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TEXAS IS BEING one-upped. In Saudi Arabia, a complete city is arising out of the desert; from scratch. Right in the thick of it is David Koester, former city manager of Santa Cruz for 18 years. It is said to be the largest construction job in the world and he is city operations manager.

The city is called Jubail (Jubayl on the map), located on the Persian Gulf.

Jubail will become an industrial city of some 350,000, said David, who recently visited here on a work break. It is to be a dream city, for the energy to run it is free.

The isolated desert area is a vast oil and gas field, so close to the surface that it gushes forth on its own.

Wally Trabing's Mostly about People



Dave Koester Reports



Dave Koester

"When you fly over the area at night, the darkness peppered with the flares of burning gas wells. It was decided to capture all this energy going to waste and put it to work running a city," he said.

It is Koester's task to mold the operations of the new harbor, the steel mills, the petrochemical plants, the streets and businesses and utility into the unity that allows a city to run efficiently.

He's been on the job six months now and he speaks with awe describing the scene of a city literally growing up around him—fast. It will resemble Fresno in size and is envisioned by the Saudis to resemble Long Beach in appearance.

Jubail is taking its name from a tiny fishing village several miles down the coast. It is taking shape with the bustle of stage crews building sets for a grand opera.

To the ear, it must relate to Babel, after the Tower incident in biblical times, for some 44 nationalities are represented among the more than 40,000 people laboring to build Jubail.

They come mainly from the Third World, said David, but nearly the whole world is represented.

Koester's favorites are the Filipinos. His secretaries are Filipino men. He finds them charming, efficient and hard workers.

Men are used because women are not around. He has seen no women among the workers or in the offices.

This normally hostile land of sand, where 100 degree weather is nothing to start a conversation over, is made habitable by oil, gas, and money.

There are some \$3 billion in contracts so far and before the flag is raised on the finished city, Koester figures the total bill will range upward to \$20 billion. Most men dream of the kind of pay that is flung around here. He says \$40,000 is considered a low salary for a worker.

The former city manager lives in a modern house with all the amenities and free utilities. There is no water available, so it is taken from the sea and converted by gigantic desalination plants.

Great harbors are forming. Airports shine in the sun. Eight hospitals are up or plans are being drawn for them. Utilities are going underground and grand avenues stretch in every direction.

Oil and gas keep pressing from the ground, but if you envision the Bakersfield scene of bowing pumps, you'll be wrong. Pumps are not needed, said Dave, the oil is merely piped off.

He said his position is not unlike working with a city council, with one giant difference.

There is a king involved—King Khalid Ibn Abdul Aziz Al Saud. The "council" is called the Royal Commission, representing the King which pretty much takes care of the final say—or any say for that matter.

Koester has a second boss—the Bechtel Corporation which has the contract. He says the Royal Commission is easy to get along with, so the work progresses. His contract is for two years. As for the job, he is seeing 10 to 15 years as a completion date for the city.

The Koesters eat well. Their beef mostly comes from Australia, and fruit from Jordan.

"The fruit is delicious as are the vegetables. None of those plastic California tomatoes," he said.

Some 20,000 laborers are raising housing tracts and building freeways.

In a way, the new city is an Utopia.

Crime is almost non-existent. There is no need to lock your house or car. There is no unemployment. There is no inflation. Pay is way up there. It is seemingly a carefree life.

It is hot, hot, hot (high as 120 degrees). There are no bars, because there is no liquor. Drinking in the country is strictly forbidden.

Severe religious laws run a tight ship in Saudi Arabia. A U.S. feminist would suffer double convulsions and lay helpless on the ground kicking if she suddenly found herself a Saudi lady.

"Saudi homes have two living rooms, one for men and the other for women. Women can't swim in public pools with men. Single girls can't eat in the same restaurant as single men," he said. Not in the same section, anyway.

"Women can't ride bicycles or drive autos. There is no organized entertainment like night clubs, so life can become a bit dreary," said Dave.

On the other hand, somebody takes care of your lawn and gas is 25 cents a gallon.

Any kind of crime is considered serious over there. The contrast with the wishy-washy American penalties is a mile wide.

So the great city continues to grow, fed by the seemingly endless flow of energy from the ground.

It is assumed, one hopes that the gas will still be flowing when the city is finished.

A miscalculation would become the world's largest bloop to go along with the world's greatest construction project.