviews to count. He also produced a book-length account of the Sims and Lale families in Shawnee and his well-received autobiography, *Max's Memoirs*.

Max left Marshall briefly late in the 1950s for Greenville, Texas and a stint as publisher of the *Greenville Herald*. He soon returned and on August 1, 1961, took a position as public information officer for Thiokol Chemical Company, contractor at the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant (LAAP). Longhorn occupied more than 8,000 acres on the eastern shore of Caddo Lake near Marshall – a body of water that usually has the adjective "mysterious" attached to it, divides itself between Texas and Louisiana, and is considered Texas' only naturally formed lake.

Immediately Max began anew researching and writing local history. He

started collecting and publishing not only Longhorn's colorful history but also that of Harrison County's first ammunition plant, the Powder Mill, built in 1861 to serve the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederate States of America. When LAAP finally became eligible for official historical recognition in 1999, Max and I vowed we would collaborate on an application for its Texas Historical Marker. Other projects tore us away and we never did. So in honor and memory of Max Sims Lale, and based almost entirely on his research, here is the history of LAAP from 1941 to 1997. May it become Max's twentieth, and my thirteenth, successful historical marker application.

Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant

Shortly before Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, as war looked inevitable and plans for the manufacture of material and weapons to fight it leapt from old soldier's dreams to the drawing boards of the War Department, Monsanto Chemical Company was approached by the U.S. Army's Ordnance Department to consider the operation of a smokeless powder plant. Monsanto was willing to take on the charge, but the St. Louis-based firm answered that it would be better suited for the manufacture of TNT, "an explosive described as 'looking like maple sugar when cold and maple syrup when melted.'" From the beginning of operations at what was first called the Longhorn Ordnance Works there were two employers; the contractor, who employed the majority of the workers, and the Army, owner of the land and facility and in charge of all operations. The Army generally stationed a colonel, one or two other officers, and three dozen or more civilians at the armament works.¹

The new installation was a six-line special TNT plant designed by E.I. DuPont de Nemours C. Inc. and the location for the plant was announced on December 15, 1941. The site chosen consisted of 8,493 acres in the unincorporated village of Karnack in Harrison County, on the banks of Caddo Lake. At the time Lyndon Baines Johnson was a U.S. Representative from Texas and a favorite of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Johnson's wealthy, influential father-in-law, Thomas Jefferson "Cap" Taylor, whose home was located less than three miles from Caddo Lake, happened to own a great deal of the land involved and assisted in the purchase of much of the rest. Taylor's general store, "T.J. Taylor – Dealer in Everything," on U.S. 43 was a prominent landmark in Karnack. and he had made a name for himself as a political powerhouse by snaring the second state park established in Texas, Caddo Lake State Park, which consisted of 478 acres on the Cypress Bayou where it empties into the lake.²

Production at Longhorn began on October 6, 1942, with the first flake of TNT produced at 12:20 p.m., October 19. At its height in the 1940s, the plant had 1,518 employees, many of whom were imported from St. Louis by Monsanto. The influx caused a housing shortage in Marshall and permission was granted to construct a large housing addition, dubbed "Yankee Stadium," normally impossible in the wartime economy, on the south edge of town. Loyal and patriotic, Longhorn workers "staunchly backed the War Bond pro-

gram, 99 percent signing up for payroll deduction purchases averaging 10 percent of their salaries." Longhorn had produced 414,805,500 pounds of TNT when production ceased on August 15, 1945. By then it had reduced the price from the original cost of seventeen cents per pound to approximately six and a quarter cents per pound, quite a reduction from the nearly fifty cents per pound the explosive had cost during World War I.³

On April 23, 1946, the plant became what the Army called "a standby installation," with Monsanto maintaining a small workforce until June 16, 1946, when the government assumed control of the facility. At that point, the staff consisted of two Army officers and thirty-two civilians. It soon increased to three officers and eighty-five civilians when it became apparent that Monsanto had failed to clean up the plant adequately before being relieved of responsibility.⁴

From November 1945 to June 1950, Longhorn remained in mothballs, with the labor force fluctuating between 85 and 210 – all employed by the U.S. Army – depending on the workload required to maintain the facility and keep the plant in operating order. In February 1952 it was needed again, and this time Universal Match, also based in St. Louis, was the general contractor with instructions to manufacture a propellant fuel that would be loaded, assembled, and packaged as pyrotechnic ammunition for use in Korea. Universal Match's general manager arrived in Marshall on December 7, 1951 to begin operations. On July 27, 1953 an armistice between the U.S., Korea, and China was signed, and on March 14, 1956 Universal Match's contract was cancelled. A month later the production of all pyrotechnic ammunition items ceased and Plant One was again relegated to standby status.⁵

Longhorn was divided into three production units, each with a unique manufacturing capability. Plant One had opened with the arrival of Monsanto and produced TNT. Monsanto also opened Plant Two to meet the need for pyrotechnics – flares and illuminating bombs. By 1956 plants one and two were idle but work had begun on a new plant, one that would be used by Thiokol Chemical Corporation to produce an altogether new product – solid fuel rocket motors. Longhorn was selected as the site to do the work following an engineering study by the chemical giant, which already had two contracts to operate facilities at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. Whether Lyndon Johnson's position on the Senate Armed Services Committee had anything to do with the ultimate decision to make rocket motors on the banks of rural Caddo Lake remains speculation.⁶

Plant Three cost \$10 million, an expenditure that included roads, railroad tracks, and eventually fresh water treatment and wastewater treatment installations. The highly guarded, intensely classified area was, for the most part, completely self-sufficient. Ray McElvogue was named Thiokol's general manager on October 2, 1952, and remained in that position until well into the 1970s. Plant Three grew in a series of five expansions, each built by Brown and Root Construction and costing \$11,503,411 by the time all were completed in 1962. Driven by the Cold War, the escalating problems in the Far East,

and a growing number of American troops committed to Vietnam by 1964, the need for intermediate-range, nuclear-tipped rockets escalated. Even though Longhorn had no role in the manufacture of nuclear weapons its employees, who numbered nearly 3,000 in those days, provided the muscular means of delivery. For that effort Longhorn had been funded with more than \$141 million in 1964. Additionally, Plant Two was reopened to manufacture button bombs, illuminating flares, and other pyrotechnics needed in increasing numbers in Vietnam. A portion of those construction dollars financed the construction of three huge powder magazines in a remote area away from where TNT and solid fuel were produced.⁷

Dynamics other than war and threats of war began playing a part in the growth of the plant, particularly in the recruitment of employees as the need for them grew from the dozen Thiokol brought to Karnack in 1952 to the 2,663 who suited up in white in 1968 to run the production lines. What had been a white man's world as far as skilled and semi-skilled workers were concerned in 1941 now included women and minorities. Employment efforts extended from advertisements in scientific journals to recruitment forays into the Job Corps and the Neighborhood Youth Corps – both programs of Johnson's "Great Society."⁸

All blessings come with consequences and so it was with the influx of new employees, most of whom chose to reside eleven miles away in Marshall. The roads between the plant and the town were narrow and winding and poorly graded. The almost right-angle curves, un-maintained road shoulders, and daily traffic jams as nearly 2,000 automobiles entered and left the plant at the same time twice a day, where they often met the ten buses serving Karnack ISD students, led to much frustration and too many accidents. Moreover, despite the fact that the City of Marshall had issued permits in 1967 for 114 residences plus a few apartments, and another 224 were issued the next year, there was a critical shortage of housing, especially rentals for the more transient Army's officers and civilian personnel, who numbered about 300 of the more than 2,900 employees. By 1968, Colonel Royce P. Larned, who was commanding officer and in charge of the plant itself, and Ray McElvogue decided it was time to take matters into their own hands.⁹

They met with the Texas Highway Department's resident engineer, Harrison County Judge, and Precinct Two County Commissioner. The county was responsible for the purchase of highway right-of-way, which had grown increasingly expensive after World War II. Since all the roads involved were state property the state would have been responsible for actually building or improving them. Before the meeting Colonel Larned had ordered a study of the traffic problems and road conditions on the highways and farm-to-market roads that employees traveled daily. The study was conducted by the state highway department and resulted in a book-length report. On December 27, 1968, it was presented to the local officials. In addition, the *Access Road Study* went up the chain of command to the U. S Army Munitions Command as well as to state and federal officials. It apparently failed to make an impression. Resident Engineer Gilbert A. Youngs said that while improvements to the forty

miles of access road into the LAAP installation were on the drawing boards, "No funds are provided for its reconstruction at this time and other priorities in the county prevent our contemplating its reconstruction within the next five or six years."¹⁰

This response was utterly unsatisfactory to Larned and McElvogue who decided to counter it with an aggressive public relations campaign to educate the public about the economic and strategic importance of LAAP to the community. McElvogue conducted off-the-record, one-on-one meetings with community leaders and spoke to local civic groups, beginning with the Marshall Rotarians. He served as president of the Greater Marshall Chamber of Commerce in 1968, and he and Max Lale continued to be members of the board of directors for a number of years. News conferences with Vietnam veterans and foreign visitors appeared not only in the local media but also an in-house publication, the *Longhorn Missile*, for which Lale was responsible. Both Lale and McElvogue were also members of a semi-secret organization consisting exclusively of white males; bankers, major retailers, the *News Messenger* publisher, and heads of a couple of other Harrison County manufacturing plants. The group called itself "The Citizens Advisory Board," but members were known locally as "The Do Gooders." Among the organization's functions was to choose and fund candidates for city and county offices.

When the state refused to improve the roads between Marshall and LAAP Lale, ever the practical historian, decided to take a page from the history of Marshall city government. In decades past, when the economic engine of the town had been the Texas and Pacific Railroad, the T & P was always represented by one member of the five-man city council. Lale concluded that LAAP should enjoy the same privilege and decided to run for a seat, a decision apparently endorsed by both McElvogue and the Do Gooders. He was elected to a two-year term in April 1963, running unopposed and drawing 1,970 votes out of a total of 2,023 cast (the others were write-ins). After one two-year term he retired, at the request, he said, of his boss. For his service in this unpaid position he was presented with a box of cigars. By 1967, McElvogue himself saw the merit in having an official seat at the table and ran in 1967 against rancher Carl Swendson, whom he defeated, 678 to 456. His success was undoubtedly aided by a non-partisan "Democracy in Action" program at the plant designed to encourage employees to register to vote and to support their candidates with their funds and their efforts.

In October 1968 Thiokol executives and Army leadership decided to show off the LAAP facilities to the public and scheduled an open house at the site. More than 6,000 invitations were sent to employee families, Marshall and Harrison County opinion leaders, and area dignitaries. Lale, who had circulated a full year's printing of the *Longhorn Missile* (1968) to opinion makers, school and college personnel, banking institutions, and key business firms in the area, created a program that included paintings by well-known local artist Max Cole and the history of both Longhorn Army Ammunition and the Confederate-era Marshall Powder Mill. The open house, as well as a celebration on December 30, 1968, for LAAP's production of the 10-millionth round of artillery and mortar illuminating ammunition drew extended coverage from ABC and CBS affil-

iates in Shreveport and Tyler. Marshall Radio Station KMHT (for which Lale had once been the newscaster in addition to his duties as a *News Messenger* reporter) and Marshall and Longview newspapers also covered both events extensively. The year of frenetic activity led to many awards earned by the plant from manufacturing and defense-related entities. Each presentation ceremony was well covered by both the in-house and general publications.¹¹

Although the roads continued to be a headache, in other areas conditions improved.¹²

The increasing volume of criticism over U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War reached Marshall only peripherally. No local protests were held against a government-owned plant manufacturing ammunition for an unpopular war. Indeed, concern was exactly the opposite. Local residents worried that troop withdrawals from Vietnam, Congressional debate over the further proliferation of anti-ballistic missiles, and high-profile anti-war demonstrations across the nation would have a deleterious effect on the economic status of Marshall and Harrison County. Their concern was palpable enough that McElvogue tried to reassure his employees and the community at large in a letter he called "Smoke Signals."

I am sure you have been hearing and reading a lot of references to and criticism of 'the military-industrial complex' in our country and may be concerned that the criticism, at least by reference, is against us in the Longhorn Division....Here at Longhorn we are performing a absolutely vital task in supporting American fighting men who, without our production, would be severely handicapped in a particularly difficult war. We more than most can appreciate the anguish of our men in Vietnam. We more than most do pray for a honorable end to the war. There is no "conspiracy" about our activities. We are not plotting to rob the taxpayers. We are not trying to take over the country.

Don't be bugged. We are doing important work. We are doing it with high quality, on time and at a very reasonable cost. Whatever else may be said, we have the satisfaction of knowing our friends and relatives in Vietnam recognize and respect the work we are doing.¹³

While there were no local demonstrations against the war or the plant, the fears of McElvogue and others did come to pass. By 1973 a cease-fire in Vietnam was declared, and in 1975 the ignoble evacuation of Saigon was complete and no U.S. troops were left in South Vietnam. From a high in November 1968 of 2,986 workers and officers, LAAP employment rolls numbered fewer than 1,000 by 1975. Max Lale, who had suffered a heart attack and subsequent open-heart surgery at age 59, retired from Thiokol on October 23, 1975. There were no more comprehensive installation histories prepared under his careful hand.¹⁴

Longhorn again had its place in the sun in 1988 when national leaders decided to eliminate the Pershing Missiles once manufactured there. On December 8, 1987, U.S. President Ronald Reagan and USSR General

Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Treaty of Intermediate Nuclear Forces, in which the United States and the Soviet Union consented to eliminate an entire class of nuclear missiles. The U.S. agreed to destroy the entire class of medium-range Pershing I and Pershing II weapons and the USSR an equivalent class of SS 20 Sabers. The Soviet-manufactured Saber motors were done away with at Kapustin Yar Missile Test Complex in the USSR at the same time that the majority of Pershing motors were static-fired, then crushed, at Longhorn.¹⁵

On September 8, 1988, a U.S. delegation led by Vice President George H.W. Bush and a Soviet entourage led by Chief Inspector Nikolai Shabalin, along with representatives from several NATO countries and local, state, and federal dignitaries, watched as Thiokol engineers fired the first Pershing I motor, bound into the harness at the static testing site, and it burned itself out. It was then rolled from the platform and beaten into small bits by the bucket of a bulldozer. Pieces of the spent and blackened casing were presented to many of those in attendance. The routine was repeated with a Pershing II rocket motor. They were the first two of 700 Pershing I and II rocket engines eventually static-fired at Longhorn. Covering this first destruction on American soil of a ground-launched cruise missile, as specified in the INF Treaty, were representatives from more than one hundred foreign and domestic media outlets. But the dignitaries and the press were not the only observers. High on a utility wire above the site perched two or three dozen bluebirds. When the engine roared to life the little birds vanished, but as quiet once more returned to the shores of the lake and the tall pines surrounding the ceremonial grounds, so did the flock of bluebirds, which returned to the wire. The missiles and manufacturing activities are all gone now. The bluebirds remain, harbingers of Longhorn's future.¹⁶

Following the official ceremonies, the work of carrying out the treaty began in earnest. Every six weeks until May 1991, a team of Soviet scientists, military officers, and KGB agents arrived in Marshall, occupied a special "secure" wing of the Ramada Inn hotel, and remained for a month. When their job of witnessing the elimination of the missiles ended each day they were free to do almost anything they wished or go anywhere in the county except into private homes. Trips to Wal-Mart and automobile showrooms were a favorite, and many also accompanied their official escort, Colonel Jim Kealey, to St. Joseph's Catholic Church in downtown Marshall. Visits to schools and colleges provided a particularly enjoyable experience for both students and Soviets. When the Marshall High School Mavericks won the state UIL football playoffs in 1990 many members of the inspection teams attended home games. Tongue in cheek, they claimed credit for bringing luck to the Mavericks with their presence. When acclaimed journalist and Marshall native Bill Moyers updated and reissued his Emmy Award-winning documentary, "Marshall, Texas/Marshall, Texas" in 1992, he included a segment showing one of the Soviet Inspection Teams playing tag football with some of the Mavericks. "M.T./ M.T." opens with scenes from "Max Lale Day" when the town honored its official historian with festivities on the town square.¹⁷

In 1990, Longhorn was listed as one of the Department of Defense facilities with known contaminants in the soil, surface, and ground water sufficiently toxic to be named to a list of federal Superfund Sites. Under the supervision of what is now known as the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the federal Environmental Protection Agency, five separate locations within the plant were to be restored using funds allotted by the DOD. Per chlorate, heavy metals and other armament-related debris, petroleum, and lubricants were identified in one or all. Work to clean up Longhorn began soon afterward.¹⁸

Its personnel already reduced to a skeleton crew of Morton-Thiokol and Army civilian workers, Longhorn fell victim to the "peace dividend" after the Cold War ended. On June 27, 1995, officials of the U.S. Army, with Congressman Jim Chapman as a guest, held inactivation ceremonies, although cleanup work continued under the direction of the environmental protection agencies. The Army had the option of retaining the land or offering it to any other federal agency, with top priority going to the Department of the Interior, which quickly snapped it up. About 900 acres of the most-pristine land and the two-remaining cinder block-constructed facilities was leased to the private, non-profit Caddo Lake Institute in 1997. The remaining land apart from the cleanup sites was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and as each of the Superfund areas is pronounced safe it is added to the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Area. Public access is expected to begin in September 2006.¹⁹

Most of the termite-ridden and contaminated buildings are gone. The three powder magazines still stand as lonely sentries on a narrow road at the south end of the old plant. When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took over, Williams decided to "open their doors and see what came in." What came in were several varieties of bats, and Williams and other nature enthusiasts and tourism-promotion officials envision an attraction equal to the Congress Avenue Bridge in Austin and the Waugh Drive span in Houston, where hundreds of people gather at twilight to watch the bats' departure.²⁰

Max often mused that when he joined the Army ROTC at the University of Oklahoma in the 1930s, it was equipped with horse-drawn, French-made seventy-millimeter guns. He lived to see the Army field artillery equipped with medium range missiles whose motors were manufactured at Longhorn, where he spent the last fourteen years of his working life. And he fully approved of the decision to make Longhorn a wildlife preserve.

NOTES

¹Proposal to Monsanto made in the summer of 1941. Much of the material for this account, including the quotation in this paragraph, is taken from a well documented, four-volume history of Longhorn researched and prepared by Max Lale, a complete set of which can be found in the archives of the Harrison County Historical Museum Library (hereafter referred to as *Installation History*). According to Lale, information relating to the beginning of the plant he drew from a special section devoted to LAAP published in the *Marshall News Messenger*, November 4, 1945.

²Max Lale, *Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant: Investment in Freedom*, introductory volume of *Basic Installation History*, p. 7; Ron Tyler, *New Handbook of Texas*, III, p. 958, VI, p. 958, I, p. 889; deed records of the Harrison County Clerk's office, Marshall, Texas.

¹Lale, *Installation History*, Vol. I, p. 3.

²Lale, *Installation History*, Vol. I, p. 5.

³Lale, *Longhorn Historical Summary Reports: July 1, 1951 though June 30 1956* (Vol. 2). Located in the vertical files of the Harrison County Historical Museum. 623 Thiokol, pp. 8 and 9.

⁴Thiokol later merged with another chemical company and became Morton-Thiokol.

⁵Production and construction figures from Lale, *Longhorn Historical Summary Reports: July 1951 Through June 30, 1956*, pp.11-15.

⁶Lale, *Longhorn Summary*, p. 28.

⁷Longhorn was located on U.S. 134.

⁸Lale, *First Annual Supplement to Basic Installation History: January 2, 1968 to Dec. 31, 1968*. Located in the research library of the Harrison County Historical Museum, 623 Thiokol Supplement, p.19; Housing starts, *Marshall News Messenger*, January 19, 1969, p.1A; Youngs to Lale, September 9, 1968, cited in the *First Annual Supplement*, p. 22.

⁹Open House; problems enumerated; Lale's *First Annual Supplement*, p. 28. *Marshall News Messenger*, various issues in 1958 including a tabloid supplement October 13, 1968, as well as issues leading to the open house.

¹⁰Lale, *Second Annual Supplement: January 1 through June 30, 1969*, p. 40.

¹¹The letter was printed in its entirety in the *Second Annual Supplement*, p. 44.

¹²Employment figures; *First Annual Supplement*, p. 12; interview with Lloyd May "Cissy" Stewart Lale, June 6, 2006 and "Mr. Eskay" award to Lale with employment dates engraved on it in Mrs. Lale's possession.

¹³Employment figures; terms of treaty and description of both missiles available at <http://www.Redstone.army.mil/history/systems/pershing>.

¹⁴*Longview News Journal*, September 9 and 10, 1988; Tom Kelley, *Marshall News Messenger*, September 8 and 10, 1988.

¹⁵Moyers was hired by Lale at sixteen years of age to be a reporter for the *MNM*. He originally broadcast M.T./M.T. in 1984, as the beginning of a series called "Walk Through the Twentieth Century."

¹⁶<http://www.texascenter.org/almanac/MILITARYTOXIC.HTML>

¹⁷Caddo Lake Institute is funded for the most part by Eagles musician Don Henley, who grew up in East Texas. <http://www.cldata.org/cliinfo.htm>; interview with Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge manager Mark Williams, June 8, 2006.

²⁰Williams interview, June 8, 2006.